

SEVENOAKS & DISTRICT PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

(a 1920s forerunner of Sevenoaks Camera Club)

A partial history researched by Derek Medhurst

"Photographic society formed at Sevenoaks"

So ran the headline over an article in the *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser* of Friday 19 May 1922. A meeting had been held on Friday 12 May at "Westfield", Dartford Road, the home of Mr W H House, to consider the formation of the Sevenoaks and District Photographic Society. Colonel J M Rogers was in the chair. Others present were "Mrs Rogers, Dr Gordon Ward, W H House, G Bradbury, T E Weller, M Colebrook, N Payne, C W Payne, J Brunton [a local professional photographer], W Ansell, E Cable, Thorogood and Baker."

Mr House had suggested the formation of a society in Sevenoaks, and had lent his house for the meeting. "It seemed to him a most extraordinary thing that there had never been a Photographic Society in Sevenoaks." He understood that the object would be to help beginners and to hold meetings where the experienced members could criticise the work of the beginners. He had "a vague idea that such societies had a dark room where members met periodically and showed their products where they were criticised by one another. They could therefore ... arrange for the experienced ones to help the inexperienced ones."

Although Mr House had made the suggestion, he said the idea had come primarily from Sevenoaks' Literary and Debating Society and "time and time again he had been asked by them to do something to bring about co-operative work." He had managed to gather the names of those present at this meeting to discuss the matter. It would not only be the experienced helping the inexperienced, he thought, because sometimes inexperienced workers found something that the experienced ones did not. So far as he knew, House said that photographers as a body were always willing to lend a hand.

He felt they needed to be financially well off before they could run a darkroom. And Sevenoaks would be limited unless they could get members from the outlying villages.

In winter they could hold lectures since there "would be no difficulty in getting lecturers". Technical lecturers could easily be obtained through the trade, they

were always willing to demonstrate anything they wished to push. He thought that if they were restricted to demonstrations their work would get uninteresting so they needed to decide if they would have lantern lectures. They should probably affiliate to the Royal Photographic Society and get slide shows through them. They would need to pay lecturers' expenses.

A proposal was carried as follows "We, as a meeting, think it advisable to form a Photographic Society in Sevenoaks and resolve to do so." Mr Wallis was appointed Hon Secretary "pro tem" and Colonel Rogers and Mr G Bradbury were appointed Sub Committee to compile rules and deal with the preliminary work.

Summer meetings were discussed and it was decided to leave the matter in the hands of the Sub Committee, but nevertheless outings should take place locally.

At the end of the meeting a large number of photos were examined that had been lent by: F G Mortimer, F Judge, M Odell, Capt Knight, A W Burgess, F J Prior, Bertram and Cox, and Miss A W Burgess.

A brief item about the intended society was also published in the *Amateur Photographer and Photography* magazine of 31 May.

The next meeting

The 16 June 1922 edition of the *Sevenoaks Chronicle & Kentish Courier* reported on the next meeting of the embryonic Society. It was again held at the home of W H House in Dartford Road, and a number of people interested in "the art and science of photography" were present. Mr W H House occupied the chair in the absence of Colonel Rogers.

They discussed the work of the Provisional Committee, and the rules for the Society were adopted. Summer outings were arranged and the officers were elected. Colonel Rogers was unanimously elected the first President of the Society. A number of ladies and gentlemen were to be asked to become Vice-Presidents. Mr G T Bradbury was appointed Hon Treasurer and Mr H G Wallis Hon Secretary, and a permanent Committee of five members was elected.

The object of the Society was “to foster photography in all its branches in the district and to enlist the helpful co-operation of all interested in the art of photography”. The professional photographers of Sevenoaks had been willing to help the Society and its members in every way possible. It was hoped to hold an annual exhibition of pictures, and during the winter months to have fortnightly meetings, consisting of lectures, demonstrations, etc. The annual subscription for membership was confirmed as 10s 6d (equivalent to 52.5p) per year for full members and 5s (25p) for junior members up to 18 years. Beginners would be “especially helped in all their difficulties”. The Hon Secretary was anxious to get in touch with all interested in this hobby, which at that time had become so popular, and asked for enquiries to be addressed to him at Lady Boswell's School House, Sevenoaks.

After getting the preliminaries in order, they applied to the Royal Photographic Society and the new Sevenoaks society was ultimately admitted as an affiliate at the RPS Council meeting on 11 September 1922.

Summer outings

Many of the Society’s summer 1922 outings were advertised in the weekly meetings column of the *Amateur Photographer and Photography* magazine so we have some knowledge of the early activities. They took place on Wednesday or Saturday afternoons; shops may have had early closing on those days, so in theory retail workers may have been able to take part but we don’t have any information about the diversity of the membership.

Date	Outing
Saturday 24 June 1922	Otford, meet at Church
Saturday 8 July	Sevenoaks Common, meet at Parish Church
Wednesday 12 July	Sevenoaks Common, meet at Parish Church
Saturday 22 July	Ightham, meet at George Hotel, Ightham
Saturday 26 August	Knole Park, meet at Sevenoaks Parish Church

The 16 August issue of AP reported that the weather in Kent had been so bad for the dates of the Society's outings that it had decided to repeat them, and add one or two more if possible, in the hope of better conditions. These are the further outing references I can find.

