Sevenoaks Camera Club

Sevenoaks Camera Club: photographing the renovation of Bat and Ball Station 2018-2019

Introduction

In early 2018 Sevenoaks Town Council ("STC") embarked on the renovation of Bat & Ball Station, the Grade 2 listed original terminus for Sevenoaks, built in 1862. Since 1992 the building had been unstaffed, boarded up, and closed to the public, although train services still used the station.

The building had deteriorated and a Heritage Lottery Fund ("HLF") grant had been awarded to help renovate it and turn it into a useful asset including meeting rooms and café. The renovation project was to provide modern community facilities whilst retaining the structure and rediscovering the character of the old building.

As part of the community involvement commitment, the Council's proposal to the HLF included the idea of enlisting volunteers to photograph the progress of the restoration. Derek Medhurst, one of Sevenoaks Camera Club's members living very close to the Station offered his services and sought more volunteers from the Club. He also joined the "Friends of Bat & Ball Station" to help him keep in touch with the different elements of the project.

Initially nine members put themselves forward: the largest number of volunteers for a single community activity the Club had seen. After initial events, some members were unable to take much part in the photography. Through living closest to Bat & Ball, and being able to spare regular time, two members did the majority of the photography: Derek Medhurst and Roger Lee. But overall there was practical involvement by seven Club volunteers.

Broad approach

Derek agreed with the Council that the Club would try to take photographs every week to build a record of the progress, and to share the pictures as they progressed. The project was planned to take many months and the Council wanted to show the progress online. We set up a Dropbox facility for the sharing.

It was agreed that copyright of the photographs would remain with individual photographers, who would grant STC permission to use them in any way to promote the Station.

An aspect that we considered was whether our volunteer photography would be taking work from local professional photographers, which we certainly did not want to do. However, it was clear from the outset that this was not the case, partly due to the financial implications of paying for so many days work by a professional, and also because the HLF conditions required local community involvement and we were a significant part of that.

How we worked

Derek and Roger first undertook the site's health and safety induction given by the site manager, and then were usually allowed free access to the site after signing in, and wearing the relevant personal

protective equipment. If there was an area that the site manager felt too high risk for us to work in at any time he let us know on our arrival.

We made regular weekly visits to the station, by now a fully-fledged building site with varying numbers of craftsmen at all times (on this project they were all male). The station is not big, and the old adage of "two's company, three's a crowd" was appropriate. More than two photographers at any one time would have got in the way of each other, and hindered the workers. At all times we tried to remember who was doing the real renovation work and who was there getting in the way!

An original aim of the Council - and us - had been to create time-lapse sequences of progress in the main rooms by regularly photographing from the same spot in each room looking in the same direction. We soon realised that this was not going to work as well as we hoped. This was due to the building having to serve as the materials store as well as the subject of the renovation. Rather than simply getting "clean" photographs of progress, clear sightlines from one week would often be disrupted by piles of timber, scaffolding and materials the following week! We carried on taking such pictures, but more as independent records of each week and not as cinematic sequences.

However, we quickly began to see the potential for creative photography on site: unusual angles, interesting details, graphic shapes and colours, and so on. Something that we had not anticipated was picturing most of the "finds" that emerged during the work. Old hinges, locks and door handles – and even vintage cigarette packets and match boxes - may not seem imaginative photographic subjects, but we realised that they were part of the story of the building and so we recorded them. In this way, industrial archaeology photography became another strand to our bows and we tried to adopt some of the proper techniques.

The dedicated craftsmen working on the project were quite content with our presence , indeed they seemed to welcome it, but after three weeks or so they started to ask – albeit ironically - if we had not got enough pictures of the same scenes. We took the trouble to explain in more detail what we were trying to do and they then joined in our efforts by suggesting new subjects for us or keeping small finds aside for us to photograph next time. Most were also happy to be pictured as they went about their work, so we included some portraits in our photography.

The level of collaboration between the people on the project and us as photographers was inspiring and a significant contributor to its success. Part of this will have been due to the pride and care they exhibited in their work. Conversely they also saw the care we took, and interest we had, in recording what they were doing. We communicated openly. We never forgot whose work was the more important. Perhaps there was an element of good luck in the personalities involved, but this would be a benefit from the main contractor's recruitment approaches and the selection of sub-contractors.

Outputs

The renovation was completed after about nine months, during which we had photographed at least once a week. Sevenoaks Town Council regularly updated the station's website with some of our latest photos (www.batandballstation.com).

