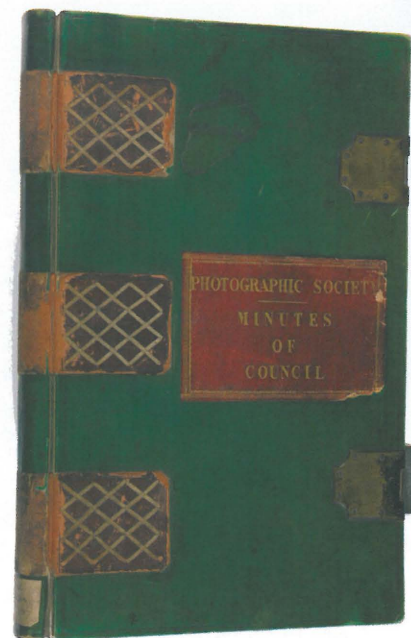
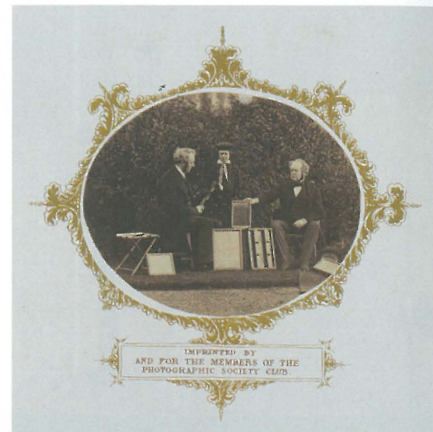
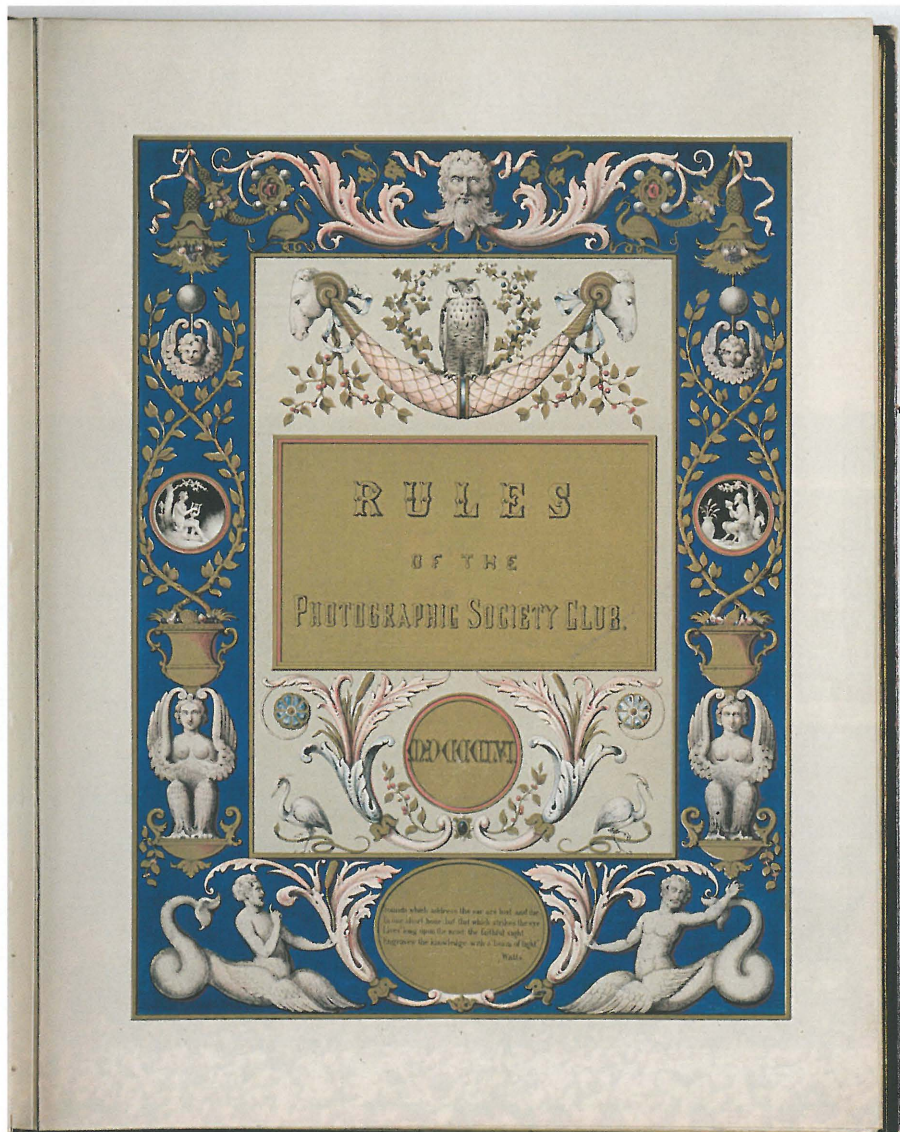


