

## LEIGH CAMERA CLUB HISTORY

Leigh Camera Club was formed in the year 1929. Our history will cover events from 1945 to 1990.

Extracts from John West's A History of Leigh Camera Club. Covering some of the events down the years.

### THE EARLY DAYS

The 20<sup>th</sup> August 1945 is the first evidence of the renewal of its activities after the war years. A security ban on taking photos anywhere in the country has been lifted in June 1945. Mr Kind had been President of the club in the pre-war years and printed syllabuses of that time show that there was a committee of four officers. There was a modest programme of events at fortnightly intervals. During the war Mr Kind had died and former secretary, Mr E W Guildersleeves, and a Mr Johnson called a meeting with a view of reviving the club. Seventeen people attended this August 20<sup>th</sup> meeting and the club was once more on its way. Notes dated September 6<sup>th</sup> 1945 'a motley assortment of camera- Leicas, Retinass, Rolleiflex, Plate reflexes- were produced at the first meeting which was devoted to reminding members of 'What your camera can do'

In the early days a club was judged by its portfolio. This was a collection of its best prints that circulated round various photographic clubs. Each club added comments and critiques on the individual entries. This was a slow process and of interest to the contributors only. The records show only one identifiable outside speaker at this time, although the club was rich in expertise even then. The club was living through the post-war period of austerity in which the country was struggling to adapt to its production of peacetime needs. Luxuries like film and equipment were in very short supply. Photographers combed the classified ads in the 'Amateur Photographer' looking for off cuts of 35mm film that might be for sale. Times were tough and this probably led to the new born club's difficulties. From the sketchy minutes of 1949 there was talk of joining forces with the Benfleet Urban District Arts and Craft Council, later there was a move to combine with Hadleigh Camera Club but this not happen.

*For many years this was all that could be ascertained from the club's records of those early days. Then in 1979 a Mr Bernard Seaward re-joined the club, just after the information above had been serialised in the club magazine 'Stop Press'. He was probably the earliest living member of the club, having originally joined at the age, he thought of 13 in 1933. He gave an insight into those very early days of the club, when its half dozen members hired a front room of one of the tiny houses in the Leighville Grove, only a couple of streets away from our present location in Elm Road. He recalled many photographic expeditions and picnics in the countryside and a visit to a house of a lady to see a lantern slide show. He was impressed by the projector, which glowed red-hot and had a little cowed chimney on the top to allow the fumes to escape.*

## THE FIFTIES

The first two years of the new decade the club was pulled from the brink of closing down by the able chairmanship of Mr R C Golding and Mr Fred Clark. Within two more years it was to become a thriving body with a full and exciting programme with a healthy bank balance. This amazing transformation was due to one man, Hubert cave Thompson. Universally known as Tommy he joined the club in 1951 with a membership of only 25 and an average of 15 attending meetings. The club was a vicious circle, without an increase in members it could not mount an attractive programme, without an attractive programme it could not increase the members. To progress the club needed to obtain outside knowledge from sponsored lectures such as Kodak and Ilford, but this required a minimum membership of 40. Tommy set about the task of increasing membership. Tommy being Tommy, he went ahead and booked an Ilford Lecture for the next season with the promise that he would fulfil all the conditions required. The next season duly opened and the members had done their stuff and the season was a great success. Tommy woke up in 1954 to find himself chairman and Mr Jim Rogers as Honorary Secretary. The next ruse Tommy used was to insert a notice in the local paper's announcing that, due to the overwhelming number of requests for membership that year Leigh on Sea Camera Club would have to limit its entry to just one hundred. The public were advised to make early application to join. It was no use enticing members to the club if there was nothing to keep them there. Here Tommy played his masterstroke. Capitalising on his love of portraiture, he organised a series of studio nights, presented mostly by himself but also by experts like Philip Gotlob, nationally famous for his 'pin up' photos. The models were of course mainly pretty girls. These studio nights proved extremely popular and was typical of Tommy that he shrewdly programmed these nights early in the season and made admission dependant on a membership card, thus ensuring that waverers had to make up their minds and that sums were quickly gathered. Studio nights soon developed into his famous 'Glamour Nights' often held in a studio above his premises at Pavilion Motors. The first was held at Elm Road Community Centre in 1956. A glimpse of what this first evening must have been like is revealed by this extract from 'Viewfinder', the clubs bulletin: Beauty on the Beach. Pheew! One of Tommy's special nights. Glamour oozing all over the place. Red-hot shutters. Everyone happy except a man who said he would have preferred to have the boat that Tommy had lugged into the hall, upstairs. Tommy had not only the boat, but a bathing hut, and a large painted backdrop scrounged from the swimming pool, sand and lobster pots, the lot, 86 attended. In 1952 the club had presented two outside speakers. In 1956 the figure was eleven. The membership could at last attract lecturers of the calibre of RH Mason, editor of the Amateur Photographer, at the time the outstanding photographic magazine. Tommy made no secret of the fact that in 1952 he joined the prestigious London Camera Club principally to contact such personalities with a view to inviting to Leigh. One such person was Major Mike Davis, a well known theatrical photographer. He had married the Baroness Anne von Granvenitz and Tommy invited her to present the prizes at he club's 26<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition. Jim Rogers, then secretary, discovered that this gallant lady had suffered at the hands of the Gestapo for her part in helping prisoners of war to escape this sensational story skilfully exploited by Jim in the local press, resulted in a coach load of visitors from London arriving on the night to swell the audience in the hall to no fewer than four hundred. Another guest was the Marquis of Ely, then president of the Royal Photographic Society and an authority on colour and stereo photography. He presented the prizes at the annual

exhibition of 1956. By the end of the decade membership was 140 and the attendance at meetings usually was in the 60s or 70s. In 1959, as in the year before, the Annual Exhibition was patronised by no fewer than a thousand people. The Fifties had been a runaway success but the best was yet to come.

