

book reviews

A Family History of Photography

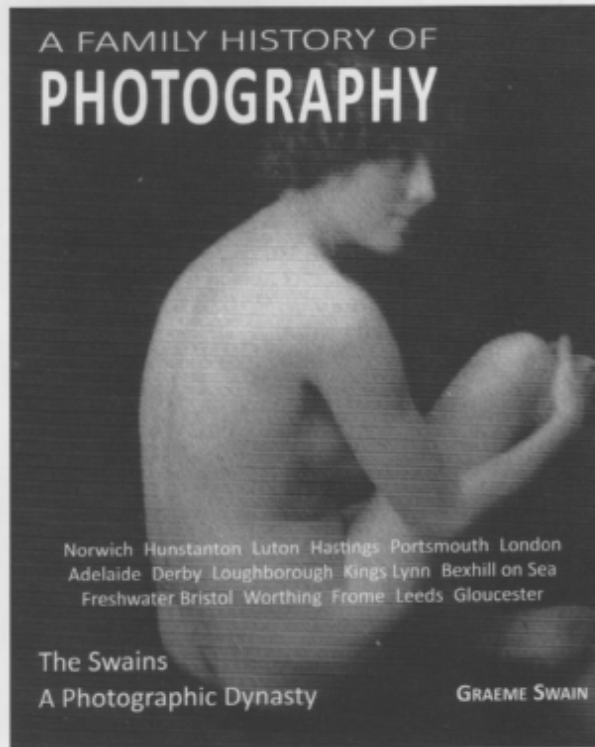
By Graeme Swain

Paperback, 21 x 26 cm, 183 pages.
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Available from the author
graemeswain@btinternet.com for
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on Amazon.

PCCGB member Graeme Swain has written an unusual volume which combines family history over a long period, with the history of photography in parallel. There is, of course, a reason for this – the Swain family were heavily involved in photography through important parts of the 150-year period covered by this book.

The family's involvement in photography included the making of cameras and magic lanterns, studio, wedding, commercial, aerial and war photography, photographic retailing, photographic processing, wholesaling, cinematography and more.

The story starts in 1750, before the invention of photography, and proceeds in 50-year steps. With alternate chapters covering family history and



the general progress of photography in each half-century, we are able to keep up both with the growth of the family and the development of its interests on one hand, and the burgeoning technology and commercialisation of photography on the other.

The earliest chapters provide the author with an opportunity to summarise the pre-history of photography whilst observing the life of the Swain family in a small village in Hertfordshire, mostly as blacksmiths. These were, of course, the early days of the Industrial Revolution, and everybody's life

Left: The Swain premises in Norwich, seen in a page from the book

was set to change. Near the end of the 1800 - 1850 chapter of course we have the invention of photography as a practical proposition; at this point the Swain family are not yet involved, but that will soon change.

We soon come across Charles, the first photographic Swain, as a maker of magic lanterns and as a photographer in his own right. His son Herbert went into the business, and found work as a photographer in various cities, moving quite frequently from place to place. In due course he had a studio in Luton and the photographic Swain were on the way. His brother George was also involved though to a lesser extent - all this at a time when photography itself was undergoing profound change both technically and commercially.

Next in line was

Charles's youngest son Percy who went south and settled at Hastings, soon moving onto Norwich where he set up yet another studio. We're now in the early 20th century, and attention turns to the two George Swains, Senior and Junior, who between them started out with studios in the same sort of way, but expanded into retailing and later wholesaling. George Junior was also an aviation enthusiast and did a lot of aerial photography. The centre of the Swain photographic enterprise has by now moved to Norwich and Norfolk, with several more family members taking significant roles in a growing business.

The book is an unusual combination of family history and the general history of photography. Most of our readers may be reasonably familiar with the latter, but for most the contribution of this family business of some regional significance will be unknown. The book is well illustrated with images from both public sources and Swain family archives. It is an excellent read and can be thoroughly recommended.

John Marriage



George Swain senior began working from Davey Place, Norwich in 1907 before moving to St. Giles Street. He ran the studio alongside his wife Mildred and his sister Muriel. Photographs make clear their involvement and many are marked as being by Mrs G. Swain and by Mr and Mrs G. Swain.

Swain premises in Gingham Road, Norwich. Copyright Picture Norfolk, Norfolk County Council's Norfolk Library and Information Service

George Swain junior used a Hare camera (see photograph) and he is pictured with this camera in the newspaper article relating to how a Daily Mirror model was photographed in his studio but, for reasons of decency, he was excluded.