

## **Dorchester Camera Club**

### **History of the Club by Keith Hooper**

#### **Introduction**

The currently available club records date from the Annual General Meeting held in April 1984. A record of the minutes was kept prior to that date but sadly it has been lost. Until sometime in the 1960's no records were kept at all.

I joined the Club in December 1949 as a junior and became secretary in about 1953 and remained in the position for 7 or 8 years. I then left the Club as I had insufficient time available but joined again in 1988 after a short interlude with other clubs.

#### **The Early Years**

The club was founded in about 1936 by a group of local enthusiasts headed by a much respected surgeon, Dr. Russell Stevens. At the time he lived in West Walks House and he kindly allowed the club to use his dark room which was in the stables. These have now been converted into living accommodation.

Subsequently the club met in premises somewhere in High East Street, possibly in one of the shops below the former Channon's Garage, now a wine shop. This shop was owned by a professional photographer, Bill Ferguson Stewart, whose name is on one of the currently awarded trophies. He was a former tramp steamer captain and had many tales to tell of his exploits trading up and down the south-west coast of Africa. His wife was a very expert negative re-toucher who did work for many other portrait photographers in the area. The names inscribed on the Ferguson Stewart Memorial Cup (Penrhyn Trophy) bring back many memories of older members.

The Club was then given exclusive use of premises in Trinity Street where it remained for a number of years. This was a two storey wooden building located approximately where the Gents Barbers shop now stands.

It was then in the back garden of one of the South Street premises owned by another founder member, W.C.L. (Len) Parsons. In these premises there was a large meeting room on the upper floor and darkrooms were established in the basement. It was a very sad loss when the owner decided to reclaim the site for development.

After that the Club moved to the Wessex Hotel (not Royale in those days) for about one season, and then to a large room above Bugler's Bakery in South Street. Bugler's Bakery was located next but one to the North of the Post Office building. Between it and the Post Office was Tilley's Garage, an exclusively Austin dealership, whose premises extended right back to Trinity Street where the charity shop now exists. Buglers may have taken over the South Street frontage premises of the garage when they moved out.

#### **Founder Members and other Early Members**

Sadly none of the founder members are still with us and there is no record of exactly who they were other than in my fading memory. Russell Stevens, already mentioned, in addition to being a photographer in his spare time was an expert amateur radio ham. He used to build his own equipment and had friends in many parts of the world. He was also one of the few people who elected to "stay behind" in the event of a German invasion in 1940 and operate a clandestine radio network to the Allies. Several of the long thatched barns in the in

the area had long line aerials installed in the roof space, often without the owners knowledge, in preparation for such an event.

Len Parsons was a highly respected local business man, as was Ron Meyers who had a builders merchant business. Leslie Frisby and Bill Ferguson Stewart were both professional photographers. Henry Longman owned a printing works (now Friary Press). Hastings Middleton was a local land owner. Fred Dericutt was an agricultural salesman in the now extinct firm of James Foot Ltd.

There were two Mitchell brothers who had a shoe repair business, and Fred Guppy, a tax collector. When I joined the Club in 1949 there were other members but I am not sure they were founder members. Jack Hosking, tax inspector, who introduced me to the Club; Phil Pretty, a dentist: a veterinary surgeon whose name I cannot remember: Ken Whalley, a printing worker; and Ken Scott-Kilner, a retired member of the Kilner Jar empire.

W.F.Hurd was the Police photographer of the day and I remember him taking the Club into the Dorchester Police darkrooms. He was only just over 5 feet tall and had consequently served in the RAF as rear-gunner in a Lancaster bomber, hence many tales.

Jean Alexander was the daughter of the Min. of Agriculture chief veterinary officer and took excellent photos of aeroplanes. She was also a trophy winning golfer. They lived in a house almost next door to Sid's home in Maiden Castle Road.

### **A New Member**

I still remember my first meeting when I turned up and proudly presented my new 35mm camera which I bought with money given by a kind neighbouring farmer who had obviously just won a bet and was happy to give the proceeds to me as a birthday present. The senior members all looked over their glasses and said "What on earth is that?" They were mostly using quarter-plate cameras; some were using 2¼ sq. roll film instruments, but nothing smaller.

I was therefore the first member to use a 35mm camera, an Ilford Advocate, with a fixed 35mm Dalmeyer lens, which I still have. It is very battered and no longer in working order.

