

## **A history of Photography teaching at the University of Westminster**

The Polytechnic's predecessor, the Royal Polytechnic Institution (RPI), was at the forefront of technological developments in Victorian science, including photography. As early as 1839, chemist J.T. Cooper experimented with 'photogenic drawing paper' and delivered lectures on the latest photographic processes such as daguerreotypes. In the same period, geologist L. L. Boscawen Ibbetson conducted a series of experiments at the RPI including the application of oxyhydrogen light to speed up the exposure process. The RPI purchased the rights to demonstrate Fox Talbot's patented calotype photographic process in 1841. Later that same year, the first photographic studio in Europe opened on the roof of the building at 309 Regent Street, managed by portrait photographer Richard Beard (1801-1885).

Photography was becoming increasingly accessible to a wider public and in Spring 1853, the first Polytechnic Photographic School opened, with its own glass house, class rooms and separate ladies' apartment. Its first teacher was Thomas A. Malone, who had previously worked with Talbot and had run a successful photographic business in Regent Street.

Following the closure of the RPI in 1881 and Quintin Hogg (1845-1903) purchased 309 Regent Street for his Young Men's Christian Institute and immediately engaged Ernest Howard Farmer (1856-1944), another successful photographer based in Regent Street and inventor of 'Farmer's Reducer', to teach evening classes in photography. Within fifteen years, the number of students taking photography at the Polytechnic was greater than any other class (in 1895 there were 472 photography students compared to 250 in tailors' cutting and 33 in mechanical engineering). The classes were to become 'The First and uniformly most successful School of Photography in the World'. In 1906/7 Farmer visited the Lumière Laboratories in Lyon, France, to learn about the autochrome process that had been perfected there. After Farmer's visit, it was reported that: 'Messrs Lumière have requested their London agents in important cases of instruction (such as medical research and educational work) to work in conjunction with Mr Farmer'. The Polytechnic School of Photography took the lead in the training of 'natural colour professional portraiture', culminating in a Royal commission in 1911 to create an autochrome of Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught (1850-1942).

Farmer retired in 1918 after 26 years at the Polytechnic; he was followed by Albert James Lyddon (d.1945), who had been a proficient artist before moving into photography. Lyddon was succeeded by Laurence J. Hibbert, under whose leadership the Polytechnic School of Photography saw a shift in emphasis towards more scientifically and technically-orientated classes. Margaret Harker (1920-2013) was appointed Head of the School of Photography in 1959, and oversaw the introduction of the first three year diploma in Photography in the UK. By 1972, the Polytechnic offered the only two degree courses of their kind in UK and Europe: a BA in Photographic Arts and a BSc in Photographic Sciences. Throughout the 1970s, the curriculum at the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) as it was now named, broadened yet further with initiatives to set up inter-disciplinary courses with architecture, law and management.

By 1974 the School of Photography had become the School of Communication, bringing together the former departments of Photography, Communication Studies and the Centre for Extra Mural Studies into a single school based in the Poly's Riding House Street building (today, known as 4-12 Little Titchfield Street). PCL's School of Communication explicitly linked theory and practice, placing particular emphasis on 'the relationship between theories of knowledge, systems of belief and valuation, the meaning of the idea of community and the development of relationships between aesthetic theory and social analysis'. Former student Donald Lush, who studied for a BA in Film and Photographic Arts at PCL in the early 1980s, recalled: 'we were told time and time again "this is not a vocational course, it's not about training, it's about ideas really; expressing ideas through photography" [...] It was quite life changing'. Another student on the same course, Steve Moulds, remembered the broad range of lectures taught on the course: 'everything from semiotics to post-feminist structural politics [...] stuff I would certainly never have considered approaching from a photographic sense [...] if I'd never gone and done that course at PCL'.

At Harrow Technical College and School of Art similar developments in film and photography education had been forged. The institution can trace its origins back to 1887, coincidentally the same date that the Eastman Photographic Company opened nearby in Headstone Drive, Harrow. The courses encouraged links with industry and regular research projects were undertaken at the Eastman Kodak research laboratories. By 1959 Harrow College offered a three-year full-time Diploma course. Practical work experience was a core element, with one day a week of the third year spent on day-release in industry.

A quarter of a century later, under the umbrella of the University of Westminster, these parallel developments were united following the merger in 1990 of the film and photography schools of both Harrow College and the Polytechnic of Central London on what is now the University's Harrow campus. The cross-fertilization of allied subjects with strong links to industry continues to remain at the heart of the University's teaching and research strengths in this area.

*Adapted from Introduction to 'The Magic Screen: A History of Regent Street Cinema'*  
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## Sources available in the University of Westminster Archive:

Royal Polytechnic Institution (1838-1881):

The catalogue of the RPI can be viewed [here](#). Notable items relating to photography include the patent signed by Fox Talbot (RPI/2/60a), mentions of photography exhibits in the 1840 and 1844 catalogue and the weekly programme (RPI/3), and contemporary journals including the Polytechnic Review (RPI/7)

Regent Street Polytechnic and Young Men's Christian Institute (1871-1970):

The catalogue of the Polytechnic archive can be viewed [here](#), although please note that all series are fully catalogued at present.

The two main sources for the history of photography teaching at the Poly are the prospectuses (RSP/5/3 and RSP/5/4) and the Polytechnic Magazine. The Magazine has been digitised and made available online, free of charge, at <http://westuni.cook.websds.net/>

In terms of administrative records relating to the Photography school, RSP/2/5/2 contains a series of reports on the work and research of the department 1906-1911. Board of Education timetables (currently uncatalogued) document the content of the course at this period, while RSP/4/5 includes registers of students studying Photography.

RSP/2/PHO contains Margaret Harker's working papers, including files on the successes of former students, and course accreditation files relating to the introduction of the BA and BSc courses. The Archive also holds examination papers, files relating to the Annual Exhibition, and examples of student work from the 1950s-1960s.

As part of the Oral History project, Archive staff have conducted interviews with several former students from the 1950s and 1960s – the interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room. There are also photographs of the photography students, and the facilities for photography, from approximately the 1930s onwards.

Polytechnic of Central London (1970-1992):

The main source for this period is again the prospectuses (PCL/5/4) and also the staff newsletters, which report student and staff successes, and changes to the department. As with the Regent Street Poly, the University Archive holds course accreditation files, examination papers, student work, and photographs of students in the photography studios.

Harrow College/Harrow School of Art (1897-1991):

Unfortunately not many records of Harrow College course survive. However the Archive does hold press cuttings books covering the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and an incomplete set of prospectuses for the latter half.

University of Westminster (1992-):

The Archive holds comprehensive records for the modern day University, including course handbooks, prospectuses, records of annual exhibitions, and photographs of photographic facilities.