Date	Outing
Wednesday 30 August	Knole Park, meet at Sevenoaks Parish Church
Saturday 9 September	Sevenoaks Common, meet at Parish Church
Wednesday 13 September	Sevenoaks Common, meet at Parish Church
Wednesday 27 September	Otford, meet at Otford Church

An early embarrassment

The Society advertised in the local press and in *Amateur Photographer & Photography* an open meeting at which Capt C W R Knight "the well-known Tree Top Naturalist and Photographer" would give a lecture entitled "Further Tree-Top Discoveries", illustrated with his latest films and slides not before shown in Sevenoaks. The meeting was on Monday 9 October 1922 at the Club Hall, Sevenoaks. Reserved seats were priced at 5/9 (eq 29p) and 3/6 (eq 17.5p) and unreserved seats at 2/4 (13p) and 1/3 (eq 6p), tea included. Amongst the places where tickets could be obtained were the studio of Miss Beatrice Essenhigh Corke in London Road, and Cranbourne Studio in Bank Street (which may still have been a branch of Essenhigh Corke).

Unfortunately for the Society there was a complaint in the *Sevenoaks Chronicle & Kentish Courier* of 13 October 1922 from an attendee:

"Sir, Last night I attended Captain Knight's interesting lecture at the Club Hall - the first function of its kind I have been to since residing in this district.

I must, however, say that I was distinctly surprised that at the close of the lecture no member of the promoting Society rose to propose a vote of thanks to the lecturer for his successful efforts to amuse and educate us, and also to apologise to the lecturer and the public for not having taken the trouble to provide a proper apparatus for showing the film. Judging from the crowded

hall, the Photographic Society could quite well have afforded to have provided a proper machine for a show which must have added very considerably to their Bank balance. I enclose my card and remain 'STILL WONDERING'

Clearly the Society had recognised the problem because in the same edition was a letter to the editor from Mr Wallis, the Hon Secretary:

"Dear Sir, I shall be very much obliged if you will allow me to express in the next issue of your paper the regret of the Committee of the Sevenoaks and District Photographic Society that the Chairman, Colonel Rogers, at the lecture by Capt C W R Knight at the Club Hall on Monday evening last was unable to get to the front of the Hall to propose a vote of thanks to the lecturer owing to the continued applause at the close of the lecture and the subsequent general movement of the large audience to leave the Hall. Capt Knight, who is one of the Vice-Presidents of the Society, was good enough to deliver the lecture entirely without fee for the benefit of the Society, and the thanks of the Society are due to him, and I am sure all those who heard the lecture would have wished those thanks to be publicly expressed."

Despite this hiccough, the "Among the Societies" column of the *Amateur Photographer & Photography* of 11 October said that the syllabus of the Society was "very ingenious and tastefully carried out". (It is not clear exactly what they mean by the last phrase, perhaps it was the design and printing quality.) Meetings were held in the Cornwall Hall, two portfolios were already circulating, and it was hoped to hold an exhibition in the New Year.

The meeting on Monday 16 October 1922 was about "Home Portraiture". The 6 November meeting was the "Ascent of Mont Blanc and other Climbs", illustrated by lantern slides but the speaker was not named. On 20 November the presentation was "*Amateur Photographer and Photography* 1921 Slides" which was presumably a presentation of pictures published in the magazine over that year. On Monday 4 December local professional J Brunton (of St John's Studio, 40 Holly Bush Lane) gave a demonstration of "Tank Development". The final meeting of 1922, on 18 December, was about "Psychology in the Studio" by C. P. Crowther. I have not found much information about this speaker but he gave a talk with a similar title to Edinburgh PS in 1924, and the National Portrait Gallery has four of his portrait prints in their collection. He is also mentioned in the Radio Times between 1923

and 1925 as presenting talks on the “wireless” about photography, Japan and other subjects including children’s stories; his “day job” may well therefore have been in early broadcasting,

1923 activities

In June 1923 a number of members spent a very enjoyable afternoon taking photographs of the courtyard and gardens of Knole, by kind permission of the Right Hon. Lord Sackville.

Over October and November 1923, Tunbridge Wells hosted an Arts and Crafts Exhibition. The Society's Secretary, H G Wallis, was commended for his photographs "The Keeper's Cottage" and "Knole, Sevenoaks". Perhaps these had been taken at the June outing.

Later references

The 1924 edition of *Photograms of the Year* had a directory entry for the Society. This publication was an annual and contained a selection of photographs from the previous year and general photographic information. The entry showed that they met at the Cornwall Hall on the 1st and 3rd Mondays in the month, although there was no indication if this was all year round or if the summer months still had outings instead of indoor meetings.

Full subscriptions by 1924 had fallen by a quarter to 7/6 a year (eq 37.5p). Juniors now had an escalating subscription: their first year at 2/6 (12.5p) was half of the former level, rising to 5/- in their second year and then 7/6 in their third year.

The 1926 *Directory and Handbook of Sevenoaks and Neighbourhood* published by the Caxton and Holmesdale Press) had an entry for the society. The President J M Rogers (now a Lieutenant Colonel) was still at the top but now designated President instead of previously being Chairman, but the Hon Secretary was now G T Bradbury. Meeting days and location were the same as in 1924 but there was no information about subscriptions

In a newspaper report in February 1926 the Society Secretary was once again H G Wallis. (He was actually named as H G Wells, but one must assume a misprint for Wallis since there is no evidence that the famous author was Secretary and although he spent some time in the town it was over 30 years earlier.) Wallis gave a lantern lecture to the Shoreham Women's Institute on "The Darent Valley" and a Capt. Somes operated the lantern (slide projector) and sang some songs.

Gone but not quite forgotten

The *Sevenoaks Chronicle* of 25 February 1944 wrote that the years after the First World War had seen a number of new organisations spring up in the area, but many had had their days and "ceased to be". The Sevenoaks Photographic Society was one of a few mentioned in the article, but the paper stressed that they were not referring to the Sevenoaks Cine Club, which at the time was in abeyance owing to the war.

I have been unable to find any reference to the Sevenoaks & District Photographic Society after 1926, so sadly it probably had quite a short life.

Derek Medhurst
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