

Smile-Worthy: A Story About Storytelling

There are numerous ways that visualisation techniques can tackle insomnia and be an aid to relaxation. You reconnect with a place or a time when you've been calm and tranquil; you close your eyes, imagine it in your mind's eye, remembering your feelings, the sensations – the warmth, the breeze, maybe there's a scent in the air. And that's the way I often re-visit Bamburgh on a sleepless night (it's a seaside village on the Northumbrian coast, and a frequent holiday location for us when our Matthew was young). But recently I did more than that – I turned those dreamy, late-night memories into something more physical by creating the montage below.

I focussed on the castle – reflecting its physical presence in the village and for miles around – but then more subtle, ethereal memories took its place; standing on the beach, hypnotised by the big sky ahead of us, while the sharp wind made tendrils in the sand. It became so vivid I started to feel the wind driving that sand onto the backs of my legs – stinging and uncomfortable. Then, as that memory receded, more flood in – you can see them, added around the castle.

I continued until the montage was complete and, by then, the picture it painted represented everything I remember about our holidays in Bamburgh – both the views and the spirit.

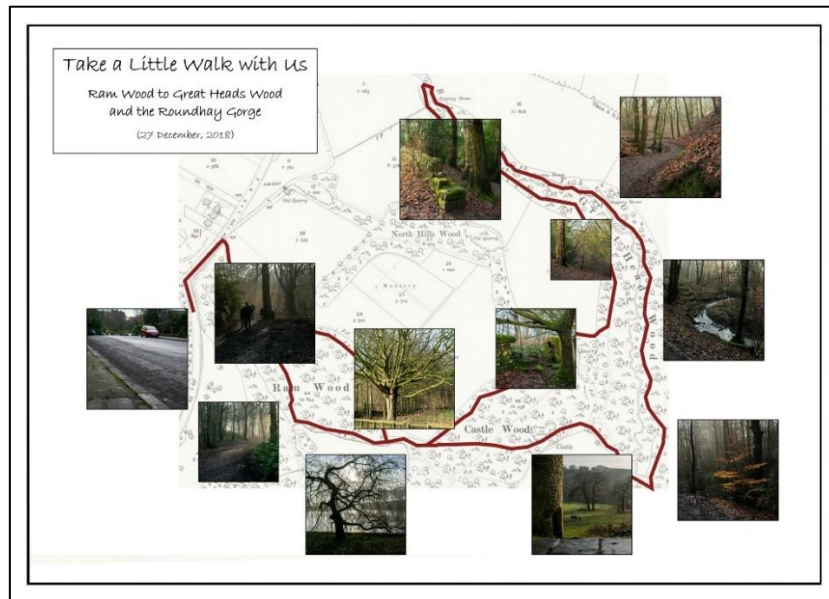


Memories of Bamburgh

A perfect story of big skies and big beaches.

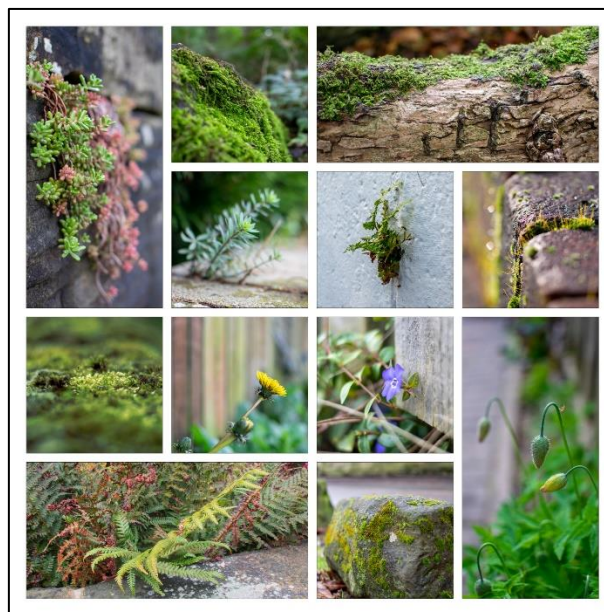
Nearer to home, we've a favourite walk in Roundhay Park that takes us down through the woods (as far as the Upper Lake) and around the edge of the golf course; then we take the steep path down into the gorge, and follow the side of the stream as far as the Lower Lake; after that, it's uphill all the

way – back through the woods to the ‘castle’ (an old folly), more woodland and finally we reach the café, very pleased to order a pot of tea! And I’ve also re-imagined that walk as a story – in an artwork this time – called ‘Take a Little Walk with Us’, (below).



Take a Little Walk with Us

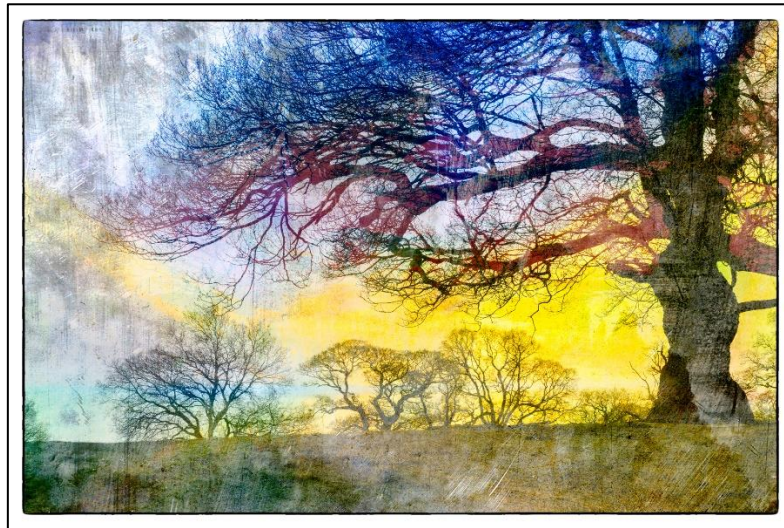
Even closer to home, there’s our walk to the local shops and this is the story – a record – of the plants and lichen that I’ve noticed growing in unlikely, unprepossessing places, under fences and on the surface of walls.



Edgelands

Over the last three years I've created two hundred or more of these multi-image montages and artworks, and it poses an obvious question, why?

Why have I chosen to work in this story-telling style? Why have I turned my back on the type of photography I've studied and practised all my adult life? In particular, I hope to explain why my commitment to this style is so strong that the image below is the last 'traditional' print I made – a single image on its own – some 3 years ago, back in 2020.



*My Last 'Traditional' Print
(June 2020, 45 x 30 cm)*

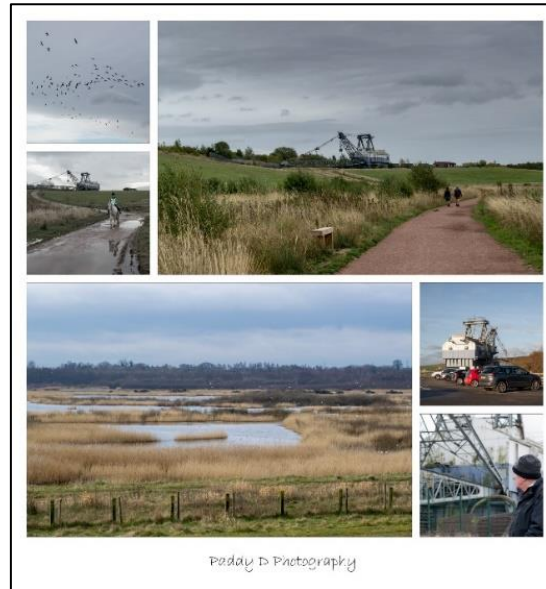
St. Aidan's Nature Reserve

If this was a workshop, we'd all be sitting here with a camera in hand, itching to get outdoors and to have a go at something practical. So I won't start with any theory, or whys and wherefores, I'll start by describing a visit we made to St. Aidan's – a nature reserve about 15km from home.

