



# DATING OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

SHORT GUIDE



# BASIC CHRONOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHY FORMATS



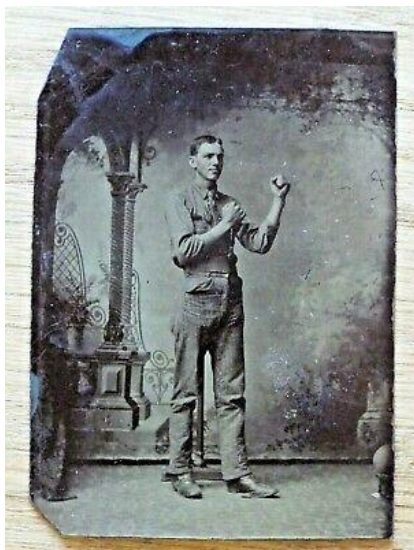
## 1840s and 1850s Daguerreotypes

Images printed on metal plates. Always cased.



## 1850 – 1875 Ambrotypes

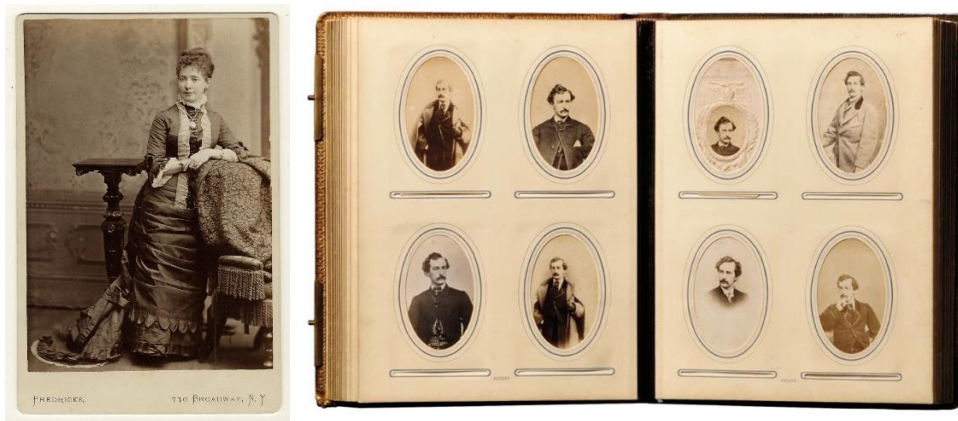
Images printed on glass, using wet collodion process, with opaque black coating on back. Usually cased, often in fancy moulded thermoplastic cases



## c.1855 – 1920s Tintypes

Images printed on thin iron plates. A speciality of seaside photographers 1880s – 1930s

## Early 1860s –1900 Cartes de Visite



Images printed on treated paper from glass plates using wet collodion process.

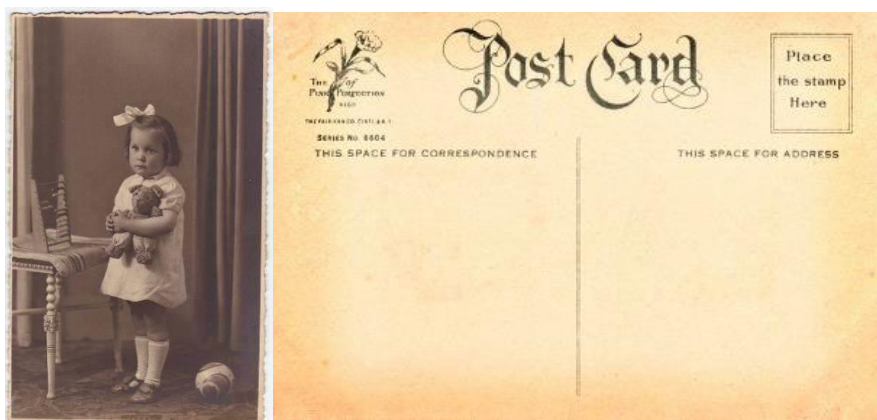
Mounted on card sized 2.5in x 4in. It was customary among middle classes to distribute and collect CDVs in albums such as the one above.

## c.1870 – c.1910 Cabinet prints



Same process as above, mounted on card sized 4in x 6.5in. These also become the first photos which are commonly displayed in frames on cabinets (hence the name).

## 1902 –1940 Postcards



A cheaper, quicker format for producing prints, made photo portraits available to almost everyone.



# DATING POSES AND BACKGROUNDS

1860s



Early 1860s most photographers' studios offered plain backgrounds, with possibly a column for the sitter to lean on, and a velvet drape on one side. This could be pulled across the back to hide the base of the posing stand – invariably used. Men and women were usually photographed at full length, standing, or occasionally seated. Children were posed standing on a chair seat, or leaning against a chair or table for support, and the base of the posing stand can often be seen. Babies, if not “in arms”, were tied to a chair back by a sash to keep them upright.

Later 1860s more elaborate painted backcloths were introduced, depicting windows, archways, Bookcases and other heavy, imposing-looking furniture, and balustrades.

1870s



The painted backcloths became more fanciful, with outdoor, parkland scenes, with fences and stiles. Fences as studio props were introduced, against which the sitter posed. Heavily padded, fringed and tasselled furniture features largely in studios, for the sitter to lean against or sit upon. Half-lengths and seated poses become more common.

