

## **Louis A. A. Le Prince and the Whitley Family**

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Did you know that the first great film mystery began in the garden of a house in Roundhay? That one of the actors was to die within a few days of her performance? That the cameraman was to disappear two years later and two of the other actors were to die as a result? The garden belonged to Roundhay Cottage, the home of Joseph Whitley.

Joseph Whitley, the eldest son of Thomas and Susannah Whitley (nee Halstead), was born at Wakefield in 1816, he was christened in the Salem Independent Chapel, St. George Street, 24 November 1816. He had three younger brothers, Samuel, Charles and George, their father Thomas was an engineer working in Wakefield.

Joseph became a brass founder by trade, and on 17 February 1842, at the age of 25 he was married at the Zion Chapel in Wakefield to Sarah Robinson also of Wakefield, the daughter of a stone mason. At the time of his marriage Joseph was already working in Leeds as a brass founder and living at Lilac Terrace, off Regent Street

In 1844 Joseph founded his own business as:- 'Joseph Whitley, Brass Founder, 71 Byron Street, Leeds'. A year later he established a foundry at South Row, near the South Market, with lodgings at Lower Beckett Street. A Leeds directory of 1847 states:- 'Joseph Whitley Brass founder & Fitter up of mechanical brass work, 5 South Row', this foundry was later known as the 'Tablet Works' The family now lived at South Brook Street.

Joseph and Sarah's eldest son John Robinson Whitley was christened at Leeds in December 1843, their second son Joseph was born June 1845 and their daughter Sarah Elizabeth was born 4 January 1846. By 1851 the family was living at Croft Buildings, Water Lane. The census shows, Joseph and Sarah with their parents and a fourteen year old house servant. The now 8 year old John was not there, perhaps he was already away at school for Joseph was very ambitious for his children.

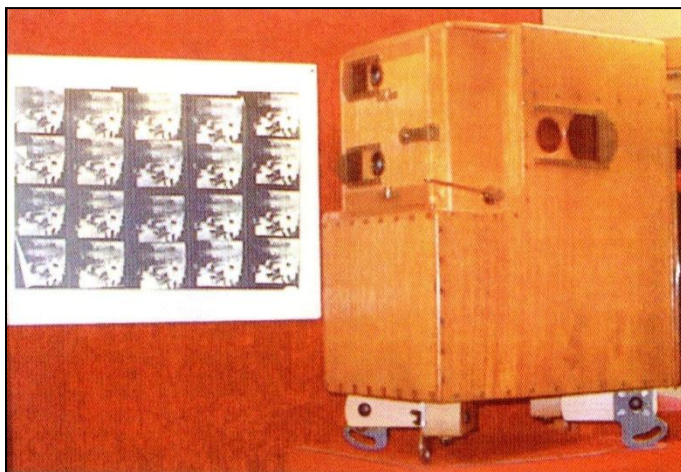
The foundry business grew steadily through the boom years of the 1850's and early 1860's. With the expansion of the railways across Britain and the rest of Europe, the firm took advantage of these new markets. John Whitley had been sent to Leipzig University to complete his education, where his professor gave him an introduction to a postgraduate

chemistry student, Louis Aime Augustin Le Prince. Le Prince had been trained as an artist in Paris, where he was engaged in oil painting, pastel portraits, and the painting of fine of art pottery. His father was an artillery major in the French Army and an intimate friend of Louis Daguerre, the pioneer of photography. The two young men became friends and John recognised that Louis Le Prince's knowledge of modern languages could be very useful to his family firm. In 1866 John invited his friend to visit Leeds, where he eventually joined the firm of Whitley Partners. In 1867 Louis married John's sister Sarah Elizabeth Whitley, (known as Lizzie to her family), who also had a keen love of art, and had trained as an artist under Carrier Belleuse, the director of the French Government pottery of Sevres.

Joseph Whitley was a member of the Royal Society of Engineers, a remarkably clever innovator, who amongst other things, developed a method of spinning large cylinders and pipes from molten metal. The firm expanded, in 1857 opening a larger foundry at 47 Bowman Lane, with the family living next door at No. 48. In the census of 1861 he is shown employing only 2 men and 4 boys. This was soon to change:- In 1860 Joseph realised the potential of a new type of steam valve designed by Samuel Peet of Boston, Massachusetts and made an agreement to produce the valve, under licence, in Leeds, paying a royalty to Mr. Peet. To manufacture these new products extra plant and machinery was needed and both Joseph and John Whitley were again eager to expand. To finance this expansion father and son solicited a number of heavy loans from friends and other firms. Among these investors was Le Prince, who now became a partner in the firm of Whitley Partners, and took on the responsibility for the marketing in France. In 1865 Joseph moved his family to the growing suburb of Roundhay where he purchased Roundhay Cottage.

In July 1870 the France of Louis Napoleon's Second Empire declared war on Prussia. The war was expected to last only a few weeks, France mobilized enthusiastically and early victories sent a wave of exultation through Paris. This was short lived however, six weeks later on the 4 September, following a crushing defeat at Sedan, the Second Empire fell and Louis Napoleon was taken prisoner. The citizens of Paris once again became the heart of Republican France and prepared for a long siege.

