

Robin Dale

Hearing from Artists

Robin Dale's truthful, tender photographs document the landscape, industry and people of Teesside through times of social and economic change. His work is in the Middlesbrough Collection, and was presented in MIMA exhibitions Localism (2015-16) and Teesside World Exposition of Art and Technology (2016). Robin was born in Stockton-on-Tees in 1940, and lives in Billingham, Tees Valley. He is in conversation with Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator, in July 2020.

OH: When did you become interested in film and photography?

RD: I discovered photography as a teenager and joined a local club to see what others were doing. They had such a rigid way of working. They would have slide or print 'battles' where members would submit a print or slide anonymously. The judge would go through them, declaring what didn't fit, what wasn't acceptable. The rules of photography seemed very rigid, all about technique and equipment. So I went my own way.

I began to create film shorts by ordering my transparencies in sequence. I pictured events such as horse races using shots of horses, bookies waving their arms, the parading ring, spectacular falls, congratulations, a grumpy bookie handing out money – like a low budget film.

In the late 1960s, I started taking pictures of children on the streets around Teesside. Kids would be on the pavement or in the gutter,



*Browns Foundry 8, Stockton-on-Tees 2, 1970s.
Image courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library
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playing marbles and with dolls. I crouched to their level to capture the moment – they were half playing and half wondering what's going on.

In those days, taking a photograph was quite an event. They would run after me shouting, "Are you from the paper? Take me picture mister!" Photography has lost that "one-off" nature now. Then, you just had one chance. I'd take my camera films to the CWS chemist on Wellington Street in Stockton. They would be ready a week later, in bright, budgie-yellow boxes.

OH: How did your work develop?

RD: I met Graeme Miles, a local songwriter, in 1968. He had a background creating soundtracks for radio. The BBC had begun to use real people to narrate radio plays. Graeme was involved with creating *The Ballad of John Axon*, the story of a Stockton train driver who lost his life trying to avert a train accident. The soundtrack incorporated field recordings of steam and other railway sounds, and interviews with locals, merging in and out of a ballad about the incident. I experimented with an old BBC recording I'd found of children singing "Nymphs and Shepherds". I spliced it with my images of local kids to create short films, with a montage effect.

Graeme and I began to collaborate. We decided to produce a full-length study of Teesside, collaging my images to Graeme's



Take Me Picture Mister, Southbank, Middlesbrough, 1970s.
Image courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library © Robin Dale



Top Table, The Bridge Hotel, Darlington, 1970s.
Image courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library © Robin Dale



Iron Mines. Slide from *The Banks of the Tees* (1971-75).
Image courtesy of the artist © Robin Dale



Iron Mines. Slide from *The Banks of the Tees* (1971-75).
Image courtesy of the artist © Robin Dale

soundtrack through a slide show. We worked out a narrative and I set out to find the images. We called it *The Banks of the Tees*.

There were dozens of small foundries on the riverside. I spent a day taking pictures at a small out-of-town foundry in Stockton. A friend introduced me to the men, and they let me take photographs inside. Men stoking furnaces with coal and wood and then inside the foundry. It was a dark and satanic place, with sudden waves of crimson heat as they tipped the crucibles. One of the last shots of the day had the local pub in the background. We wanted to show how industry connected with social life.

It took five years to do this first study (1971-75). We were both working at the same time. We used our own money, so we had artistic freedom. Other people were involved too. Graeme had a group of people he could call upon to contribute different skills and voices. We all met up together. Everyone got a credit line.

We created two more films together. The second, *The Ballad of the Country Camera*, was about the rural. We used existing songs by Graeme about the moors, sheep, seasons, the weather. My brief was to match these with images. It took five more years. The third, *Down the Sands to Whitby*, was a coastal study.

I went to Whitby fish market with a Walkman strapped to my waist to capture field sound recordings. I photographed the fish boxes and men unloading boats. This one was finished in 1983.

OH: Tell us more about combining sound and image to create an atmosphere.

RD: We didn't have portable sound equipment to begin with so we created sounds at home. We recorded lapping water in Graeme's bathtub. He pulled a garden hose along the concrete of his drive to create the sound of foundry men scraping out the furnace at the end of their shift. We used coconuts for hooves at a horse race.

Later on, technology improved. We visited working men's clubs with a tape recorder to capture the hubbub. In the background, the sound of the compere blowing down the microphone, "here's the singer for tonight", footsteps coming on stage. I photographed the locals, poised with bingo cards. We created an audio-visual collage, recreating the atmosphere. Watching it is almost as if you are there.

We shared the slide show at photography clubs and folk groups. We set it up properly, in a darkened room. We projected the images at life size. We wanted the audience to take

part in an experience of a particular time and place, step into a moment. In the audience, someone from another society or club would ask us to come and show at their meeting the next month. There was a knock-on effect.

The slide show was feature length, with over 300 slides, too many for a projector cartridge. So we put them in one-by-one and pushed them across by hand, magic lantern style. This got rid of the jarring automatic 'clunk and blink' that you normally get between slides. The soundtrack helped to blend the images too – eyes and ears working together to connect the gaps. We timed it with a stopwatch, showing one slide every 20 seconds. It was performative. Like a musician playing live, the show had a slightly different intonation each time.

OH: How did your personal experience of the landscape, industry and social life of this region influence your aesthetic and subject interests?