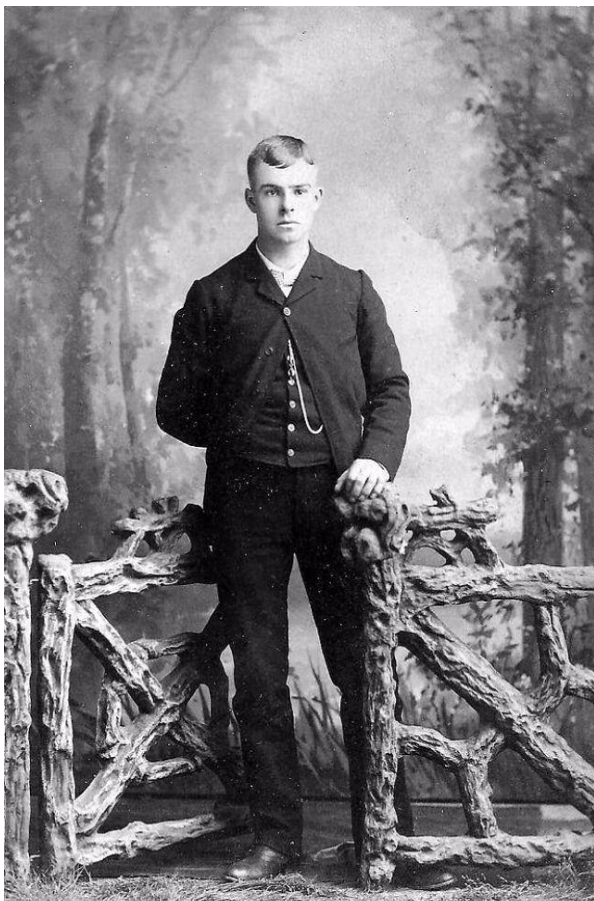




1880s



The painted backcloths become more dramatic, and the props more elaborate and evident. The “outdoor” fiction of the backcloth is now brought into the foreground, with ivy covered tree stumps and rocks for the sitter to sit on, clumps of grass and pebbles on the floor. Specialized sets are provided for seaside and holiday photographs, with sand, rocks, driftwood and sides of boats.



1890s



Studio settings now rely more on props and furniture to set the scene, rather than painted backdrops. Typical props are oriental screens, mirrors on stands, potted palms, and bamboo furniture of all kinds, the studio aiming to look like a high-class conservatory.

The fashion for “close-up” portraits of the head and shoulders only, possible with the improved lenses of the 1890s, meant that the background was becoming less important. “Vignette” photographs are typical of the 1890s, in which the head forms an oval which fades into a pale blank background. As a general rule, the closer the camera is to the sitter, the later in date the photograph is.





1900 – 1940



The studio settings for postcard format photos are usually simple, with plain backdrops and few items of furniture, a small table, a chair or a plant on a stand, all usually rather attenuated and delicate-looking, rather than massive and substantial.

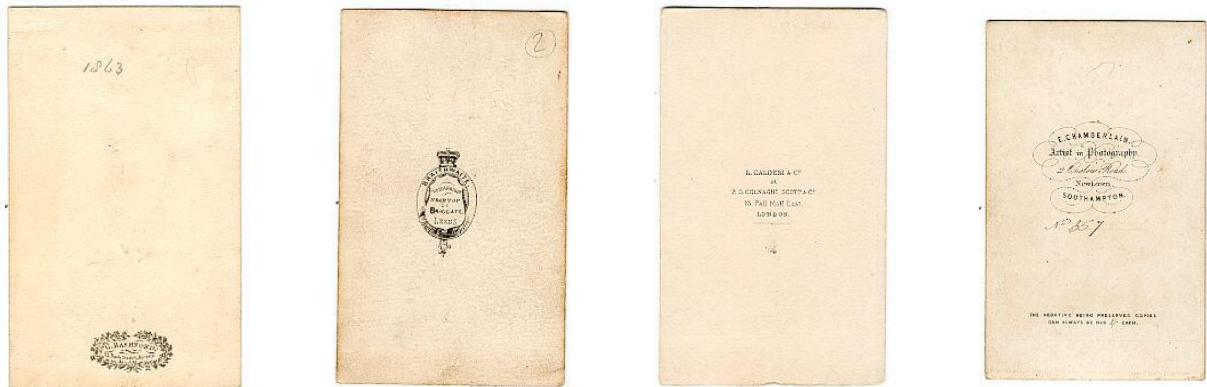


By the 1930s the fashion for studio props, influenced by Hollywood films, tended towards the “classical” with columns and podiums.



