



Fox Talbot's calotype camera made by Chevalier of Paris c.1845. Royal Photographic Society Collection.

William Henry Fox Talbot was born at Melbury in Dorset on 11 February 1800, at the home of the Earl of Ilchester; his mother, Lady Elizabeth Fox-Strangways, was the eldest daughter of the Earl. His father, William Davenport Talbot, an army officer, died when Henry was only six months old so Lady Elisabeth and her son spent the early years of his life in the homes of various relatives.

A brilliant child and gifted scholar, he excelled, both at Harrow and Cambridge, in the classics and sciences.

In 1827 he returned to his ancestral home, Lacock Abbey, where he was Lord of the Manor. In 1832 he married Constance Mundy of Markeaton Hall in Derbyshire. In 1831 he became MP for Chippenham, but only remained in Parliament for about two years.

His interests then took him abroad, particularly to Italy. On his travels he used a camera lucida and a camera obscura, optical aids to drawing, which gave him the idea of retaining permanently the images these aids produced.

From 1850 Fox Talbot concentrated on perfecting reproduction techniques, so that original photographs could be reproduced as printed illustrations. He coated metal plates with bichromated gelatine using silk to form a screen pattern, patenting this process in 1852.

The span of Fox Talbot's life embraces an age of tremendous progress in the arts and sciences in Britain and Europe. When he died in September 1877, he was one of the rare people who had made significant contributions to the advances in both these fields.



Lacock Abbey from the River Avon.
Calotype by William Henry Fox Talbot.
Lacock Abbey Collection.

William Henry Fox Talbot.
Portrait by Moffatt of Edinburgh, 1864.