Le Prince concerned for his mother's safety, agreed with his brother Albert, that he would travel to Paris and bring his mother and Albert's wife back to Leeds until the hostilities ended. The train bringing his sister-in-law to Paris from her home in Dijon was late. While waiting at the station he was accused of being a Prussian spy, arrested and taken to a local prison. With the help of a reporter of the London Daily News, who he had met in Leeds, and Lord Russell the British ambassador, he was eventually released. To the relief of his wife Elizabeth (Lizzie), now pregnant with their first child Gabriella Marie, Louis arrived safely back in Leeds together with his mother and sister-in-law. Her relief was short lived however, Louis returned to France, where as an officer of volunteers, he served throughout the siege of Paris. When in January 1871 Paris surrendered, he took the first opportunity to return to his family, now living at the Whitley Home in Roundhay.



**'Replica of the Camera made by Louis Le Prince  
in Armley Mills Museum'**

Early the same year John Whitley had taken over as managing director of Whitley Partners from his father. He had ambitious plans for expansion, building a new foundry on an adjacent site in Hunslet Road and renaming it 'The Railway Works'. With the help of Le Prince, John travelled extensively, setting up company stands at international exhibitions in Paris 1867, Leeds 1868, Lyons 1872, Moscow 1872, and Vienna 1873. The firm

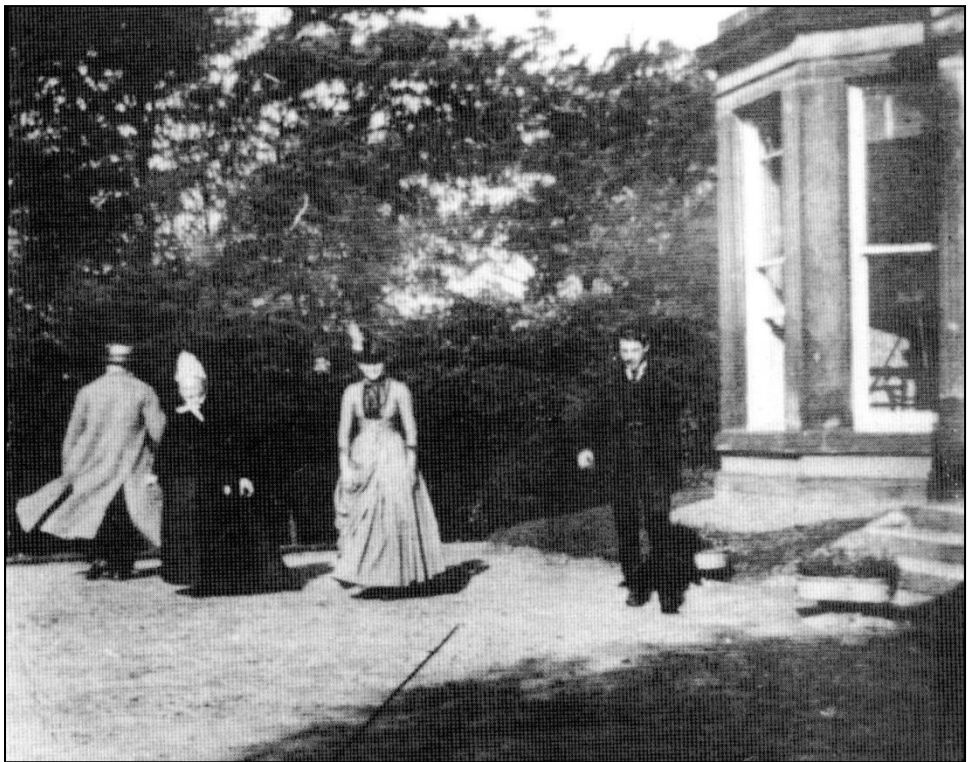
was soon in difficulties, by 1874 large debts had accumulated and the price of its shares fell steeply. Joseph believed his son had over extended the firm and was 'wasting money'. A prolonged battle between father and son eventually resulted in John being replaced as managing director and Joseph taking back control of the company he had founded to avoid its liquidation.

John Whitley went to live in France for a few years out of reach of angry creditors. The relationship between Joseph and his son-in-law Le Prince however, remained warm and friendly. On his return to Leeds after the siege of Paris, Le Prince and Lizzie carried out experiments of colour photography on metal and pottery, fixing the colours in a special kiln built in the Whitley home at Roundhay. Their first School of Applied Art was opened at Roundhay Cottage in 1874. In 1875 they exhibited chinaware, painted and fired by the Le Princes and their pupils, at the Yorkshire Exhibition of Arts and Manufacture. In 1877 Le Prince used private means to move his growing family, they now had six children and three servants, to a large house at 33 Park Square, where they established the Technical School of Applied Art, the first in Leeds. Their portraits of Queen Victoria and W. E. Gladstone were placed in the foundation stone of Cleopatra's Needle, along with other records of the time.