RD: I grew up in Norton, Stockton-on-Tees. Everyone worked at ICI. I worked as a turner, producing cylindrical objects out of metal. It gave me a wage so I could go out and take photographs. In the mornings I'd cycle up Billingham Bank and join the hundreds of others on their bicycles, and later in their Ford Populars, heading towards the factory gates.

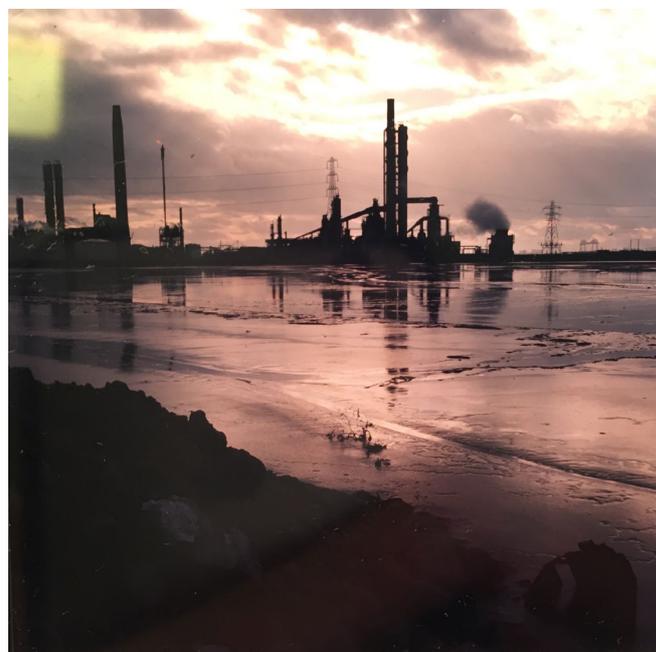
We would all file in. It was the reverse at night. Clocking off. Smoke like a chimney on the way home. A set routine. My parents thought it would never end.

ICI had everything for workers. Sports. The company's social centre, the Synthonia Club, had a ballroom, a theatre, and a cinema. Once a month the film club screened films supplied by the local circuit. Black and white French films. Ingmar Bergman, resistance films from Czechoslovakia; arty, experimental and edgy films. There was a form to fill in with marks out of ten and comments. I loved it. It gave me a lifetime interest in film. I took a few photos around ICI. Some images of the cable car bringing anhydrite out from the mine. Some of my workmates playing dominoes in their lunchbreak.

If you live in a place, you don't realise its beauty because you see it every day. In the sixties, the Tees stank. The air was polluted. There was a permanent haze and the sun, and seagulls' wings, sometimes looked blue because of it. The chemicals in the steam and smoke coming from the cooling towers would catch the light of the sun and create all kinds of exotic colours. Graeme wrote a song about it called 'Blue Sunset.' But, as he said in *The Banks of the Tees*, "now you can see the hills from time to time."



Oil and Gas. Slide from *The Banks of the Tees* (1971-75)
Image courtesy of the artist © Robin Dale



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Graeme took me out to Greatham Creek in the late '60s, when the salt extraction business there was winding down. Industry was always apparent on the skyline, but there was a sense of remoteness there. The tide coming in and out, the odd sheep farm, bird life. There was a lovely atmosphere. Curlews crying, the steady thump of the engines pumping the salt up. A lone salt-worker whistling. On a clear day you could hear the church bells ringing in Greatham.

So we photographed it. My friend Ian MacDonald photographed it as well. People used to go for the weekend, stay in their handmade houseboats there. But now they're gone. There are a few images of ICI in the final sequence of *The Banks of the Tees*. At the time, the new hope was finding oil and gas in the sea. They reclaimed Greatham Marshes so bigger ships could get in. I put on my ICI boots and a donkey jacket and went out to photograph the pipe bridges and strange futuristic buildings. After the oil boom quietened, nature came back. Seals and wildlife. The sky and river are cleaner.

OH: Did you think of yourselves as artists?

RD: We were trailblazing. One of the first shows we did when we completed our first reel was at Berwick Hills Camera Club. There was stunned silence. They hadn't seen anything like it before. It proved I'd broken away from the camera club ethos – I was quite chuffed with that. For me,

photography isn't about formal composition, or having the latest camera or equipment. It's about the artist capturing the essence of a person or place. My photographs are true to the moment. I had a different way of seeing and framing reality.

No one at that time was doing slideshow to that degree. Now it has even more value because it captured a time, the late 60s, early 70s, when everyday life seemed so set in its ways. We captured the air of satisfaction with a day's work. A man satisfied with his way of life. Connected communities. 1968-1983 was a fascinating time. Those three projects with Graeme. I hardly threw anything away; I have boxes and boxes of slides at home. Since then, the air is cleaner, people are living longer. But I miss that time.

Now you can enlarge, edit and adjust photographs. It's instant. You can take dozens in sequence. Before, you only had twelve on a roll. You had to make every image count. I spent years using the same camera. It almost becomes part of you. I'd know intuitively if I'd got the shot. A friend lent me his modern camera once. There was a millisecond delay between seeing the image and pressing the shutter. I thought, "Thanks but no thanks. I'll stick with my Box Brownie." You've got to wait for the moment. It's more intimate. What you see is what you get, no editing.