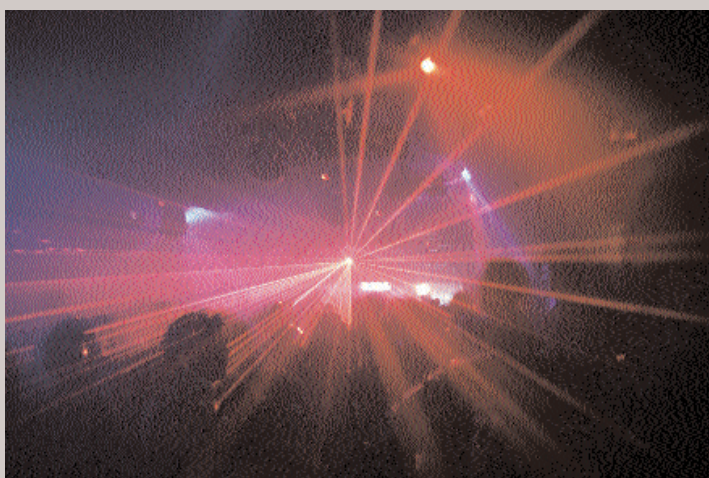


NEED A PICTURE OF A DEMON? OR AN IGLOO? SARAH SAUNDERS FINDS HIDDEN TREASURES AMONG THE UK'S SPECIALIST IMAGE LIBRARIES

OBSCURE DELIGHTS

Beyond the giants of the photolibary business lie hundreds of small-scale specialists, each expert in a particular field of imagery.

1. Igloo at night, Northwest Greenland by Bryan Alexander of Arctic Photo. www.arcticphoto.co.uk
2. A Lusitano stallion at Turville Valley stud in Oxfordshire by Kit Houghton of Houghton's Horses. www.houghtons-horses.com
3. Lasers at Turmills, London by Debbie Bragg from club photography specialists, Everynight Images. www.everynight.co.uk



NOSTRADAMUS, BORN 500 years ago this year, had remarkable powers. Writing in verse in French, Latin, Greek and a secret alchemical code, the Green Language, he is said to have predicted the Great Fire of London, the landing on the moon, and the destruction of the twin towers.

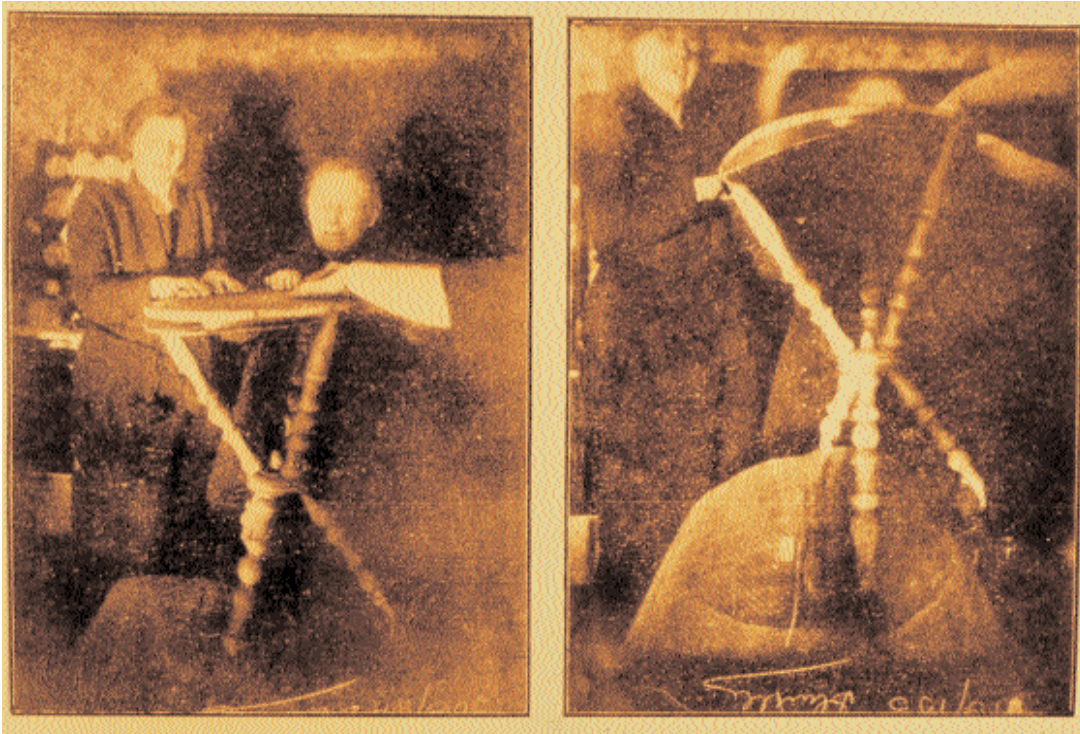
This is powerful stuff, and it is perhaps easy to find resonance today in what he knew then. Similarly, images of obscure niche areas can be used to illuminate contemporary themes in a number of surprising ways. Images of Nostradamus are held in The Charles Walker Collection, along with many other images of myth and magic and the occult, and a large amount of detailed information. But are creative users plugged in to sources like this?

