

Contemporary Photography



View from the Chair

We have arranged for the **Contemporary Group AGM to be held on 7 March 2015 in the Birmingham Central Library**. Peter James, the Curator of Photography Collections, has agreed to talk about the Library's collecting policy. We must hope that petitions, which are in response to proposals by Birmingham City Council to cease funding the photography department along with drastically reducing library staff numbers from April 2015, are successful, and that support for the Library bears fruit. Although it does appear that it will not affect our date for the AGM, I would urge members to try to attend, to not only show support for the Contemporary Group, but also to support the Library. Many of their archives are by photographers who have spoken at our weekend events; and to find that these are no longer available to the public and researchers would be a tragedy.

This leads into our own weekend event, **Concerning Photography, which will be held 16 – 17 May 2015**. Over a third of the tickets have been sold, with all of those attending the dinner when photographer Liz Hingley will speak. Several of our speakers will remain during the weekend and will also attend the dinner. A deposit of £25 will secure a place. I understand that the Jury's Inn, which will give a discount, is within walking distance of Sheffield Hallam University and the railway station. To obtain the discount when you are booking please mention Sheffield Hallam.

I attended the presentations for the RPS 2014 Photobook Exhibition. It was a great pleasure to be able to view so many books over which such care had been taken. Congratulations are due to those who organised it, Rod Fry and Brian Steptoe, and to all those who entered. A very high standard was required and it was met by all the entrants. Our thanks go to Gerry Badger, photographer and photographic critic, for selecting the award winners, and to RPS President Derek Birch for presenting the awards. It was a hugely co-operative effort between members of the RPS and the staff at Fenton House, Bath. I hope the Photobook Exhibition is launched as a regular occurrence.

Best wishes,
Avril

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If you wish to submit articles for the Journal, please send all copy and images on disc to:
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Text should be in Microsoft Word and images are preferred in TIFF format, 300 dpi, file size guideline 10-20Mb. Images are also acceptable as high quality JPEGs, file size guideline 3-6 Mb. For other formats, please contact the Editor. Large image files may be supplied on disc or by use of on-line large file transfer facilities. Unless requested, discs will not be returned.

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Contemporary Photography

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View from the Chair	Avril Harris ARPS	2
Editorial	Patricia Ann Ruddelle ARPS	4
The Essence of Music	Douglas May FRPS	5
El Plan: on Thin Air	Manuela Henao Restrepo	8
A Journey with Sebald	Jeff Hutchinson	16
From The Thames	Duncan Unsworth	20
Venice off Season	Graham Low LRPS	24
Beyond	Frazer Ashford ARPS	26
Back to the Beginning: John Stoddart	Stephen Clarke	29
Mother Road: an Exploration of Route 66	Jessica Harvey	32
Something Like a Nest by Andy Sewell	Book review by Brian Steptoe FRPS	38
Group Events		39
Committee		39
If you don't know what you're doing, Don't Touch	Chris Coekin, from <i>Knock Three Times</i>	40

Contemporary Group ethos - Photography that conveys ideas, stimulates thought and encourages interpretation; photographs 'about' rather than 'of'.

Editorial

“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear”

The poet Walt Whitman celebrated the variety and vitality found in the young United States in his collection *Leaves of Grass*. He extolled his love of America and its achievements as a new, free nation; moreover, he was exuberant in his praise of those people who delighted in their individual labours.

No so many decades later, a road was born that even now symbolises the variety and vitality found in the country. Route 66 was established as one of the country’s original highways; one that has achieved subsequent iconic status. Even though now decommissioned from the modern road network, you can still travel vast parts of it - through its diverse landscapes in different climates from Chicago to California. Like Whitman’s list of the various occupations in his poetic catalogue, Route 66 can be seen also as a symbol of the diversity that continues to prevail in the United States.

A land too vast to grasp. You are interstates crossing the country and back roads leading to nowhere. Towns with idiosyncratic names like Eureka, Tuba City, Normal, Tenkiller. Billboards and neon signs. Wildflowers and friendly faces. Endless spaces with bright hot reds and dark lush greens. Junkyards. Farmlands. Mountains that soar lifting the spirits, mountains that roll soothing the soul. Crowded cities and ghost towns. Diners and deserts. Only in America.