All too often in the past, my preparation and pre-visualisation focussed on coming back with an image that would become 'wall-worthy' – something that might be good enough to hang on the wall at home, maybe enter for an exhibition or a competition. I'd often check the weather forecast and the 'SunBoard' app on my phone to start anticipating light and shadow, or the time of high/low tide if we were going to the coast – I've even done a course on meteorology to help me understand the light and the cloud formations better! I'd put my Nikon D850 in my bag, with the best lenses. And back in those days I would have empathised with the photographer Andy Gray who said recently that he went to the west of Scotland for several days and came home with "nothing decent"!

But not now. That never happens since I stopped aiming for 'wall-worthy' and value 'smile-worthy' instead – a new approach which involves asking myself, does creating it and looking at it make me smile, and bring me pleasure? Now I always come back with something I can use, so it means my pre-shoot preparation is more about curiosity and imagination – more like a little kid, the week before Christmas.

St. Aidan's is a post-industrial site – a former open-cast mine – and 'Oddball' (the massive dragline excavator) still sits at the top, lording it over the wetlands below. It's a world of owls and bitterns, of gulls, skylarks and harriers; reedbeds, wetlands, meadows and woodland. But thinking back to past visits, I was mesmerised by Oddball – it was imprinted on my mind's eye wherever I was looking – and my photography reflected this, ignoring the delights that nature provided and mostly focussing on Oddball, and its presence over the site.



*Oddball, lording it over the wetlands
The focus of previous visits*

But this time, instead of thinking about Oddball, or the weather conditions, or the likely water-level in the reed beds, my 'smile-worthy' preparation was childlike and fun, full of energy, curiosity and imagination – picturing what I might see in my mind's eye, what colours, what birds, what bugs and biddies, butterflies and pollinators, what flowers and plants. And whether they'd have that fabulous coffee and walnut gateau in the café!

I also started thinking about all the overlooked areas of the site around its periphery – its edgelands – and, unlikely as it might sound, I decided that the car park might be a possibility. I could visualise it, surrounded by an annulus of trees and plants, willowherbs, grasses, teasels, and a wilderness of plants that I can't begin to name.

Then, for kit selection, I decided that weight would be my sole criterion and so I chose my lightest camera combination (i.e. Nikon D5300 and a 50mm prime). And, by the time we were in the car, I really was like a kid before Christmas!

"Are we there yet?"

At first, there's nothing remarkable to report about being at St. Aidan's. We had a short walk along the 'high road' that looks down over the wetlands, I took a few photographs and then we sat outside the café with a cup of tea (and yes, the gateau was fabulous!)



A Big Vista

The most wondrous part of the visit occurred when I started to explore the magical, overlooked edgeland in the shadow of the carpark – I found an amazing world in miniature.

I know you think I'm contrary. I was on a site of several hundred hectares, and yet I devoted most of my time, energy and focus to the exploration of a patch of land of barely a hundred square metres. But there was a quiet fascination in taking time for this microscopic examination of the small space – it had a gentle intimacy and curiosity. I was visually rummaging amongst the plants, like a child in a jewellery box; and seeing the 'gems' in the way that a child does – immersed, engaged and absorbed. (Well almost – I didn't squat down like a child does!) And I knew that I would be able to create a story-image which makes a feature of the vast differences in scale between the two worlds which coexist at St. Aidan's – the big vista and the microscopic one.

There were also other elements that, cumulatively, made the visit so enjoyable and memorable; the chance encounters and conversations with strangers – there's something about the combination of my physical disability and the camera that encourages such happenstances; the delights of finding teasels and berries and flowers; the engagement and encouragement of an RSPB staff-member, who looked out for bees and hoverflies I might shoot; the knowledge that, when we got back home, I'd captured enough storytelling-material to create a story-image and share it with you; and knowing it would act as an aide memoire in future times to help me re-engage and re-experience the pleasures of the visit – to help me smile and be calmed again, and any dis-ease I might be feeling would slip away.

Back Home

And that's exactly what happened when we got back home. I started by creating a few simple story-images (four-ers, or quadriptychs if I'm being more correct) to help me 'tune-in' – to reconnect with St. Aidan's and the experience of visiting it; familiarise myself with the photographs I'd taken; determine their relationship with each other, the mood they inspire in me, and whether they'll 'play nicely' together.



A simple quadriptych – helping me ‘tune in’

Then I moved onto the ‘main feature’, creating story-images which aim to recapture more about the spirit of St. Aidan’s – its flavour and what it meant to me – in an all-embracing, holistic way. And this is just one example (below)

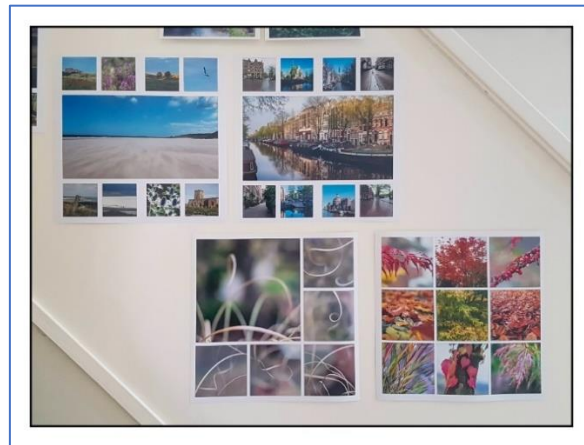


A flavour of St. Aidan’s Nature Reserve

Finally, I printed it and, because it has an intended audience of only two (me and Ian), I ‘hung’ it in the place that communicates the most – my informal staircase-gallery – where it sits in my eyeline, greeting me regularly whenever I pass by, and reinforcing its ‘smile-worthy’ message.

But suddenly today, I've changed the rules on these story-images of St. Aidan’s. They’re not just heading for the staircase gallery – instead, they’re illustrating this project. And this change in context is making me think about them differently, and appraise them differently.

In this new light and with a different function, I'm already thinking of changes I should make, of improvements – I like the energy of the story-image on the previous page, but the composition isn't right. Maybe I should remove one of the big vistas, separate the two with grasses, perhaps I could ...



The Staircase Gallery – already full of stories

But it doesn't matter because I'm not constrained by the need to find one single, definitive layout. Instead, I can create different stories – different versions each with a different atmosphere, mood, and focus. And so that's what I did in the case of St. Aidan's. I returned to the pool of photographs and 'wrote' more stories – some of them focussing on my 'magical, overlooked edgeland in the shadow of the carpark' and having a greater sense of intimacy, as the one below.



A Triptych of Teasels in the Edgelands

Move over, St. Jerome

Back in the 1950s we were taught this little rhyme as a way to remember comparatives and superlatives (from St. Jerome, apparently):

Good, better, best. Never let it rest. Until your good is better and your better, best.

And it's really useful in a grammatical context, but its underlying message (with its heavy-handed Victorian morality) has pestered me for most of my life and was certainly the ethos behind my 'wall-worthy' approach. I have to say that not every camera-outing in the past was quite as intense as my earlier description – that was mostly confined to photo-assignments for my mentor – but I think there was always an implicit sense of St. Jerome in the air, whenever I went out with the camera, and it created that subconscious pressure I recognise in Andy Gray, of needing to come back with 'something decent'.

