

Let Me Take You There: an audio guide for a field in Calderdale, narrated by Alain Chamois, fanzine writer.

Please make your way to a field in Calderdale, Yorkshire, in the north of England, preferably in winter, and bring a camera if you have one. Avail yourself of stout footwear. Once you arrive in Calderdale go to Hebden Bridge, and make your way to the Hardcastle Craggs National Trust car park. Outside of the car park, and over the bridge, is a toilet building, and to the right of this a steep path marked 'Calderdale Way'. Make your way along this path until you reach a large iron gate marked 'Haworth Old Road'. Lift up the chain that holds the gate and make your way along this path for around 100 metres until you reach the fifth telegraph pole on your left. As you stop on the path turn to your right and you will see a steeply inclined field with a stone wall at the far end, with tall trees behind the wall. Please stay here for the full duration of this guide.

Winter photographs well in this northern field. You will be fortunate if it snows when you visit the area, as snow has a beautiful pristine purity in and of itself, and here it throws up dramatic contrasts between dark and light. It simplifies the landscape: trees and stone walls become writing on a white page. Time freezes in winter, and death is always present, but this condition is also pregnant with future growth: the spring rebirth that hibernates and waits under the frozen land, like the photographed moment seeded within the photograph itself. What follows are some winter reminiscences related to this field.

There was a documentary shown in 1980 by Granada Television, from the arts series *Celebration*, about two northern landscape photographers. Part of the programme documents the photographer Charlie Meecham taking a five-by-four plate camera photograph of the landscape near his home in Hebden Bridge, a few miles south of Top Withens, the landscape inspiration for Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

Charlie says at one point during the programme: 'I am trying to produce an image that is not really about photography at all, it's about... what *atmosphere* I'm trying to pick up on... It doesn't necessarily even have to be good light. I mean that's probably a

terrible day to make that image, it's very dark, shadowy, very bleak. You could have some nice leaves on the trees. I don't know, you could make it look much more cheerful, but that probably wouldn't help the atmosphere of it.'

At the start of the documentary, Charlie and the narrator of the programme, Daniel Meadows, venture out into the snow-covered valley to search for inspiration. Charlie has short dark hair that probably looks darker than it is against the snow and has a small face with small but handsome features. Daniel, who is considerably taller than Charlie, has slightly longer, slightly lighter brown hair and has a longer nose and face. Suddenly Charlie stops in front of a scene, which the TV camera does not show us, and says, 'Yes. Try one.'

He takes off the backpack that carries his plate camera and tripod.

Daniel asks, 'Do you want a hand?'

But a curt 'No', is the simple reply.

Then Daniel says, 'What are you looking at here? What can you see that other people wouldn't see?'

Charlie looks back at the scene, which we also see on camera for the first time, and says, 'There are two things vertical, two vertical elements... and a very strong horizontal. Very pure, very pure...'

Daniel says, 'The trees and the spiky bits of grass are the verticals.'

Charlie continues, half-ignoring Daniel, 'Yes, yes... and also monochromatic, very little colour. In fact what colour there is is going to be lost.'

The location that Charlie was about to photograph is the field, wall and trees straight ahead of you. Charlie's view of it back then was almost black and white, and split into two nearly equal halves. The top half consisted of tall trees behind a low stone wall; the side of a steep hill can be seen through the trees, and part of a grey sky above them. The bottom of the scene was filled only by snow punctuated by vegetation. It makes me think of a fragment of a diary I read once, describing a train journey into exile, through the frozen Russian landscape that defeated Napoleon and Hitler. Leon Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1928, and on the way to his ship in Odessa his train was stopped on a sideline for 12 days:

*...near a dead little station... He relates to his diary...
There it sank into a coma between two thin stretches of*

woods... Our engine keeps rolling backwards and forwards to avoid freezing... we do not know where we are.

Charlie's view of the field you are standing in may have been very similar to the view out of Trotsky's train window during those 12 days. Days in which the whole of history seemed paused. Frozen.

