

Photography by Jem Southam

Saturday 15 September – Sunday 4 November

Rivers and Streams

This is the first photography exhibition to be held at Riverside Mill and we are very pleased to be showing the work of Jem Southam, a photographer who lives and works locally and exhibits his work internationally. The pictures on show are from a series that Jem has been working on for four years. This is the first showing of the work.

On a summer day in 1827 the first landscape photograph was taken. It wasn't the first ever photograph -- that had been made in 1822 using a non-lens, contact-print of an engraving -- but it was the first photograph from nature. The word 'photography' didn't exist in 1827; Joseph Nicéphore Niépce had made a heliograph or 'sun print'.

Niépce made his image by placing an engraving onto a bitumen-coated metal plate and then exposing it to light. The shadowy parts of the engraving blocked light while the lighter areas reacted with the coating on the plate. When the plate was put into solvent, the image gradually appeared. It took eight hours of exposure to light to create the image and then it gradually faded away.

In 1829 Niépce and Louis Daguerre entered into a partnership to improve Niépce's method. It took another 12 years to reduce the exposure time to less than 30 minutes and 'fix' the image so it didn't fade away. Within that time Niépce died but Daguerre continued his experiments. He used sheets of polished, silver-plated copper coated with iodine to create a light-sensitive plate. The plate went into a camera where it was exposed for a few minutes. The image was 'fixed' with a solution of silver chloride to make a lasting, permanent image. Daguerre unblushingly named his invention a daguerreotype.



This is an 1841 Voigtlander daguerreotype camera. By 1850 there were over 70 daguerreotype studios in New York City.

The next leap in technology was the negative-to-positive process developed by Henry Fox Talbot. Talbot used a silver salt solution to make light-sensitive paper. When the paper was exposed to light, the background darkened while the subject was rendered in shades of grey. From this paper negative, Talbot could make contact prints which reversed the light and dark to make a detailed picture. When he perfected the paper negative process, Talbot called it a calotype - Greek for beautiful picture.

The word 'photography' comes from the Greek word for light, *photos*, and *graphein*, to draw. Drawing with light describes the process of recording images through the action of light, or related radiation, imposed on a sensitive material. The term 'photography' was first used by the scientist John Herschel in 1839.

After the calotype, the 'wet plate' negative was the next significant development. This was a glass plate coated with silver salts, a stable process but still not ideal as the negative had to be developed before the emulsion coating dried. Wet plate 'field' photography necessitated a portable darkroom, a cumbersome process.

This gave way to the 'dry plate' negative (1879), a process that allowed negatives to be stored, and finally made the hand-held camera possible as dry plates absorb light much more effectively.

In 1891, film made of cellulose nitrate, unbreakable, flexible and able to be rolled, was invented by George Eastman. Rolled film enabled the relatively cheap box camera to become a reality.



This Kodak No 1 camera was Kodak's second camera. The first was just known as 'Kodak'. The No 1 was produced from 1889 – 1995. After exposure, the film was wound to the next frame using the key.

The Thornton Pickard Ruby camera 1899 – 1904, was a compact, folding field camera. The front door became the base and tripod legs could be fastened to the built-in turntable.



This Minox camera, manufactured from 1937 – 1943, was originally sold as a luxury item, marketed as 'an elegant companion, like a fine watch, for sophisticated ladies and gentlemen to carry and use to record the events of their daily lives'.

And finally, on the 'history' front, the Instamatic camera; this one dates from 1969. These cameras were cheap, quick to load, had a flashcube socket and an automatic exposure setting. Anyone, and everyone, could take pictures with an instamatic.



As we all know, the next big leap forward in recording images is the advent of digital photography, a technology which Wikipedia describes as ‘a form of photography that uses an array of electronic photodetectors to capture the image focused by the lens’ (as opposed to an exposure on photographic film). The captured image is then stored as a computer file which can be processed, immediately viewed, digitally published or printed. To the newly initiated, the concept of making an image with electronic photodetectors is no less magical than a glass plate coated with silver salts. Both processes are still, as Herschel defined and named it, photography or *painting with light*.



Jem Southam describes the photography equipment he uses as ‘arcane’; it has modern components but resembles Victorian cameras. When he sets off to take photographs he carries 20 – 30 kgs of equipment. The reason for this is that the seemingly old-fashioned, ‘slow’ kit allows him to make much more considered decisions. A day’s work may result in only two or three exposures.