Whereas 'smile-worthy' is, for me, is very different – underpinned by two elements. Firstly, it's about seeing the world around me in a different light – adopting a philosophy which, in the words of the mental health counsellor, Wendy Smith¹, required:

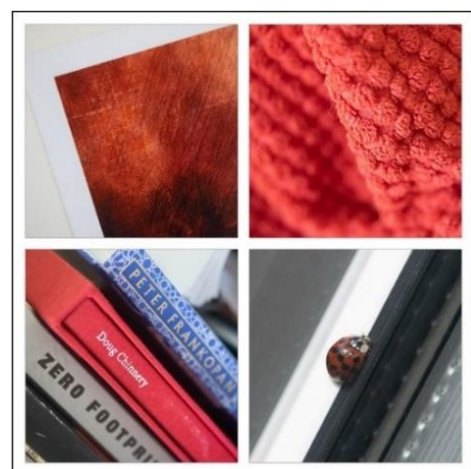
A shift in perspective toward valuing innate qualities (as opposed to physical or comparative ones).

Secondly, it's about fully recognising and registering this world I'm seeing anew – and about making my connections with it clear and explicit. Using a camera – any one, it doesn't need to be the D850 – to record my relationship with it; to enhance it and make it visible, unmissable (in that strange way that a camera seems to strengthen the connections between my eye, the subject matter and my mind). And it's these elements which, in turn, have helped me appreciate the 'soft skills' of storytelling – its ethos and values – and its beneficial influence on my wellbeing and mental health.

The Beginning

This turnaround in attitude is well suited to mitigating my mobility issues, but I had already changed to this style months before I became disabled. I can track its origins – in both a practical and a philosophical sense – back to a short, online course I took in 2020 (in the midst of Covid-19) run by Ruth Davey², entitled 'Reframe Your Now: Mindfulness Photography for Mental Health and Resilience'.

We did a simple in-session activity about observation – taking a photograph of anything red we could see in the room around us – and I recorded it as this simple 'four-er', because it seemed a practical, pragmatic way to go.



Seeing Anything Red

¹'Grieving an Acquired Disability', Wendy Smith, MA, LMHCA online at <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/grieving-acquired-disability/> accessed 2023/08/04

² Ruth Davey, Look Again, <https://www.look-again.org/values>

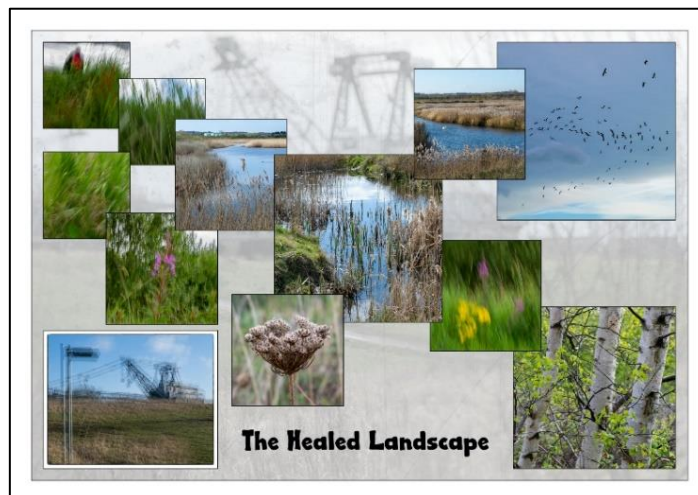
Then we did an assignment that took this observation-practice outside the house – I tell people I’m doing a 'noticing walk' – looking out for textures, or colours, or something quirky or unexpected. So I recorded that in that same, simple style of presentation and that’s when this shift in philosophy started to happen. There was something refreshing and liberating going on – I felt recharged and energised by it – not just by the walk, but by the story-image as well (by creating it and seeing it). Somehow, it gave me a fast-track to reconnect directly with the walk – something which happened as soon as I sat down at the computer – as if I was back there in the woods, feeling the breeze and the sun, and the physicality of walking.

Inevitably this occurred subconsciously at first – Wendy Smith’s explanation came later – all I could sense was a lightening of my mood. And that’s when my new criterion of 'smile-worthy' evolved – does creating it and looking at it bring me pleasure?

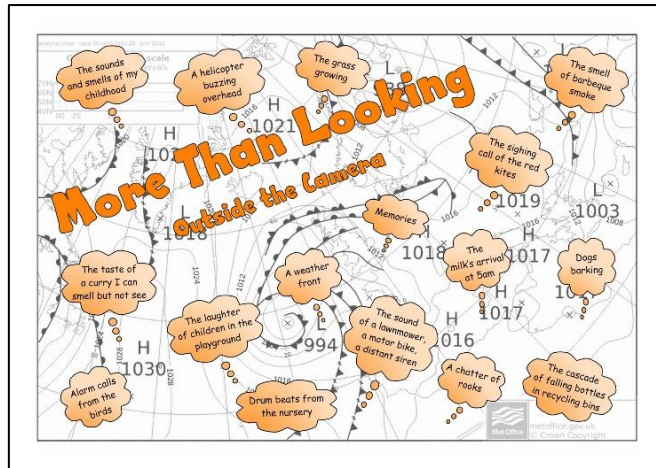


'A Sense of Now'
Placing myself at the centre of a noticing walk

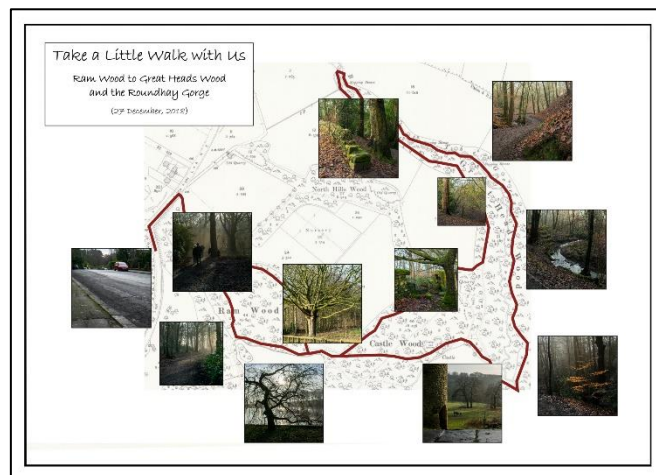
Soon my 'four-ers' became 'nines', and 'sixteens' and, to my surprise, this became my go-to style. I became absorbed and excited, particularly when I realised how wide-ranging a story could be – with different media, different styles, different content. I’ve added text, maps and newspaper cuttings; I've re-traced walks and holidays; retrieved and embraced memories; represented abstract ideas and concepts. There are over 200 stories that I could share with you, but these are a few examples!



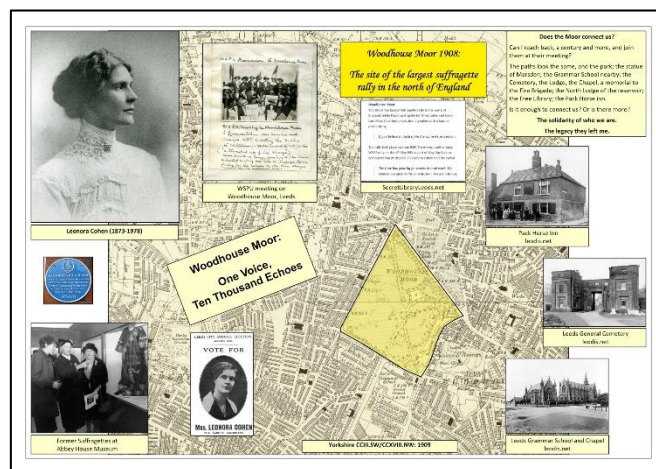
'The Healed Landscape'
Presenting photographs in a different way



'More Than Looking'
A story about things we can't see (using little visual imagery)



'Take a Little Walk with Us'
Combining maps and images



'Voices on Woodhouse Moor'
Text, a map and news items

Wellbeing: A Voice

I've already mentioned the generalised way that the story-images lifted my mood – the way they complement the 'green therapy' of being out and about in nature, as well as helping me remember holidays, walks, memories, and special events. But I realised that, in practice, storytelling was having a positive effect on my wellbeing in two, more distinctive ways.