THE INTERCHANGE OF THOUGHT & EXPERIENCE

As The Society enters its 160th year, Michael Pritchard FRPS looks back to its origins in 1853, how it was formed, and what it accomplished in its first year



Above: Rules of The Photographic Society Club, 1856, from the Lord Chief Baron's [Sir Frederick Pollock FRS] copy of The Photographic Society Club album. The Society's first group was formed in 1856. Called the Photographic Society Club, it was designed 'to promote union and friendly feeling among members of the Photographic Society'. It consisted of a President and 21 members, all of whom had to be members of the Society, and met and dined together five times a year. One dinner took place in the country, at a venue 'favourable to photographic pursuits'.

Top right: Members of the Photographic Society Club, 1856, from the Lord Chief Baron's [Sir Frederick Pollock FRS] copy of The Photographic Society Club album.

Above right: Photographic Society. Minutes of Council [1853-1857], minute book.

All images: © The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Media Museum, Bradford.

For any organisation to have been around for more than a century, it must have met the needs of those it was designed to serve. The Royal Photographic Society is no different, and its original aims of 'promoting the art and science of photography' are as relevant today as they were when it was formed.

The Society has evolved as the interests and needs of its members have changed and, particularly, as photography itself has changed - not least since the mid-1980s.

Origins

The Photographic Society, as The RPS was originally known, was not the first photographic society, but it was the first to be formally organised and to have been in continuous existence in the same form since its foundation.

It took only a few years from the announcement of photography in 1839 for the first loose gathering of amateur photographers to come together. The Edinburgh Calotype Club consisted of 'keen experimentalists', and was formed in 1843. Its dozen members met to look at calotypes, to discuss photographic art, and to socialise. With such a small number of members it had no need of rules or officers to run it.

In London, the publisher Joseph Cundall, along with Robert Hunt, started the Calotype Society - later known as the Photographic Club - in 1847. This, again, was a gathering of around a dozen photographers or 'gentlemen amateurs', who met regularly to discuss their experiments in photography and to exchange photographs. Among its members were Frederick Scott Archer, Hugh Welch Diamond, Edward Kater and Sir William Newton, who would later become founder members of the Photographic Society.

In mid-1852 the United Kingdom's first properly organised photographic society was formed in Leeds by J W Ramsden, who later became a Society member. The Leeds Photographic Society operated under properly constituted rules, and as early as July 1852 it circulated the work of its members. In 1878, it became a section of the Leeds Field Naturalist Club, and was re-established as an independent society in 1881.

Towards a London Photographic Society

By the late 1840s and early 1850s, photography was beginning to move on technically from the daguerreotype and Henry Talbot's calotype processes.

In March 1851, Frederick Scott Archer published in *The Chemist* details of his collodion process, which represented a significant advance on the calotype. It used collodion on glass to carry light sensitive chemicals, and although it would take further work to refine it for commercial use, amateurs and commercial studios were able to use it freely, as it was not protected by patent.

Talbot claimed that his 1841 calotype patent applied to Archer's process, but the courts eventually dismissed this in 1854. This uncertainty held back photography's progress in the meantime.

