

Beamish Great North Steam Fair April 2012

From the Front Line of Photographers Night

The gods of weather and photography smiled upon the gathering. From their lofty position on top of Penshaw Monument they felt, for once, benign. Rain earlier on had settled the dust and cleared some of the atmosphere. The sun shone from a sky sufficiently cloudy to provide a decent amount of contrast should we chose to use a yellow lens filter. However, no-one has told the gods we now have *Photoshop*. Still, they thought they were doing us a favour.

Gathered in the cafe-cum-coffee-bar we stood (or sat) in our little groups clustered close to friends and fellow Society members. Like greyhounds in the slips straining upon the start we waited for the briefing and the “off”. A collection of the finest beards and whiskers this side of a Victorian Daguerreotype you have yet to see. But it was one of those moments where equipment is compared and the latest acquisition is displayed and there was I with a miniscule 50 mm lens feeling inadequate in the presence of so many BIG telephotos. If the measure of a man’s virility is in the size of his lens then all those 300mms, and bigger, then a 50mm just doesn’t stack up. What really rubbed it in was chatting later to the wee lassie who was studying for a degree with the Open College of the Arts had a 70 – 300mm telephoto zoom on the end of her Canon that dwarfed her. It was at this initial meeting that the nature of those gathered began to solidify into a sociologist’s dream. From the chat it was clear that there were the blasé and the “hail-fellow-well-met” groups. Compared with these exhibitionists the warmth from my fellow DPS members was reassuring.

Moving around Beamish by bus and tram meant more fraternising with these “foreigners”. As a distinct group, those who had come just to add record-photos of the machinery were generally a knowledgeable and harmless collection of mostly retired “chaps”. This group tended to be loosely aligned and came from distant parts like Derby and Birmingham and Sunderland.

Travelling on the bus to the pit village meant wooden-slatted seats but being alone trying to avoid eye-contact seemed hardly comradely, under the circumstances. Avoidance might be fine on the Tube or a Go North Eastern bus but these were fellow photographers and logic told me I should have nothing to fear. However, my attempts to engage these “foreigners” in conversation with the odd jokey remark didn’t work very well. Perhaps it’s the accent (Yorkshire via Suffolk, Australia and an ex-wife from Catford!). So, back within my shell I followed the basic rules of the Cartier-Bresson guide to street photography and tried hard to become invisible. That meant joining the other old farts by merging in amongst the beards!

In the Pit Village the slanting sun cast long shadows and created burnt-out highlights on the radiators of the various vehicles. The Cleveland Fire Department truck was besieged by ardent snappers and even when I was in a position to try taking a photograph admirers were still in evidence. Old men would smile understandingly while I tried to photograph people. However, the younger, bible-black clad, tripod wielding chaps with their VERY long lenses bolted onto Nikon D3s and Canon equivalents exuded far too much masculinity to

acknowledge the likes of me. These gladiators of the photo-fraternity formed a clique all their own. Monopods and Manfrottos ready, they were first on and first off the bus, the first to stake their claim to a place and first to work the shutter. All the while the steaming, red Coffee Grinder patiently chugged up and down the track belching steam and providing a delightful amount of pseudo-mist.

Appropriately dressed volunteers smiled as a multitude of lenses were thrust in their faces and the gentle evening sounds were disturbed by the noise of multiple shutters shuttering. This is when it became clear that there were three approaches to these portraits. There were the “Directors”, the “Manufacturers” and the “Phantoms”.

“Can we have another one just to be sure!” These were words often spoken by the “Directors. These men (they were exclusively male) would bellow their instructions and spend time ordering the various models into poses that were very unrealistic. “Stiff” and “stolid” were words that occurred to me at the time. “Go on! Stick your head out! That’s right! Further now, you’re smiling; don’t smile! Look angry!” The victim of this tirade was a *Cat Weasel* look-alike. All the way from Kent he’d come with his old 1920s Ford butcher’s van. A kindly and obliging, gentle soul who had responded generously to several of the DPS team he did what was demanded of him. There were several other “Directors” though always in the minority.

