

A Noble Gift: The University of Leeds Collection of Photographs by Godfrey Bingley

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IN 1913 Godfrey Bingley (Fig 1), a well-known amateur photographer, donated a huge collection of glass photographs to the University of Leeds.

The University has little information about his life other than what can be deduced from the photographic bequest, but there exist two small leather-covered books, a 'record of family and other events',¹ in which, in his handwriting and unmistakable cryptic style, the barest data about him are set down. The earlier part of the 'record' gives dates of birth and death of his recent ancestors and on the first page is a pencil drawing of



FIG 1 Godfrey Bingley Slide JJ

the coat of arms, labelled 'Bingley (Yorkshire)'² the crest of which he appears to have had printed as his private letter heading. In fact he had no right to either crest or coat of arms, which are not of the Bingley family but of Robert Benson, who was made Baron Bingley (after the place) in 1713 and who died in 1730 with no issue, so the coat of arms 'died' too. Like Godfrey, various people called Bingley, innocent wishful thinkers probably, subsequently 'usurped' it.

It is difficult to tell when the entries become a diary, in the sense of being written within a day or two of the incidents they describe. The handwriting and colour of the ink is constant over periods of several years, and the layout so regular, with ruled red ink lines a tenth of an inch under each date, that one may be justified in assuming that the 'record' was tidily compiled some time after the events.

The handwriting changes abruptly following an entry (Monday 13 October 1913) naming friends who came to stay the week, and two small newspaper cuttings, one about the funeral of William Bowling (October 26) and the other about the birth of his grandson John Godfrey Bingley Platts on November 21. The next entry says:

Monday 3rd Nov. Whilst reading during the evening I suddenly lost the sight of my right eye, caused the Doctor said, by a stoppage of the main artery of the eye. I was kept nearly flat on the bed for five weeks, hoping that the stoppage would become absorbed but without effect. Having only the indistinct vision of the left eye, reading and writing is not possible.

Thursday 25th Dec. Lizzie and I spent the evening at Mrs Platts', Springfield Mount, as on several previous years.

Owing to my loss of eyesight we had no Xmas gathering as in former years.

On the next page is a newspaper report of Bingley's photographic gift to the University.

In a letter to the Vice-Chancellor dated 15 December 1913 the Professor of Geology, P F Kendall (Fig 2), wrote:

Dear Sadler

. . . My old friend Godfrey Bingley who has made for himself a great reputation as an amateur photographer and has amassed probably the most magnificent collection ever made of lantern slides illustrating Architecture, Archaeology, Geology and scenery in all parts of England, but especially Yorkshire, has been suddenly stricken with almost total blindness.

The oculists hold out no hopes of recovery of more than the dimmest vision, and they warn him that under any circumstances his career as a photographer is at an end.

He consulted me about the disposal of his collections and has offered to hand them over to me as a gift to the University.

The slides number roughly *ten thousand* and if such exquisite work were



FIG 2 Professor P F Kendall sheltering under a peat turf stack during a storm.
Blea Hill Rigg, Flying Dale Moor, 24.6.1912 Univ 9713

purchasable at ordinary lantern-slide price, their value would not be less than £500.

Each one is properly numbered, named and catalogued, and the value of the series is greatly enhanced as a historical record by the fact that every one is dated. Prints of about 500 have been accepted by the trustees of the British Museum for the Photographic Record scheme of Sir Benjamin Stone.³

I felt that it was a great responsibility to accept the charge of so magnificent a series of records, but subject to the approval of the council I promised that proper provision should be made for their housing. Lantern slides are of course, destructible by various (non-political) agents – wet, fire and breakage and as an additional safeguard against loss I proposed to Mr Bingley that the *negatives* should also be presented to us, and assured him that if this were done we should treat them as if they were held in trust to posterity. This exactly expressed Mr Bingley's desires.

He wishes that the lantern slides should be, as heretofore, available for the use of such of his friends as have been accustomed to borrow from him, and also for the use of my own and other departments. I think that the council will be willing to accept this noble gift and if it should be possible I believe it would give great pleasure to the poor afflicted donor if you could some time manage to call on him in Shaw Lane and tender him thanks in person. A finer example of Christian resignation and fortitude under an overwhelming calamity I have never seen . . .

Details in the notebooks are scant, but there are enough facts for a back-of-envelope life of Bingley.

He was born on 3 July 1842 to Mary (née Walker) and Godfrey, a journalist, in Skinner Lane, Leeds. The family moved house several times in Leeds, living for a while in Grove Mill, Headingley, the home of his maternal grandfather with whom his father went into business as a carpet yarn spinner.

He records visiting his old tutor (Mr Geo Cowper) but does not say where he went to school.

