

After The Coal Dust

If we were to do an internet search on, let's say, Castleford, we'd no doubt get references to rugby. If we scrolled down far enough on the results, Henry Moore might get a mention. We might even get some comments about it being a historic Roman settlement. We'd definitely get references to it being a former mining town.

Likewise, if we did the same search on Sheffield, we'd find 'former steel city'; or Bradford; 'former textile city'.

The common word would be 'former'. We define many places by what they used to be, rather than what they are now.



Castleford town centre 2020

When I was growing up in Castleford, it certainly revolved around the coal mines. Glasshoughton, Prince of Wales, Fryston, Wheldale, Kellingley, Allerton Bywater, Ledston Luck and others all within walking distance. Everyone knew someone who worked at one of these. We were all part of mining families to some extent. In my case, Uncle Bill, killed under the rubble of a Wheldale roof collapse; Uncle Herbert, with a framed newspaper photograph of him, stood alongside Arthur Scargill in the early seventies, proudly on display on his mantelpiece. And Uncle Ken, even he had the connection,

if only through his failed attempts at claiming compensation for vibration white finger and industrial deafness.

Of course, the mines have long since disappeared, along with many of those who worked in them. What has also disappeared is the sense of community and social cohesion that shared experience brings with it.



March to mark the closure of Kellingley Colliery, December 2015

Times change, of course. We are more aware of the environmental impact of fossil fuels and the pollution that comes with major industry. Everything has its time. The problem is the vacuum left behind. Other than the minimum wage, there is little that binds a Starbucks barista to those filling boxes at an Amazon distribution centre. The sense of community has largely disappeared.

Heavy industry, manufacturing and production have declined so much that in the UK, around 80% of jobs are now in the service sector.

When my wife, Bridget and I started the 'After the Coal Dust' photography project, it was an attempt to show that which was left behind. We weren't particularly wanting the photographs to be an exercise in nostalgia or some longing for the 'good old days'. We just wanted to create a dispassionate record of life and the people in these 'former' towns, after the 'coal dust'. Nor is it just the former industrial areas that have seen such decline; many of our traditional seaside towns have suffered too.

Of course, there has been massive redevelopment in many areas too, but not everyone can, or wants to, change. It is these people that feature most prominently in our photographs.

Social documentary photography has a rich heritage in the north. Jack Hulme of Fryston created a compelling record of the rich tapestry of life in the village; Bill Brandt with images of Halifax; John

Bulmer, Chris Killip and many others. Today, however, despite an ever-increasing number of images produced and shared on the various social media platforms, it seems to me that documentary photography has declined. There are probably several reasons for this. We are much more protective of our image today; our mobile phones allow us to share every aspect of our lives, but we are very selective of what we share. Social media demands our best side.

We are also far more protective of our privacy than we once were, although in the age of CCTV and mobile phones tracking our every move, we have less privacy than we ever had.



Scarborough 1980s

In some ways, very little has changed. The photographs we have taken over the past few years could easily be interchangeable with those taken thirty years ago. It is important, however, to have a record of the present. When those social documentary photographers were practising their art in the 40's and 50's they were only recording what was 'normal' at the time. Today is tomorrow's history, but we tend to not notice something until it's gone. The whole point of *After the Coal Dust* is to record everyday life as it is. The past fascinates people. We enjoy looking at sepia tinged images of our grandparent's homes; we laugh at the fashions; feel relieved that we no longer live in the same squalid conditions. But without these photos of the ordinary lives of ordinary people, we would not have these records. That's why, despite the objections and disapproval of some people, creating a record is so important.



Scarborough 2017

One recurring theme in our photographs seems to be that of contrast and division. This can be cultural, religion, ethnicity but perhaps most clearly in inequality. Many areas, although geographically neighbours, have a little in common. The centre of Leeds, for example, with its Harvey Nichols and Louis Vuitton stores, is a world away from Harehills, Seacroft and Beeston. Such vast discrepancy in wealth distribution can only further lead to further social fragmentation, which then leads on to resentment and areas of higher crime. Unfortunately, it seems that we now actively promote and encourage societal division. The Brexit vote is a good example and has led to a further fracturing of communities.



Bradford 2015

Some have suggested that our photographs focus too much on the 'have nots'. Perhaps they have an argument. However, although the days when photographs had significant power in changing public opinion (war reportage has changed much since Vietnam) it is possible that they can help highlight some things that need to change. This, in itself, is a worthwhile cause.

Bridget and I have been very fortunate in that, after much initial resistance, 'After the Coal Dust' and our photography in general have built up an audience. It is strange to think that photographs of ordinary people in our local towns have had resonance far beyond the local area, even to the extent of being exhibited in places as far removed as the National Mining Museum in Wakefield to galleries in Tokyo. The 'After the Coal Dust' book that came out in 2020 has found an audience from the US to New Zealand. Perhaps the North of England is not so unique after all.



Leeds 2021

At its heart, our photography is more about people than place. Initially, we felt the images had a peculiarly English feel to them, but we have had messages from many countries saying that they can identify with the people we photograph. There seems to be a global human condition. I think this takes photography beyond a social document and more into a depiction of the human spirit and resilience. In the vast majority of cases, we don't know the story of the people we photograph. Even if we did, a photograph cannot possibly tell the complete story. Rather, it is hopefully a representation of something universal, a capture of sentiment that resonates with everyone.

Covid-19 brought a completely new set of challenges to everyone, and of course, to a lesser extent, to photographers. In the relatively few lock-down pictures we took, we wanted to show the human side to this. The pandemic writes itself into our history, but eventually individual stories get lost and merge into the white noise of statistics. Hopefully, this picture shows the conflicting human emotions that many of us felt.



Castleford 2020

I'm not sure what the future holds for this type of photography. We manipulate our images to a great extent already. Our mobile phones create an algorithm derived ideal, and we ourselves select the image that best represents a view of how we want people to see us. This may not always be how other people see us. This is the main reason we take our photographs candidly. It's all about being as truthful as possible.

The rise of AI (Artificial Intelligence) and the ability to manipulate or even create images from scratch will cast doubt on the veracity of much of the content produced in the future. We may be already at a turning point in the recording of history. This could be the last era when we can trust what we see.

At least for now we will carry on producing photographs showing life as truthfully as possible and maybe at some point in the future people will look back on them and reminisce about life in 2023.

After the Coal Dust

John & Bridget Gill 2023

<https://www.afterthecoaldust.com>

The 'After the Coal Dust' book is available from:

<https://www.johngill.photography/john-gill-photography-books/> and other retailers.