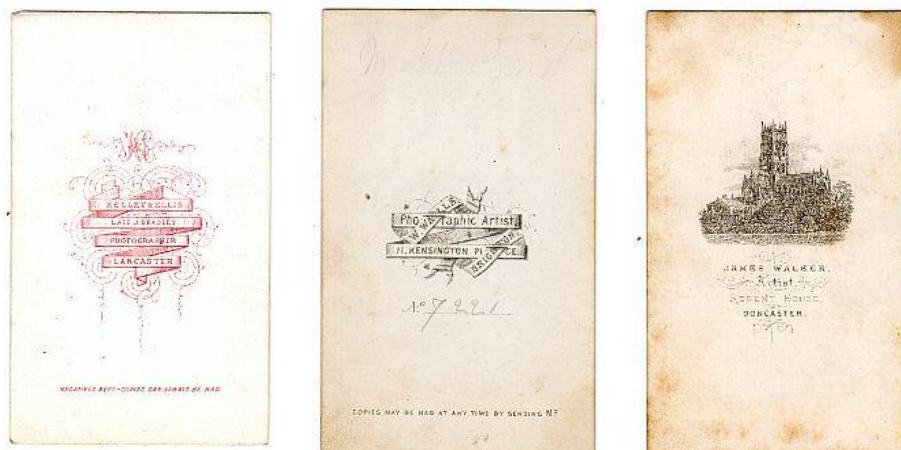
# DATING CARD MOUNT CHARACTERISTICS AND BACK INSCRIPTIONS

1860s



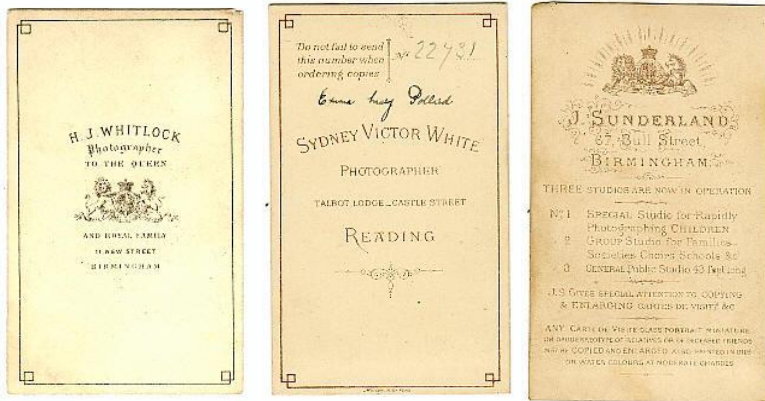
In the early 1860s the card was thin, with square corners, the logo and writing are not much better than an ink stamp, simple writing or with a logo.

By 1865 designs like ribbons and scrolls, crowns and copies become more popular, but the main design keeps to the middle of the card.



From 1868 on the designs gets more intricate but still quite simple, without borders and concentrated in the centre of the card.

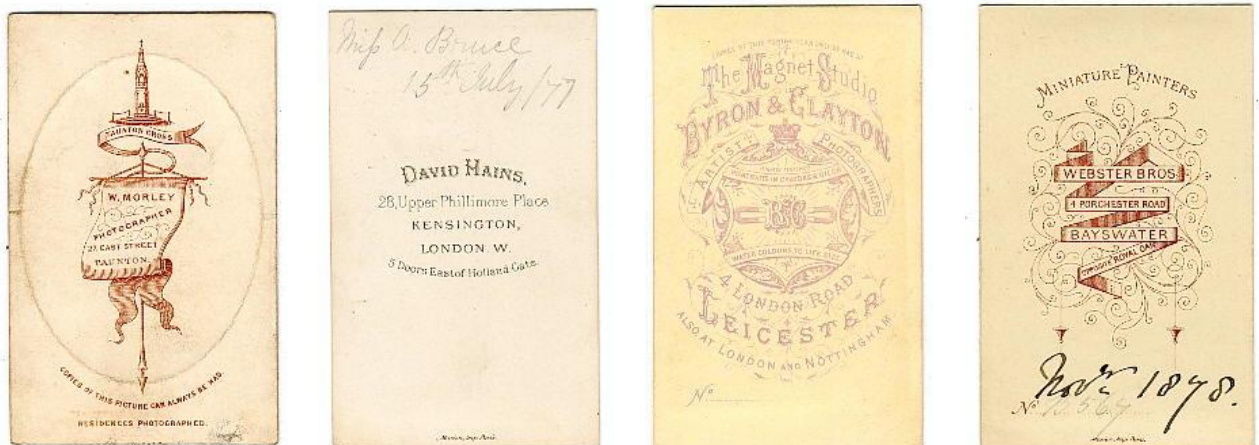
1870s



In the early 1870s although the card remains quite thin, it is slightly better quality than in the 1860s, with square corners. There are now printers to make and sell the cards in bulk to professional studios. As such certain designs appear to be "copied" by different studios. E.G. the first two samples on the left, illustrate the 'Rotating Squares' design used by the card printer Marion, Imp Paris which was widely copied.



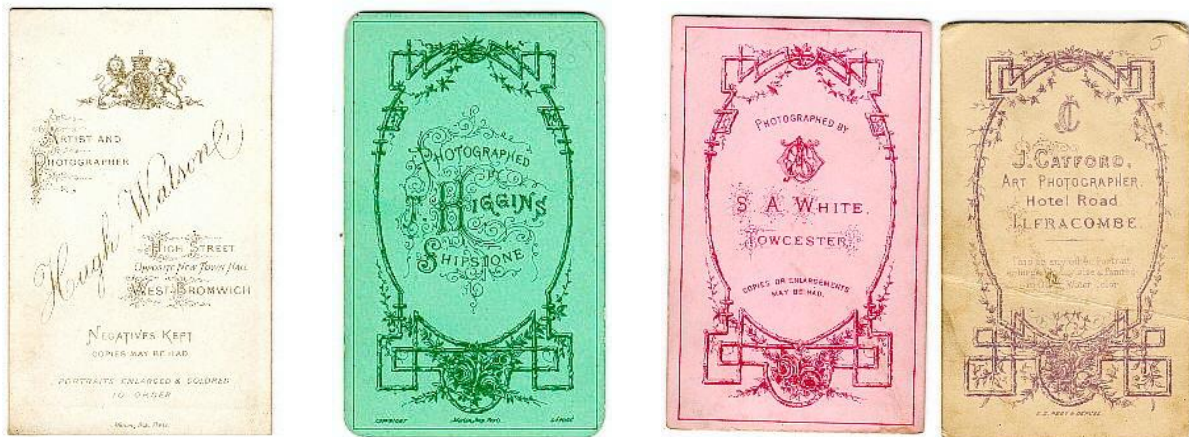
Also notice the designs of the 1860s are now incorporated within a border and become larger.



