

Photographing 'Of things not seen'

An interview with Jim Grover, the Photographer

Why Black and White?

Two reasons. Firstly, it felt right to follow in the footsteps of the original photo-essayists. And secondly, it forced me to develop a new skill: I shoot colour 99% of the time and committing myself to Black and White gave me an intensive and inescapable immersion into unfamiliar territory.

What did you shoot 'Of things not seen' on?

I used two Leica M Monochroms, both the original M9 version, and the current M246 version. These digital range-finder cameras only produce Black and White files...there is no colour to fall back on!

They were a joy to use...small, quiet and discrete, which was critical for this project; they produce beautiful files, filled with detail, especially in the shadows; and they produce lovely images at high ISOs, which was invaluable given the low light on many occasions.

Whilst I personally prefer the images from the original M9 version, the M246 is a better all-round camera (producing great files at ISOs of 2000). The 'super quiet' shutter release capability on the M9 version was especially useful in quiet church services, or when shooting people 'close up'.

In terms of lenses; with a very few exceptions, I used the Leica 35mm f1.4 ASPH, or the Leica 50mm f2 APO...some of Leica's iconic glass!

6 of the 46 exhibition images were shot on a Canon 1Dx; these were colour images that I originally produced for the church's web-site, but which subsequently proved to be a valuable addition to the overall photo-story.

How did you find shooting in Black and White?

Very different, of course! On the one hand, challenging and frustrating, especially with interior, dull, and 'flat' light (sadly the inevitable setting for many scenes given the subject matter). But on the other hand, magical and unbeatable, especially with directional light. This has been a wonderful way to explore what is possible.

Every time I walked into a new room with Kit - - whether it be a church hall, a church, a care home, or the home of a bed-bound parishioner - - the first thing I always looked for was the light, which either excited me, or filled me with gloom. Even Kit started to notice and comment on the light! Kit's church of St. James' could feel like two different spaces depending on whether or not there was sunshine streaming through the windows.

I used natural light throughout to avoid being conspicuous.

I've learned to love shooting in Black and White, to look for shapes and textures, to see how the light falls, and to create somewhat surreal daylight images and portraits by exposing for the highlights.

It's a challenging creative form and I now have even greater admiration for some of my favourite 'greats' such as Koudelka, Larrain, Killip, and Graham Smith. I still have so much to learn. I would also have to be honest and say it's lovely to shoot colour as a break!

What have you found most challenging in shooting your photo-essay?

I have had extraordinary access to Kit and his ministry; he's let me into his life completely and that has made it so much easier for me. And, as I've got to know his parishioners and colleagues, they too have been open, welcoming, and trusting. I have experienced almost no 'push-back' in 12 months, even though this is a sensitive and personal area for many of Kit's parishioners.

I have chosen to be selective in what and when I have shot; so I've typically not photographed someone in the middle of personal prayer (unless I felt it was essential), waiting until the 'Amen' moment. And there was a time when a parishioner was weeping with Kit; whilst it would have made for a very strong image (and I was itching with my camera!), I just didn't feel it was an appropriate moment for me to capture.

I've also had to watch out for inevitable clichés; after a while I was seeing crucifix shapes and forms all over the place!

Two particular challenges that I didn't overcome. The first one is just a limitation of the Leica rangefinder and the church environment. Thus a 70-200mm zoom would have been invaluable in some church service settings...when it would have been too disruptive and intrusive for the congregation if I had been 'in close' with my 35mm or 50mm lens.

The second challenge was to be ready with the camera all of the time! Alas I missed many unexpected interactions and intimate moments between Kit and his parishioners...both 'out and about' and in his church.

How much time did you spend on this project?

Over a 14 month period, my image files tell me that I took photographs on 93 days, but some of these were days for context images or still lives. In total I spent 63 days with Kit. But the time spent was very uneven and was, necessarily, built around both my own work (non-photography) commitments, as well as Kit's agenda.

Thus on some of those days I spent less than an hour or so photographing, whilst on others, I spent the best part of a day 'shadowing' Kit'. Similarly, for 3 of the months I took photographs on at least 10 days, whilst in 3 other months I took photographs on just 3 days.

All told I took around 15,000 images over the 14 months, although this figure includes a lot of colour images for the St James' church website (which were not intended for the photo-essay).

How have you processed and printed the images?

I have relied on experts! I regard processing and printing as much as a craft as taking photographs. I deliberately chose a very clean and natural aesthetic for the images, which felt was right for this project. And, in the spirit of documentary and 'reportage', I have been true to what I saw and shot, resisting the (strong at times!) temptation to clone out any distractions in the image in the processing stage.

Simon Butterworth, a very talented photographer with many awards to his name, processed the images for me; he lives 'up North' so we'd spend hours on the phone in front of our respective PC screens, talking through each image and how best to bring it to life. I know I am very fussy around things like retaining the detail in the shadows, and Kit's hair needs to be black!

Nick Barnett at Bayeux in London printed the images for me on Hahnemuhle Baryta paper; it produces a lovely tonal range from deep black to strong white, but it is also a demanding paper to print on, requiring careful final image processing. It was fascinating to see how different papers produced different images. It was an exciting and exhilarating moment seeing the first exhibition prints; somehow it's just a completely different experience to seeing images on a screen.

It was a privilege working with Simon and Nick; they've worked together before, which helped, and we all have a similar vision in avoiding any risk of 'over-processing'.

And the website?

I decided that I wanted a dedicated website for 'Of Things Not Seen', which would contain much more than just the exhibition images...so that anyone who wanted to learn more about ministry, Kit's year, and the Church of England and some of the issues it faces today, could do so through a single entry point.

A talented photographer friend of mine, Nick Riley, designed and created it for me. We were pleasantly surprised to find that the domain name was available (www.ofthingsnotseen.com). The website includes various, relevant 'facts and figures' about Kit's life and that of his church, lots of links to selected content relating to the CoE and Ministry, and more images beyond the exhibition selection. I plan to continue to update and refresh it so that it remains relevant.