Firstly, the storytelling principles and ethos have given me a voice for a lot of things I can't express verbally (or I don't want to!) – an outlet for troubling emotions. It's given me the tools, the permission and helped me find a visual language for difficult feelings. And when I developed spinal fractures in 2022 – and had to make the mental and physical transition from ability towards partial disability – this method of expression felt an absolute lifesaver.



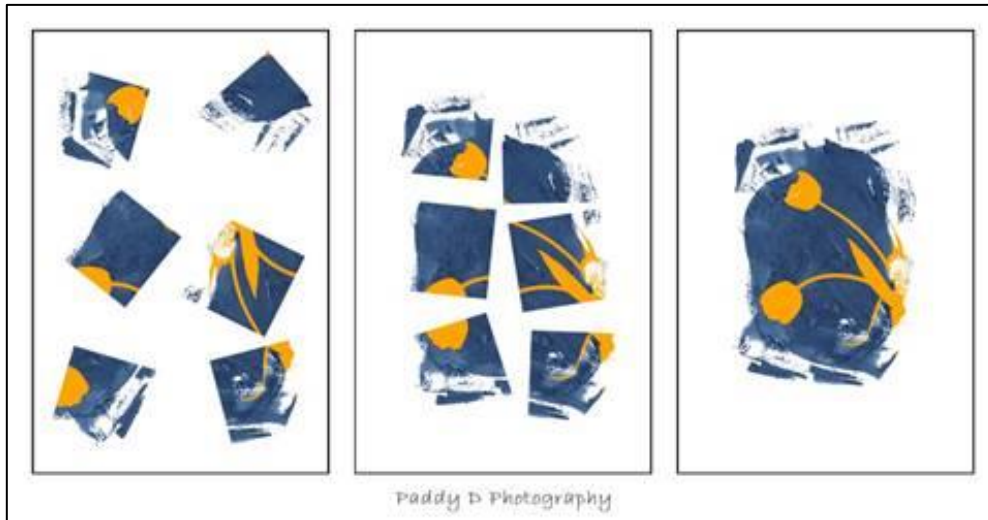
Uncertainty



Shattered

Then later, as I began to move forward (literally!) and my mood began to lift, the next stage was equally valuable – arguably more so. I was able to chart this improvement – this change in perspective, my increasing positivity and a sense of empowerment – make it explicit and reinforce it.

I was ‘reframing my now’, to use Ruth’s phrase.



Repairing: Reframing my Now!

And before I move on, I want to express my gratitude to Ruth for setting me on this path, and for generously sharing her ideas, her values, beliefs, and methodologies.

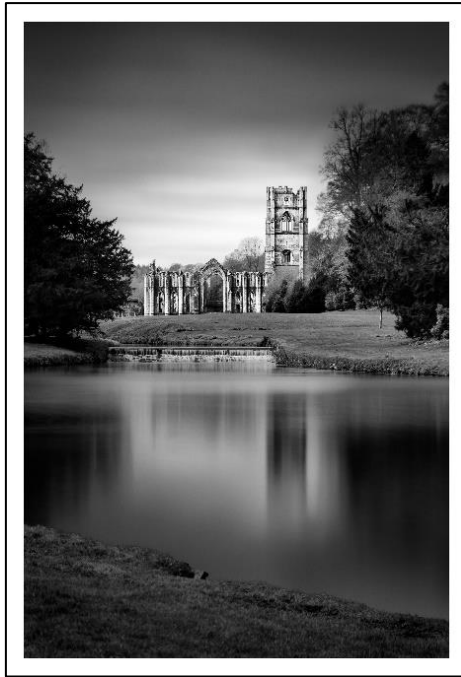
She didn’t just get the ball rolling, she carefully steered, nudged and encouraged me along a new way of thinking, a new creative path.

Wellbeing: Wholeness

There’s a second way in which storytelling explicitly boosts my wellbeing and that’s in its sense of ‘wholeness’ – the holistic, caring way that the stories seem to bundle up every aspect of an experience, keeping it alive, visible and tangible.

This starts with the process of ‘writing’ a story – of creating a story-image – because a story inherently collects the group of images together and then keeps them together; they’re like a party of children, all holding hands. It means I work on them at the same time, and retain the sense of them as a body of work, as a whole – a practice that’s the polar opposite of what happened with the image overleaf (an assignment piece I worked on with my mentor).

I concentrated on it with a level of scrutiny that was so intense, I lost any sense of connection with the original outing to Fountains Abbey – I forgot about the abbey, the things we saw, the way we felt and the wealth of other photographs I’d taken. It took hours of editing in Photoshop and several revisions, and by that point I was only thinking about the image – it had become entirely isolated from its origins, its context and sadly, in this case, from my intention to honour a friend.



*In Memory of Kate:
Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire*

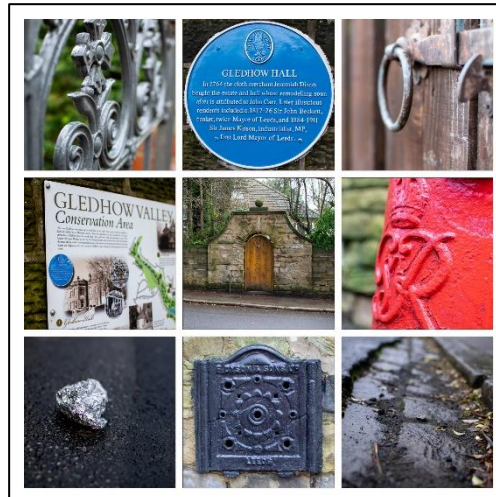
But a story, like the one below, always embodies ‘wholeness’ – something that’s evident in the way I create it, and also within the image itself, in the way it’s experienced by the viewer.

Three years ago, when I first started storytelling photography, I likened the process to curating an exhibition or composing a photobook – collecting, selecting, editing, organising – but I soon discovered there’s a significant difference. A viewer doesn’t ‘read’ it like a book, or imagine they’re in a gallery because a story-image doesn’t have the same physicality as either one – the same sense of touch, the sense of space, the peripheral distractions. Instead the viewer sees the ‘story’ as a single entity – completely within their vision at one time – and hence they read it more like an individual painting, and certainly not as a hanging of the four, nine or sixteen separate images.



*A Noticing Walk at
Swinsty Reservoir*

It was a real breakthrough moment when I realised this feature – that a story behaves like a single image (albeit a fractured one) – and therefore follows the same 'rules' as a single image but with the individual elements taken collectively. Hence, when I'm 'writing' the story – composing it – I'm working with all the same issues that I'd tackle in traditional post-processing (proportion and scale, balance, rhythm, movement, continuity with lines, pattern, white space, corners and edges etc.)



'Gledhow Hall'

Tackling patterns and rhythm

And this, I think, is one of the pleasures of storytelling – this absorbing, creative, fascinating phase with its challenge of juggling and combining all the disparate elements. It ensures I stay in close contact with the spirit of the outing – with its whole – and the entire body of images throughout the entire process. So that now with St. Aidan's for example, I can look at the different story-images and immediately reconnect, re-create, re-experience, re-engage, re-trace and reflect on all the emotions and feelings – with the spirit of wholeness. It covers the entire span from my initial, childlike excitement and anticipation beforehand, to the almost spiritual satisfaction of completing the images and seeing them printed. It's a record of my relationship with the world around me, and also how I see it – fragmented, imperfect but with glimmers of magic and beauty (I just need to keep looking, maybe a little harder). It's mindful, meditative, soothing, and well, exquisite.

It's as if a story can understand the essence of an experience, and encase it in bubble-wrap – make it explicit and ever-present, a boost for my mood and wellbeing.