By mid 1870s, full designs are starting to be copied with only the wording being adapted to each studio. Some Studios adopt a classic uncluttered simplicity design like the David Hains's card above, made by Marion in 1877; while others continue to adopt more imponent designs such as the 'Ribbon and Scrolls', widely used in various forms but usually curved during the 1880s, not angular as in the Webster Bros' card by Marion, of 1878 seen above.

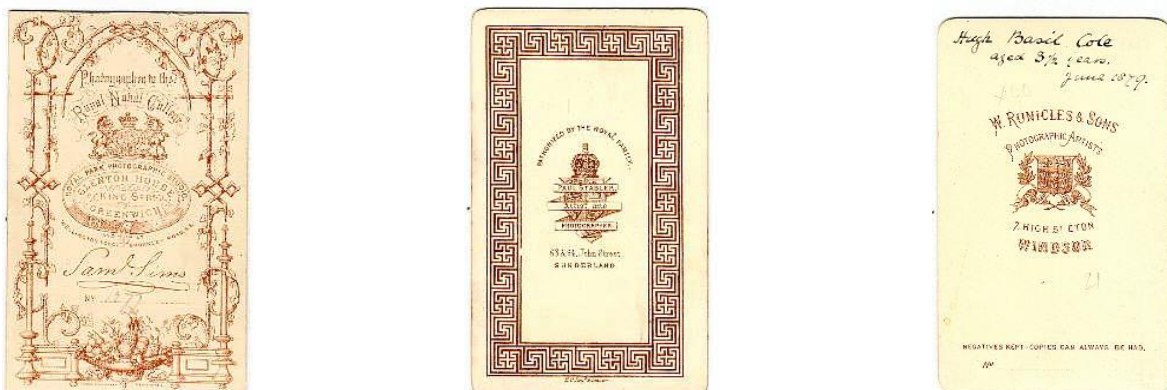


## The later 1870s

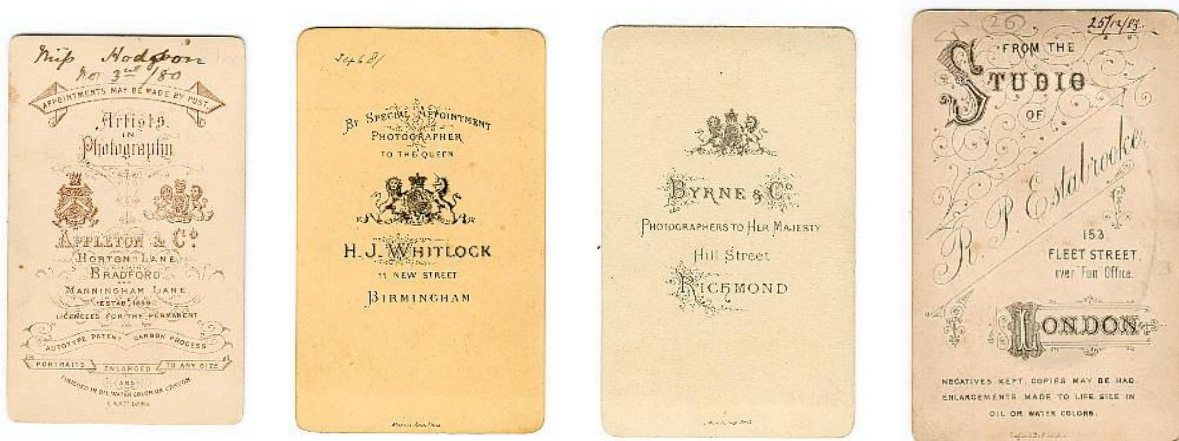


In the later 1870s the card's square corners were gradually replaced by rounded corners - easier to slip into the slots in the carte de visite albums now sold at every studio. Colour card becomes more popular and design copy is now widespread as you can see in 3 samples above. Interestingly card designers themselves are now copying from each other! For example, the green card example above was originally designed by Marion, Imp Paris who claim the copyright. However this did not stop neither E.O.Regr & Depose' from using it and redrawing it almost exactly (pink example) nor another unidentified printer from doing the same (the cream example). It is obvious they are all varieties of the Marion card dated from c.1874, with the copies being a few years later, c.1878. Placed in the centre of the design is a remnant of the 1860s simple design.

By the end of the 1870s not only did most cards have rounded corners but a better quality of card was being used.

