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the valleys archive

David Bailey, Mike Berry, John Davies, Peter Fraser, Ron McCormick, Francesca Odell, Paul Reas, William Tsui, Roger Tiley, Wally Waygood

Ffotogallery originally established the Valleys Project in 1984, as a unique undertaking to document what has to be one of the most captivating yet industrialized landscapes of Northern Europe. During the five years of the project to 1990, it has drawn together the work of photographers resident in Wales and from further afield, to create a contemporary visual record and social commentary encompassing a broad geographical spread of the South Wales Valleys.

The first commissions initiated in 1985, enabled two well known UK photographers, Ron McCormick and Paul Reas to produce bodies of work which focused on the changing topographic landscape and the partial introduction of new technology into a latter day industrial wasteland. During the same year, John Davies, an artist synonymous with landscape photography, was commissioned by Rumney District Council to record the demise of the massive mining infrastructure, and its impact on the people and character of the Rumney Valley.

Later in 1985, David Bailey visited the valleys to produce a portfolio of seductive black and white images which reflected an outsider's detached sense of bewilderment when faced with the austere geographical and social conditions of this fascinating region. In 1986 the work of Mike Berry, Francesca Odell, Roger Tiley and Peter Fraser, each very distinctive picture makers, featured in an exhibition and accompanying publication. This particular project sought to deal directly with the communities of the Valleys, and in particular the resonance of the Miners' Strike, although the inclusion of Peter Fraser within this context proved to be something of a departure, as his contribution, the first series in colour, contradicted mainstream documentary modes, by utilizing oblique photographic depictions.

Ffotogallery established even broader parameters for the Valleys Project, when the artist Wally Waygood, a local of Merthyr Tydfil, was commissioned in October 1989 to create a unique Billboard hoarding artwork on a site at Dowlais top, Merthyr. The 20'x10' work, combining photographic image and text, explored the theme of the South Wales Valleys and the demise of its heavy industries in a post-industrial society.

In 1990, the last contributor to the Valleys Project in its present form, William Tsui was awarded a major commission to document the Upper Afan Valley in general and some of the personalities in the wind swept village of Aber/Blaengwynfi in particular.

Many other satellite activities have sprung up as a result of these major photographic initiatives, which have embraced historical research and archival gathering, workshops with local community groups, and courses and classes in schools exploring regional heritage and identity. Photographs from the project have been shown in a wide variety of venues: schools, community centres, art galleries and museums.

The collection forms an extraordinary portrait of areas in South Wales laden with history. All photographs made for the Valleys Project, over 450 in all, which forms part of Ffotogallery's archive is available for loan and research to schools, colleges, community groups and gallery members.



david bailey

David Bailey - The Valleys Project, 1985

The Valleys Project presented a challenge to David Bailey, a photographer obviously more used to subjects of glamorous proportions.

When questioned as to why he particularly wanted to work on this project, his answer was that he had for a long time been interested in photographing the urban landscape; indeed he had been doing just that for himself, but he felt he needed a focus for an idea to intensify his concentration by working within a very disciplined context. Bailey had no preconceptions when he began working, and his visual responses to this particular environment are significant, given his emotional perception of the area, which was, on the whole pessimistic. In this set of photographs, with a few exceptions, Bailey has made reference to the past and his is not so much a precise and lucid description of significant fact, but utilising austere printing methods, an attempt to load his subject matter with a dark narrative alluding to the area's history.





mike berry

Mike Berry - The Valleys Project, 1985

Mike Berry began photographing in Glyncorrwg in the Afan Valley during Easter 1985. His ubiquitous presence won him the confidence of the initially wary people.

Glyncorrwg was an object lesson in the recent history of South Wales. Geographically the only way out of Glyncorrwg is down the valley to Port Talbot, or over the mountain to Rhondda. As a result of the pit closures, the community of around 1700 people suffered unemployment levels of over 40%. And while during the mid 1980s the town infrastructure was still buoyant with four chapels, a church, a pub, clubs, a rugby team, three shops, a post office and a café there was little money to spend in the community. One small, local furniture factory provided employment for over 40 people, but there was no other large-scale employer. A seemingly dismal situation, but to Mike Berry's surprise he did not find bitterness and despair. His images take us in and out of the community, from panoramic vistas of the distinctive valleys to close-ups of personalities from the local community. His subject's exude energy and a shared joy that stems from a intense sense of place. Berry's photographs are tender, evocative images of a struggling, but determined community.





john davies

John Davies - The Valleys Project, 1984

In June 1984, John Davies was commissioned to photograph the industrialised landscapes within the Rhymney Valley. This long and narrow valley stretches for about 25 miles from the Caerphilly Basin northwards to Rhymney and the 'Heads of the Valleys'.