Wellbeing: Self-Care

A lot of the things I say about storytelling-photography are, I hope, widely applicable to photographers of all shapes, sizes, and levels of experience – and I always want that to remain the dominant look and feel of my work – so that's the reason I've outlined the generalities of 'wellbeing', not wanting to make this sound like a session about mental health with a psychology practitioner.

Similarly, I don't want to emphasise the problems of mobility and disability (and the fact that, in my own case, I walk with two sticks or use a wheelchair since developing the osteoporotic spinal fractures in 2022). But, at the same time, disability and mental health easily get 'swept under the carpet' – made light of, or worse, dismissed and ignored – and I don't want to collude with that.

So it's important for me to address these issues explicitly in this project – make them visible, talk about them and share them – because, sadly, there may be times in the lives of us all when we need a bit of self-help, self-care. Times when we need to look after ourselves, be more kind and compassionate, less self-critical. Times when there is value in consciously choosing a style of photography that can explicitly address wellbeing, as I believe storytelling photography does.

And maybe it's timely that I reinforce that tenet. Time to write a strongly worded 'note to self', reminding me that storytelling has helped me restore a healthy 'sense of self' – one which is not defined by disability, age, grey hair or that annoying little rhyme of St. Jerome!

And lastly ...

One of my disappointments in the past is that, too often, I've created a series in the spirit of 'proper', traditional photography, and one of my favourite images has been left to languish on the cutting room floor, simply because I couldn't make it fit. But a final joy of storytelling photography is that there's always a story out there that can highlight a favourite – no matter how unlikely – it's just waiting to be written.

Well, that's what I believe – I'll let you know how I get on!



Dashing Towards the Ice Cream Van:

My late mum, her handbag, and Richard her eldest grandson (c.1977)

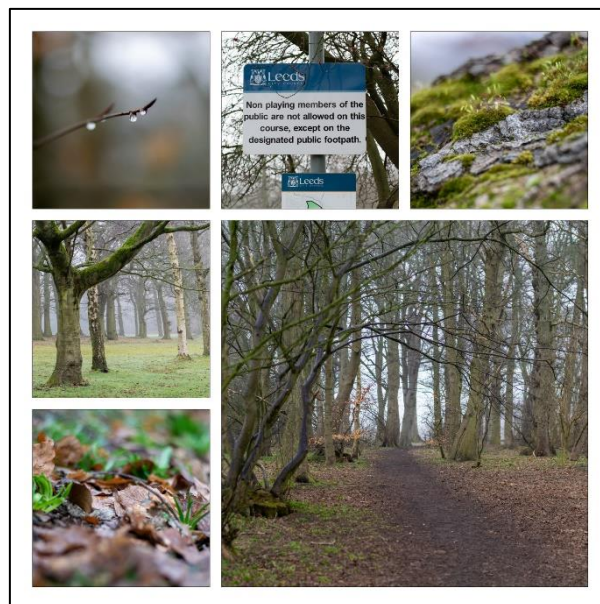
End Piece

If you ask me to provide a formal description of storytelling photography I'd say:

Storytelling photography is a way of portraying your relationship with the world around you – a record of your connections with nature, with a place, a person, an event, a moment, a mood, an emotion, a message, or an issue – in a non-verbal manner that's compact and succinct, but also significant, relevant, meaningful, and far-reaching.

Alternatively, I could use an eclectic range of nouns and phrases:

It's rich and rewarding, fresh and refreshing, creative and expressive, spontaneous and fun, joyous and liberating, significant and challenging; it provides a sense of 'wholeness'; it's beautiful and smile-worthy, meditative and contemplative; it boosts one's sense of self and wellbeing; it can be a voice for unexpressed, choked-up feelings; it's totally absorbing – so that I'm 'in the zone', in a 'state of flow'; and it can be a counterpoint to your normal style, or become a way of life.



'Seeing the World Anew'

Overall, I believe that it's a matter of personal preference whether or not one likes the philosophy and methodology of storytelling photography. We're all different – there's no right answer, or wrong one. I've simply tried to explain why, and how, this approach works for me – and express my belief that it's helping me to manage and to rebuild my sense of self (after the last few difficult years).

It's 'smile-worthy' – and that's something which fills my mind with pleasure when I wake in the mornings, and stays with me throughout the day.

And Now ...

... that brings down the curtain on this project – A Story about Storytelling – a labour of love which extends back over several months.

When I started, I was aiming only to make sense of a style of photography which had, somehow, infiltrated my practice and embedded itself into my way of thinking. I simply wanted to understand it better (just for me, primarily) and so I allowed my engineering-self to take the lead, and begin to organise this extensive body of stories, to see trends and themes, to make the processes explicit.

But, as the weeks progressed, the soft-skills made their quiet appearance – the ethos, principles, and philosophy – and it became clear that storytelling was having a significant impact on my wellbeing and my sense of self (and continues to do so). And that's when I decided to embark on writing this 'Story about Storytelling' and to share it with you.

And now I've reached the end. You may be too young to remember it, but as they said at the end of the Looney Tunes cartoons:

That's All Folks!

Thank you for letting me share this with you.

Stay safe.

Paddy

October 2023

Addendum overleaf.

An Addendum

In a perfect world I would have found the perfect structure for my story about storytelling. One which enabled me, effortlessly and seamlessly, to include everything I want to share with you, without recourse to an addendum. But inevitably I couldn't find that perfect structure – so this is a random miscellany of items comprising:

1. Outline thoughts about composition
2. A how-to guide showing the way I create the stories
3. Examples of stories I've written – differing in styles, content, media etc.
4. And finally, where next? – my plans for the future

And I'd also like to reiterate my acknowledgments and thanks here – to ensure they don't get lost in this final flurry of additional information and ideas.

Acknowledgments and Thanks

I extended my thanks to Ruth³ in an earlier piece, but her contribution is so significant, it bears repeating:

Every credit goes to Ruth for setting me on this path, and for generously sharing her ideas, values, beliefs, and methodologies.

She didn't just get the ball rolling, she carefully steered, nudged, and encouraged me along a new way of thinking, a new creative path.

Thank you, Ruth

My thanks also go to Dr. Alice Staniford and Dr. Sarah Timperley for their insight and confidence in me, and to Wendy Smith, for her online article⁴ which has helped me make the mental and emotional transition from ability to partial disability.

And to Rachel Wright, Morag Paterson, Kaisa Sirén, Noelle Bennett, Helén Lundén and Sue Bell for their ideas, and for their continuous encouragement and support.

³ Ruth Davey, Look Again, <https://www.look-again.org/>

⁴ Grieving an Acquired Disability', Wendy Smith, MA, LMHCA, accessed online 2023/08/04 at <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/grieving-acquired-disability/>

Part 1: About Composition

I was re-reading John Berger a few months ago and I came across this quotation:

“In a painting all its elements are there to be seen simultaneously. The spectator may need time to examine each element of the painting but whenever he reaches a conclusion, the simultaneity of the whole painting is there to reverse or qualify his conclusion.”

John Berger, *'Ways of Seeing'*, 1972

And making the connection between a story-image and a painting, was an absolute breakthrough moment. It helped me understand that a story behaves like a single image (albeit a fractured one) and therefore follows the same 'rules' as a single image but with the individual elements taken collectively. Thus the layout of multiple images in a story equates to the composition of a single image; the key image in a story – the one which first focusses the viewer's eye – equates to the subject of a single image; and I select the key position for it, just as I would when composing a photograph in camera.

Continuing the 'single image' analogy, there are then a myriad of issues to consider as I create the story – proportion and scale, balance, rhythm, movement, line, pattern, white space, corners and edges etc. And the 'rule for horizons', for example, is the same as any conventional landscape; they need to match up across the layout or be wildly different – otherwise they distract the viewer's eye from the intended message. And it's the same for any lines that cross through several images.