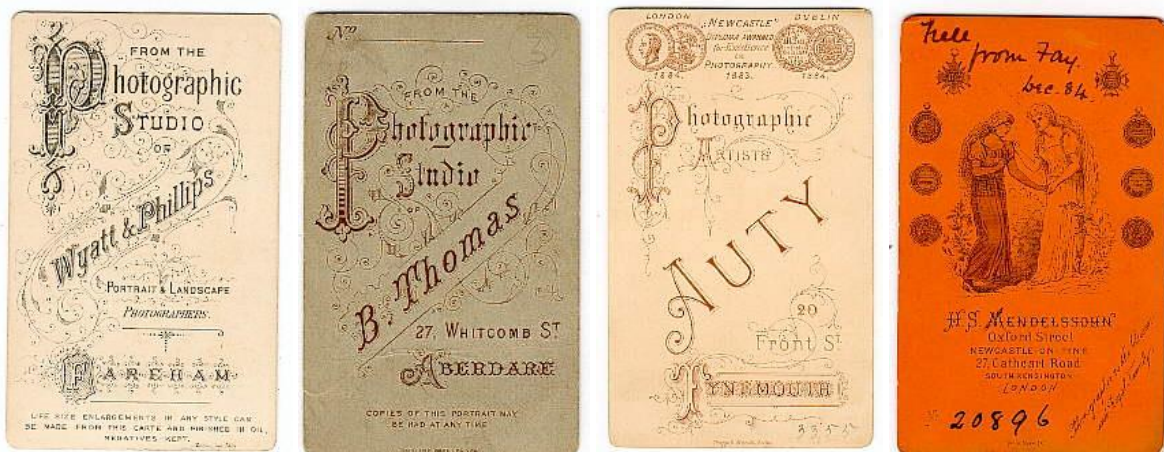


## The 1880s



By the 1880s the remains of the 1860s logo designs have now gone, the card is designed for its own sake. The first card dated 1880 is a late 1870s early 1880s design with its ribbons, royal crests and three main fonts and still being used in 1885. The Whitlock and the Byrne cards above are classic Marion Imp Paris cards from the early 1880s, notice the letters surrounded by scrolls.

The fourth card above dated December 1883 is an 'Early Large Letter' combined with the name on a slope, lots of background scrolls, and three main fonts, is typical of many of the late 1870s and early 1880s cards.



Here some more examples of 'Large Letter' designs produced (1876 to about 1889, but mostly used in the early 1880s) by Marion, Imp Paris, England Bros London, and Trapp & Munch, Berlin.

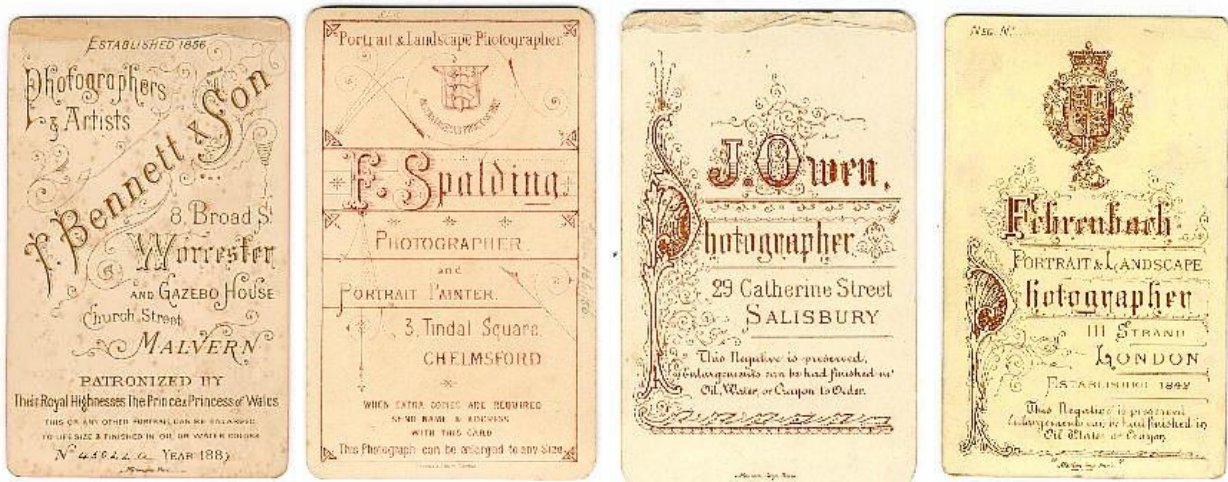
The orange card made by George Mason & Co. is dated December 1884 and has medals from 1884, it follows no trend and looks more like an 1890s back - so be warned! However all those medals should be a clue to its earlier date.





The first sample above, dated March 1885, is an identical back to the first sample we saw of 1880 showing that these styles can be long lived.

Martin & Sallnow started in 1885 and recorded 3631 customers, making this a classic design of about 1887, printed by W. Herrmann & Co. Berlin who were working c.1884-1892. The Brown Barnes and Bell dates to about 1884 and is not a design used by others. Edmund Wheeler kept this design a long time, but he put an annual date code on each: E - 1877 to W - 1895, making this one N - 1886.



The first card from Bennett & Sons is dated 1887 and is a typical - Marion, Imp Paris - - - card, those dashes (and dot) vary and seem to be a date code (this code is for 1884 but used in 1887). F. Spalding is dated November 1886 and can be considered three fonts and a logo and a border, a bit basic for the later 1880s. Card three is a Marion, Imp Paris with a large P that and probably 1885. The Fehrenbach also has a large P has "Marion Imp Paris" with a - - - underneath, this I associate with 1888.



The Naudin card is a design by Marion and they claim copyright. This did not stop the many near copies made by other printers, made after the mid 1880s to about 1890. Walter Tully, "Marion, Imp Paris - - (1888) uses a small parasol and fan. Frederick Argall has a design with 'Bamboo and Square' from about 1888 - 1889. Thomas Ball has a copy of the same design by the printer Reeves & Hoare London and probably much the same date.