Louis and Lizzie Le Prince, through their interest in applied art, now became highly skilled in interior decoration, materials and design techniques. In 1881 John Whitley became interested in the Lincrusta-Walton process of manufacturing decorative wall and floor coverings. He persuaded his brother-in-law to go to New York to assist in the introduction of the process. When he arrived in America Le Prince discovered the patent rights had been sold to another company. Lizzie and the rest of the family had joined him, so he decided to stay on as the manager of a group of French artists producing circular panoramas. Lizzie began teaching art at the Institute for the Deaf on Washington Heights, her husband being a friend of the principal, was allowed to use the institutes well-equipped workshop for his experiments.

As early as 1885 Le Prince began building a moving picture camera, filing his first United States patent for both single lens and four lens machines on November 2 1886. He sailed for Europe to obtain patents for his apparatus, arriving in Leeds in May 1887, where he began work on a one-lens machine. He then stayed with his mother in Paris, where he took out his French and other Continental patents, and where he also made and demonstrated a camera with 16 lenses.

Early in October 1888 a series of pictures was taken in the grounds of Joseph Whitley's home Roundhay Cottage. In notes detailing his father's experiments, Adolphe W. Le Prince, Louis and Lizzie's eldest son, described the making of these films. In one film Joseph and Sarah Whitley are seen dancing together in circles in their garden, with Adolphe dancing a little jig on his own and a self conscious Annie Hartley, Sarah's companion, looking on. Another film shows Adolphe moving about and playing a melodeon on the steps of Roundhay Cottage. Adolphe states that, the Leeds series, showing traffic moving over Leeds Bridge, was taken at a later date. Thus Roundhay became the site of the first moving picture to be taken using a single lens movie camera. Mrs Sarah Whitley died on 24 October 1888, proving conclusively that the film must have been taken before that date.



**'Louis Le Prince First Moving Picture'**

In September 1890 Louis A. A. Le Prince mysteriously disappeared, whilst visiting his family in France before returning to his home in New York. He was last seen boarding a train for Paris at the station in Dijon, after visiting his brother's family. He never arrived at Paris and despite extensive searches by his friends and family, no trace of him was ever found.

The family now had great difficulty in protecting Le Prince's patent rights, in America, seven years had to elapse after a disappearance before a legal presumption of death could be made. It was therefore 1897 before the family could administer his estate and fight the counter claims now being made. In August 1891 Thomas Edison applied for three patents for moving-picture apparatus.

Joseph Whitley's health had deteriorated rapidly since the death of his wife Sarah. The pressure of trying to restore the fortunes of Whitley Partners and the worry over the disappearance of his son-in-law, had taken their toll. Nevertheless he travelled to America to do what he could to help his daughter and give her the latest news of the fruitless search for her husband. He arrived, accompanied by one of Lizzie's cousins from Leeds, in a bath chair and looking very ill. Joseph Whitley died in New York on 11 January 1891, he was buried in Trinity Cemetery 153rd Street. His body was later returned to Leeds and reburied alongside his beloved wife Sarah, in the Cemetery at St. John's Roundhay, on 19 December 1891



**'The Whitley Grave'**



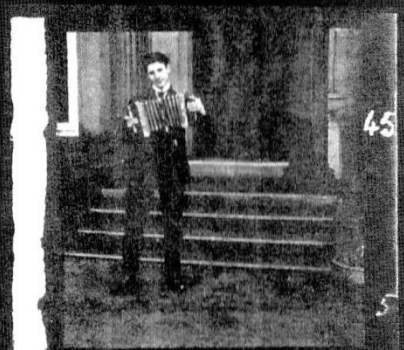
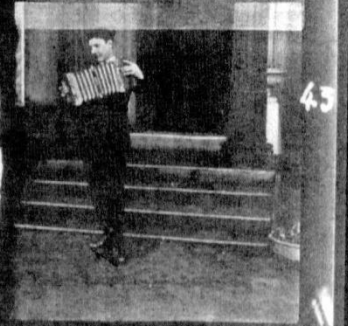
Since the disappearance of his father Adolphe Le Prince, who was convinced that his father had been 'put away' for his invention, spent his time searching for him and fighting for his recognition as the true inventor of moving pictures. In the late summer of 1901 Adolphe's body was found in the Point O' Woods sand dunes on Fire Island, New York, USA. He died of a shot to the head, the official verdict was suicide.

When Marie Le Prince, Louis and Lizzie's eldest daughter, came to Leeds in December 1930 to unveil a plaque in memory of her father, she stayed at Roundhay in her Grandfather's old house, where she was born sixty years earlier and walked in the garden where those first films had been taken. The house was by then the home of the architect Sir Edwin Airey and had been renamed Oakwood Grange. The house was demolished in 1972, all that remains are the two gateposts at the end of Oakwood Grange Lane.



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**'Leeds Bridge by Clifford Stead'**