Like its neighbouring South Wales valleys of the Taff and Ebbw, the Rhymney Valley has seen an enormous growth in population and industrial activity over the last hundred years. Throughout the 19th century numerous settlements were created to accommodate the massive labour force required for mining and transporting the millions of tons of coal. New communities were established around the pits, in places like Bargoed and New Tredegar. However with the decline of this heavy industry in the latter part of the twentieth century, only two collieries were still in production within the Valley. John Davies' photographs are a testament to this new post-industrial landscape, and his poignant images, which focus on the emblematic symbols of history, are an apposite comment on the changing face of the Valleys.





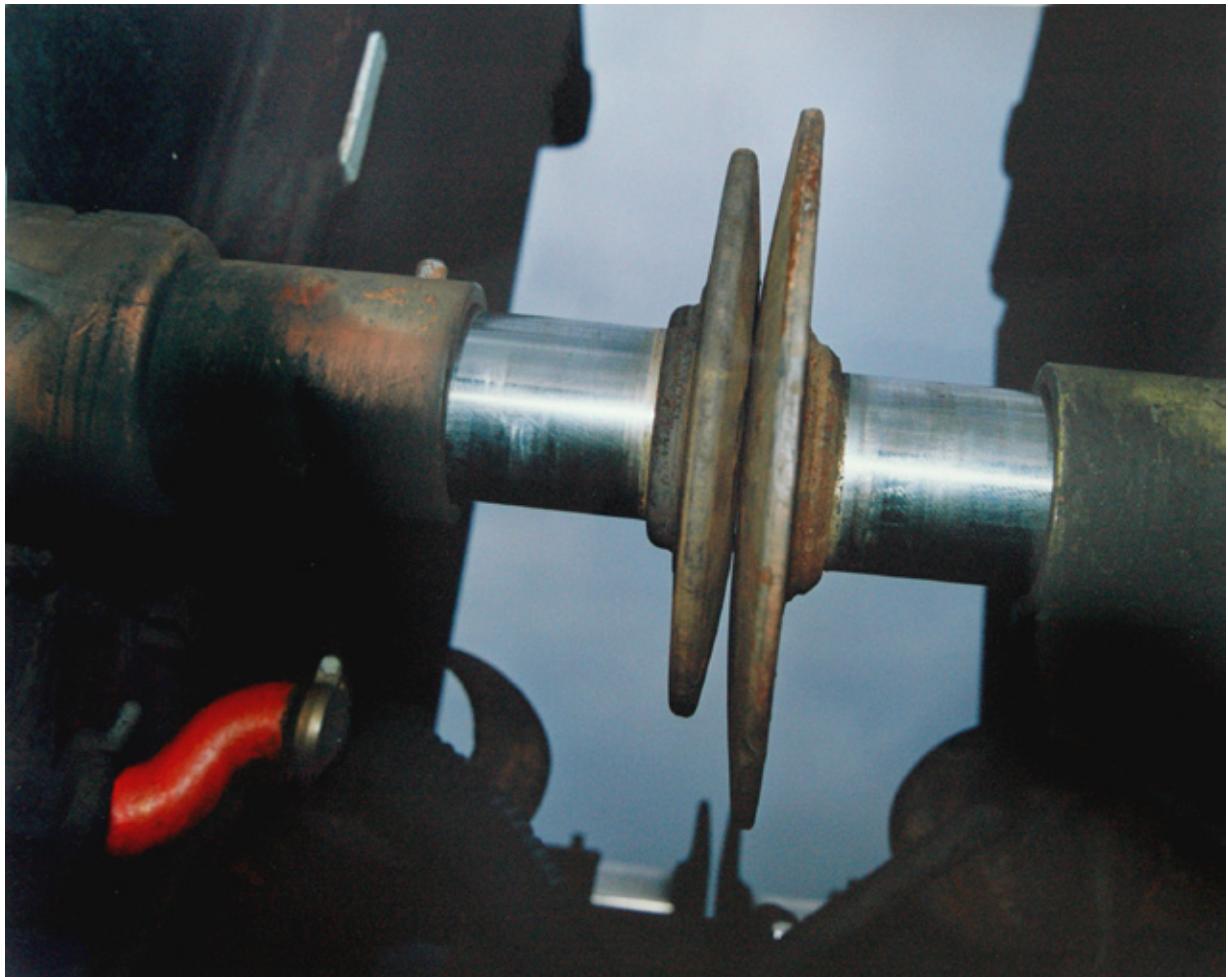
peter fraser

Peter Fraser - The Valleys Project, 1985/86

Peter Fraser is a native of Wales, born in Cardiff and brought up in the valleys. For the Valleys Project he re-visited areas familiar to him as a child and generated pictures, oblique but inextricably related in some way to his childhood experiences.

He says about the project, "I'm personally inclined towards what could be called a peripheral use of photography because of the way I see the world – I would say that these photographs, while not didactic in their construction, could not have been taken anywhere else...they are of the valleys." Devoid of people Fraser's photographs are an intense, and clearly personal depiction of a place which holds many evocative associations. This intimate set of images retain a child-like curiosity; a vocabulary beyond what is visible to the passer by, past surface impressions. What Peter Fraser appears to achieve in this body of work is a perspective, which does not allow prejudices or presumptions to bear on direct experience.





ron mccormick

Ron McCormick - The Valleys Project, 1985

The South Wales Valleys as we now know them are the result of the most extraordinary industrialisation process. An industrialisation which brought with it profound changes to the landscape as the encroaching sprawl of the rapidly developing iron and coal industries took over the land.