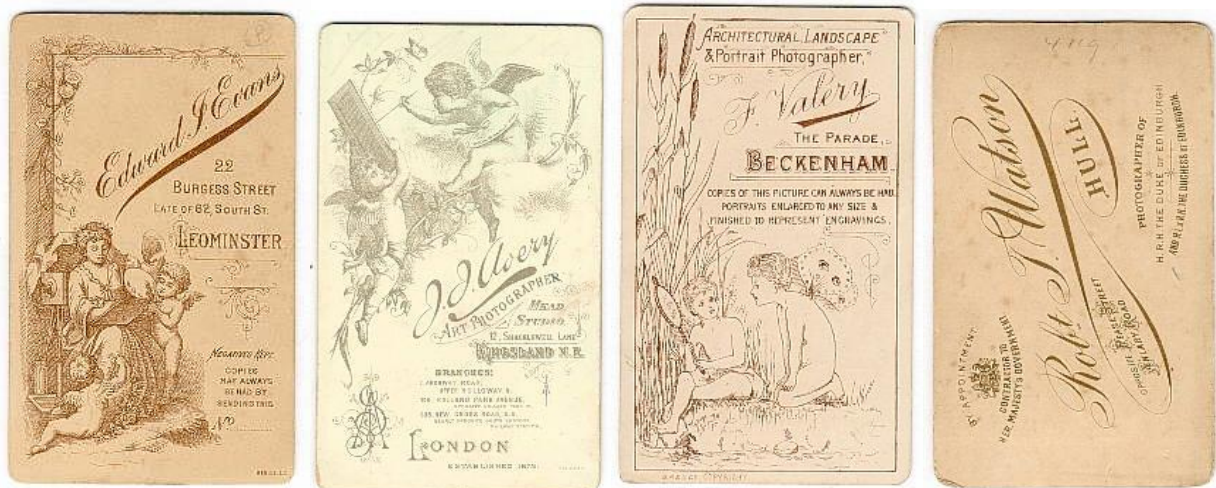


The Edwin Lott card is a design by Reg C E & C and is about 1887. The next is a classic Marion design I call with a seated Artist and was widely copied. Marion sold the same design to many studios and it can be found on cards from 1888 to 1894, Reg Design 41062. The last two include Bamboo and Fan designs, the F.C. Christopher is a Marion card, and the last one is by Spicer Bros, London. This is an 1884 design but mostly used about 1888.



## The 1890s

By 1890s card start becoming even more elaborate and including, cherub angels, grecian ladies, art equipment and flowers. At this time most studios were art shops as well selling painting supplies as well as photographs and picture frames. As Kodak cameras were now being used by anyone, the studios had to claim that their photographs were better and more artistic, a quality product and this is reflected in the designs.



Edward J. Evans is by Reg C E & C. and another wonderful art card, the same company made the next Avery card with cherubs painting a picture. F. Valery went for fairies, reeds and a mirror (meaning a photograph). Watson has gone for a simple old-fashioned design and must be the last of the letters with scrolls but again using the landscape format.



Williams Bros, Chiswick, shows the art and camera. The next, an early Williams and Williams has a design that belongs in the late 1880s, this was replaced by the next card 'The Horn of Plenty' and this was used perhaps 1893 to about 1901. The last William & Williams must be a late 1890s or 1900s card and has gone to an art design. You may also have some cards with a plain green back and gold writing on the lower front, these can date from the mid 1880s to the late 1890s and have to be dated by the clothes worn.

## The 1900s



All of these cards have square corners and plain backs (1890s have rounded corners but a few survived as old stock as late as 1903). The first card from Smith, Stroud, is from about 1900, the border has a pressed leaf design and the ship and roses design tissue protector is still with it. The Russell & Sons is dated on the back as given June 27th 1900, and has a leaf and flowerhead pressed design. The A& G Taylor, is ink stamped 25 JUL 1900. The girl 'Annie' in the Kerslake gave this for Xmas and New Year 1901. The last photo is by Webber of Lancaster and dated March 1902.

### IN A NUTSHELL:

**1860s** - Card mounts were thin and white, with right angle corners. The reverse usually only had the photographer's name and address, sometimes in a circle, cartouche or shield, and a reference number for ordering repeats.

**1870s** - Card mounts became thicker, and started to have rounded corners. There was more text and information on the back, and a wider use of decorative typefaces and ornamentation.

**1880s** - Mounts could have bevelled edges, and coloured card and inks began to be used. Photographers' puffs were prominent on the reverse, including references to royal patronage, medals won at international competitions, and facilities such as "electric light". Pictorial images of birds, plants, nymphs began to be included.

**1890s** The early 1890s saw continuation of the trend towards great elaboration, with much use of dark-coloured card, particularly black or dark green, printed in silver and gold, and fashionable motifs such as cherubs, bulrushes, Chinese fans and swallows.

**Late 1890s – Early 1900s** - Return to plainer mounts, often displaying a subtle elegance, with matt-finish card in cream or grey, printed in brown, silver or gold, with incised or textured lettering.

### 1905 onwards

Mounted prints began to have much wider, plain cream mounts, and the mounted photo was presented in a matching folder.

The practice of pasting of the photographic image to card was largely dropped after 1920, and mounts instead had slots cut in them into which the corners of the print could be inserted.