Thanks to STC we were able to put on an exhibition of a selection of about 60 of our photos at the station over a weekend during the Sevenoaks Summer Festival. To our amazement, the exhibition was visited by over 120 people – some from as far away as Hertfordshire and Sussex. Complementing the

show, we were also invited to give a public talk about our photographic contribution to the project. This was based on an earlier presentation that we had made to Sevenoaks Camera Club which was seen by a member of STC's staff. The talk at Bat & Ball attracted an audience of 54 people.

A third major output was the production of a photobook – *Restoration Station The renaissance of Bat & Ball 2018-2019*. The book is available for purchase from the station café and from Sevenoaks Bookshop as well as form the online publishers – Blurb.

We were delighted to receive some unsolicited feedback about the book that showed we had succeeded in our aims for the book, and so implicitly for our whole approach to the project:

> *"What a wonderful record of renovation and all those who made it possible. I can imagine the community was grateful for your efforts to document the work. Of course you have gone beyond just documenting. You have captured the people and the small moments of beauty. Well done!"*

The Club volunteers' efforts in numbers

- Time invested by volunteers on the project was at least 300 hours. This included photography, travel, photo editing, attending meetings, and co-ordination/communication. This last topic was important for all concerned and did need time.
- If translating that to a 7-hour day and 20-working day month, the volunteers willingly contributed to the B&B project not far short of 8½ working weeks.
- Derek Medhurst took photos on 54 separate occasions. This includes internal and external shots, plus photographing station memorabilia at the council offices. In all there will have been well over 100 volunteer photo visits.
- We shared nearly 1500 photos with the Council.
  - This is a majority of those taken, but not all. We did not cull the pictures severely, and erred in favour of sharing reasonable photos that were not obvious duplicates taken on the same date.

Some of the benefits to the Town Council

- Photos of the progress of the refurbishment for <www.batandballstation.com>.
- Photos of the refurbishment for a looping show at a number of public events.
- Some of the photos will be printed by the Town Council for use as a "hard copy" archive of the renovation work for historical reference by future generations. (Rather than simply relying on digital records.)
- A route via the Camera Club members for communication to local residents about the project.
- One photo was used as the underlying picture of the 2018 Town Mayoral Christmas card, edited by one of the Council employees to give a seasonal appearance.
- Many visitors to the exhibition and the talk were first timers at the Station, and many tried the café for the first time. Thus there was a promotional benefit from the exhibition for STC as well as the benefit to the photographers.

Some of the benefits recorded by the photographers

- Practising photography in low light (very low light sometimes) including improving understanding of flash and/or a camera's capability for such pictures without flash.
  - deciding when one might be preferable to the other.
  - progress was made on ability to balance lighting between a dark interior and bright outdoors visible through a window.
- Most of the photography took place during the winter months and so, when it was able to penetrate the clouds, the sun was at a very low angle. This presented a range of issues and interest in coping with the extreme contrasts of light and shade.
- Considering the visual significance of large-scale versus small-scale construction features in our photos, eg, deciding when to go close and small, and when wider overall shots were appropriate.
- Looking for more "creative" and interesting photographs to supplement what sometimes might appear quite standard "process" pictures of the progress of the construction.
- Photographing details and close-ups on site, plus the memorabilia at the Council offices. Both had been done before, but now needed more structure because of the formal use of the photos.
- After being thrown unexpectedly into the photography of old hinges and locks etc found on site (ie, industrial archaeology artefacts or 'small finds') we researched "proper" ways of doing this.
- Night-time photography of a floodlit building site.
- Photographing public events with significant numbers of attendees.
- Trying to improve the ability to select optimum photos from many similar ones taken around the same time. It is often said that photographers – even professionals - are the worst editors of their own work, so this was valuable practice.
- Broadened knowledge of the station's and area's history, and some of the construction techniques used in the second half of the 19C to build it.

Overall

Perhaps the key photographic lesson for us was that even in a seemingly mundane project of recording construction work there were chances to broaden our vision by looking for creative photographs around the site and taking portraits of the craft workers. The willingness to have open minds expanded the opportunities tremendously into areas that we did not contemplate at the start.

The members who have been most closely involved in this project agree that it has been a valuable and enriching project for them. For them, the commitment to take part in this medium-term project encouraged them to improve photographic skills to deal with real issues they faced at various times, whether technical or aesthetic.

The element of "commissioning" by STC involved in the project made us think carefully about what they and others might wish to see from the project and so to go beyond our own personal interests. Thus as well as (on the face of it) giving the Town Council a good free service, it was also been a great learning and doing experience.