It was John Ruskin who, warning of the impending industrial juggernaut in his writings, was convinced that industrialisation would not only damage the environment but would eventually obliterate the very memory of the world it was setting out to serve. It seems that in the century that has passed since Ruskin first sounded his warning, the South Wales Valleys, perhaps more than any other place in Britain, came to represent the worst excesses of industrial and environmental blight. It was to take the disaster at Aberfan and the decline

of the coal industry generally to focus attention on the environmental problems of the region. The latter part of the 20th Century has seen the topography of the area alter dramatically as tips and mines have disappeared and spoil heaps have been levelled to neutralise their danger and lessen the impact on the eye. Ron McCormick's elegant but brutally honest pictures encapsulate this metamorphosis with precision and aplomb.





francesca odell

Francesca Odell - The Valleys Project, 1986

Francesca Odell's documentary focus was directed towards three communities – in Clydach Vale, the Gurnos Estate, Merthyr and Gilfach Goch – that could be seen to channel the mainstream ethos of The Valleys' experience. Gilfach is literally a dead end: an isolated township sandwiched between the Rhondda and Garw valleys where Odell shot pictures of her redoubtable family in their new 'Garden Village' setting. On the Gurnos estate, perched high above the Heads of the Valleys Road, she photographed another would be brave new world on the doorstep of what was once the world's iron making capital. The children, Odell photographed hanging about on the streets of Clydach Vale do not look at the camera: their gaze is downwards, blank or fiercely insolent in disinterest, reflective of a insidious form of working class entrapment. Together, this portrait of three distinct but complimentary environments encapsulates the gritty determination, fierce pride and communal loyalty of its citizens while acknowledging that the future for the youth of the valleys remains, at best, uncertain and at worst, without much prospect of long term fulfillment.



