

Pit Profiles: Re-profiled The Changing Face of an Industry

I'd like to start by giving a little bit of background as to how the Pit Profiles: Re-profiled project came about.

*Royston Drift Mine group

Back in 1989, whilst working as a young photographer at the Barnsley Chronicle newspaper, I photographed some of the last shifts of miners at Roston Drift Mine in South Yorkshire, just before its closure.

*Young Miner

The pictures then became part of my archive and it wasn't until I met Imogen Holmes-Roe, the Curator of Art and Photography at the National Coal Mining Museum for England, in 2010, that I really did anything with them.

*Portrait of a Deputy

The museum purchased a set of 12 silver gelatin prints of the photographs for their collections, as part of their 'Seeing The Whole Picture' project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and this started a dialogue between us about the possibility of working together on a new project.

***H.A. Freeth and COAL**

The museum was keen to use its existing collections to inform new acquisitions and exhibitions, and with this in mind, H.A Freeth's portrait work for *Coal* magazine was a natural choice.

*Coal cover Vol 1

Coal magazine resembled magazines of the time such as Picture Post. It was the NCB's monthly journal, created shortly after the coal industry had been nationalised. This is the cover of the first edition from May 1947.

Freeth, who had been a war artist with the RAF, was commissioned from the beginning to record miners across the coalfields. His on-the-spot drawings were published with miners' biographical stories as 'Pit Profiles', between 1947 and 1952. Many of Freeth's original mining portraits are now held by the museum.

*Pit Profile No 1

This is the first Pit Profile portrait by Freeth, and in the opening paragraph the magazine states;

“Pit Profile will present a gallery of figures distinguished in many field of service to the community. Soldiers in the battle for coal...”

It goes on to briefly describe Griffith Thomas and ends with the line;

“He has proved his faith in the future of British mining by the gift of six virile sons into its ranks.”

*Coal cover Oct '48

The magazine offers a fascinating inside view of the nature of the coal industry at that time.

13 Volumes of the magazine are now digitally archived and available on the museums website.

*Pit Profile No 18 Oct'48

This profile of Samuel Cookson, who worked at Kemberton Pit in Madeley Wood, is featured in the current Pit Profiles exhibition at the Coalbrookdale Gallery at Ironbridge Gorge Museum along with a fantastic photograph from their archives which shows him posing with colleagues at the mine.

I'd like at this point to show you a short film from the Mining Review newsreel, from January 1951, which shows Freeth at work on a Pit Profile as it illustrates beautifully the nature of his commissions.

*Show Freeth film

Freeth continued to make portraits in this way throughout the country and met some incredible characters.

*Show John Jones Pit Profile No 21 Jan 1949

One of which was John Jones, or 'Long Jack' to his friends.

A man who's beer consumption and strength were legendary amongst his workmates. To quote the profile;

“...about ten pints on working days, about twenty-four pints on Saturdays, but he has not touched a pint on a Sunday for forty years.”

The original Pit Profile series ended with this portrait in December 1951.

*Show Final Pit Profile No 56 Dec 1951

It's interesting to note on the opposite page, the magazine heralds "Mining's New Faces", illustrated by a photograph of residential students learning mining through classroom tuition.

The future of the coal industry and something which touched the lives of all the miners I met later on.

Freeth continued to make portraits for the magazine after this but not as Pit Profiles.

***Re-profiled - Kellingley Colliery**

The process undertaken and the journey of the project

So, armed with the resources at the National Coal Mining Museum and Freeth's original portraits we set about trying to produce a new project that might do justice to this important work.

We felt from early on that to do the project properly would require some additional funding, above what the museum already had available. We approached Arts Council England and were successful in securing their financial support through the Grants for the arts programme. I think I'm right in saying that this was the first time the museum had received Arts Council funding directly in order to produce new work.

The project we drew up would have three particular elements, photographic portraiture, oral history interviews and written profiles.

One area where the museum wanted to strengthen its collections was material on miners who are still working in the industry today.

I'd like to show you some of the portraits whilst I explain a little bit about process behind the project.

***Allan Heppinstall portrait**

The coal industry in the UK is, obviously, a very different place to what it was in Freeth's day. Indeed there are only a handful of deep mines still operating in the UK today. For instance since the project began, both Daw Mill Colliery, in Warwickshire and Maltby Colliery, in South Yorkshire, have closed.

With this fact in mind it was felt the best way to approach the project was to concentrate on one large deep mine.

Kellingley Colliery in North Yorkshire employed around two and a half thousand people at its peak and it now employs around eight hundred. It's owned and run by UK Coal.

***Trevor Vaughan**

Access is often very difficult to private industry, understandably keen to maintain some control over its own public image.

Fortunately the museum have a very good relationship with UK Coal and I was able to gain an introduction to one of their Directors and persuade him of the projects merits and the integrity of the idea behind it. I also met with the NUM delegates on the ground very early on to explain the background and historical context of the work.