Specialist picture libraries are a particularly British phenomenon – no other country has a similar range and depth of material or the number of passionate enthusiasts peddling their pictures. But is it a phenomenon whose days are numbered? Some photographers and collectors who made a business from their passion in the 70s and 80s are

reaching retirement age, and the investment needed to digitise is daunting to libraries surviving on the outer reaches of business. Now that the picture researchers who knew and loved these collections are themselves under threat, what next? Nostradamus might shed some light on the matter, but what do the picture libraries say?

The Charles Walker Collection is a case in point. On Charles Walker's retirement, the library, undigitised, was rescued by Topfoto, a hub site of complementary collections operating a bit like a portal. The collection is being digitised and will be cared for by Topfoto's features editor, Liz Peck. A yoga teacher with an interest in New Age phenomena, Peck has the ideal credentials to continue the tradition of the specialist library. She feels strongly that collections like this one, unique in its field, should be preserved intact, and not added, like a droplet to an ocean, to a large general library.

Although collections like this sell predominantly into editorial markets, Liz Peck believes that they can be successfully used in creative markets. "I think there is a lot of scope. The images ►



◀ are not always immediately obvious, and might not be what people are used to, but they are certainly different.” She believes that images of demons and devils, tarot cards and magic symbols, alchemy and astrology can create powerful messages.

Bryan and Cherry Alexander have been photographing the polar regions, north and south, for the last 30 years. Bryan Alexander developed an interest in Arctic peoples, while Cherry’s

on the searchable website.

They have also created the hub site, Polar Circle. Bryan Alexander believes there is strength in depth of coverage at a time where small libraries are feeling particularly vulnerable to being “gobbled up”. “We’ve always had a relationship with other collections. The Polar hub concept is a logical progression, creating a point of excellence for photography of polar regions.”

Bryan Alexander admits that,

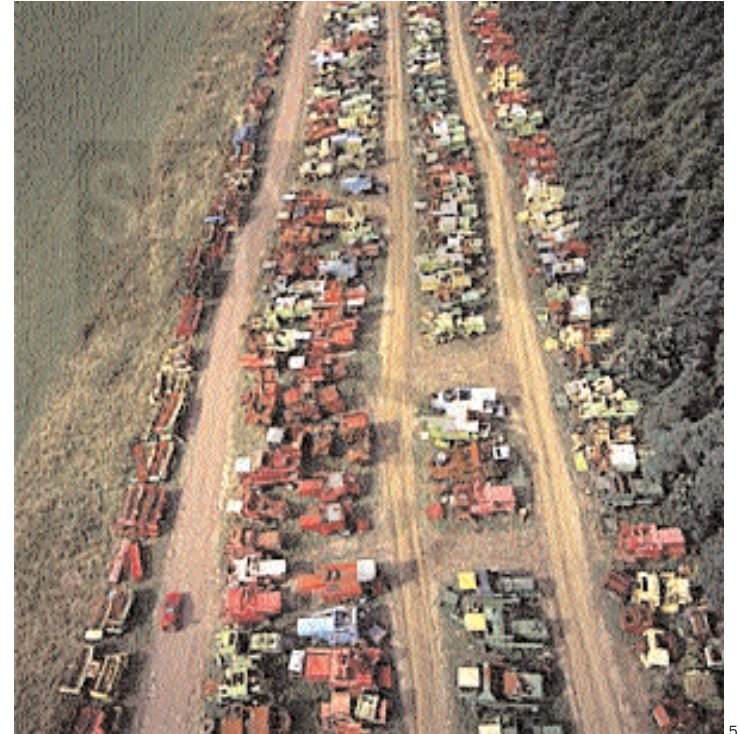
SPECIALIST IMAGE LIBRARIES ARE PARTICULARLY BRITISH – NO OTHER COUNTRY HAS A SIMILAR RANGE AND DEPTH OF MATERIAL