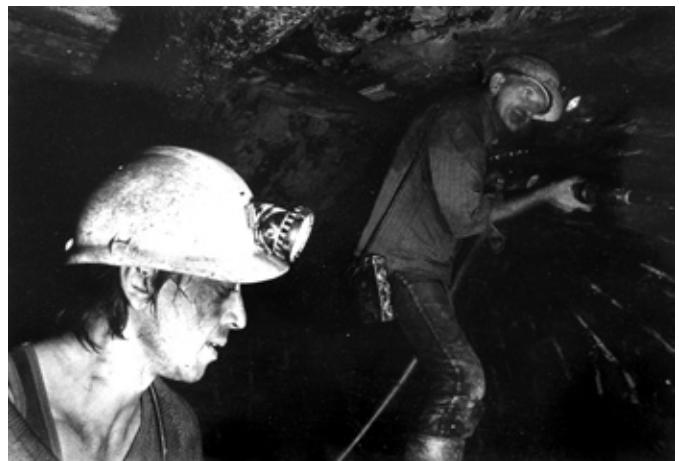


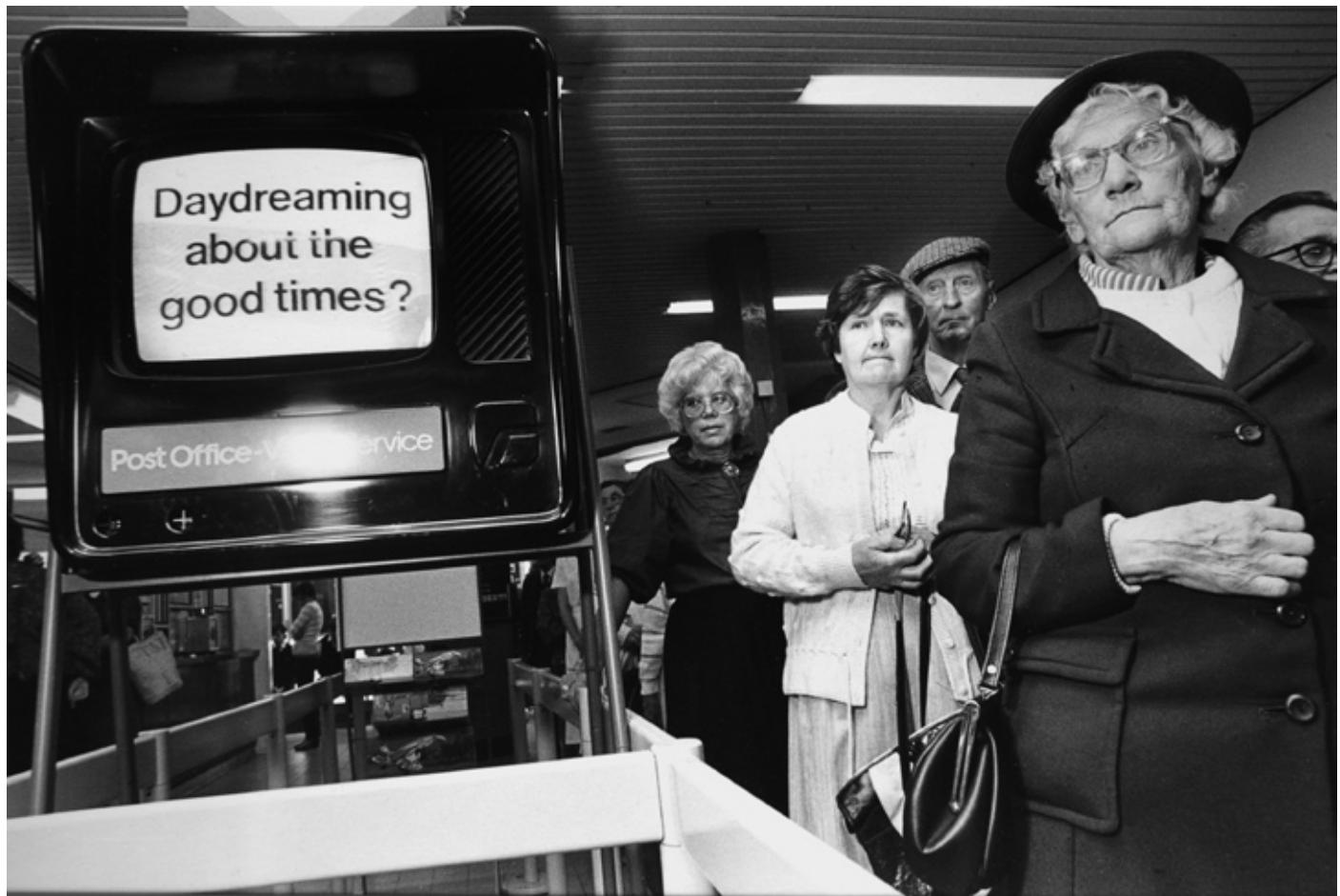
paul reas

Paul Reas - The Valleys Project, 1985

Traditionally the South Wales Valleys have been an area of heavy industrial importance, their steel mills and coal mines fuelling the British economy.

