Some Victorian Christmas Cards

Writing this in mid-December, an article about Christmas cards seems rather appropriate. By the time you get to see the finished product it will probably have lost that timeliness. But think of it rather as a dip into material culture; an opportunity to consider how things have changed, or not changed, in the last century and a half. And ponder the irony that this celebration of Christmas comes from the collection of a prominent local Jewish family.

The first commercial Christmas cards were produced in the 1840s, and by the 1880s were very popular. They didn't, on the whole, feature religious scenes or wintry landscapes, and there were no robins. Rather they portray spring and summer flowers, small animals and children. The examples here come from a scrap-book kept by David Lionel Salomons from 1879 to about 1898. Most of the contents are official invitations and menu cards from dinners at the Salomons' London house, but there are also Christmas cards. It isn't obvious why these particular ones were kept. They are mostly from family or close friends. **CJ**

Images courtesy of Salomons Museum.



A hand-made card from David's sister, Laura, in 'olde-English' style. The phrase 'God have you in his keeping' was much used after the loss of a loved one during the First World War, but here seems simply to hark back to the 13th and 14th centuries. 'On the Earth, Peace, Goodwill towards Men' is from the New Testament.





One of a series of cards from Joseph Swan and family - good friends of the Salomons. Swan was the inventor of the incandescent light-bulb. His house in Gateshead was the first in the world to be lit by light-bulbs. He moved to Lauriston in Bromley in 1883. The images inside his Christmas cards, as here, tend to have a light-based theme.





Left and below left: Small (c. 4" high) commercially-produced cards sent by Hilda and Mildred in 1881/4. Hilda and Mildred Lucas were the daughters of David's sister, Laura. Below right: Also commercially-produced though the message seems a little more personal: 'A humble wish I send / That happiness may ever be / The portion of my friend'.

The label appears to say 'From Fraulein 1879'. We don't know who she was.









Some of the cards have quite elaborate 'pop-up' mechanisms. Left: The roses pop up to display six smaller images, and the message 'Health, peace and Plenty. May they cheer you at this time of Year'. Below: The front of the card represents a bag of money, and opens to reveal five piles of coins. There is no message (it may not actually be a Christmas card).







Left: One of a series of cards from Frances Goldsmid, aunt of David's wife, Laura. Like others from her it is printed on a clear 'plastic', possibly celluloid.





In 1894 David was made Mayor of Tunbridge Wells and received cards from other local Mayors - including Hastings (above) and Eastbourne (left). They seemed to favour wintry local scenes, rather sombre for seaside resorts.





A pair of humorous cards. Above: supposedly from David's nephew, Arthur Paget, then aged about 4 or 5, so presumably chosen by his parents. Left: 'Fate cannot harm me, I have dined today.'

A novelty card from Laura, David's wife, in the form of an annual Season Ticket on the Health and Prosperity Line.

'Never part with it or lose it ... For Love's the only ticket in this world of din and strife, That can ever bring you safely to the Terminus of Life.'

'Terminus of Life' seems a rather unfortunate choice of words.