area is mainly the Antarctic – no people, but magnificent, inspiring empty landscapes of snow and ice. Like many others, they have built their business around diverse skills. Both write features – a necessity in remote and freezing areas where no journalist will venture – and these remain a key part of their business. But the Alexanders have also faced up to the digital revolution with 5000 of their images now scanned and placed

though many of their images are ripe for conceptual use, sales into creative areas are relatively low, aside from some major advertising sales. One of the problems is model release, often obtained after the event. Alexander is concerned about how images are used and says, “I have a great deal of sympathy for native people and their lifestyle. We won’t supply pictures if they are likely to affect the lives of the people we photograph.”

The de-skilling of the picture research industry is a threat to small libraries. New researchers are easily lured into the streamlined world of the giant agencies, where they are, relatively speaking, spoon-fed. For the libraries, there is a price to pay for surviving in the tough new climate, but there are plenty of compensations: “I love being in the Arctic. I like the people, the landscape is breathtakingly impressive and I love the light.” The downside is the scanning and long hours. The benefit for customers? “Quite a lot of people want to shop somewhere different,” says Alexander.

Diversity is the key for Houghton’s Horses library too. Kit Houghton is a veteran photographer of the horse world, and includes commissions and PR work in his portfolio. Horses? This may seem an odd place to look for concept and commercial images, but there are stunning shots in the library – even though they are buried amongst the editorial stock. And this is the point. Specialist libraries are having to learn that the non-editorial customer needs an easy route to conceptual, commercially useful images.



Houghton is looking to create more images which fit that bill, using Photoshop to enhance sales potential. But though there are plenty of lifestyle benefits for the specialist library, “If you looked at this as a business people would say you’re mad.”

Brenda Marks at Skyscan, selling breathtaking images of sky sports and aerial images, believes her library is well set for the future. Her recipe for survival, aside from the digital requirement, includes injecting conceptual thinking into any photographic shoot from the start. She also runs a marketing network. Drawing on contacts in the business, she can source any aerial image needed by a customer. It’s another way of providing the one-stop service touted by the portal sites, but at a specialist level. Skyscan can offer the creative a different view of almost anything, she says. From naked skydivers to crop circles to industrial landscapes, there are images to fit a number of briefs if you can think outside the box.


The pictures are out there, but the problem for the web-based researcher is that most specialist images still lurk in filing ►

4. Séance. Levitation. Two photographs taken simultaneously by two cameras to show the levitation in a séance, held in October 1923. From The Charles Walker Collection available at www.topfoto.co.uk.
5. Combine harvester scrapyard in Northumberland, from aerial photography specialists, Skyscan. www.skyscan.co.uk

◀ cabinets. Life is easier for new entrants to the picture library market who embrace the digital more quickly.

Everynight is a new library of night-life images featuring clubs, bands and youth culture. Founded by photographer Debbie Bragg, the library is run by Eleanor Ferguson, a graphic designer and past employee of Getty Images. The search reflects the way clients search big sites, with linking keywords and a mass of conceptual and mood keywords. Everynight targets commercial and editorial markets with its gritty, focussed images, but also has some great images without model release. How can you ask for a model release in the middle of a party? The agency is set to concentrate on producing more released images and agrees that a model released category on-line would help users.

According to picture library association BAPLA, specialists are thriving, with new libraries emerging as others cease trading and 50 new members this year alone. Browsing the BAPLA website www.bapla.org.uk for links will uncover many gems. Better yet, you can find, and talk to many of them at this year's BAPLA Picture Buyers' Fair (see details below).

The specialists would urge you to use their experience and knowledge to help your search. They also understand the need to bring targeted selections into better prominence for creative users – a little more spoon-feeding if you please! In the spirit of Nostradamus we can predict that many more magical images will be dragged out of obscurity in the next few years, but for the time being it's well worth doing a bit of digging yourself. 

Sarah Saunders runs image consultancy, Electric Lane. The BAPLA Picture Buyers' Fair is at the Business Design Centre, Upper Street, London N1, from 15-16 May. For details of exhibitors, ticket prices and seminar programme, go to www.pbf.org.uk