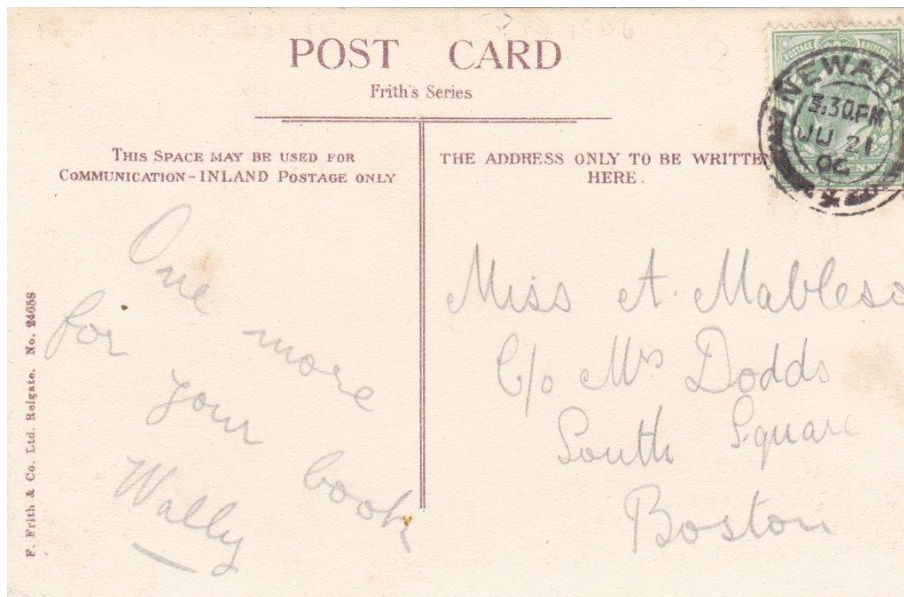
# DATING IN POSTCARD FORMAT

Photographs printed with postcard format backs, with the space divided between address and written message, cannot be earlier than 1902, as that year the Post Office made that format legal.

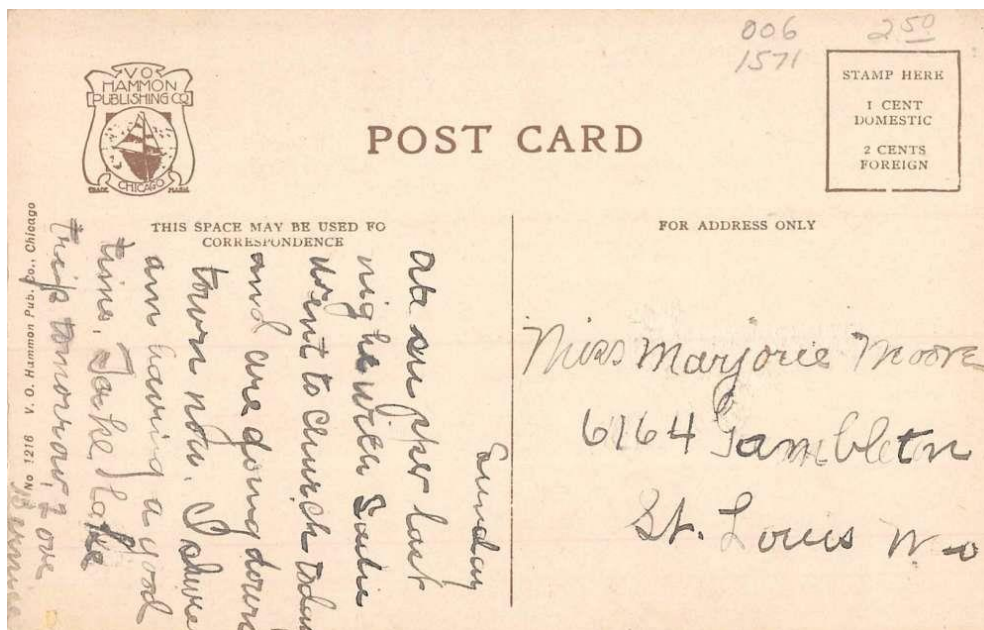
**Before 1902 the whole of one side had to be reserved for the address.**

When this format was first introduced, it was only legal for mail sent within Britain, so for the next few years the printed instructions help with dating.

From 1902 to about 1906 the instruction "For inland postage only, this space may now be used for communications" was used.



From 1904 to about 1907 the wording was "Inland postage only"



After 1907 the postage rules changed, and the instructions became more complicated, for example “This space may now be used for communications in the British Isles, also some colonies and foreign countries”; or more simple, for example “Communications” on one side, and “Address” on the other.

Postcards can also be dated by the postmark, if present and legible, and by the value of the stamps used.

Until 3 June 1918 postage a halfpenny ( $\frac{1}{2}$ d)

From June 1918 to June 1921 postage one penny (1d)

From June 1921 to May 1922 postage one and a half penny ( $1\frac{1}{2}$ d)

From May 1922 to the late 1930s postage reverted to one penny (1d)