Just before his sixteenth birthday (1858) Bingley 'went to learn the business of an engineer' with his uncle John Bingley at Harper Street foundry, Leeds. Illnesses (inflammation of the liver, eczema and 'congestion of the brain' (?) kept him away from work for several years at a time in the 1860s, but he became a partner in the foundry in 1870 and sole owner in 1874.

In 1878 he married Lizzie Huckvale of Over Norton (Fig 3) and after a honeymoon in North Wales they returned to live next door to his mother, now widowed, at 'Ash Lea' 15 Cardigan Rd, Leeds (Fig 4). His daughters, Edith and Mary Gertrude, later to make their appearance as solitary figures in his landscape photographs (Fig 5), were born in 1879 and 1882.

In 1884, at the age of forty-two he closed the foundry and went into retirement for his remaining forty-three years.

Until then there is no evidence that he had any interest in photography. The first mention, in 1887, is restrained:

Wednesday 24th August

Went to Clapham by an afternoon excursion, and took a few photos.

The catalogue in the University collection reveals that in the preceding eight weeks he had already taken about 150 photographs, the first being of Kirkstall Abbey on 18 June 1887. His early work looked accomplished but his subjects were just the kind a novice might choose: his children, his home and the nearby abbey ruins, and picturesque locations in Headingley, Adel and Meanwood (Fig 6). In July he took his camera on a three-week holiday in and near Scarborough and returned with sixty-six exposed plates.



FIG 3 The Rick Yard, Overnorton, Oxon Slide JJ



FIG 4 Drawing Room, Ash Lea, Cardigan Rd, Leeds Slide JJ



FIG 5 Rydal Valley, 26.6.1901 Univ 5594



FIG 6 Rustic Bridge, Meanwood, Leeds Univ 15

This was the first of very many trips made during the next twenty years, always with a camera. He was an obsessive traveller, by train, coach, bicycle, steamer and eventually motor car.

Travelling about and photographing Great Britain took so much of his time it is hard to believe he had any other interests. In fact he was a busy member of many societies: naturalist, philosophical, Liberal (his father had been elected a Liberal councillor for Leeds NW ward in 1869), geological (Professor Kendall and he worked closely with the Yorkshire Geological Society and the Leeds Geological Association), Methodist (he was involved in the organization of the YMCA and the South Leeds Baptist Chapel) and historical (the Council of the Thoresby Society). He served the societies as an officer and president and illustrated their transactions and learned publications with his photographs, for which he was repeatedly praised. A typical testimonial comes from the *Proceedings of the Yorkshire Geological Society* (Vol XXI):

... popular appeal. No branch of our science has contributed more to that end than geological photography. We are proud to have included among our active members one of the past-masters in the art: Godfrey Bingley.

A respected representative of Yorkshire photography clubs, he attended all the annual conventions in the UK and lined up beside the other photographers to take aim at the local photogenic targets. 'Tintern' (Fig 7) was popular in 1899. In 1891 there was a large national photography exhibition in Leeds and Bingley's work was awarded a medal (not his first) by a panel of celebrated photographers (Fig 8). He organized the convention in Leeds in 1896. At the official dinner he was frequently toasted and described as 'one of the hardest working men in Leeds and on every committee in the city'. He was president of the Scarborough meeting in 1910. With other conventions he travelled to Switzerland (1903), Ireland and Norway (1905), the Isle of Man (1907) and Belgium (1908). Independently he seems to have made several trips to Mexico, Colombia and New Orleans, but these are not entered in the 'family record', nor are the few slides taken in Central America entered in his catalogue.

His was the largest contribution to the collection amassed by the Geological Photographic Committee of the British Association.

The commercial value of his work was recognized by the firms of photographic suppliers, Reynolds & Branson and Flatters & Garnett; both copied about 200 slides for sale to the general public. As a provider of academic aids, garnering and storing information on slides, he was greatly sought after; for many years his slides were used in the University as study material and even now sometimes illustrate theses and research papers.



FIG 7 Tintern, 13.7.1899 Univ 4928



FIG 8 The Judges, Leeds Photography Exhibition 1891: Cambrano, Pringle, Wm England, Gale, Blanchard Slide JJ

His status as a lecturer and prominent figure in national and local photographic groups indicates that he was an acknowledged *good photographer*. But did that mean more than 'skilled technician', someone whose work was notably practical and useful? Did it mean 'artist'? There is hardly any record of his illustrated talks which might have given us his own thoughts about the matter. As far as one can discover they were usually about technical matters, like the relative merits of flexible film and glass plates. Talks like 'Wanderings with a Camera',⁴ with slides, could simply have been travelogues illustrated with competent 'holiday snaps'.