The Great Exhibition was also important. Opening on 1 May 1851, by the time it closed on 15 October 1851, it had brought together 700 exhibitors and over 6 million visitors. Photography was exhibited as both a fine art and as a branch of science, and over 700 photographs were shown, as well as cameras, lenses and associated photographic apparatus.

The exhibition was important in raising awareness of photography as an art form, and by late 1851, as Roger Taylor has noted, there was a campaign underway to establish a photographic society in London. A detailed prospectus for a photographic society, held by the National Media Museum, possibly written by Roger Fenton, appears to date between January 1851-June 1852.

The main difficulty a new society faced was to convince Talbot to release members from any restriction imposed by his calotype patent. Robert Hunt met with Talbot, but despite him amending the restrictions on practicing photography, no agreement was reached.

In April 1852, a committee planning for a London society published a *Proposal for the formation of a Photographical Society* in the national press, directly challenging Talbot over his right to limit photography by amateurs 'for their own amusement', and to bounce Talbot into relaxing his conditions.

Talbot was understandably upset, but he agreed to meet a group comprising Frederick Berger, Roger Fenton, Peter Wickens Fry, Peter Le Neve Foster, Thomas Goodeve, Robert Hunt and Sir William Newton. Reconciling Talbot's interpretation of the patent laws with those of the committee proved impossible, and their efforts were adjourned indefinitely.

Despite this setback, discussions continued under the auspices of the Society of Arts, with Sir Charles Eastlake, Director of the National Gallery, and Lord Rosse, President of the Royal Society, taking the lead as official representatives of art and science in the UK.

After two months, an agreement with Talbot was reached. In a formal letter dated 30 July 1852, Talbot acknowledged the impact of the Great Exhibition as heralding a new era for photography, and he presented his invention to the country.

Later that year, the Society of Arts held the first exhibition devoted to the art and science of photography. It opened on 22 December 1852, and was organised by Joseph Cundall and Philip Delamotte. Nearly 400 photographs were shown, and such was its success, it was extended to meet the public demand.

The inaugural meeting

Following the agreement with Talbot, the committee that had attempted to form a photographic society earlier in 1852 was resurrected. It resolved to recommend the establishment of a photographic society, and placed advertisements in newspapers announcing an inaugural meeting on Thursday, 20 January 1853, in the Great Rooms of the Society of Arts in John Street, Adelphi, London. The meeting was open to 'ladies and gentlemen interested in Photography', and this was the inaugural meeting of the Photographic Society.

The chair was taken by Sir Charles Eastlake, after Talbot had declined the presidency of the new society, with Roger Fenton acting as

Honorary Secretary to the provisional committee.

Eastlake addressed the meeting, and thanked Talbot for having 'thrown open his invention to the enterprise of men of science, of amateurs and artists'. Fenton read a report from the provisional committee, which described the informal gatherings at members' houses, the impetus given by the Great Exhibition which had increased the number of photographers, and the failed discussions with Talbot. The meeting then moved on to consider establishing a society to be called the Photographic Society.

Le Neve Foster, Dr Playfair and Dr Booth, acting on behalf of the Council of the Society of Arts, proposed that, rather than setting up a new society, photography might be better served by establishing a photographic committee under the Society of Arts, which would provide funds and rooms. Those attending the meeting disagreed, and the original proposal for a separate society was passed, with only a few dissenters.

A Council was elected for the first year, and rules agreed which allowed for a president, three vice presidents, a secretary, treasurer, and 19 other members forming a Council.

Rule 9 stated that ladies would be eligible as members. Admission was set at one guinea (£1.05), with an annual subscription of one guinea. Life membership cost 10 guineas.

Meetings were to be held at the Society of Arts on the first Thursday in the month between November and June, starting at 8pm. The rules also established a gallery, at which members could exhibit pictures for sale, from which the Society would take a 10% commission.