### **Running the Club**

Fairly soon after I became a member a young and enthusiastic chemist moved into the town from Clitheroe in Lancashire, John Tinegate. He joined the Club immediately and it was not long before running the Club was left to the two of us!

Difficulty in finding volunteers to run a club is nothing new! He appointed himself Chairman, with me as the Secretary and the two of us as the Committee. It was then quite an easy task compared with today. We met fortnightly, alternating competition evenings with either lecture or practical evenings. Obtaining a lecturer was no problem as all the major manufacturers ran a team of experts who were only too pleased to come. Kodak, Ilford, and Johnsons particularly seemed to vie with each-other to engage the leading names in photography at the time. Johnsons had Lancelot Vining of the Daily Express. Ilford had Karl Pollak, a famous portraitist who we managed to get for an evening.

I stuck to my 35 mm cameras in spite of the opposition and it was not long before I purchased a second-hand Leica from an army officer who had obviously acquired it while defending the country, and happily I was joined by another Leica enthusiast who had bought

his outfit new. Ken Kilner, mentioned above, joined the miniaturists with a couple of Swiss Alpa reflexes which were the most expensive cameras on the market at the time.

### **Competitions**

The competitions were much the same as at present. The judges made exactly the same ridiculous comments. The only difference was that we did not go as far afield to get them. Generally speaking we knew them all so some members would not even enter a competition if the judge had not been named in advance! There were no colour prints, the process had not been invented by then.

Most members produced "whole plate" prints, 6½ x 8½ inches (strangely "half plate" was not half the size, it was 6½ x 4¾), but some of the top members came in with 16 x 12 prints. Wonderful prints they were too, I wonder what has happened to them all, they are probably rotting in the cellars of the County Museum!

### **The Arrival of Colour**

Colour slides became available slowly but it was some time before enough members lowered themselves into buying the dreaded 35mm cameras to make it worth holding competitions. There was only Kodachrome with a speed of 8 Weston (I think that was 12 ASA or ISO as it is now called). Agfa had a film but it was terrible. The fun film was Dufay Colour. This was a B & W film with a tri-colour dot matrix screen attached to the emulsion. It produced surprisingly good colour but the snag was that if you were not careful developing it you ended up with a length of celluloid in one hand and a length of emulsion in the other! The film had to be fogged with a lamp and re-developed. There were no transparent spirals then so the wet film had to be removed from the spiral, fogged and then returned to the spiral. Ever tried loading wet film into a sticky spiral?

### **Club Decline and Revival**

Through the 1960's support for the club declined considerably and there were only a handful of stalwarts left to keep it going but fortunately it survived until the present senior members arrived and their enthusiasm has resulted in the successful Club which we have to-day.

### **Big Changes**

We have seen many changes over the years. Firstly the improvement of the film stock which allowed members to drift into the use of 35mm. cameras and say good bye to the quarter-plate monsters.

The next was colour slide film again improved sufficiently to enable it to be used in 35mm cameras. It may not be generally known, but part of the very first Kodachrome film, a 120 film, was kept for many years in a house in Weymouth. Sadly the owner is no longer with us and I have no idea what happened to it.

There were several makes of colour film, but it was Kodachrome that most members went for and became the standard by which all competition entries were judged. It became sufficiently good and easy to produce that black and white photography began to take second place. This pulled the club out of the doldrums and slowly the membership began to rise again.

Nothing can dwarf the change brought about by the introduction of digital photography. When it first arrived anyone who used it was accused of cheating but now it is almost universally accepted. To produce the best pictures I am not certain that the degree of skill

involved is any less than it was with the old chemical methods, but it is much cleaner and more predictable. Its popularity has increased the general interest in photography more than the invention of photography itself. From the Club's point of view it has meant that many more people are keen to learn how to manipulate their work to the best advantage and consequently the membership has increased by leaps and bounds.

### **Nothing has changed really ...**

So much for the changes, what remains of the old Club? In 60 years the judging has changed very little! The judges' comments? Just listen today! The best part of the Club though is as strong as ever, the friendship, the spirit and the desire to succeed. Long may it continue.

### **What next?**

What is the next revolution? It is difficult to imagine, but whatever form it takes it is unlikely that anything will surpass the thrill and excitement of pulling a successful print out of the washing tray and finding it to be as good as or better than one hoped in the first-place.

### **Keith Hooper**

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