What constitutes a *good* photograph is still debated. During the years when Bingley was taking photographs opinions about the 'art of the camera' were regularly discussed in photography magazines. From the moment of its invention photography was expected to emulate the qualities and current conventions of academic painting. When, in art, fashions in subject and treatment changed, photography was required, limping, to try to keep up. Rather as it is among amateurs today, there was a general agreement about the need to pay attention to the disposition of light and dark; planning parts to be in and out of focus; situating everything in the picture comfortably within the frame in a balanced relationship with everything else – in short, *composition*, very much as it was described in instruction books on painting. Bingley's pictures show he knew all about that. It is the subject of one of his talks. In it he deplores the practice of composing when printing, ie after the photograph has been taken, to choose an area of picture which is well arranged and then crop off the unwanted remainder in the enlarger. He argued for the alternative: composing in camera, which required a decision about exactly what were the limits and ideal placing of elements in the scene before the camera, and capturing them and only them, on the plate. Bingley was very good at it. A typical demonstration of his careful eye is 'Warwick – Cottage' (Fig 9) in which stripes and rectangles of houses, wicket and cobbles make geometric patterns that frame the contrasting informality of the distant tree. This deep-focus form, something distant seen through a gap in the foreground, is used beautifully again in 'Bolton Abbey' (Fig 10), and in 'Knaresborough Castle' (Fig 11) where the arch is made to frame a child at play. His instinct for a telling contrast in very simple arrangements is unerring, as in 'Sir John Franklin's Monument. Spilsby' (Fig 12) and 'Rudston. Monolith' (Fig 24).

Is Bingley's flair for neat presentation the principal interest in his photographs? A form of that apple-pie order which pervades his notes and labels? Such an eminently tidy man would certainly have been preoccupied with whatever is the photographic equivalent of tidiness.

It is evident, I think, that in making an orderly composition he achieved



FIG 9 Cottage, Warwick, 1.5.1900 Univ 5154

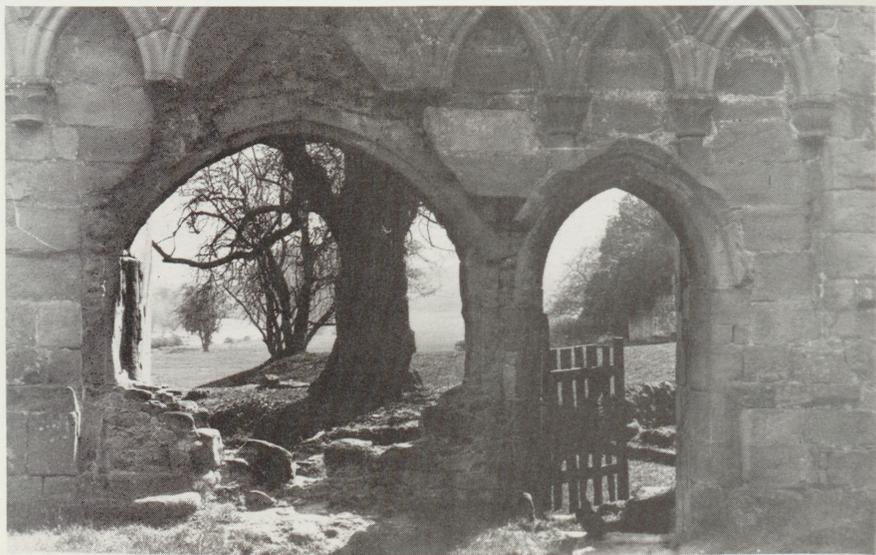


FIG 10 Bolton Abbey, 18.4.1889 Univ 715



FIG 11 Knaresborough Castle, 1.6.1891 Univ 1773



FIG 12 Sir John Franklin's monument, Spilsby, 29.4.1905 Univ 6810



FIG 13 Lord and Lady Biddulph, 20.7.1907 Univ 7839



FIG 14 Mr and Mrs Hindle, Headingley, Leeds Univ F (Headingley 5)



FIG 15 Women at Cottage Door, Lavenham, 8.7.1902 Univ 5953



FIG 16 Cottage Door, Luccombe, Somerset, 11.5.1893 Univ 2556

something else which may strongly recommend itself to modern eyes assailed and exhausted by a lifetime of clamorous images. As always, when it comes down to it, the real virtues of works of art outwit the critic's thesaurus. Out come 'indefinable', 'impenetrable', 'elusive'. In a way, more than most, Bingley's work gives these evasive words a proper job to do. His pictures are cherishable precisely because of their apparent lack of 'expressive' intent.

Consider the Victorian appetite for anecdotal art and all those sly works in which 'significance' lurked: the quaint portraits of children ('Innocence') and the aged whose every wrinkle screamed 'Dignity!', the street urchin ('Cockney Sparrow'), sheep in mist ('Peace') – and those anthropomorphic landscapes, the skies rent with human drama or divine unease – and oh, the sterilized antics of nudes straining to become Symbol. In this torrent of sentiment and 'meaning', Bingley is pure spring water. Beside his reticence, even the work of his celebrated contemporaries, like Frank Sutcliffe and H P Robinson, whose groups are more posed than composed, seem uncomfortably contrived, their taint of theatricality showing.

