



# CHANGING BRITAIN

Documentary Photography from the Arts Council Collection



**Bill Brandt**, *Parlourmaid preparing a bath*, 1937  
© Bill Brandt Archive 2010



**Bill Brandt**, *Coal Miner's Bath*, 1937  
© Bill Brandt Archive 2010

Photography is ever-present in our lives, filling newspapers, magazines and advertising hoardings in towns and cities all over the country. In the age of the camera phone, most of us experiment as photographers as we go about capturing our daily lives for friends and family. Our fascination with recording the everyday has its traditions in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, but began in earnest in 1937 with the social surveys and photography of Mass Observation.



**George Rodger**, *A London family bombed out of their home during the night, salvage a few personal belongings on the pavement, 1940*

An early practitioner of social observation was the German-born photographer Bill Brandt, who arrived in Britain in the early 1930s, where he began recording English society and its customs. *The English at Home*, published in 1936, depicted the lives of the upper classes, observing their social codes with the detached manner of someone unfamiliar with this country and its mores. The same year, several hundred people marched from Jarrow to Westminster to protest against unemployment and extreme poverty. The protest, which became known as the Jarrow March, did little to alleviate their misery but as a result, Brandt became increasingly concerned about the plight of the working classes. Visiting the north of England for the first time in 1937,

he began to document the lives of the poor and the working class, producing images that contrasted starkly with the pictures of his earlier well-heeled subjects.

The outbreak of the Second World War produced more photographers keen to make observations of society and our way of life. Some were financed by the War Office and Ministry of Information. Brandt, one such photographer, was commissioned to document air raid shelters and the streets of London in the blackout. Another photographer, George Rodger, previously employed by the *Listener Magazine*, recorded the effects of the Blitz on the lives of the British people.

In the post war period images of the daily lives of Britons could be found in the



**Tony Ray-Jones**, *Picnic, Glyndeboune*, 1967  
© Tony Ray-Jones collection at the National Media Museum/SSPL

pages of magazines like *Picture Post*, *The Tatler* and *Illustrated London News*, which employed the talents of photographers such as Roger Mayne and Bert Hardy. Roger Mayne, after achieving success as a photographer in the United States, returned to Britain in 1954. He settled in North Kensington and embarked on what became his most famous work, *Southam Street*. A somewhat reserved person, he felt immediately at home with the busy street life of the area, describing the streets as 'having their own kind of splendour whether empty or swarming with people'.

With the arrival of television in the 1950s magazine sales began to dwindle and, as a result, an important source of financial support for photographers diminished.

The colour supplements of *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*, which appeared in the mid 1960s, only partially filled the gap, their emphasis being more on reportage and 'news' photos. Nevertheless, the desire to capture our way of life in pictures remained. Tony Ray-Jones, returning to this country in 1965 from the United States, began a camper van tour of the country with the express intention to document English festivals and customs before we became too 'Americanised'.

Until the 1970s the Arts Council, like most museums and galleries, did not collect photographic work in the same way as painting or sculpture, regarding photography as a 'news medium'. But, in 1973, the Council appointed their first



**Martin Parr**, *Hebden Bridge, Steep Lane buffet lunch*, 1974–1977  
© Martin Parr/Magnum Photos



**Vanley Burke**, *Grove Junior School – Reading with Teacher* (from 'Handsworth from Inside' series), 1968–1982

full time Photography Officer, Barry Lane. The previous year Lane had produced his authoritative report *Public Funding of Photography in America and Canada*, which convinced the Council that in order for photography to flourish in this country it needed sustained funding and support. Lane immediately appointed a committee of specialists to advise on photography with the aim of organising touring exhibitions, producing and disseminating publications and, most importantly, commissioning and buying photographic work. With this breakthrough the Council's extraordinary photography collection was established.

A number of British photographers were starting to work in a markedly different way. While they continued to explore the familiar

subject matter of social deprivation, these new photographers did not wish to solely reflect British courage and determination in the face of adversity. Through the 1970s, images of a more divided society began to emerge. The establishment of small galleries across the country dedicated to photography also meant that there were increased opportunities for photographers to show their work.

In addition to acquiring work, the Arts Council recognised the need to provide financial support for struggling practitioners. Grants were made available to photographers on the understanding that once the work was made it would automatically find a home in the Collection. In 1974, with the support of the Arts Council,



Paul Graham, *Old man being interviewed, DHSS Office, Birmingham 1984* (from the series *Beyond Caring* 1984–1986), 1985

Daniel Meadows took to the road in a double-decker bus for a project called the *Free Photographic Omnibus*, an attempt by Meadows to capture traditions and carnivals that were fast disappearing. Three years later, Ian Berry produced his two year exploration of English life in a book of photographs, simply entitled *The English*.