THE FIRST YEAR

Meetings

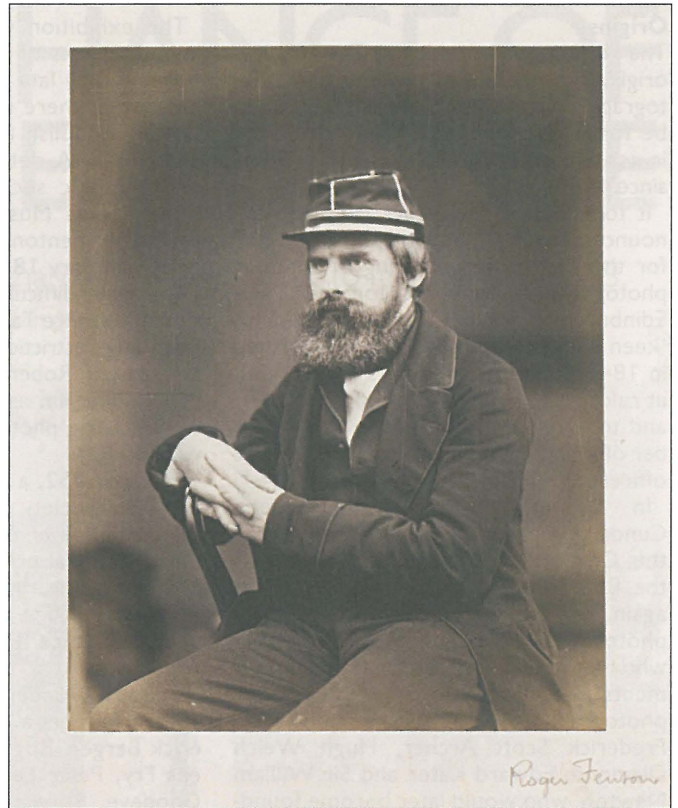
The first proper meeting of the new Photographic Society was held on 3 February 1853, at which new members were elected, papers read, and photographs 'chiefly of wood scenery, taken by Sir William J Newton', were exhibited. This was the basic structure of subsequent meetings.

At the second, on 3 March, a letter was read from the Society of Arts, asking for cooperation in forming a collection of photographs to circulate among 'the Literary and Scientific Institutions and Mechanics Institutions throughout the United Kingdom'.

At the third, Mr Fry showed the first camera made in London, and a 'chromatic Daguerreotype' by Mr Niépce. Sixty 'magnificent' Calotype views of Venice were not shown, as time ran out.

The first annual general meeting was held on 2 February 1854, and a series of resolutions from Mr Ripplingham revised the original rules, so that the president and vice president could stand after holding office for one year and be re-elected.

Retiring members of Council became eligible for re-election. More controversially,



Above: J J Forrester, portrait with a stereo tailboard camera, 1856, from B B Turner's copy of *The Photographic Society Club album*.
 Right: Roger Fenton, 1856, from the Lord Chief Baron's [Sir Frederick Pollock FRS] copy of *The Photographic Society Club album*.
 Both images: © The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the National Media Museum, Bradford.

a resolution proposing that future vacancies in the Council could not be taken by any person practicing photography professionally with a view to profit or dealing in photographic materials or apparatus was passed after discussion. It was later rescinded.

Council

In addition to the monthly members' meetings, Council met weekly. It was preoccupied by a number of issues over its first year. The first meeting of Council, which took place on 27 January, discussed the relationship between the Society and the Society of Arts. There was a feeling that the new Photographic Society needed to distance itself from the Society of Arts, and a committee was established to find new premises.

Various establishments, including the Chemical Society and others in Upper Regent Street were inspected, and by May the Society finally settled on rooms from mid-Summer at the Botanical Society for one year, at a rent of £15 p.a. In 1854, new rooms were taken at 21 Regent Street, and the Society applied for rooms in the proposed new building on the site of Burlington House, London.

Administration

The administration of the Society was also considered, and Council agreed that a proper manner of keeping the minutes of the Council and of its committees and other records was a necessity. Minute, voucher and correspondence books were authorised for purchase.

On 31 March, Council resolved to thank Mr Vignoles 'for his very valuable laborious and persevering exertions in effecting the organization of the Society and arranging all its business details, and for his liberality in permitting Council to hold their weekly meetings at his Chambers'.