We have available an enormous legacy of the life lived along what John Steinbeck called the ‘Mother Road’ in books and films, and in the vast archives of photographs taken by American and European photographers during the road’s heyday. (Edward Weston’s *Hot Coffee, Mojave Desert*, 1937 remains one of my favourite images. It illustrates roadside enterprises, those Mom & Pop shops that grew up along the route, while on another level it amuses us with the surreal availability of a hot cuppa in the scorching desert.) Photographers continue to take to the open road and explore what remains of small town America. Perhaps in some ways Route 66 is a symbol of the enduring myth of the open road. It’s all about the journey, not the destination.

Patricia Ann Ruddie, Editor

The Essence of Music

Douglas May FRPS

The three essential elements in music are a composition, an instrument and a player. In July I went to Ilkley to photograph the talented English classical guitarist Michael Christian Durrant. He played for me the *Five Bagatelles* for guitar by William Walton. These bagatelles had been commissioned by Julian Bream, who sought to increase the repertoire for classical guitar by getting a number of British composers such as Benjamin Britten, Richard Rodney Bennett, Lennox Berkley and William Walton to compose for him. Walton said that he “managed to write some very pretty pieces” for Bream.⁽¹⁾ That rather understates the bagatelles,

and having listened to Michael play them, I decided to include the score in some of the portraits.

Michael told me that he was playing a guitar he had commissioned from the young luthier Sam McClaren of Yarm. He had met Sam at the London Guitar Festival, and an arrangement had been made for Michael to play some guitars made by Sam. Michael was so impressed that he commissioned Sam to make him one. It has just been delivered. There were some slight adjustments to be made. I saw the guitar again when I went to Yarm to make portraits of Sam. The guitar is included in some of them.

Sam plays the guitar himself and obtained an A level in music. This enthusiasm for music was combined with his woodworking skills. He became a luthier, having studied at Totnes and Newark.

Having seen the collaboration between Michael and Sam, it seemed right to reflect this by presenting my photographs as a series of diptychs, which also include the Walton score. There is one pair where Michael sits with the score, apparently listening to it in his head while Sam taps part of a guitar to check that the resonance is correct.

1. From the booklet notes to the Naxos recording *British Guitar Music* 8.557040.





El Plan: on Thin Air

Manuela Henao Restrepo

El Plan is a rural settlement situated at an altitude of 2600 metres above sea level in the mountains of Antioquia in Colombia. These types of settlements are smaller in size than

villages. Usually their economy is strongly linked with the provision of fresh food to large urban centres.

The peasants in Antioquia have been historically characterised as

people who work their own land, which gives them a good economic status. In peasant societies the family tends to be the social circle where everyone mostly interacts; this



sometimes creates hermetic societies. In El Plan, most of the population comes from this historic peasant culture. Although there are still traditional tasks such as growing food, flowers and stock breeding, many of the new generations are inclined to work in services or as employees.

This series of portraits and still life images depicts a changing peasant culture and society in which the family and religion still play a rôle, but where external influences, especially in younger people, have created a different aesthetic with unique idiosyncrasies.

Ed Note: Manuela is the recipient of the 2014 Joan Wakelin Bursary and is currently working in Colombia on her winning bursary project about local farmers.

<http://www.manuelahenaorestrepo.com/>





A Journey with Sebald

Jeff Hutchinson

The writer, WG Sebald, is highly articulate about his journeys which are a mixture of physical and mental activities including historical fact, literature and metaphysics where space-time seems random. I have read and re-read *Austerlitz* a number of times and find new and overlooked parts each time, and my interpretation of the work often changes too. He's a fascinating but very difficult writer to try and pin down.

He is always travelling, always searching; looking for some sort of identity through the history of a place and unmeasurable things seem to happen to time. His schedule, often walking long distances, allows for chance events that can change the course of his direction at a whim. He has a particular interest in military history, especially forts, which I believe he uses as a metaphor for our insecurities.

