

Dating cartes-de-visite

Do you have undated Victorian cartes-de-visite in your family album and you do not know how to identify them? The spreadsheet below will give you a general overview of popular styles and trends in the design, composition and fashions of British cartes-de-visite from the 1850s to 1900s. Analysing the information in and on your cartes may help you date them.

When dating your cartes-de-visite, always compare at least three different characteristics listed below (for example: card colour, fashion and design of the back of the card). And remember: there are always exceptions to the rule!

Decade	Card Thickness	Card Colour	Corners and Edges	Design of the Front	Design of the Back	Fashion and Composition
1850s	thinnest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cream - white - off-white 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - square corners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - empty or - small text - small crest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - full length portraits - some vignette - plain backdrops - painted backdrops: pillars or drapery - women's fashion: leg-of-mutton sleeves, wide skirts (but not as round as a full crinoline)
1860s	thinner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cream - white - off-white 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - square corners - scalloped edges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - minimal writing - one or two thin red lines around print 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - empty or - small text - small crest - small decorations (cherubs, medals, camera, lion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - full length portraits - some vignette - plain backdrops - painted backdrops: mock drawing-room interior (a painted window, doorway or arch) - props: pillars, balustrades - women's fashion: crinoline dresses (round hoop)

Decade	Card Thickness	Card Colour	Corners and Edges	Design of the Front	Design of the Back	Fashion and Composition
1870s	thin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cream - white - off-white - light colours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rounded corners - gold edges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - plain simple text - gold print 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - larger and more decorative text - decorations (medals, photographer's studio building, patrons etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - half-length and seated poses more common - painted backgrounds: outdoor and parkland scenes - props: fences and stiles - women's fashion: bustle dresses (flat front, rounder behind) with a short train
1880s	thick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cream - white - off-white - light colours - dark colours (green, red) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rounded corners - some scalloped edges - gold edges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cursive text - larger text - gold text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - text and decorations covering entire back (royal patronage, medals won at international competitions, and facilities such as 'electric light') - decorations (pictorial images of birds, plants, nymphs, bamboo, Japanese parasols) - gilding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - painted backgrounds: outdoor, parkland scenes, with fences and stiles - props: ivy-covered tree stumps, rocks for the sitter to sit on - props: sand, rocks, driftwood and sides of boats - props: bicycles - women's fashion: corsets, tight sleeves and high necks, layered and draped skirts (often with an 'apron' front and a trained back)

Decade	Card Thickness	Card Colour	Corners and Edges	Design of the Front	Design of the Back	Fashion and Composition
1890s	thicker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ivory - light colours - dark colours (black, dark green) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rounded corners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - larger text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - text and decorations covering entire back - decorations - gilding - many different decorations (cherubs, bulrushes, Chinese fans and swallows) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - close-up portraits of the head and shoulders only - props: oriental screens, mirrors on stands, potted plants, bamboo and wicker furniture - vignette - women's fashion: plainer skirt with smaller bustle, train. Very small waists (boned bodices). Blouses with stiffened high necks. Leg-of-mutton sleeves
1900s	thicker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cream - white - off-white - light colours - dark colours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rounded corners - square corners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - larger text - textured lettering - plainer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - text and decorations covering entire back - decorations - gilding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - close-up portraits of the head and shoulders only - props: oriental screens, mirrors on stands, potted plants, bamboo and wicker furniture - vignette - women's fashion: ruffle, button and lace decorations, high necks, fitted bodice but no corset. Regular long sleeves or long double sleeves (long sleeve with a separate cuff attached)

Useful publications and websites

Samples of the design of carte-de-visite:

- EdinPhoto, 2015. *Carte-de-visite by Date*: http://www.edinphoto.org.uk/0_CAR/0_cartes_de_visite_0_by_date_backs.htm. [Accessed 29 August 2015]

Photographers:

Establishing when and where the photographer had his/her studio is a great way of dating your cartes. Here are some useful links:

- The University of St Andrews, 2015. *Scottish Photographers 1839-1870*: <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/imu/imu.php?request=browse&irn=1655>. [Accessed 29 August 2015]
- *Photographers of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2015. Photographers' biographies: <http://www.cartedevisite.co.uk/photographers-category/> [Accessed 29 August 2015]
- *PhotoLondon*, nd. *The Database of 19th Century Photographers and Allied Trades in London, 1841-1901*: <http://www.photolondon.org.uk/pages/az.asp>. [Accessed 29 August 2015]
- Hannavy, John (ed.), 2007. *Encyclopaedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography, Volumes 1 & 2*. London: Routledge

Posing and backdrops:

- Linkman, Audrey, 1993. *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*. London: I.B. Tauris
- Batchen, Geoffrey, 2008. 'Dreams of Ordinary Life: Cartes-de-visite and the Bourgeois Imagination,' in J. J. Long et al. *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*. London: Routledge

Fashion:

- Victoria & Albert Museum, nd. *Victorian Dress at the V&A*: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/victorian-dress-at-v-and-a/> [Accessed 29 August 2015]
- Gernsheim, Alison, 2012. *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*. New York: Dover Publications
- Lansdell, Avril, 1985. *Fashion à la carte, 1860-1900: a study of fashion through cartes-de-visite*. Oxford: Shire Publications