

Harold Paynting Collection: photographs by the Commercial Photographic Company

Pictures Collection

Acquired 1983-90

This collection of 22,000 photographic negatives was a major acquisition for the State Library's Pictures Collection that ensured that this commercial photography archive was maintained intact rather than dispersed into fragments.

When Christine Downer, then picture librarian, made her initial submission to the Library's selection committee in 1983, she made a strong case for acquiring the material; it was of exceptional quality and covered a wide range of subjects not held by the Library. To support her application, samples of the images were printed for senior management to view.

Very few negative archives have survived from this period. Photographers had moved from using glass-plate negatives to nitrate and acetate film. Film had a number of advantages, and was lighter and allowed cameras to become mobile. But the film stock was unstable and degraded over time. In addition to the problem of technology changing, many photographers' archives were 'recycled' to extract the valuable silver content.¹

Although known as the Harold Paynting Collection, the 22,000 images (acquired in instalments) were actually the archive of the Commercial Photographic Company, run from the early 1930s by Lyle Fowler (1891-1969). The late Harold Paynting, a philanthropist and motoring enthusiast, had acquired the archive when the company folded in the late 1960s.

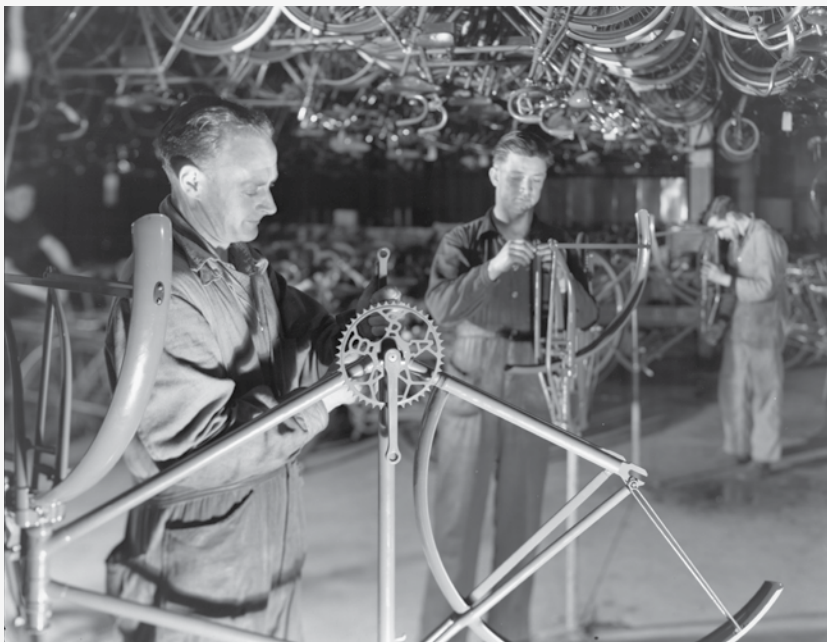
The Commercial Photographic Company was a truly appropriate name, as Fowler had photographed an extraordinary range of subjects. Using crisp black-and-white, large-format photography, the company documented building projects, advertising, products, commercial premises, trade fairs, and events such as the Victorian tour of champion cyclist Valda Unthank. One aspect of the archive that amused Library staff was the series of negatives documenting cracks and faults in buildings. Admittedly these are dull photographs, but they are an indication of the often mundane work a commercial photographer was employed to undertake.

When the collection was acquired, Christine Downer acknowledged that it could be used only once the negatives were printed. At that time, no one could foresee the introduction of digitising technology that would allow photographic negatives to be made available as positive images 'anywhere and anytime' via the Library's online catalogue. Digitisation has allowed thousands of images from the Harold Paynting Collection to be easily accessible online.



Top: Commercial Photographic Company, The public bar, Hancock's Essendon Hotel, c. 1938, from photographic negative. Pictures Collection, H83.221/4

Above: Commercial Photographic Company, Peters ice cream van, c. 1937, from photographic negative. Pictures Collection, H2011.52/209



Top: Commercial Photographic Company, Centenary Electricity Exhibition, 1935, from photographic negative. Pictures Collection, H92.20/14

Above: Commercial Photographic Company, Malvern Star bicycle factory, Melbourne, 1940, from photographic negative. Pictures Collection, H92.20/844



Top: Commercial Photographic Company, Time Theatre, operated by Hoyts, at 449 Whitehorse Road, Balwyn, 1941, from photographic negative. Pictures Collection, H92.20/1325

Above: Commercial Photographic Company, Clearing the site of the old Bijou Theatre at 219-225 Bourke Street, Melbourne, 1940, from photographic negative. Pictures Collection, H92.20/459