

Chris Upton 'Thoresby Colliery'

Chris Upton is a professional photographer, based in Nottinghamshire: he has his ARPS and is a brand sponsor for Fujifilm. Two of his great passions are travel and photography. Chris has received awards in national photographic competitions and has twice been commissioned to photograph in Thailand on behalf of the Tourism Authority of Thailand. His images are represented by several international stock agencies and clients have used them worldwide across many different sectors.

In 2016 Chris presented a major social documentary project recording the final year of Thoresby Colliery, the last pit in Nottinghamshire.

Thoresby is on the edge of Sherwood Forest, and its mining history goes back 900 years. Chris became aware that the colliery was about to close down and arranged a visit with a view to taking photographs there. He was given the green light, and set about some research before his first visit. He found a project on a Welsh colliery by David Bailey and looked into local history. The pictures of the miners usually showed them smiling and happy in their bright overalls and helmets.

Even at the security office, half a mile from the mine, he noted coal dust was everywhere. At the colliery he was paired up with Grant, the Safety Officer. His first visit involved a walk around the site to get an overall idea of what was there. He was told at the outset that because of the safety implications he couldn't be taken under ground.

As with any project, Chris made a short-list of the images he would need. It was about a year to the closure, at which time the site would be demolished. He asked if anyone else was preparing a documentary on the pit's demise: no one was. After three visits (each one took about three hours) Chris decided how he would approach the task. He settled on monochrome. The reasons were that monochrome is timeless, the different methods of lighting meant white balance was 'all over the place', and the miners wore bright orange overalls which would have dominated every image they were in.

The colliery opened in 1925. In 1935 washing facilities were provided. At the time it was 'the jewel in the crown'. It was the first pit in the country to be built with electric winding: the first pit without a chimney. In 1951, Thoresby became the first nationalised mine to exceed a million tons output in one year. One of the most productive and profitable coal mines in Europe for many years, in 1988 went on to produce two million tons in 43 working weeks. The coal went mainly to the Trent power stations.

Chris took us on a tour. First the Rapid Loader where the coal was tipped from a conveyer-belt into railway trucks. The tiny rooms – 'snap cabins' – where the miners took a break and refreshment were grubby with coal dust. To continue his tour, Chris needed boots, gloves, goggles and a helmet. This was because of the mixture of coal dust, muck, oil and tar everywhere. The closer he got to the Head Stocks (the winding gear for the lifts) the heavier his boots became. The views from the top were amazing; the drawback was that as the wheels turned muck and grime filled the air. There were views of the second Head Stocks and the spoil heap, which after 90 years of work became the highest spot in Nottinghamshire.

Returning to the photography, Chris emphasised how important it is with any project to have an end-product in mind. He realised this project would be important to industrial archaeology: once the pit was dismantled his images would be all that remained. He needed to know the miners better before he pointed his camera at them, engaging them in banter. He used a Fujifilm XE1 and XT1, with three zoom and two prime lenses. These cameras are mirrorless and have a live histogram. He always exposed for the highlights – dark areas were acceptable for this project. Because of the coal-dust he had to keep lens-swapping to a minimum. He used a tripod, but since he had to be accompanied by Grant all the time he didn't feel he could wait too long anywhere before moving on.

Many areas of the site were already falling into ruin through lack of maintenance. A few miners began to appear in the photographs, their faces unrecognisable at first. A close-up of a tool belt, worn and dirty. After his fifth visit, Chris showed his images to Grant and his line manager, who asked Chris to take a portrait of him to be used on his LinkedIn profile to help him get a new job.

At the NEC Photographic Show Chris met the editor of Black & White Photography magazine. He was told 'You've got an 8-page feature there'. This was to spark a new direction.

The visits now turned to filling in the gaps with details of specific buildings. The blacksmith, the joiner, the store room, and the coal preparation plant where coal was washed by a huge noisy vibrating splashing machine – the worst place to work on cold winter days. The cage operator, the miners emerging from the cage. Spoil being conveyed to the spoil heap by huge trucks,

dwarfed by the age-old heap itself. In the workshop machinery was being cut up to be sold as scrap. The camera's flip-out screen saved kneeling in coal-dust.

Chris now felt ready to include the miners themselves. The time when all the mined coal had been sent on its way was getting close, and redundancy loomed. The over 50s might manage on part-time work; those with a skilled trade might find alternative employment; but as for those who mined the coal – a well-paid job – what could they do? The anxiety showed in the miners' faces: men like 'Happy Frank'.

Chris also turned over in his mind what he would do with all the images. Magazine articles? A book? An exhibition? He sent some pictures and text to 13 publishers. 9 replied, but would not take the job on as it was 'too niche'. The only way was to self-publish – a costly and time-consuming exercise: including getting the ISBN number and finding a suitable printer. Mansfield Museum was able to stage an exhibition because of a cancellation – a real bit of luck.

One of his images was the racks of miners' lamps, with gaps where miners who had left the colliery had taken away their lamps with them as tradition dictated. Fuji used this image on their stand at the next NEC Photographic Show. For the final day of Thoresby Colliery, Chris sent out a press release. Radio Nottingham picked up on it, as did the papers and TV channels. Chris set up a website. The exhibition took place after Christmas. He met the man who checked the miners' chest X-rays and learned that Nottinghamshire miners were less prone to chest illness than those in Wales because Nottingham coal contained less silicate.

Chris recorded the voices of the miners. Their emotions showed both in their portraits and in their voices. Memories of the Miners' Strike (1984-5) were still raw. We saw scenes at the Exhibition: 51 images were displayed: two TV crews turned up and their pieces were seen on national as well as local stations. Articles appeared in papers and magazines. Reprints of the book sold out.

The talk ended with an AV which included the voices of the miners. The project took a whole year. What began as a simple idea to take some pictures of a coal mine at the end of its life had turned into a multi-faceted tribute to the 90 years of Thoresby Colliery. In time it will be replaced by 800 new homes, a primary school, leisure facilities and a 350-acre country park. Chris's work ensures the memories of Thoresby will never die.