As writer John Banville writes on the back of *Austerlitz*: "A superb meditation on time, loss and retrieval. A new kind of writing, combining fiction, memoir, travelogue, philosophy and much more besides [...] greatness in literature is still possible."⁽¹⁾

My photographs were taken on Orford Ness which features in another book by Sebald - *The Rings Of Saturn* in which he records a journey on foot through coastal East Anglia, where certain places spark a peculiar mental experience unlike any other. The aftermath of history is strangely evoked where the reader feels the loss of a place and the people associated with it. Sebald talked about visiting the area in 1972 when it was still Ministry of Defence territory: "The M.O.D. continued to maintain Secret Weapons Research Establishments on the coast of Suffolk, and imposed the strictest silence on the work carried out in them. The inhabitants of Orford could only speculate about what went on at the Orford Ness site, which, though perfectly visible from the town, was effectively no easier to reach than the Nevada Desert or an atoll in the South Seas."⁽²⁾ Sebald thought the site resembled a penal colony in the Far East.

Orford Ness is the oddest place I've ever been to, with a military history that started in 1913 and lasted for 70 years. It was used for aerial warfare in WW1, gun and bullet testing before and during WW2 and culminated in nuclear experimentation. It is now looked after by a very nervous National Trust who (with some justification) have concerns regarding unexploded bombs. Their philosophy is to leave the site to its own devices and over time it will revert to nature.

1. Sebald, WG. (2011 re-issue) *Austerlitz*, translated Anthea Bell, introduction by James Wood. London: Penguin.

2. Sebald, WG. (2002) *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Vintage Classics, page 233.







From The Thames

Duncan Unsworth

"It is history, the river of history, along which most of the significant English events of the last two thousand years have taken place."⁽¹⁾

When walking the Thames Path, it was more this temporal space than the geographical space occupied by the River Thames that resonated with me. How much more has the river witnessed that is now forgotten?

All the photographs I took of the river seemed superficial, just showing the surface, revealing nothing of the memories or mysteries lurking in its depth. Inspiration and a way forward came after a workshop with Paul Kenny whose *Seaworks*⁽²⁾ images can show the whole world in a drop of water.

I have since spent several years scouring the beaches of the river in London, collecting items which have been cast into the river only to then re-emerge and disappear again with each



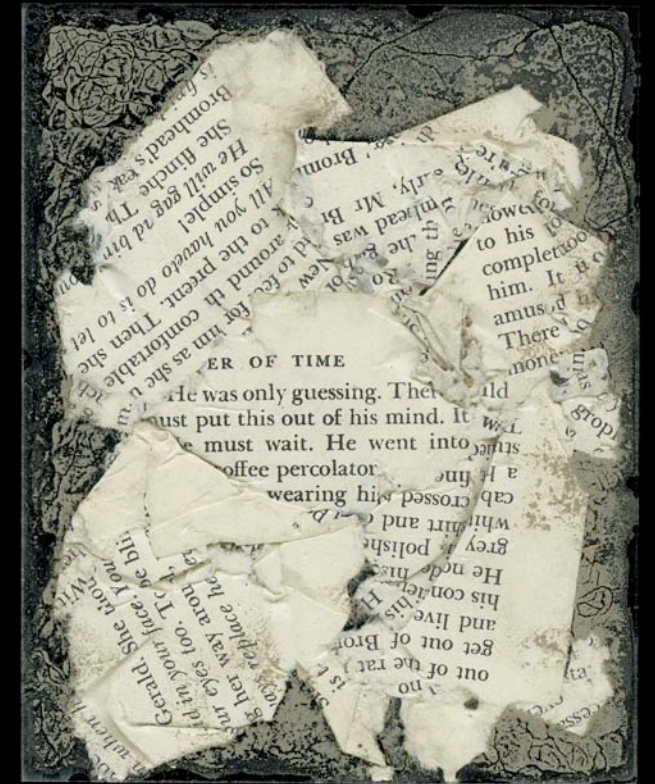
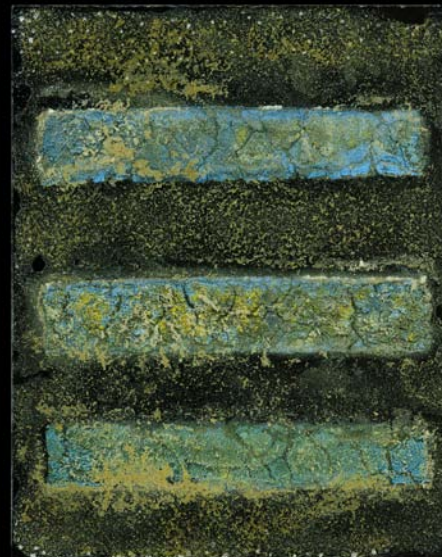
cycle of the tide. Many of the items seem mundane: bits of metal, broken glass, plastic scratched as it has been moved over other objects by the water, a few pages from a gay romantic novel about to return to pulp. However, each item has its own secret history.