Sadly, a week before I was due to start work at Kellingley there was an accident underground and a miner tragically lost his life. It came very soon after the Gleision drift mine accident in Wales where four miners lost their lives. This led to a lot of negative press coverage of the Kellingley incident and some resentment amongst the workforce, who felt the colliery was being unfairly represented.

*Barry Leadbitter

When I visited Kellingley, one week on, the feeling was still very raw and as I wrote at the time;

'It is a difficult time to ask people to trust you and for them to come forward and tell you something of their own story.'

*Brian Pashley

Despite this, thankfully, UK Coal granted permission for the work to go ahead and exactly one month after the accident I was able to begin work on the portraits.

I was lucky to be placed under the supervision of the Training Manager at Kellingley, Alan Barker, who was initially my chaperone on site. He was able to introduce me to people and that really helped from the start.

*Terri Westerman

I concentrated on the portraits to begin with as I felt the interviews could come later on. The practicalities of working in this kind of environment are quite demanding and I'd love to say that it was as romantic as the Freeth newsreel suggests. But it wasn't.

Mining is a tough job and the last thing people want to do at the end of a long shift is to stand around and be photographed, so often there would be a flurry of activity and I would be grateful to come away with a few portraits at the end of it.

*Bob and Chris

I had set out quite conscious of how Freeth posed his mining portraits, with a relaxed formality and I wanted to capture something of that in my own work. There are of course differences between the two mediums so what works for one doesn't necessarily work for the other.

I used simple, clear model release forms at the time of the portraits in order to get people's contact details, as well as written consent to use the portrait. This helped later on when it came to arranging interviews, most of which took place at Kellingley, but for some I went along to the miners homes.

*Quotes page

I had drawn up a list of interview questions designed, with feedback from the museum, to give some structure to the conversations and to get a good cross section of people's experiences in mining.

The museum curators were also able to offer me advice and the equipment in order to make the recordings.

It was the first time I'd really worked in this way and I found it hugely rewarding. When people share their personal stories with you it's definitely something of a privilege.

*Len Wood

I also made some sound recordings of the ambience around the colliery. Which has an atmosphere all of its own.

When it came to writing the new profiles I really liked the characterful nature of Freeth's writing and his use of language. There was always dark and light, and that mirrored the nature of the subject.

*Alan Blackburn

A general reflection on the commission from your point of view
(demonstrating a model of a successful artist-collection collaboration, giving insight into working with an artist in this way)

If I was to reflect on the commission, I would simply say this;

I think with an artist - collection collaboration it's important that there is a level of trust there, between both parties. For the artist to have that level of creative freedom to explore the work, but also for the collection to have the confidence to know that the work created will make curatorial sense.

*Alan Brown

I'm not sure there is an exact model for this kind of collaboration but the secret to it may lie in finding the right artist for the right collection, and working with good curators who understand and believe in the original work.

***The Exhibition**

***Images of prepping the selection**

A slightly unusual aspect to the Pit Profiles project is that the finished exhibition work has gone out on tour prior to being exhibited at the National Coal Mining Museum. That exhibition will open in February 2014. This posed quite a few questions regarding the design and shape of the exhibition, and whilst we always had the mining museums gallery in mind during the process we were conscious of the need for it to have an inherent flexibility.

***Images of the Ironbridge exhibition installation**

Interestingly the current exhibition, at Ironbridge Gorge, mixes the two sets of work together. Drawing direct visual similarities within the portraits. For instance a person's features; their facial characteristics or their gait and demeanour. And hanging those works together.

But this wasn't necessarily the original intention. Certainly with the mining museum exhibition the plan is to exhibit the work as two separate parts of the same exhibition.

Working with existing collections does, however, allow for that flexibility of curation.

And whilst the original work does feed into the new work, in many different ways, it's interesting that the explicit decisions you make during the project aren't always the ones that tie the works together. Sometimes the finished portrait actually makes that decision for you. Whether that's down to some inner instinct whilst working, I'm not entirely sure. But it seems that successful portraiture has a voice of its own that needs to be heard.

***The Book**

***Cover image of the book**

An important aspect of the project for me was to be able to also produce something which could be seen outside of an exhibition context.

Once the work was complete the museum curators really got behind my idea of producing a book which featured the new portraits alongside some of the written work.

The museum were able to find some additional funding which meant we were able to add this extra element to the project which allows the work to be seen in a different way.

***Poem image**

We have copies of the book available today if anyone would like to purchase one.

Any lessons learnt

It can be a long and complicated road to reach the finished work, whether that is an exhibition, a book, or both.

***Portrait spread image**

An important aspect in the whole process is in keeping the integrity of the work intact and the projects aims central to the outcome.

Sometimes the actual work can feel a very small part of the process and can get a little lost in amongst all the other elements. For me it's vital to be able to keep the work uppermost in your mind when making decisions which effect the project, particularly if those decisions have to be made by committee.

I suppose another way to phrase this would be to say – stick up for the work!

Because it is a very valuable process working with existing portrait collections to produce new work.