A clerk was employed by the Society to copy meeting reports into the Society record books, and in May Mr Williams was engaged as an assistant secretary at the rate of £30 p.a.

A register of members was also established, and it was proposed to print a list of members and their addresses for distribution with the *Journal*. Membership recruitment was supported by placing advertisements in the two main London daily newspapers, *The Times* and *The Morning Chronicle*.

On 10 March 1853, Council read letters from Captain Scott and Mr Dancer on the subject of appointing local representatives in different parts of the Kingdom. Fenton was ordered to consider and prepare a report on the subject.

General business was also reported to the Council. On 30 March 1854, letters were read from the Deputy Inspector General of Fortifications and the Hydrographer of the Admiralty, asking for advice on the application of photography to military and naval purposes.

On 19 May, a letter from the Secretary of the Leeds Photographic Society was read proposing a 'junction', or joining, of the two societies. Council set up a sub-committee to consider the proposal, which seems to have come to nothing. The Ipswich Philosophical Society asked to receive the *Journal* for free, which was acceded to.

The Society was also the recipient of gifts. These included photographs from M Regnault, a photomicrograph of a caterpillar by Mr Pratz of Vienna, copies of the French journal *La Lumière*, and a series of pictures taken in 1840 and 1841 by M Bayard.

Journal

The need to publish a journal had been defined as essential even before the Society was set up, and Council appointed a publication committee at its 10 February meeting. Council resolved that 'A Journal be established for the dissemination among the members of this Society of the communications made at the Ordinary meetings, and of information bearing upon the interests of the Photographic Art, and that the *Journal* be published monthly'.

The committee was authorised 'to make the best and most economical arrangements with a respectable firm for the printing and publication of the *Journal* of the Society'.

The committee resolved on 16 February to propose to Council that 'the proceedings of the Society ought to be published under the name of *The Journal of the Photographic Society*'. It also proposed that the *Journal* should appear

promptly after each meeting, and 1000 copies be printed of the first number, so that free copies could be sent to all the clubs of London and to scientific and literary institutions, thereafter 500 copies would be printed.

The following week, Messrs Taylor and Francis were appointed printers and publishers of the *Journal*. The first number was ready by 3 March.

Such was the demand that a second edition of 800 copies of the first number was ordered, and throughout the first year reprints and larger prints runs were approved.

By the end of 1853, it was ordered that, 'The standing number of the *Journal* now printed be 4000 and that the back numbers as they may require printing be made up to 4000'. By May 1854, the print run was reduced to 2750, with the *Journal* stereotyped for future reprinting if required.

Consideration was also given to publishing it twice a month, and this was agreed on 21 April. The same meeting also resolved that the *Journal* would be sent free of charge to Henry Talbot.

In June, Council considered complaints regarding 'the want of punctuality in the delivery of the publication', and it resolved to write to the publishers.

To produce the meeting reports, a shorthand writer was employed, although his services were discontinued in January 1854.

Arthur Henfrey FRS was requested at the 10 March Council to edit the next two numbers of the *Journal* in return for £5. He was appointed Editor from 1 May, at a salary of £60 p.a. but only stayed in post for a short time.

Exhibitions

Producing a Society Exhibition was also a key objective for the new Society. The Society of Arts had proposed that the Society cooperate with it in a plan for forming a collection of photography to be sent around the country for exhibition. Council agreed to support this, and Mr Foster and Mr Fenton were set up as a committee to draw up an answer to the Society of Arts request.

The Society was keen to mount its own exhibition of photography in London, but the difficulty of securing suitable premises continually delayed it. On 17 March, the subject of rooms for an exhibition came up and the rooms of the Water Color [sic] Society were looked at, but proved to be unsuitable. Eventually, on 2 June, Council resolved that 'in consequence of it not being possible to obtain suitable Rooms, the Council have considered it advisable to postpone the exhibition of photographs to the latter part of the year'.