Combining the items with water collected from the river at the same sites where the items were found, I created assemblages which were then photographed using a flatbed scanner. In

the resultant still-life images sometimes the items are easily recognisable, but in others they are more abstract and appear to be disappearing back under the surface of the water. Memories about to be forgotten again?

1. Ackroyd, Peter. *Thames: Sacred River*, London: Vintage Books (first paperback edition), 2008.

2. Kenny, Paul. *Seaworks 1998-2013*, Triplekite Publishing, 2014
<http://www.triplekite.co.uk/book-shop/paul-kenny-seaworks/>



Venice off Season

Graham Low LRPS

Venice in February, walking the canals, parks and alleyways for three days. There were no carnivals or festivals, nor too many tourists beyond St Mark's Square, and no climatic emergencies like floods or snowfalls. There is always a degree of tourist activity all year, especially in and around the Grand Canal, but away from the tourist magnets, what we found was different. Venice in 'ordinary' off-season mode - a city whose inhabitants just go on with life, interacting with its public and visible heritage in a quiet way that, to the outside observer, frequently emphasised waiting, absence and aftermath of various sorts (like elections or tourists). The result was at times the creation of public cameos and virtual stage sets.



Beyond

Frazer Ashford ARPS

During my working life I have been concerned with capturing images of people, often at play but mostly at work. Many of these 'faces' are famous and are still with us, while others have passed on. Many of my subjects have left lasting memorials for future generations, for example, the great movie moments of Charlie Chaplin and Anna Neagle. Others such as Elton John and Rod Stewart are still playing their part in musical history. As photographers, we may find that we leave lasting memories with our images. I would like to think that these pictures in books, archives and publishers files will survive us after we ourselves have gone.

But what about other kinds of memorials? On my travels I have always been surprised to discover graves and small cemeteries in the most remote places. Not meant for the wider public gaze but simply erected as a token by those who loved them. These places and scenes began to fascinate me. After a lifetime of photographing people in action, I now found myself looking at these quiet and lonely spaces.



St Michael's Church, Leenane, County Galway, Ireland



Blackwater, County Wexford



Our Lady's Island, County Wexford, Ireland

I do not know who the subjects are. Take Nicky White in an old derelict church yard on Our Lady's Island in Ireland. He was buried at the age of 7. The large impressive headstone simply features his name which looks as if it were carved by a simple knife. Maybe by a father, mother or sibling?

We may never know the real stories but thanks to the efforts of friends and relatives they will always be remembered. They were all built with love.

I continue to be fascinated by these places and will continue to locate and record them. Maybe this is, in a very small way, my own personal tribute to the 'faces' of the past.

Back to the Beginning: John Stoddart

Stephen Clarke

One of the exhibitions that showed in the launch year of Liverpool's Open Eye gallery was that of the American photographer William Klein. Klein is known for his gritty street photographs of New York taken in 1954. Having spent eight years in Europe, serving with the U.S. Army for one year before practicing as a painter in Paris, he returned home. Published in 1956 as *Life is Good & Good for You in New York: Trance Witness Revels*, these photographs were his response to the city of his birth. Klein's 1978 exhibition at Open Eye coincided with the homecoming of John Stoddart to Liverpool. Stoddart had spent six years in the British Army before serving his informal 'apprenticeship' as a photographer between 1978 and 1985. Open Eye, then based in the Whitechapel area of Liverpool, played a key part in Stoddart's photographic education, and in turn benefited from Stoddart's contribution to the gallery's early programme. Access to the small library and exhibitions of significant international photographers is what Stoddart enthusiastically attributes to his photographic literacy. It was specifically the street photography of Klein that resonated with Stoddart.