Story-images are also very forgiving in terms of presentation. It's (fairly) easy to incorporate images from different days (though blue skies can be tricky) and to balance the differences in sunlight/cloud/season/weather etc. by making a feature of these differences – making a pattern – something that's often impossible with a conventional photographic series. And, as a result, I'm under no pressure when I'm out with the camera because it doesn't matter how many images I capture, or how few – whether it's only a handful or it's enough to populate a 16-image story. I have the luxury of choice! I can create the story around a single visit or create one based on several trips, over several weeks or months.

It's the same when using mixed media – all the individual images are in sight at the same time, so 'difference' can be made into a distinctive pattern which, in turn, can become a deliberate, obvious feature.

*'Edgelands'
Making a feature
of mixed media*

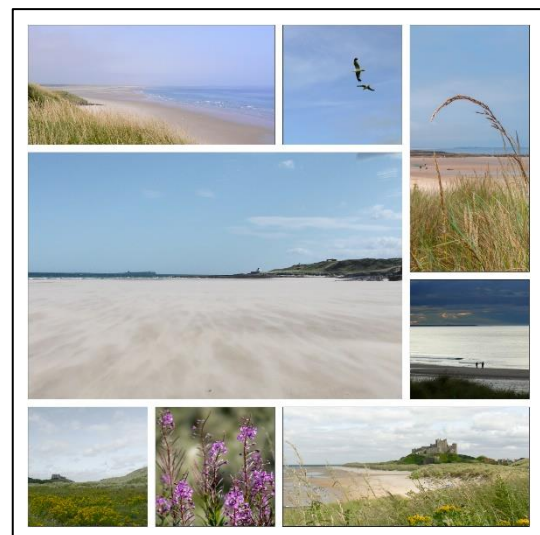


And about the layout

I've been reviewing hundreds of story-images over the last few weeks, and I've become aware that, when I first started to produce them, I favoured very formal layouts such as the one immediately below. But then, as my experience and confidence developed in this style of photography, I adopted layouts that, in my mind, have more rhythm, fluidity and energy. And so that's another factor that I now consider when I'm juggling and combining all the disparate elements in my story-images.



My first 'Bamburgh' image based on a formal layout



Less formal versions of the Bamburgh image with, I believe, more energy and fluidity

Part 2: How I Create a Story

I've included a brief outline of my working methods here for those of you who use Adobe Lightroom Classic. I'm sorry that I don't have any experience of working with Lightroom Mobile, or Affinity etc. to know whether this technique is transferable.

Preparation

I've already set up a number of user-templates in the Print Module (based on regular layouts of 2x2, 3x3, 4x4 etc.) and I have these basic structures in mind during the early stages of post-processing.

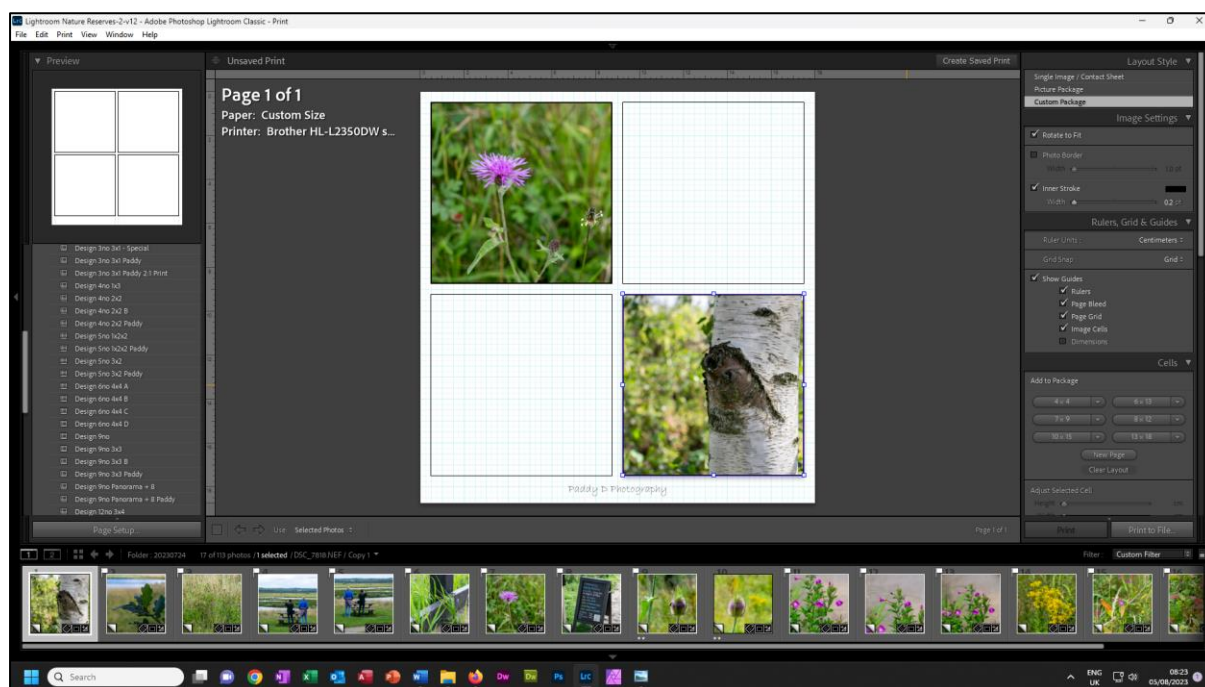
Tuning In

I select a number of potential images (using the pick and rating facilities in the Gallery Module) grouping them as a 'Quick Collection'. Then I edit them (with a quick, light touch) in the Develop Module. Initially I apply a square crop and use the Auto feature to adjust the exposure, presence etc.

Moving onto the Print Module, I arrange the screen to have the 'filmstrip' at the bottom. I select one of my user-templates (typically starting with the 2x2) and begin to 'populate' it by dragging images from the filmstrip into the 'placeholder' positions of the print.

As I've already discussed more fully, this phase helps me to get a feel for the images – particularly their tones and colours, and their relationship with each other – and to identify my key image(s).

I also begin to envisage more creative and expressive layouts options.