Unlike them, Bingley did not often photograph people. It is a pity, as his unobtrusiveness is entirely suited to portraiture. One would never know a photographer had been present in 'Lord and Lady Biddulph' (Fig 13) who display (betray?) themselves seemingly quite uncoaxed. Some details of his figure pictures are so felicitous, like the glance exchanged between Mrs Hindle and her dog behind Mr Hindle's back (Fig 14), that they look more like good luck than design (isn't it the same with Cartier-Bresson?). When they recur, Bingley must be given the credit, as in the way the girl stares at her mother's hat in 'The Cottage Door, Lavenham' (Fig 15) and the walking stick and the fork-handle direct attention to how the cat's face echoes the woman's in the Somerset 'Cottage Door' (Fig 16). The portrait of John Smith (Fig 17) whose black doorway dwarfs him is eccentric without a hint of artificiality, and is quite unforgettable.

Is it eccentricity that 'discovers' the horse in 'Stonehenge' (Fig 18), or the man with the wheelbarrow in 'Coffin. Allerton Park' (Fig 19) and gives these elementary subjects the keen flavour of surreality?

Two other photographs which are unpretentious almost to the point of invisibility are typical of hundreds which show Bingley's magical restraint: 'Market Cross, Alfriston' (Fig 20) and 'Hemingford – Mill' (Fig 21). In the first there is an unspectacular monumental cross, a tree, a dark doorway and a bicycle. For me this nondescript group is extremely engaging; each object sits like a rock in a raked Japanese garden, its 'presence' riveting. Similarly the Hemingford picture is just a gate between trees and a path across a field, but it conveys, hard to say why, a strong sense of familiarity, holding the eye like a well-known place accidentally rediscovered. Perhaps

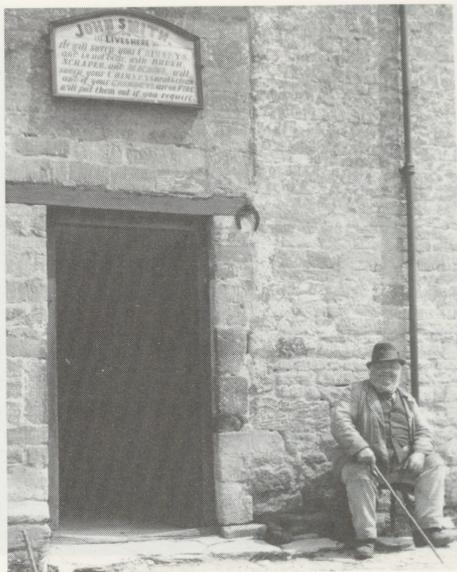


FIG 17 John Smith, Burford, 5.6.1908 Univ 8202



FIG 18 Stonehenge, 12.4.1892 Univ 2158



FIG 19 Coffin, Allerton Park, 22.10.1901 Univ 5795



FIG 20 Market Cross, Alfriston, 24.4.1913 Univ 9843



FIG 21 Hemingford, 11.7.1902 Univ 6001



FIG 22 Marley, nr Bingley Univ A (Bingley 1)



FIG 23 Women Watching Boats, Staithes, 23.7.1888 Univ 583



FIG 24 Rudston, Monolith, 4.5.1894 Univ 3110

the picture is so empty that one invests it with pleasant memories of a country childhood. There is a lot of room in Bingley's pictures to be filled with the spectator's private thoughts.

Or could it be that an image which is not trying to sell anything, nor convert, nor elicit applause or sympathy – not soliciting anything at all, but which delicately calls attention to the still beauty of a scene which is otherwise not particularly remarkable, is irresistibly disarming?

It must be art. It's too artless to be anything else.

REFERENCES

- 1 In the collection of John Jones (JJ).
- 2 *Bingley (Yorkshire)*. Argent, Three trefoils in bend sable between two cottises gules. Crest A bear's head, erased, argent, muzzled and collared gules, studded and ringed or.
- 3 Sir Benjamin Stone, MP, President and chief photographer of the National Photographic Record Association (1897), a scheme aimed at leaving to posterity a permanent photographic record of contemporary life. Mainly because of the apathy of its members the Association was dissolved about 1910, to Sir Benjamin's keen disappointment. 6000 photographs were deposited in the Department of Prints at the British Museum. Sir Benjamin's own collection of 22,000 photographs was bequeathed to the Birmingham Reference Library (1914).
- 4 1892 Lecture to the Annual General Meeting of the Leeds Photographic Society.