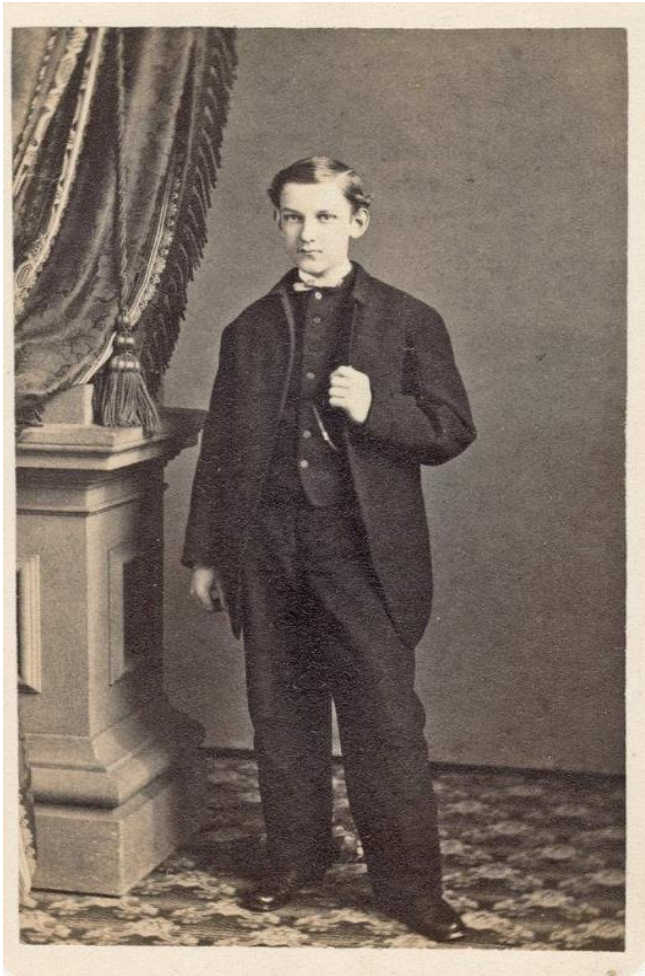
# TYPICAL SPECIAL OCCASIONS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

In the second half of the 19th century photography was often used to record certain events and rites of passage within the family.



Babies were photographed either in the arms of their mother or nurse, or when they were old enough to sit unaided. Sometimes the problem of getting them to sit still was solved by tying them round the waist with a sash to the chair back, or by having holes in the backdrop for a mother to put her hands through to hold the child (the hands are sometimes visible!)

Small boys were sometimes photographed when they were first dressed in trousers, rather than the skirt of babyhood (usually around 4 or 5). This ritual was known as “breeching”.



Teenage boys were photographed when they started their first job, around 13 or 14. The telltale signs are a new-looking adult-style suit, and possibly the first watch and chain. If the boy is joining the Royal or Merchant Navy, (which was customarily about 13), he will be wearing his uniform.

Engagements were commemorated by photographs, sometimes of the couple together, or the girl on her own. If the photographer has posed the girl with her left hand in a prominent position and wearing a ring, then it is likely that it is an engagement photograph.

Wedding photographs were very popular, as they are still. However wedding photographs taken outside the photographer's studio were rare before the 1890s, except for weddings among wealthy and aristocratic families who could pay for the photographer to attend at the bride's home or reception venue. Studio portraits before 1900 usually only show the bride and groom.

Because many brides wore a fashionable best dress and hat or bonnet, rather than a white or otherwise obviously "weddingy" dress, sometimes bridal couples are difficult to identify.





As the photograph could be taken some time after the actual ceremony, the bride is not always carrying flowers. Sometimes a clue is given with a prominent hand with a ring, as in the engagement photo.



Photos of wedding groups, often taken outdoors, with a garden backdrop (or in the case of lower class families, the backyard wall) become much more common from the late 1890s onwards. Studio photographs still were popular, and in the 1920s and 1930s could include quite a large wedding group. Photographs taken outside the church or wedding venue did not become fashionable until the 1930s.



Three-generation or four-generation photographs were a popular Victorian convention, in which the first grandchild, or great-grandchild, was photographed with its parent, grandparent and great-grandparent, who usually held the child.

Silver and Golden Weddings were also occasions for family group photographs.



Many photographs survive (mostly in postcard format) of men in First World War uniform with their wives and sometimes a child or baby. These were presumably taken after the men had received their call-up papers, and before they were sent to the battlefields of Europe.



Postcard-format prints also can be found of women dressed in the uniform of their new (and often groundbreaking) War roles, as members of the armed forces, nurses, VAD volunteers, Land Girls, and munitions workers, a valuable record of this emancipation and important change in women's status.



# PHOTOGRAPHS OF HOLIDAYS & OUTINGS

With the expansion of the railway system in the mid 19th century and especially after the introduction of Bank Holidays in 1871, the family holiday (or day trip, in the case of the working classes) became an institution and was commemorated by photography.



Photographers' studios proliferated in popular seaside resorts such as Brighton and Torquay, and middle-class families went to have their photographs taken there, often against a backdrop painted to show a beach, and with real sand and rocks as props.

From the later 1880s when the wet collodion process became simplified and photographic equipment and developing chemicals etc became more portable, photographers took to the beaches and promenades in search of customers, with their "studio" in a handcart, so photographs of holidaymakers actually sitting on the beach (or visiting popular beauty spots) become more common. Often the photographs are tinplates (printed on very thin iron plates) which was a safer and quicker process than printing from glass plates when on location.

Photographers were also aware of the commercial possibilities of group photographs taken of outings, such as Church and Sunday School annual trips, and of the huge annual religious processions or "walks" that took place in many northern towns. Such photos almost all date from after 1900, and were produced in the cheap and affordable postcard format.

In the same way that photographers in seaside towns photographed their clients in a fictional beach setting, holidaymakers and travellers in the Swiss Alps could go to a studio in Zermatt and other climbing centres and be photographed in full alpine kit in front of a mountain background, whether or not they seriously intended to do any climbing. It is likely that the photographer had appropriate outfits and equipment for hire in his studio. These photographs appear to date from the mid 1860s to the 1880s.

## BOOK LIST

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