

Exhibition in London

Shirley Baker: A compassionate photographer of 1960s working class life

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“Women, Children and Loitering Men” at The Photographers’ Gallery, London until September 20, 2015

The exhibition “Women, Children and Loitering Men” consists of unique black and white and rarely seen colour images, by the photographer Shirley Baker (1932-2014), of the urban clearance programmes in the North West of England in the 1960s.

The show is a wonderful opportunity to see the compassionate and humorous photographs of working class life by someone whose work rarely reached a wider audience during her own lifetime. It was not until 1989, when Baker was nearly 60, that her first book *Street Photographs: Manchester and Salford* was published.

Born in Salford, Baker studied photography at Manchester College of Technology, before working for a number of companies and news outlets as a photographer and writer. In 1960 she became a photography lecturer, which gave her more freedom to pursue personal projects in the North West, London and the South of France. Baker was particularly influenced by the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand.

It was difficult for Baker, as a woman, to break into what was essentially a male preserve. One patronising article to which she contributed, “How to photograph children”, proclaimed, “You’d expect a woman photographer to be at home with such a subject.”

Baker claimed she never got her subjects to pose for her photographs but it is clear she was able to seize a fleeting moment and imbue it with a lasting power. In a 2012 interview, she described how one of her most evocative photographs came about. Baker said, “I can remember seeing this graffiti and thinking it was rather artistic, but I wanted a human face. A little boy was about to walk past, so I waited and took one shot. I like the contrast between

the face on the wall and his. To me, he symbolised the optimism and humour of the people, despite the doom and gloom.”

The scenes Baker shot of working class women socialising and children playing outside their homes in the Hulme district of Manchester are treated with respect, joy and humanity. In Baker’s own words, “My sympathies lay with the people who were forced to exist miserably, often for months on end, sometimes years, whilst demolition went on all around them.”

In a review of a 2013 exhibition at Tate Britain of the artist L.S. Lowry, who painted the same streets as Baker photographed and whom she had met in 1970, Baker explained how she started “initially out of curiosity, because I’d seen some cranes in the distance...I was just fascinated by the place. It became almost an obsession.

“I would go with an idea of perhaps taking pictures of textures, peeling paint, etc, but I always ended up photographing the people. I knew that it was a time of enormous changes, but I’m glad that I actually managed to capture the traditional areas too, before they were pulled down.

“There were streets that hadn’t changed at all, as well as those in the process of demolition...I didn’t intend to go out looking for poverty-stricken areas. What I did find was a great sense of humour. Also, there was the sense of community, but that, of course, was gradually being broken up.

“A lot of people collected Lowry prints because they reminded them of where they were. It was nostalgia. I hate that word! Though I do understand feelings about past memories. Nostalgia comes later and at that time I was working in the present, and so was Lowry. The other important thing to remember was that many of the people lived in dreadful conditions and their houses had to be

pulled down. Then of course, when they built up the new stuff, it wasn't very long before they pulled all that down too."

The areas that Baker photographed were immortalised by the co-founder of scientific socialism Friedrich Engels in 1844, in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels depicted the smoking factories and mills, low-quality housing, grinding poverty and disease. Engels described Hulme as "one great working-people's district, the condition of which coincides almost exactly with that of Ancoats [the industrial hub of the city]; the more thickly built-up regions chiefly bad and approaching ruin, the less populous of more modern structure, but generally sunk in filth."

But 70 years later, in 1914, the council was still reporting some 63,000 people living in 13,000 dilapidated homes, 90 percent of which lacked washing facilities.

The post-World War I economic crisis and threat of social revolution increased pressure for social housing, with Prime Minister David Lloyd George promising "homes fit for heroes".

In 1927, work was begun on the low-density "garden" Wythenshawe Estate to the south of Manchester and, in 1934, large areas of the city were designated for clearance, including the Hulme area where Baker took many of her photographs. But it was not until after World War II, in 1954, that work started. Even then the number of new houses being built fell from about 4,000 a year to around 1,000 by 1960. It was a similar situation in all the major British cities.

By 1965, of the 200,000 or so dwellings in Manchester, some 55,000, or 27 percent, were still classed as unfit for human habitation. In Liverpool, the figure was 45 percent.

Describing how much of Manchester looked at the time, Baker said, "There was so much destruction: a street would be half pulled down and the remnants set on fire while people were still living in the area."

The 1960s was a period of rising working class militancy and expectations, putting pressure for social reforms on successive Conservative and Labour governments (Labour's Harold Wilson was elected in 1964). Manchester council initially opposed high-density development but several factors thwarted these aspirations, including land speculation, high interest rates, bigger government subsidies for tower blocks, cost-cutting and objections from wealthier rural neighbouring authorities. An *Economist* article from 1965 displayed in the exhibition reveals how the council had been "engaged in perpetual strife with Cheshire's commuter

communities, swollen by Mancunian refugees, who dread the thought of working-class overspill estates next to their own spec-built equivalents".

In Hulme, plans were unveiled in October 1965, by the Housing Committee chair, Eric Mellor, for "one of the finest [and what was to become the largest] schemes in Europe", housing 13,000 people in four six-storey crescent blocks. *The Manchester Evening News* declared, "(Of) all redevelopment schemes that will rejuvenate the Britain of tomorrow, Manchester's plan for Hulme stands out boldly. For it is unique. Here is a fascinating concept which should make proud not only the planners but the citizens. That the design for a thousand maisonettes in long curved terraces will give a touch of eighteenth century grace and dignity to municipal housing is welcome indeed."

The Crescents were completed in 1972, with most of their new residents happy to leave their squalid living conditions. In all, some three-and-a-half million people in England were rehoused.

However, the massive rebuilding programme coincided with the collapse of the post-war boom and the decline of well-paid secure jobs. Estates like the Crescents, poorly designed, constructed and maintained, were left to decay and became the refuge of last resort for the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. By 1984, the council had stopped renting out the flats and demolition began in 1991, less than 20 years after their construction.

The "Women, Children and Loitering Men" exhibition is a welcome rediscovery of Baker and her seriousness and aesthetic sensibility... and a sharp contrast to the self-absorption and worship of celebrity that is evidenced in so much photography today.



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