As the documentary continues, we watch Charlie assembling his plate camera and tripod. The TV camera position is at the side of Charlie's camera so we look at right angles to the view being photographed, which remains out of sight. Charlie wears a green khaki boilersuit with lapels, and as the TV camera views his upper body, he resembles a Russian soldier on the frozen steppes.

He turns a screw attaching the camera to the tripod and says, 'This sometimes becomes a little tricky when your hands are really cold. I've tried various techniques, of using mittens and fingerless gloves and suchlike. But it doesn't usually work. Usually I'm back on...' Assembling the back of the camera he forgets to finish the sentence, and then blows hard into the camera body to remove dust.

'What happens if it starts to rain Charlie?' Daniel says.

'I have to work very quickly', he replies, leaning over to the front of the camera; his hands almost affectionately cupped around the whole of its body. He pulls out the lens and adjusts the tripod so that the camera is head high. He sniffs, and as our camera looks at a level gauge on the tripod, he says, 'I try always to get everything dead level, again in an attempt to try and make things as accurate as possible, rather than to distort, which is very easy to do photographically. Fortunately this [camera] has got spirit levels on it so you can do quite a lot of things with it.'

The TV camera pans over the assembled plate camera, and pans out to see Charlie cover himself with a grey blanket and approach the back of his camera.

I saw a gig by the band Rooney that involved a similar blanket. The singer Dermot Bucknall, during a gig in Mytholmroyd, also near Hebden Bridge, draped a blanket over his head during one of their songs. He had a habit at this point, it was around February 1994, of using his alleged talent as a medium on stage. At this particular performance, while the band played on behind him, Dermot knelt on the stage with the blanket over his head and mic, and proceeded to shout out fragments of information. Eventually the information became more focused: Dermot seemed to have become a vessel for

another's voice: 'I am an angel... Clarence, yes, Clarence... I saved Jimmy Stewart from suicide, on that snowy night in Bedford Falls. I specialise in saving suicides... I can see a field in Calderdale and the stone wall is the same, those tall trees have not changed... it is winter there, there is snow all around. Let me take you there...'

He then shouted out even louder than before: 'Let me take you there.' Then Dermot suddenly screamed at the top of his voice some lyrics from the 1984 party hit *Atmosphere*, by the northern comic Russ Abbott:

*Oh what an atmosphere,
I love a party with a happy atmosphere.
So let me take you there,
And you and I'll be dancing in the cool night air.*

The band stopped playing at this point, as if too concerned for the well-being of their singer to concentrate on anything else. The audience, only 40 people at the most, also became silent at Dermot's chilling screams. For a moment, perhaps 30 seconds, the room was utterly still and quiet, I felt as if I was watching a bootleg video of the gig and had pressed the pause button by mistake.

'Oh yes, that's not looking too bad at all.' Charlie says from underneath the blanket, as he looks at the inverted image and adjusts the camera as he does so.

Still underneath the blanket he tries to explain his relationship to the image that we cannot see, and says, 'Now I can't lift the front too far, because you've got quite a long coverage on the vertical side, so I do have to actually bring the camera over a bit, which is a nuisance. But I can bring it forward again, which helps to bring in the foreground as being in focus. Now I've got to go even more... and even that's too high, you can see the lens cutting it out... that's better. Still not sure this is working: bring back forward.' He takes the blanket off and moves away from the camera, retrieving a magnifying glass from his bag. The TV camera then closes in from the side on Charlie looking through the magnifying glass at his framed image.

'Quite a broad exposure range', he says, as he assesses his exposure meter, pointing it at his hand, at the snow, and at the trees in the distance. He then says, 'Because I'm going to have to allow one thing or the other to go. I want to keep the snow white, but keep as much detail as possible.'