Even this proved to be optimistic. Council increased the amount it was prepared to spend on rent from £20 to £30, and on 1 December Fenton was able to report that he had engaged the room of the Society of British Artists in Suffolk

Street, Pall Mall, for an exhibition during January and February 1854 at a rent of £25 per month.

A committee was formed to manage it, comprising Fenton, Berger, Hunt, Rosling and Vignoles. Advertisements were placed in a range of papers and journals advertising the exhibition, and it opened to the public on 4 January 1854.

The previous day, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had been given a private tour by the President, Sir Charles Eastlake, and Fenton, and they had bought several prints.

In February, Council agreed that the 'working classes' could be admitted in the evenings at a cost of 3d per person, and that this was to be advertised in *The Times* until the exhibition's close at the end of February.

On 9 February 1854, a letter from the secretary of the Committee of the Dundee Photographic Exhibition was read, and Council agreed to deliver photographs belonging to the Society for exhibition in Dundee. Many of the photographs sent north had been included in the Society exhibition.

Royal Patronage

At the Society's fifth ordinary meeting on 2 June, Fenton read an extract from the 12 May Council minutes, which noted that Council considered, 'It is of the highest importance to the interests of the Photographic Society that H M the Queen and H R H The Prince Albert should become patrons of the Society'. The President was asked to take action to secure it. On the afternoon of the 2nd, the President received a letter from Mr C B Phipps at Buckingham Palace dated 30 May, stating, 'I am commanded to inform you that the Queen and Prince will willingly give their Patronage to the Photographic Society'.

This raised the question of whether the Society's name should be changed to reflect the Royal patronage. The Council minutes of 16 June recorded that 'the subject of the assumption of the title of "Royal Photographic Society" having been considered. Resolved that it is not expedient to take any further steps in that matter for the present'. The Society eventually became 'Royal' in 1894.

To the future

The Photographic Society had a busy first year. Council was preoccupied with ensuring that papers were ready for meetings, and with setting up the administrative procedures of the new Society. Some of the rules regarding elections to Council were amended before its first year was over.

The finances of the Society do not feature significantly in the Council minutes, but the *Journal* report of the first annual meeting held on 2 February 1854 reported cash and assets at a healthy £406 17s.

Much like today, the Society was approached by other organisations as a point of contact for photographic advice.

The need to publish a *Journal* and to produce an exhibition were the Society's two main concerns, and were both realised and successfully continue to the present day. The occasional late receipt of the *Journal* and finding appropriate exhibition venues are problems still present.

The work undertaken by Fenton and the other members of the Photographic Society's Council in that first year did much to establish the Society on a sound long term footing. Over the following years, the Society had occasional financial or political crises, which it successfully weathered.

The aims of The Society and how it achieved these through its administration and membership have evolved and continue to do so as imaging changes. Despite this, Fenton and the members of its first Council would surely recognise The Society today as the direct descendant of their Society.

Dr Michael Pritchard FRPS

info

Most of the information for this article comes from *The Society's Minutes of General Meetings*

1853, and *Minutes of Council 1853-1857, held on behalf of The Society by the National Media Museum, Bradford*

FURTHER READING

There is no full history of The Society, but the following are useful:

- John Hannavy (editor) *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* Routledge, 2007. ISBN 978-0415972352
- J Dudley Johnston *The Story of the RPS [1853-1869]*, London: The Royal Photographic Society, 1946
- Marian Kamlisch Claudet, *Fenton and the Photographic Society. History of Photography*, 26 (4), Winter 2002, pp. 296-306.
- Grace Seiberling with Carolyn Bloore *Amateurs, Photography, and the mid-Victorian Imagination* London: Chicago University Press, 1986. ISBN 978-0226744988
- *All the Mighty World. The Photographs of Roger Fenton, 1852-1860* London: Yale University Press, 2004. ISBN 978-0300104905
- Roger Taylor *Impressed by Light. British Photographs from Paper Negatives, 1840-1860*, London: Yale University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0300124057
- Roger Taylor Claudet, *Fenton and the Photographic Society. History of Photography*, 27 (4), Winter 2003, pp 386-388

Acknowledgments

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