

The 2012 Durham Photographic Society Annual Exhibition in the Cathedral

John Cogan, reporting from the front line

They drift in, the Cathedral visitors. Mostly couples but occasionally there is a family. In the past I've seen these visitors look at the Chapel and see just a space. Yes, there's the wonderful, calligraphic Altar piece and the medieval wall paintings, the Annunciation sculpture and the Renaissance Altar but how can these compare with the size and majesty of the Cathedral itself.

This chapel is merely an adjunct; an afterthought, both in time and concept. A few seconds spent in looking before returning to the main purpose of the visit. Yet, for some the Galilee Chapel is a pleasant surprise. There is an innate sense of calm that engenders a feeling of contemplation. Some settle for a while and let the magic of the place envelop them. Granted, there have been German visitors seriously

disappointed to discover that a Saint of such importance as Cuthbert should be so sidelined and given a slate and stone tomb... until they were pointed in the right direction. The "Ten things to see in Durham" fails to differentiate. Oh, dear; how often is poor Bede ignored, or sought behind the aumbry door?



Not so this fortnight. For once the space is filled with colour and secular images; it is alive and dynamic. The hook is baited and slowly the visitors approach. Curiosity is a powerful motivator and the urge to satisfy is strong. "You never know, there might be something of interest!" says the daughter to her mother. But, for most of this ad hoc audience it's all new and unclear just

what the confusion of images is there for. It takes time to readjust to the intimate nature of a photograph after the enormity of the Cathedral. So, for a while, they tend to drift along until one image draws them in. It always happens. In our eclectic selection there is something for everyone; be it a landscape or a kestrel or one of the Goths; a bucking motorbike or a battered aeroplane hovering over a Spanish city. The image, for whatever reason, is “claimed” and the mind settles on the personal involvement with the image.



This is when the discourse between the photograph’s author and its audience begins. Someone once argued that to spend money on an art gallery or even a single, special painting was a waste of money as the *average* amount of time the *average* visitor spends looking at a painting is about 3

seconds. Not so with our photographs! Yes, some are only briefly examined; that’s only to be expected. We can’t all be interested in every genre the DPS has on offer. “I took a photo last year stood just there!” says one visitor pointing to a photograph of the autumnal trees along the banks of the Wear. “That’s a great idea,” says the eleven year old girl to her father as she explains Mavis’s picture of the old motorcar in Havana. We talk and she reveals an intensely personal and very perceptive appreciation of the photograph. Her parents fluff up as proud parents should as she and I talk about some of the other pictures. “She draws,” says her father, “but maybe I should buy her a camera!” Too right he should.

The chosen subject is important because it often resurrects a memory or an experience both sides of the lens have shared: the icy blasts of winter in the countryside; the trip to the beach or the sun-drenched streets of Havana. Being photographs they are accessible. We nearly all have a camera today and that

democratisation allows us to share meaningfully. “How’s that done?” some ask, adding that it must be with some computer program or other. This is usually asked about the Lumiere illuminations projected upon the Cathedral and the look of surprise when they discover that it WAS like that in “real life” is wonderful to behold.

“Are you part of all this?” asks a trio of American Cathedral addicts. I tell them I’m with the DPS and steward of the exhibition but they want to know about the arches that hold up the roof of the Galilee Chapel. Eventually, they disappear satisfied with the connection between the Moorish style found in the Alhambra in Seville and the returning Crusaders in the 12th Century. I only hope this nugget of information does not end up in some learned treatise.



“There are some excellent photographs,” says the nineteen year old German student on holiday in Durham with his Scottish aunt. “But I won’t tell you which ones.” The French Canadian couple with their family Nikon D3s are fascinated by the variety. “We don’t expect to see such a rich mixture,” they say. The wife is a professional macro-photographer and is hard pressed to leave Margaret’s images. “That is magnificent,” she says of the insect on the plant (but in French!)

There are photographers from all corners of the world: Iran and Australia; Cyprus and France; Germany and Holland; the USA and Canada Poland and

Spain to mention just those I spoke to. There were also people from nearer home: Ferryhill and Sunderland; Bowburn and Taunton. Granted, the talk with a Somerset family was mainly about the relative merits of various West Country ciders. I think Hereford won out.... but only just.

We chose well. There were sufficient images to satisfy nearly everyone who came. Joe's pale tree in the garden captured some hearts while Mavis's steam locomotive challenged a few gender stereotypes. "Where did you take these then?" asked a pasty-faced teenage girl. I told her it was Whitby, at the Goth weekend. "I'm a Goff," she said. "I ain't been to no Whitby! Why Whitby then?" I tell her but she merely shrugs. Perhaps Dracula isn't what she thinks of being just a "Goff". And perhaps she'll return next year with a little more understanding after having her interest stimulated by our images. If we have achieved anything it has been that: the gentle exercise of expanding the understanding of those who, for a brief while, stood in front of our images and entered into our world.

The final mystery belongs to Alan Sharp: how did he manage to dangle his catkin? That really intrigued a great many people (and what did Colin's calligraphy say?)

John Cogan

Note: The Durham Photographic Society 2012 Annual Exhibition was showing 1st to 17th June in the Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral. We have been privileged to be showing there annually for nearly two decades. Our grateful thanks go to the Chapter management and staff for their continuing support.

In 2013 our Annual Exhibition will be in early July.