The gallery's second director Neil Burgess (1982-86) was an important figure for Stoddart. Burgess committed the gallery to supporting photographic work produced on Merseyside, and this included the body of work which Stoddart exhibited across two solo shows, catalogued as *New Evidence* in 1983 and





Everton in 1985. These projects gave Stoddart the opportunity to build on his skills as a portraitist and as a social documentarian. The city that he had returned to in 1978 was caught up in the upheavals of the period. As an ex-soldier who had served briefly in Northern Ireland it seems pertinent that he documented both the celebrations of Liverpool's Orange Order alongside the reporting of the Falklands victory. The backdrop to these subjects was the continued collapse of Liverpool that would eventually lead to an exodus of its population in the mid-1980s.

In more recent years John Stoddart, like many photographers

of social documentary, has revisited his earlier work and embarked on the process of reselecting and reprinting from negatives. In 2012 he viewed his collection of approximately 90 prints at Open Eye's archive and confirmed that the Liverpool collection had not been exhibited since the mid-1980s, nor been published as a body of work. Julia García Hernández, then working with the gallery archive, committed to finding a platform for publication. Following her introduction to Café Royal Books, a meeting was set up between Stoddart and Craig Atkinson, Café Royal's founder. This small independent publisher, established in 2005, produces affordable, limited

edition photobooks from both archived and new projects. Atkinson is conscious of the role that his books can play in regards to both photographer and audience returning to past projects. Collected by individuals and institutions, Atkinson comments on how the photographs in these Café Royal Books are 're-archived', extending their availability in the public sphere⁽¹⁾.

Stoddart's first book with Café Royal Books, released in October 2014 as *Liverpool Flags and Badges*, shows a nationalist militancy not normally associated with the socialist Liverpool that opposed Margaret Thatcher. Orangemen march towards the camera on the book's cover. Inside the slogans 'No Surrender'



and 'Smash the IRA' interweave with the headline 'Victory in the Falklands'. A young boy holding a toy rifle and wearing an army beret pops up from behind a garden wall and is shot by Stoddart, the ex-soldier, with a camera. The photobook closes with a portrait of Stoddart's mother, standing in front of Union Jack bunting holding a song sheet, and a photograph of the burned-out, boarded up Open Eye following a petrol bomb attack. The attack on Open Eye coincided with the first week of Stoddart's solo exhibition in 1983. By 1985, Stoddart joined the exodus, deciding to leave a burnt-out Liverpool and move on to London. Portraiture had been at the core of his practice. He went from documenting people on the streets of Liverpool to making pictures of the famous in the thriving capital. Stoddart became known for his glamorous photographs of the 'stars', moving from the grit of social document to the smooth of social whirl. In Paris 2011, Stoddart met and photographed William Klein⁽²⁾. This meeting, and the publication of his Liverpool archive with Café Royal Books, are a return home for John Stoddart, connecting past and present for the photographer and his viewers.



1. See interview with Craig Atkinson at: <http://photoworks.org.uk/cafe-royal-books/>
2. For an excerpt of the Stoddart/Klein interview see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0DKCP-CgWY>

Liverpool Flags and Badges, with an introduction written by Julia García Hernández, is available at: www.caferoyalbooks.com A second publication of Stoddart's work from Open Eye is due for release in 2015.

For a history of Open Eye see: Davies, S. (2009) 'A Commitment to Merseyside', Source: The Photographic Review, Issue 61 (Winter 2009), pp 26-31

Mother Road

An exploration of Route 66 by artist Jessica Harvey

Harvey's journey along the 'Mother Road' from Chicago to California was not only a photographic exhibition – that is, a record of singular, unrelated images she took along the way, but also a trip that involved the personal stories and memories of others who she met on her journey. Their photographs and memorabilia were displayed with her own, as well as an audio recording that played their individual narratives from travelling Route 66. There was also a large-screen installation continually projecting the many images that Harvey had taken during her journey.

The culmination of her work made during these travels was an exhibition and residency shown at the Hardesty Art Center in October and November 2014. (The Hardesty itself is a stone's throw away from historical Route 66 as it passes through the centre of downtown Tulsa, Oklahoma.) In addition to the exhibition, as part of her residency, Harvey set up a studio where she invited the public to record their own personal recollections, as well as giving them the opportunity to contribute any special keepsakes and souvenirs which represented to them the meaning of travel.

Mother Road developed from a project that was initially concerned with the history and myths that come from travelling Route 66, to a wider perspective on journeys in general, when both personal and shared stories can lead to discoveries that all of us can make and enjoy through travel.

The Editor.

