William Willis's Transatlantic Connection: Alfred Clements

Shannon Thomas Perich and Mike Ware

William Willis Senior (1814–1883) invented his "aniline" process for the reprographic copying of architectural plans and engineering drawings in 1864.[1] The UK patent rights were purchased from Willis by the photolithography company of Vincent Brooks (1815–1885)[2] in 1866. The modest premises provided for Willis and Brooks's aniline printing works in 1867 are shown in figure 1,[3] and their location is identifiable as the village of St. Mary Cray in Kent (now Greater London), where Brooks had his family home.

The printing-out frames are seen to be much larger than any camera negative, indicating that drawings were being photocopied (fig. 1a). It is highly probable that the "apprentice" figure in the photograph taken c. 1867 is William Willis Senior's employee, Alfred Clements (1846–?), then aged about twenty-one.[4]

In 1867 the American patent rights for Willis's aniline process were bought by Edward Anthony of E. & H. T. Anthony & Company, representing the American Photo-Lithographic Company of Brooklyn, New York. Consequently, Alfred Clements was sent to the United States in 1868, charged with the task of operating the process there. The print illustrated in figure 1 was probably conveyed to the United States by Clements himself; it is captioned on the verso, "Mr. Willis' Shop," and signed by J. W. Osborne, who donated his print collection to the Smithsonian Institution in 1888.[5] Osborne had arrived in the United States in 1864 and had set up the American Photo-Lithographic Company, remaining as its superintendent for a decade, so he was Clements's employer for some four years, hence the likely provenance of this photograph.

The aniline process enterprise turned out to be unsuccessful, however, so Clements turned his attention to photolithography. After four years service, he changed his employer to the New York Graphic Company in 1872.[6] During his time in the United States, Clements had kept in touch with the Willises, father and son, and on the occasion of his visit in 1877, William Junior renewed his acquaintanceship with the expatriate Briton, forming a partnership with Clements, who undertook to introduce the new Platinotype process to photographers in the United States through their firm, Willis & Clements of Philadelphia.

Notes

1. Willis 1864. A copy of an architectural plan that is an example of the "aniline" process is in the National Media Museum, Bradford, somewhat inaccurately labeled as "The first platinum print by Willis." See Stulik and Kaplan 2010, 6–7.

2. For more about Brooks, see F. Vincent Brooks, "My Life's Medley: An Autobiography by F. Vincent Brooks," online at vincentbrooks.blogspot.com.

3. See Wright 1996; Wright 2000.

4. An Alfred Clements is listed in the Register of Births for January 1846 in the Malling District of Kent. For a biographical note on Alfred Clements, see "Eastward at Sundown" on the website Photo-Seed, photoseed.com/collection/single/eastward-at-sundown/.

5. Wright 2004, 21.

6. [Woodbury] 1895, 216–17.

References

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Figure 1. Photographer unknown, inscribed: "Place where Mr Willis made his aniline pictures—Received from him about 1867–8." Albumen print, 26.7 × 28 cm. Courtesy of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., J. W. Osborne Collection.
1a. Detail showing an apprentice with printing-out frames.

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1a

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