There is a poem by Ted Hughes called *Six Young Men*, about another photograph taken in Calderdale. It describes an image of six youths sitting in the landscape near Hebden Bridge, just before the First World War, before they all went to Rochdale, a few miles to the south, and joined the Lancashire Fusiliers. Hughes writes:

*Six months after this picture they were all dead.
All are trimmed for a Sunday jaunt. I know
That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall
Which are there yet and not changed...*

In winter 1979, the same winter that the Granada documentary was filmed, another six young men went to Cargo Studios in Rochdale to record some songs. They were the four members of the band Joy Division as well as their manager Rob Gretton and producer Martin Hannett. One of the songs recorded that winter was called *Ice Age*, a remnant from their punk days, and one a new song, *Atmosphere*. In little more than two years the band had moved on from their punk beginnings to the remarkable achievement of the *Atmosphere* recording. The song has an air of perfection about it, it seems almost unimprovable, and for this reason was described by music journalist Paul Morley as, 'The end of pop.' The writer and record producer Richard Cook wrote of it as: '...in some ways the last Joy Division song... it sounds symmetrical, pristine in detail, entirely finished.'

The singer sings of remorse and dread over the frozen washes of synthesiser chords, produced by Hannett to sound like musical blankets of snow. The singer's voice is all the more unsettling for its coldness; its emotional numbness. The run-off grooves of *Atmosphere*'s eventual 12-inch release read: 'HERE ARE THE YOUNG MEN, BUT WHERE HAVE THEY BEEN.'

Sylvia Plath, in the poem *Tulips* written in the last year of her life, describes lying in numb hospital whiteness:

*The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed in.
... My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch on to my skin, little smiling hooks.*

The husband in the photograph is poet Ted Hughes. A week after Sylvia's suicide, as Britain was in the grip of one of the century's

harshest winters, she was buried in the village where Hughes's parents came from, Heptonstall, a mile from Hebden Bridge. As a final act of faith, the poem she placed last in her last sequence of poems, *Wintering*, a poem about hanging on through the winter, finishes with the word 'spring'. Ted Hughes rearranged the order of the poems for publication after her death, however, removing this final note of optimism.

In the Granada documentary, the camera cuts to a shot of Daniel looking admiringly on; head propped on his fist. Charlie takes a transparency from his bag as we hear the sound of dogs in the distance. He slots the transparency into the camera, checks the camera lens for obstructions, removes the back of the transparency plate and presses the shutter. The TV picture then fades to a shot of the finished photograph, as we hear the sound of distant barking gradually fading.

At that Rooney gig, the silence of the room was eventually broken by Dermot rising from his kneeling position, still covered by the blanket, and walking off the stage, bumping into the drummer's cymbals as he did so. This was followed by whispered chattering from the audience and the usually unnoticed sound of hands caressing guitar necks, squeaking their metal strings, the hum of amplifiers, and the sustained icy shiver of cymbals. The band looked at each other briefly then left the stage, to neither applause nor obvious disapproval.

The Joy Division song *Atmosphere* ends with a crystal ring of chimes, like the aural equivalent of frosted branches suddenly shifted by a gust of wind. Richard Cook wrote: 'The tremble in the closing chords brings a shiver as one recalls the sleeve of the reissued 12-inch: a snow scene, empty, virginally white.' Six months after recording the song in that wintry Pennine studio, the singer, Ian Curtis, was dead. The photograph referred to by Cook, on the cover of the *Atmosphere* 12-inch released in September 1980, four months after Curtis's suicide, is Charlie's photograph: the taking of which is documented in the Granada programme, the subject of which is straight ahead of you. The photograph, which is placed in the centre of the record cover on a white ground, is almost black and white, and split into two nearly equal halves. The top half consists of tall trees behind a low stone wall, the side of a steep hill can be seen through the trees, and part of a grey sky above them. The bottom of the image

is filled only by the writing of vegetation on the blank page of the snow.

Thank you for coming to this field and listening to this guide. Please take a photograph of the field before you go, and have a safe journey home.