“The Manufacturers” were not as strident but they came to Beamish with affixed ideas in their heads as to what history SHOULD be! An urchin leaning on lamp posts trying hard to be Jackie Coogan look-alikes from “*The Kid*” was asked to: “Look sad! Try and look poor!” The costume was definitely cod-middle class and the child too clean and well-fed to ever be an urchin but urchin was what was wanted so urchin he had to be. Now, I’m in danger of getting on a hobby-horse here. I trained as a historian and taught history for many years and even lectured and written on it. I have no trouble with living history events and experimental sessions but that is what they are and should be seen as such. Thankfully, all the DPS images I’ve seen respect this and that says much for the integrity of the members of the Society. These “Manufacturers” did not! They took what was on offer and twisted it into a shape that matched their preconceptions. For the cluster of kneeling men this young lad was a heaven-sent opportunity to produce a piece of *history*. Throughout the evening, every shot they took was a carefully choreographed interpretation and you could see their faces fall when the volunteers failed to live up to their expectations.

The shots taken at Pickering and Whitby are works of photography and are regarded as images in their own right. They record an event and portray people who are dedicated to the pursuit of living history. It is a harmless hobby and provides colour and excitement. The “Recorders” who capture the spirit of the event are, in many ways, the same as the “Vehicle Collectors” who take their shots of buses and trucks and bicycles as records. There is no artifice in their motivation.

The “Phantoms” are a subset of the “Recorders” in that they drift from scene to scene and remain invisible. Their aim is to capture the spirit of the day and the place. These skilled

photographers are disciples of the greats of the past; Doisneau and Cartier-Bresson et al, those who observe and take their photography seriously for its own sake. These “Phantoms” tend to have greater humility and more integrity than either the “Directors” or the “Manufacturers”.

To see Neil and Ian, Stephen and Alan, David and John, Michael and the others drift smoke-like amongst the crowds; make their pictures and then evaporate was, for me, part of a profound learning experience. I had thought all photographers behaved as DPS members did. I was wrong. Thank goodness there is intelligence and integrity still abroad.

I warmed to the Vintage Vehicle group with their micro and macro lenses as they bent to take detailed shots of flanges and oscillating baffle-valves, triple-castellated grommet sprockets and the three-layered packing around the Webber double carburettors. They were not the ones who made the kindly bus driver stand up and then sit down, lean against the bonnet of his red bus and go back upstairs to pose with several of the women dressed in what passed for Edwardian middle-class couture.

While all this went on a lone cyclist peddled laboriously into the yard and was besieged by yet more tripod-mounted Canons and a few hand-held Nikons. His arrival is ignored by the elderly gentleman with an immaculate *Mamiya*; all polish and gloss-black that mirrored his highly polished shoes. He’s concentrating upon the arrangement of the hoses on the fire truck.

Back in the town’s main street a Birkenhead tram was a static display. With its one headlamp and shiny brass “bits” the scene was destined to remind some of Captain Smith on the bridge of the *Titanic*. Poor man was made to move into and out of his cab, stand by the light, then have the single lamp illuminate his face; then remount the steps, rest his hand on the tiller; turn first this way and then that while being photographed by a gum-chewing 30-something on his *iPhone*. Never once was he allowed to smile or change his expression from one of sternness. This is obviously what people did *back in the day!*

There were more treasures for the *Mechanicals* in the town street. On display were rare examples of classic British engineering: a blue BSA motorcar complete with couple and their dog (the poor Sheltie had not long had 24 of her teeth removed... a re-homed dog once fed on the wrong sort of food); the War Department Grey two-seater, chain-driven car brought up from Birmingham just for the day; the Fowler traction engine and many of the other items. Each one had a story and characters to embellish their presence.

Did I come away with any photographs? 163 when I last looked and no doubt converting some to monochrome will inflate the final tally. Have I used the miracle of *Silver Efex Pro* to create my own distortions? Guilty, as charged! With a few judicious crops and a lot of *Photoshop* I’ll have my own harvest of images and they’ll be there in hard copy for future generations to discover in some suitcase (though probably NOT Mexican... an in-joke for those who have followed the story of the recently discovered cache of negatives and contact-strip books by Chim Seymore, Girda Taro and Robert Capa). Have I committed as heinous a “sin” as the “Manufacturers” and the “Directors”? Will my monochrome images cause a

future generation to ponder such unanswerable questions as: “Who is the hirsute cyclist with the wobbly old bull’s-eye lamp on the front fork?” Ah, now that would be telling!

John Cogan