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Deutsche Borse Photography Prize: John Davies



Bowling Greens, Stockport, 1988

By Drusilla Beyfus

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In the second of a four-week series on the artists shortlisted for the prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008, Drusilla Beyfus looks at the nominated work of the British artist John Davies

Many are the photographers attracted to depicting the natural beauties of Britain and its picture-perfect sites and scenes. Few, however, are drawn to John Davies's favoured subject matter: Britain's industrial and post-industrial landscape. Master of the atmospheric topographical study, his black-and-white pictures seem to invite the viewer to speculate on what went before, and what might come after.

A characteristic shot is Bowling Greens, Stockport, 1988. Davies sets great store by the captions that accompany his photography. This one reads, in part, 'Heaton Norris Park,

opened in 1875, was financed by public subscription and by a gift from Lord Egerton. As with many other public parks established in Victorian Britain, its creation was in response to the poor living conditions of industrial workers.'

Davies points out that the park's crown bowling greens continue to hold regular bowling competitions and that apart from the houses having a fresh coat of paint, not much has changed in the picture since it was shot. What has altered is a factor not visible. 'People are much more concerned about security these days, and I might not be given access to a private location as I was for this shot.'

'I try to look for the best view to show features in context, and aim to get the maximum detail from my photographs,' he says. The scene was taken on a clear day, from a position on a high tower block overlooking the prospect. The green park, its borders tidily framed in the manageable trees associated with municipal planting, is almost marooned in a sea of domestic dwellings that stretch as far as the eye can see.

In focus in the foreground are the diminutive figures of the bowls players, but the viewpoint reaches to the far horizon where one can glimpse a tooth-like frieze of high-rise buildings and industrial constructions, as well as the thrust of an occasional church spire. 'In composing the frame I like to find interesting aspects round the edges,' he says.

The photograph, which was shown in Davies's *The British Landscape 1979-2006* exhibition at the National Media Museum, Bradford, in 2007, is part of a series that has won him a Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2008 nomination.

'I am careful with my photographic technique, process all my own films, do my own printing. I enjoy doing these things.' He is attracted to the flexibility of black-and-white film and occasionally uses digital colour, but not a digital camera. 'To get the quality I need would mean mortgaging my house,' he jokes.

Davies has something of an archaeologist's eye, but his pictures suggest he is a humanist and take account of the impact of the environment on the people in the pictures. His widely reproduced signature shot, *Agecroft Power Station, Salford*, which was taken in 1983, is partly about manmade scale and the human figure. Under four towering chimneys in a sprawling industrial landscape, a football pitch is improbably sited, the players reduced to mere specks.

Other panoramic views in the collection also capture the dense layers of experience in Britain's history of building. His picture of Stockport's viaduct, built in 1839, which still carries the Manchester-London main railway line, shows a calm River Mersey beneath its arches. Reflected in the water are hugely disparate styles of building, such as the columns of the viaduct, the linear architecture of a modern block and the shadows of the converted warehouses on either side of its banks.

Davies's work is especially appreciated in France and Italy, more so than here in the past. European galleries and museums commission new work. 'I use my research on industrial and post-industrial sites in Britain and apply what I have learnt.'

Born in 1949 in Sedgefield, County Durham, he is a scion of the North. He lives in Liverpool, studied at Nottingham's Trent Polytechnic, and much of his work has been inspired by the management (and mismanagement) of what has happened on his home ground.