In the same decade the work of Martin Parr began to attract interest. Perhaps our most perceptive commentator on the idiosyncrasies of the British at leisure, his work has proved controversial for its less than comfortable perspective. The 1970s also witnessed the development of a more ethnically diverse population and the emergence of photographers like Vanley Burke. Originally from Jamaica, Burke had

arrived in this country as a child in the mid-sixties and, having received a camera as a gift, began to take photographs of his local community in Handsworth, Birmingham. Having noticed a lack of images of black people in British photography he made a conscious decision to document their social history.

Until the 1980s most British documentary photographers produced their work in black and white. Paul Graham was one of the first photographers to embrace colour film, which he used to extraordinary effect in the series *Beyond Caring*, 1984–1986. The work constitutes a record of people's experiences of the welfare benefits system. Made during a time of economic recession, the images evidence a powerful sense of



**Henry Bond and Liam Gillick, 14th February 1992;**  
*Auction of the contents of Robert Maxwell's London home, Sotheby's, 1992*

social inequality and embody a somewhat bleak assessment of the lives of the poor.

In the early 1990s the photography collection was incorporated into the main body of the Arts Council Collection where it has remained ever since. Reflecting the increasing interest in the art market, photography is pro-actively acquired, but, as the medium has become fully integrated within fine art practice, the emphasis is less on documentary work. One of the more recent works in this display, *14 February 1992; Auction of the contents of Robert Maxwell's London home, Sotheby's, 1992*, is from a larger collaborative project by artists Henry Bond and Liam Gillick and illustrates one of the ways in which artists work in the photographic medium has

evolved. For their *Documents* project of 1990, the artists attempted to examine the dissemination of information through the media by using materials from press agencies and posing as journalists to gain access to 'news events'.

Like the rest of the Arts Council Collection, photography continues to generate a high demand for loans from other institutions and continues to be shown extensively in our own touring exhibitions. Since 2008, two major exhibitions featuring photography – *No Such Thing as Society* curated by Professor David Alan Mellor and *Unpopular Culture: Grayson Perry Selects from the Arts Council Collection* – have been shown in eighteen venues in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Poland where they have been seen by over 210,000 people.

---

### What is the Arts Council Collection?

The Arts Council Collection is one of this country's foremost national collections of post-war British art. It is also the most widely circulated collection of its kind. It acts as a 'museum without walls', lending modern and contemporary British art to publicly funded bodies within the UK as well as museums and galleries worldwide.

### Why does it exist?

The Collection was established in 1946 with the aim of purchasing innovative work from artists living and working in Britain. Through touring exhibitions and by making loans to other institutions, the intention is to give access to the best of modern and contemporary British art to organisations, large and small, in all corners of the nation.

### How large is the Collection?

The Collection owns over 7,500 works by nearly 2,000 artists. The Collection continues to make new acquisitions every year. The Collection's holdings can be viewed on line at [www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk](http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk).

### Where can I see the Collection?

The Collection provides loans to museums, galleries, and other public institutions such as universities, colleges, schools, charities, libraries and hospitals. In the past three years 1,305 works have been seen in exhibitions and a further 1,227 were displayed in public buildings across the country.

### Who runs the Collection?

The Collection is managed by Southbank Centre on behalf of Arts Council England (ACE). Collection staff are based in London and at Longside, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where the sculpture collection is housed.

### How can you borrow from the Collection?

The Collection is always happy to consider requests from public institutions to borrow work. Enquiries can be made by emailing [loans@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:loans@southbankcentre.co.uk) or by telephoning 020 7960 5218. Further information about our different loan schemes is available from our website.

### How are new acquisitions made?

The Acquisitions Committee is chaired by the Head of the Collection. Every two years, three individuals are invited to advise the internal members of the committee on the purchase of work. Over the past decade, this panel has included some of the country's leading artists, writers, critics and curators from every part of Great Britain.

### What is the annual acquisitions budget?

The annual acquisitions budget is typically around £180,000, which is occasionally supplemented by additional external funding for exceptional works of art. The Collection holds key works by such luminaries as Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Damien Hirst, Bridget Riley and Anthony Gormley, all acquired at early but critical points in their artistic careers.

---

### Changing Britain:

Portcullis House 1 June – 1 July 2010

Exhibition organised by Jill Constantine with Monika McConnell, Andy Craig and Greg Salter. Text Jill Constantine.

Cover Image – Tony Ray-Jones, *Brighton Beach*, 1967 © Tony Ray-Jones collection at the National Media Museum/SSPL

All images © the artists or artists estates unless otherwise stated.

Visit [www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk](http://www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk) to find out more about us and to search our holdings online.

A full list of Arts Council Collection and Hayward Gallery Publications may be obtained from the Publication Sales Manager, Deborah Power: [deborah.power@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:deborah.power@southbankcentre.co.uk)

ISBN no. 978-1-85332-290-7

---

ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION AT

**SOUTHBANK  
CENTRE**



Supported by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**