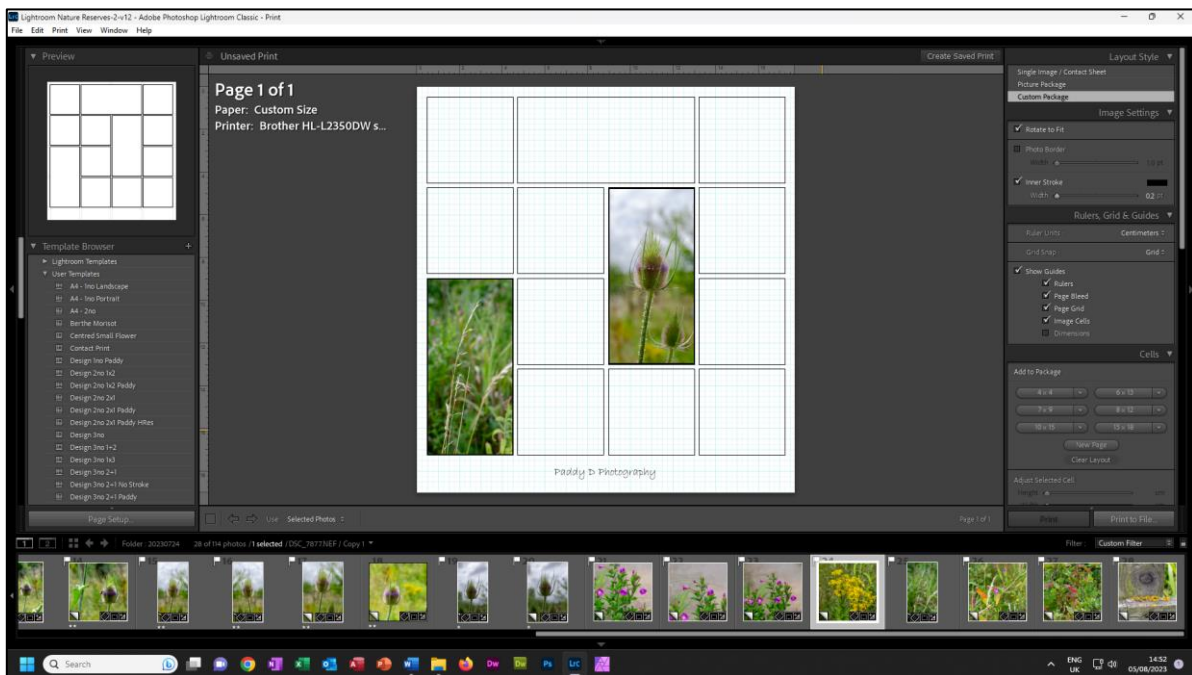


Tuning In

Writing Really Begins

Firstly, I select a larger user-template – usually 3x3 or 4x4.

Next, I consider the shape/crop of my key images – often re-cropping them to a 2:1 aspect ratio, or 3:2. Then I locate them in key positions – the ones which first focus the viewer’s eye and create a sense of movement – exactly as I would when placing the subject in a single image. If I’m using a 2:1 aspect for a key image I increase the length (or height) of the relevant placeholder and delete the adjacent/redundant square. (Similarly, I adjust/delete squares for 3:2 aspects etc.) Then I populate the remaining placeholders with the complementary (square) images.



That’s how it starts, using a basic technique and concept that are simple enough. But what follows is, as I’ve mentioned earlier, an iterative process whereby I flip to-and-fro between the modules – the Gallery, Develop and Print – selecting different image-options, adjusting tones and colour balance, re-cropping to maintain the ‘rule’ of horizons, changing the layout, and often using ‘flip horizontal’ to ensure images ‘point’ in the right direction, etc. etc.

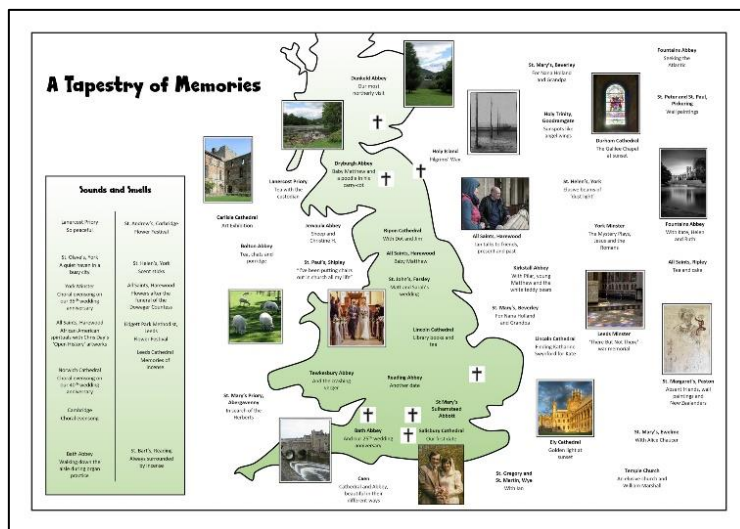
Then finally, I print the image and, because these stories generally have an audience of only two (i.e. Ian and me), I display them informally. Any door becomes a temporary gallery – cupboards, wardrobes, main doors – or the side of the staircase. And wherever possible I place the print at the level of my normal eyeline – because this helps to reinforce its message and/or content – enabling me to savour it, maximising the pleasure that a story brings me, and the sense of wellbeing it encourages.

Part 3: A Range of Examples

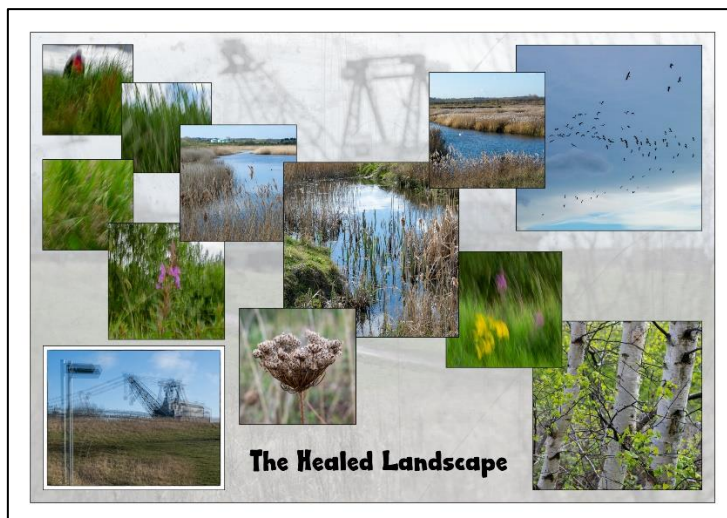
As I mentioned earlier, I've created two hundred or more of these multi-image montages and artworks over the last three years, and it's been interesting to look back and see the diverse ideas, styles, media, and subject matter they cover. You've seen a lot already, but I've tried to exemplify more of this range here, and to explain their differences.

A range of media

My stories are mostly created from photographs (as you've seen throughout this project), but they also lend themselves well to having multi-media content, including maps, polaroids, text etc. And the visual flexibility of stories means that dissimilar images can fit in, by creating patterns.



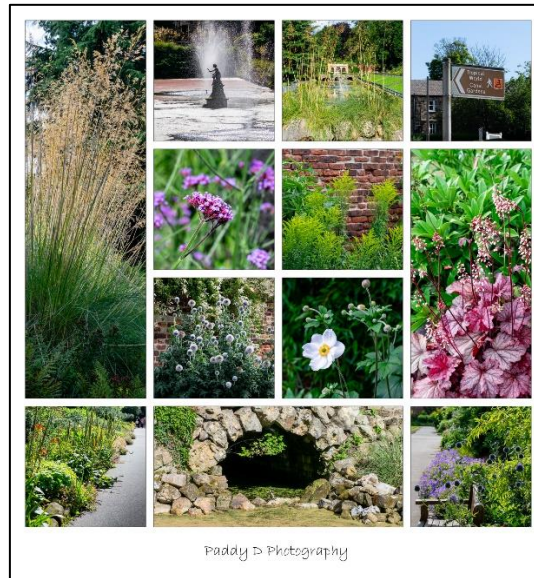
*'A Tapestry of Memories'
A multi-media story.*



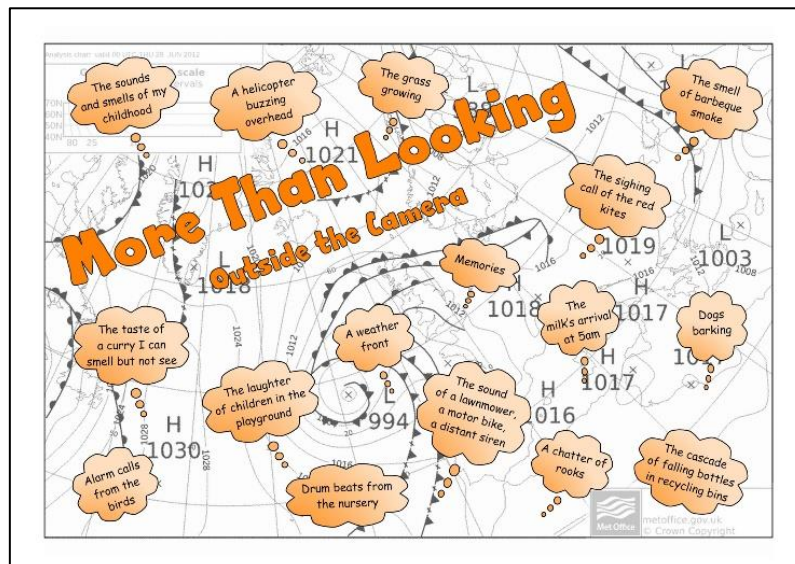
*'The Healed Landscape'
Presenting photographs in a different way*

A range of styles

There's a wide range of styles and 'looks' amongst the stories. Some are rigid, regular and formal, whilst others are more fluent, irregular and informal. Some are based solely on my images, some use little visual imagery, and there's a continuum of everything in between. Some include text, maps, newspaper cuttings etc.