## THE SIXTIES

In November 1962 Southend was twinned with Calais and Leigh Camera Club made its contribution to European unity by arranging a slide battle with the Foto Club de Calais. Another event in which the club played a prominent part was the Southend Show, both in 1959 and 1960. This embraced everything from bee keeping to weaving and housed a pavilion of photography, largely organised by Leigh with the help of Hadleigh Photographic Club, the Shell Club and the Southend Photographic Society. It presented a continual slide show, exhibitions of prints and three days of demonstrations, performed principally by Tommy. Another of his contributions was a series of aerial photos of the town forming a 40 long frieze. All these events added to the club's reputation and, more surprisingly, membership. In 1963 it was chosen as the venue for the premiere of the first Kodak Colour Show. This was attended by 400 people and 100 had to be turned away. In that year our membership rose to its highest point so far: 250. Small wonder the club could draw a galaxy of photographic selections: James Jarcho, Karl Pollack, Houston Rogers and names retaining their fame today, Kevin McDonnell, Ron Spillman and Jorge Lewinski. At the 1963 Annual General Meeting Tommy announced that he did not intend to stand again as Chairman. A 'bombshell' the local press called it and feared the collapse of the club, as Tommy was the driving force within the club. A new Chairman, Wilf Goodwin, was then elected and, to the relief of all, a new position was found for Tommy, that of ~President. Wilf Goodwin was perhaps the leading figure in the club in the last half of the Sixties and into the Seventies. He had made a study of black and white technique and his precepts in this field were to influence many of the club's then new photographers, like Peter Millard and David Davenport who were to win their laurels, first in club competitions, and then go on to make their mark outside. It is interesting to compare the syllabuses of the Fifties with those of the Sixties and see the sweeping changes that have overtaken photography, which had the committee constantly drafting the competition rules during this period. Stereo photography was fast waning and by 1974 there would be the problem of what to do with the Marquis of Ely's bowl for this category. The medium format negative was ceasing to be a serious contender to 35mm. Cine had gradually come to be seen as a separate discipline. Although colour printing had been demonstrated at the club as early as 1955, the first slide and then colour prints began to threaten the supremacy of black and white. In 1969 the Print of the Year was joined by the Slide of the year. More significantly the old sponsors of photography, such as Kodak, Ilford and Agfa were being joined or supplanted by names from the Far East, such as Pentax, Minolta and Nikon. A sea of change was taking place in photography that in Seventies was to become an irresistible tide.

## THE SEVENTIES

The difficulties were financial and were to come to a head in middle of the decade but the good times were due to the interest in photography among the general public this was mainly the results of the advance of electronics which began in the Sixties. The coming of cheap automatic cameras put an end to the public's perception that only experts could achieve good pictures. Electronics also gave photography increased appeal to the technically minded. Another beneficiary of Electronics was the slide show which with its aid, was to become almost another art form, the audio-visual or AV show. These were a far cry from our 'Lantern Talks in 1955 audio visual, starting with the Synchro-slide Show of 1972 using manually controlled slides changes, must surely have culminated in 1982 with the computer controlled 'Spectacular using no less than 8 projectors. Yet despite the dedication of members, the seventies were worrying times for the club. In 1974 the minutes begin to record evenings lost through fuel cuts and rail strikes. This was the period of the three-day week and more seriously for the club, of rapidly rising inflation. By the middle of the decade rising costs began to cause worries about the viability of the club. In 1970 the membership was 140 but had been declining ever since. The committee was only too aware that around us were rival clubs, born in late Sixties and Seventies, Canvey, Wickford, Basildon, Billericay, Benfleet and Rayleigh all within easy motoring distance and eager to absorb our membership. No one could know that membership decline would bottom out in 1976 at 106. By 1975 the subscription had doubled. Another shock came when the Borough Council was absorbed into Essex County Council. Everyone expected a substantial rise in the hiring fee for the Community Centre where we were housed but no one was prepared for the increase of 25% that materialised. It was then that Tommy, noting the favourable terms given to Adult Education classes had an idea. He arranged a meeting at the Civic Centre where, using all his considerable powers of persuasion; he convinced county officials that many of the club's evenings were infact educational. Reluctantly discount was given for these meetings – as it still is – and our hiring was reduced. Leigh had weathered this storm.

## THE EIGHTIES

Throughout the Eighties the club continues to evolve, a significant development was the institution by John Dakin LRPS of the Challenge Trophy, still going to date. John noted for his photographic creativity, wanted to give an opportunity for members to break out of conventional moulds of competition categories such as landscape, natural history, etc. His object in framing the rules of the Challenge Trophy was to make contestants go out and look for pictures instead of merely looking through their existing stock of negatives and slides. Also John was the instigator of the Beginners Workshop, which again was a break from traditions of the club, by inviting groups of new members to his house and giving varied instructions on all forms of photography. The Eighties found the club continuing to hold its own with around 120 members, with a strong committee of Linda Hurst, Peter Millard, Alan Waters and Alf Sclater. Sadly Tommy, Alan and Alf are no longer with us but would have been pleased with new members coming through onto the committee and steering the club through the Nineties into the twenty- first century.

To be continued.....