Please see www.thejessicaharvey.com for more information about the artist.







Something Like a Nest

Andy Sewell

Book Review by Brian Steptoe FRPS

Andy Sewell's earlier book, *The Heath*, showed an affectionate ramble on Hampstead Heath in north London. It was included in Vol III of Parr and Badger's Photobook history books.

Something like a Nest moves into the countryside, into farming and family surroundings away from the city. The book explores activities such as harvesting and harvest festivals, the shoot, gathering hay and straw (readers are expected to tell which is which). There are recurrent scenes of views over the kitchen sink and the kitchen window, photos of hens and eggs, of traces of rabbits in the corn, trellis fencing to keep garden predators at bay; details which are there to be extracted by the discerning reader, especially one familiar with life in the country. The harvest festival scene with tinned produce and filled supermarket bags is a poignant reflection of changes in how we live today.

Andy Sewell has emailed the following insight to his thinking: "I was intrigued by the muddle of thoughts and emotions the

www.andysewell.com

countryside provokes. The work is in some ways about exploring this - about giving shape to something that can accommodate contradictory feelings and mixed evidence."

22x28 cm, 106 pages, 53 photographs and article by Ben Platts-Mills. Self-published.



GROUP EVENTS

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 6 February | Contemporary South West meeting. Devon. Venue to be confirmed. Contact Rod Fry, rod@rodry.eclipse.co.uk , tel 01803 844721 |
| 17 January-1 March | <i>Of Our Times: The Price of Money</i> . Exhibition by Nigel Tooby FRPS. Artspace Gallery. The Ropewalk, Maltkiln Road, Barton upon Humber. North Lincolnshire. DN18 5JT, tel 01652 660380 info@the-ropewalk.co.uk |
| 15 February | Contemporary Scottish meeting. Howden Park Centre, Livingston. West Lothian. EH54 6AE 11.00-16.00. AGM. Accommodation limited. Contact John Elliott joma.elliott@btinternet.com tel 01475 67408 |
| 25 February-8 March | <i>From The Thames</i> . Exhibition by Duncan Unsworth. Upper Gallery Lauderdale House, Waterlow Park, Highgate Hill, London N6 5HG, tel 020 8348 8716, enquiries@lauderdale.org.uk . |
| 7 March | Contemporary Group AGM . Birmingham Central Library, Centenary Square, Broad Street, Birmingham, West Midlands B1 2ND. Starts 1pm. Short AGM followed by Peter James, who will talk about their collecting policy at the Museum. |
| 14 March | Contemporary East Midlands meeting. Keyworth Parish Church Hall, Selby Lane, Keyworth, NG12 5AN <i>Getting Published</i> , Sam Mellish talk. Contact Howard Fisher 0795 512 4000 |
| 21 March | Contemporary North East meeting. Venue to be confirmed. Contact Patricia Ann Ruddie ARPS, patriciaruddle@btinternet.com , tel. 01904 783850 |
| 23 March | Contemporary North West meeting. Days Inn, Charnock Richard Services. M6 between J27 and 28. Contact Ian Maxwell mail@ihmaxwell.com or tel 01524 770278 |
| 25-27 March | Contemporary Postal Portfolio. Biennial weekend meeting for portfolio members at Missenden Abbey. Bucks. HP16 OBD. Contact Anne Crabbe info@annecrabbe.co.uk tel 01494 785104 |
| 22 April | Conceptual and Contemporary Distinction Assessments for ARPS and FRPS. Fenton House, Bath. Applicants and observers may attend the Associateship Assessments. ARPS enquiries arps@rps.org , FRPS enquiries frps@rps.org |
| 16-17 May | Concerning Photography weekend . Sheffield Hallam University. Speakers are Paul Reas, Melanie Manchot, Chris Coekin, Melinda Gibson, Zelda Cheatle, Peter Mitchell and Liz Hingley. See RPS website for speaker details and suggested hotel. www.rps.org/special-interest-groups/contemporary/about/concerning-photography Contact Avril Harris avrilharris@blueyonder.co.uk for reservations and bookings. |
| Dates not fixed | Contemporary East meetings. These will be in the Ipswich and Cambridge areas when arranged. The project underway is the The Ipswich Waterfront Development. Contact Peter Ellis wordsnpicsltd@gmail.com tel 01473 780227 |

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