*'The Pleasures of Walking'
With an irregular layout*



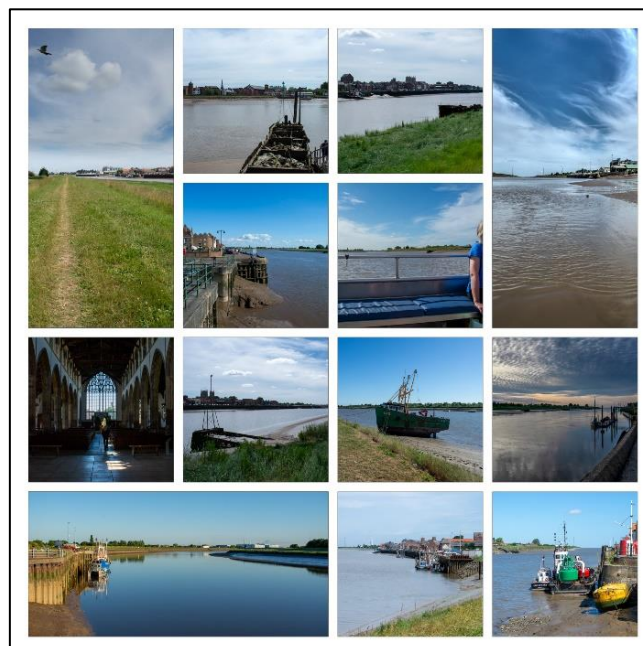
*'More Than Looking: Outside the Camera'
A story about things we can't see, with little visual imagery*

Representational Content

In a figurative context, the range of stories covers an awareness of, and a connection with, the natural world – noticing and celebrating, the beauty all around us – as well as walks we've taken and places we've visited (on a day trip or for a holiday).



'Beauty All Around Us'



'Kings Lynn'

Abstract Content

In contrast to the representational stories, other ones cover more abstract ideas, concepts, emotional expression. These allow me to retrieve and embrace memories; to change perspective and counter increasing anxiety (i.e. times when the 'wolf looks bigger than it is'); to voice things that otherwise, I couldn't express verbally (i.e. be an outlet for intractable, unexpressed feelings); to access feelings and emotions from the distant past.

Stylistically, these are often created in a conventional manner (i.e. as diptychs and triptychs), and hence in that respect they could be categorised in any of the more established genre of photography. But in my mind, they're stories because it was the storytelling principles and ethos that enabled me to voice these feelings.



'Uncertain Times'



'Another View'

Exploring the idea that there are multiple versions of us all, some positive and outgoing, some damaged and private.

Other Possible Uses

I'm aware that the action of creating 'draft-stories' (as part of my tuning-in process) helps to shape, inspire, and inform the 'top-copy' stories I go on to write. And I feel that collating material, making it visual and concrete, and placing it in close proximity might help formulate fledgling ideas, thereby making it easier to highlight possible directions and developments etc.

So, although I haven't tried it yet (and I can't offer an example), I think that the overall idea of visual storytelling could also be used in this way – like pinning things on a notice board.

And I'm sure there are more ideas like this just waiting for their moment so that, as the months progress, this section on 'possible uses' will develop into an interesting list, with more and more uses for story-images – more ideas, more connections.

Part 4: And now, where next?

I've been writing this 'Story about Storytelling' for several months now – an activity I've found both enjoyable and helpful – making the process and its different features explicit, and hence gaining a better understanding of its methodology and the way it supports my wellbeing. It's been rich and rewarding, in exactly the same way that storytelling itself is.

And I'm aware that I've used the phrase 'rich and rewarding' before – it's part of a surprising lexicon I use when I'm talking or writing about storytelling. I'm using words like playful, joyous, creative, smile-worthy, childlike, spontaneity, curiosity, self-expression, embracing memories – all very different from the vocabulary I associate with my 'proper photography'. I'm minded of my professional life – its language was precise, concise, unembellished – whilst my stories are different, they're part of my 'now-life' and are being written in a spirit of expressiveness and creativity.

But now I think it's time for me to stop writing about storytelling (and analysing its process) and get back to doing the storytelling – creating stories. So what's next? What's in the pipeline?

Plans for the Future

Have I told you I love maps?

Probably not – it's a guilty secret. Well, actually, it's not at all guilty, and hardly a secret.

I know that online maps help us get from A to B quickly and efficiently, but I prefer the physicality of using 'real' (paper) maps because they talk to me, and link me with the landscape. And one of my favourite activities (in one of our favourite locations) was poring over the map of Hadrian's Wall and seeing the landscape through its eyes – through the eyes of the map – whilst Ian drove us along the Military Road, tucked down beside the wall. (For accuracy, I'll add it was a map from the Explorer series, at 2.5 inches to the mile).

We called it our 'whoop and swoosh' drive – a phrase which immediately reconnects us with the joy of travelling that undulating, but fairly straight road, with its stunning views across the moorlands of Northumberland to the right and to the left. And now that I've drawn attention to both our endearing name for the drive and to the vocabulary I associate with storytelling, it's obvious that it's time to connect the two together – the 'whoop and swoosh' and the 'rich and rewarding' – and that this will be my next project.

I want to link the map of Hadrian's Wall with the places in our memories (and the photographs I've taken), starting at Brunton Turret and continuing to Birdoswald (about 20 miles due west), stopping at all the usual haunts – Chollerford, Chesters, the Temple of Mithras, Housesteads, Vindolanda, Steel Rigg, The Sill, Twice Brewed, the Roman Army Museum and Walltown Quarry along the way. And then I want to create the stories of those individual sites – Steel Rigg and Vindolanda, particularly. So this, I imagine, will keep me enjoyably employed for a month or three!

After that, I've no plans. Maybe I'll respond spontaneously to something we're doing at that future time, somewhere we've just visited, using new images to record these activities and how they make me feel.

Or maybe I'll dip into the list of ideas and possibilities I've been drawing up as I've been writing about storytelling:

1. Using my back-catalogue for virtual stories to reconnect us with our memories:

Walks, places, holidays, visits – walking through the Chevin Forest, visiting Lincoln or North Wales, for example.

Make itinerary maps (like Matthew Paris, the medieval monk).

2. Remembering events – historical reenactments, for example, or remembering the influx of excited birders to our local park when they came to see the kingfishers.

3. Tackling enquiry questions such as:

The Gledhow paradox – how does Turner's painting of the house at the bottom of our road fit with the reality that I live in the UK's third largest city, one developed during the Industrial Revolution?

Similarly – our local park (Roundhay Park) is one of the largest metropolitan parks in Europe. How does that fit with the past or the present?

4. And reminding myself that story-images don't all have to answer all the big questions of the universe! They can simply be about fun, and reconnecting with celebrations and small pleasures.



Dashing Towards the Ice Cream Van

And that's just a sample of the ideas on the list. So you don't need to worry that I'll get bored, anytime soon!

So that ...

... really does bring down the curtain on this project. Thank you for letting me share this with you.

Stay safe.

Paddy

October 2023