In recent years, these industries have suffered a drastic decline, in some areas disappearing entirely. As a result, an established work force was left with no meaningful employment. It was this very problem that heralded the creation of the Welsh Development Agency and similar bodies to attract new industry to the area - resulting in the development of new trading estates. Amongst the most successful of these ventures was the establishment of high technology industries. For Paul Reas, it was these 'high tech' industries and their subsequent effects on the communities that triggered his imagination: " I firstly looked at the development of the factories themselves and the industrial estates they occupied. The work process itself was also a specific area of interest. As more and more of the jobs became automated, what effects did this have on the nature of the work and the workforce itself."





william tsui

William Tsui - The Valleys Project, 1990

William Tsui centred his work on Aber/Blaengwynfi; a small village set in a fairly remote part of the Afan Valley. The photographer was drawn to this place in particular, as in many ways it epitomises the plight of so many of the South Wales Valleys which have been emasculated with the demise of the once thriving coal industry. Aber/Blaengwynfi is a supreme example of a village fighting back for its survival, and while during the mid-eighties amenities in the town were extremely scarce, efforts were made in the early 1990s by the local community to regenerate and revitalise the town's infrastructure. It was this enthusiasm and growing confidence evident in the people of Aber/Blaengwynfi that William Tsui set out to capture in his highly evocative portfolio of photographs. His images which comprise graphic yet compassionate

portraits of many of the villagers at home and in the workplace, with a selection of images which explore the exquisite topography of the region. These photographs are a testament to the dedication and purpose of the current generation in Aber/Blaengwynfi, their sense of community and their insistence that this small enclave in the south west Valleys of South Wales remains in the public imagination, not as yet another post-mining community on its knees, but as a thriving and developing community looking forward to the challenges of the 1990's.

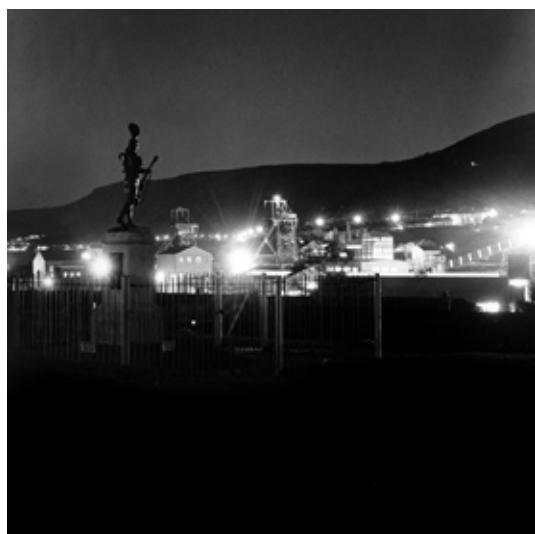




roger tiley

Roger Tiley - The Valleys Project, 1985/86

The closure of so many pits in the South Wales Valleys left many communities in a state of turmoil and poverty. Some have survived by adapting – tourism, second homes, valley exiles returning to retirement. But where there is no local work at a pit or factory, a school closure means the death of a village. It is this sad state of atrophy in the community which motivated Roger Tiley's photographic work. With an abruptness and finality he summed up the situation which faced these communities: "I have lived in the valleys all my life. A lot of my family were miners, but like many others our connection with the industry has finished." But there is little nostalgia, sentimentality or even romance in his photographs.





wally waygood

Wally Waygood - The Valleys Project, 1989

In 1989, Wally Waygood was specifically commissioned to add a new dimension to the Valleys Project, taking the concept out of the art gallery and into the public domain. The photographer, a local of Merthyr Tydfil and living near Dowlais Top on the Heads of the Valleys Road, was particularly interested in the history of the area. An area for ever associated with a visit from King Edward VIII in November 1936, who was appalled by the loss of the Dowlas Top steel works and the livelihoods of the work force. The King proclaimed profoundly to an assembled mass of miners, "Something Must Be Done". History tells us that nothing was done and Merthyr never recovered fully from the industrial decline of the 1930's. Waygood's photo-montage 'memorial' to this moment in history features an archetypal miner replete with lamp surveying the landscape, with the King's immortal words emblazoned across the billboard: a simple but poignant conflation of image and text to comment wryly on the exchange between the Welsh working class and the English monarch.

