

Jim shadowed a Clapham priest for a year for his striking photo essay



In March, the Oxo Gallery on London's South Bank will bring a series of moments, usually hidden from view, vividly to life. The idea for retired businessman and Clapham father-of-three Jim Grover's ambitious photo essay project sprang initially from a desire to document the lives and cares of people in the area. Unwittingly, Grover says, he himself has since become 'part of the story' he set out to capture.

It all began when he took the advice of a professional photographer quite literally – 'if you look hard enough, there's always something interesting in your own backyard' – and was led directly to a Sri Lankan priest living nearby when their pet cats 'introduced themselves to each other'.

Kit Gunasekera, 43, is the vicar of St James Church near Abbeville Village, and it soon became clear to Grover that he was the perfect muse for his first attempt to get under the skin

of the community. 'I thought to myself, "here's a mad, interesting thing"'. That's how it started, nothing more sophisticated than that,' he explains. 'I wanted to see how he spent his time.' So, after gaining Gunasekera's trust and friendship, he spent an entire year shadowing him.

The resulting collection of photographs, Grover's first substantive body of work, references the heritage of celebrated photojournalist W. Eugene Smith. Smith's *Country Doctor* reportage won instant acclaim when it was published in *Life* magazine in 1948. At the same time, Grover has produced something entirely original in recording a hitherto neglected aspect of London life. 'A little like this story, *Country Doctor* told the life of a man working by himself, a humble man, caring for

OF THINGS NOT SEEN

Prize-winning photographer Jim Grover looks back at the history of Clapham and celebrates the community today as a 'microcosm of London'

Words MADELEINE HOWELL



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people in the community and going to their homes,' says Grover. 'I didn't set out to replicate it, but it established the form. Nearly all my previous work has been in colour, but it felt right for the subject matter and the genre to shoot exclusively in black and white.'

Many of the images are arresting in their portrayal of intimacy. One striking image, in which an elderly woman rests her eyelids serenely as Gunasekera blesses her, pressing his palm on her forehead, intrigues me immediately. It comes as no surprise that this is the image for which Grover won the national 'Faith through a Lens' competition. Grover himself is equally enthusiastic about this particular shot: 'Florin is 84. It's the photograph I love most. She's Jamaican, she's not very well, she's bed-bound, and she's just the most incredible lady. I've become very fond of her. Kit visits her once every two or three weeks. In the picture, he's blessing her after communion. Some people thought he was giving her the ›





Jim noticed that the congregation represented the diversity of London

last rites, but I'd never photograph that.' With a pleasing circularity, Grover's winnings went towards equipment for Floris's own granddaughter, herself an aspiring young photographer. 'God's will, perhaps,' Grover muses.

Despite the religious subject, I note that Grover is not at all pushy with the Christian aspect of his work. He acknowledges that, though his subjects are a diverse group, they all choose to worship in a certain way and share the same faith. 'I took a group photo of the congregation one Sunday morning and it highlights a real mixture of ages and ethnicities. It's like seeing all of London standing together on a set of steps. Of course, the common theme is that they are all part of a group of church-going Church of England Londoners, but at the same time, it illustrates the breadth and diversity of London life. Only 50 people worship regularly at St James, but there's Brits, Eastern Europeans, Indians, Africans... and a complete spectrum of ages.'

Having lived in Clapham for 28 years, the project has provided Grover with the opportunity to discover the history, as well as the people, of his home turf. 'I've ended up talking to people in their nineties who have lived here since the Second World War. They're full of memories, which reveal a Clapham that you and I wouldn't recognise. When they pass on, leaving all their old brochures and newspapers behind, all that's lost. I think it's important to grab hold of it.'

The rekindling of his own faith is an unintended upshot of the project. A formerly lapsed churchgoer, he tells me he has since become known as a 'stalwart' of St James Church. 'The Church of England is facing some real challenges and now I want people to see what life as a minister is like, and see how



an individual can make a difference in a parish – for those that want it, that is. I took one picture of a sermon from behind Kit, from his vantage point, looking out at a church with very few people in the pews. It tells the story of most London churches these days.'

In this way, there's no doubt that Grover has truly become an integral part of the story he initially began to document as a mere observer. He acknowledges that as a photo essayist, he treads a fine line. 'It's an interesting debate amongst photographers. Should you stand back and remain objective, or become more involved in order to build trust, to gain access? For me, I believe I have to really get to know people to capture them.'

Of Things Not Seen runs from 3 to 20 March; gallery@oxo, Barge House Street SE1 9PH; oxotower.co.uk