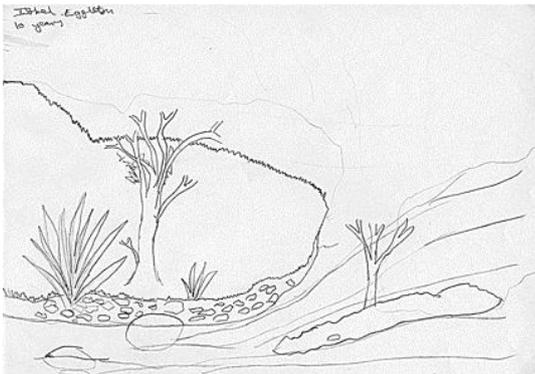
Jem’s career as a photographer started when he was 15. He found photography more exciting than maths and when he became a full-time photography student, in London in the late 1960s and early 70s, he always knew that he wanted to photograph landscapes. His critical approach to the importance of landscapes and what they mean to us is the central consideration of his work.

The Painter’s Pool, a series of photographs taken in 2006 in Stoke Woods, just north of Exeter, documents photographically what Southam describes as the ‘complex visual and spatial fields perceived by immersion in this dense woodland’. Taking the photographs for *Rivers and Streams* involves a similar working procedure. Multiple visits to the same location to observe the influence of human activity in conjunction with natural events; the photographs, or ‘views’ describe the nature and story of the place.

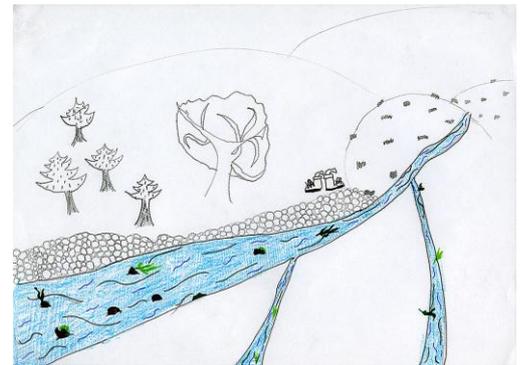
All the photographs in *Rivers and Streams* have been printed especially for this exhibition, the River Exe pictures are taken with a large box camera with a lens at one end and a viewing screen at the other. The size of the negatives allows the photographer to realise large format, highly detailed, ink-jet prints. The smaller pictures of the Dartmoor streams are made with a hand-held camera which allows Jem to get close to the water. The large photographs are printed onto cotton Photo Rag paper which has a fine smooth surface and a depth suitable for fine detail.

The initial inspiration for *Rivers and Streams* came about through Jem Southam's interest in the development of children's drawings of a river. The increasing sophistication of the drawings as the children got older set Jem thinking about rivers, not only in terms of physical and geographical characteristics but of their significance to human and natural life.

There is also a political edge to Jem's relationship with rivers; the photographs are taken in locations where there is public access but large stretches of English and Welsh rivers are in private ownership and there is no public right of access¹. There are 2,820 miles of inland river and canal in England and Wales with navigation rights and there are 40,400 miles of inland rivers with no access rights. Although the *water* is not legally owned, the owner of the land at the river's edge owns the property rights to the river bed. Anyone on the water without permission from the landowner is officially trespassing.²



The drawing on the left is by a 10-year old and the one on the right by an 11-year old.



All Jem's work over the past five years has been about addressing this question – *What is a river?* And since he'd already got well acquainted with Red River, a small tinning stream in Cornwall, a larger river very close to his home was an obvious choice for further investigation.

The River Exe takes its name from the Celtic word for water, *isca*³. The Exe rises on Exmoor in Somerset and flows fairly directly due south so that most of its length is in Devon. It reaches the sea as a wide estuary at Exmouth, the town of Exmouth on the east side and the long sand spit of Dawlish Warren extending across the mouth. Jem's home is close to this river and as he is a photographer who prefers to work close to home, the Exe was a natural choice. Over the last four years, his repeated visits to the same sections of the river and its tributaries have produced several hundred pictures. The pictures chosen for this exhibition show us, in piercing and explicit detail, how much there is to be seen, if you really look, in this remarkable watery environment.

P. de Burlet for Devon Guild of Craftsmen, September 2012 ©

¹ Scotland is different. In 2003, the Scottish Parliament passed the Land Reform (Scotland) Act which grants access for both land and inland waterways to the public.

² The Rivers Access campaign estimates that only 2% of English and Welsh rivers have public access rights. www.riversaccess.org

³ A common theory is that the Romans adopted the old British word for water, *isca*, and used it to describe a river.