

Repatriated Landscapes – by Martin J Richards

Introduction

Prior to my undertaking the formal study of Photography I served in the Royal Air Force (RAF) followed by being employed in the defence sector working on airborne surveillance systems. My initial work was on Sonar, Radar, Video and Line Scan Images and then Mapping and Imaging Software, working on turn on the following systems and as shown in Figure 1:



Figure 1 - British Military Surveillance Aircraft I have worked on as a Software and Systems Engineer

I retired early though injures I received whilst serving in the RAF and in 2010 I started the serious study of photography specialising in Landscape and Environmental Photography. Given my intertwining background it was somewhat inevitable that my eye was drawn to an image and article within my local newspaper.

The Leicester Mercury ran a story saying that planning permission had been granted to build houses on the site of a former PoW Camp. This site was located on Beeby Road, Scraftoft, with the original image shown in Figure 2

I was totally unaware of this hidden in plane site aspect of my local landscape. Nothing of the site can be observed from the road, other than the remains of a rather small brick structure.



Figure 2 – Google Maps Image Field on Beeby Road Scraftoft as run by Leicester Mercury Nov 18

Prisoner of War Camp 4 Scraptoft Leicestershire

I visited this site in October 2018 and learned that it was Prisoner of War Camp Number 4 Scraptoft and was designed to hold over 2,000 internees along with a substation guard force.

My visits and site walks were a revelation in that throughout the site, at ground level there were multiple sets of brick foundations along with various piles of demolition rubble. The site of so many sets of foundations in what a quite empty field in Leicestershire is was a contemplative moment. I found I was trying to reconstruct within my imagination what the site must have looked like, and what it may have been like to have been held there.

As a photographer I endeavoured to photograph the scene before me to capture what I felt in looking at the decaying foundations and what had been, in an attempt to communicate to others the lonely desperate views of this former site of imprisonment; - I failed.



Figure 3 - Foundations in an Empty Field

I had previously undertaken similar projects of various former military sites in the UK. These included several sites captured by Marc Wilson in his Last Stand and Wounded Landscape Projects and as also included in works such as WWII Abandoned Places by Michael Kerrigan. The images shot by Wilson and Kerrigan and even my own previous work had merit.

However, this site was quite different from other such sites nothing remaining above ground level. This is obviously NOT a military site in the conventional sense. There are no great defensive structures, no pill boxes etc.. nothing but lines in the ground that carry no content, and have no Punctum as defined by Roland Barthes within Camera Lucida. Within Image Music Text, Barthes' points to the Photographic Paradox and asks what does the photograph transmit? Barthes goes on to state that from the Object to the image that there is a reduction. My initial work reduced to zero.

Research

The internet has had a profound change on how research is carried out. Specifically, in my own quest to locate PoW Camps, I rapidly located a 2003 report issue by English Heritage - Prisoner of War Camps (1939-1948) by Rodger Thomas. This Report and online information from the Scottish and Welsh equivalents (Canmore and Coflein) to English Heritage formed the core foundations of my research.

I was able to consolidate the information into a large document of my own that would eventually form my research notes. Initially my intend had been simply to visit the various sites identified and bring the English Heritage report up to date. Again, using simple online tools such as Google Earth in Figure 4, I was able to look in detail at the various locations reported to validate the information prior to my planning any site visits.



Figure 4 - PoW Camp 74 Racecourse Viewed Using Google Earth Modern v 1945

In undertaking the work I discovered that the UK National Archives in Kew itself a former PoW site held original material on the former Camps, in the form of Reports, Diaries, Letters and other data as such I made repeated trips to the archives, copying various documents. This research built up a picture of to the conditions and history of the UK WWII PoW System.

- The last PoWs repatriated in 1948.
- Most of the camps where originally built for Allied Forces
- Through research I have identified several thousand. Thus far. Of these I have visited 250 sites, publishing on a website image of just 200.
- Many camps are difficult to discover having an address but no location.
- The camps were built utilising PreFab and standardised buildings creating identical “Logo Kit” sites though the UK.
- The PoWs held within the UK were well treated but suffered low moral owing to the length of detention past the end of WWII.
- Many camps on closure were repatriated to the original owners having been stripped of fixtures, fitting, and most prefab buildings. This left behind but few of the larger buildings, the land. The scars in the landscape, remaining buildings and fading local memory was often all that was left of ten years of human suffering.



Figure 5 - Former PoW Camp 144 Ruskin Avenue - Now THE UK National Archive



Figure 6 - WWII PoW Sites In The UK Identified as of July 2020

Aerial Photography, Surveillance and Drones

It was WWI that saw the true development of airborne surveillance and mapping via photography. My own work in the military and the techniques used in capturing and combining multiple images and merging to form maps and layers of information is still used today.

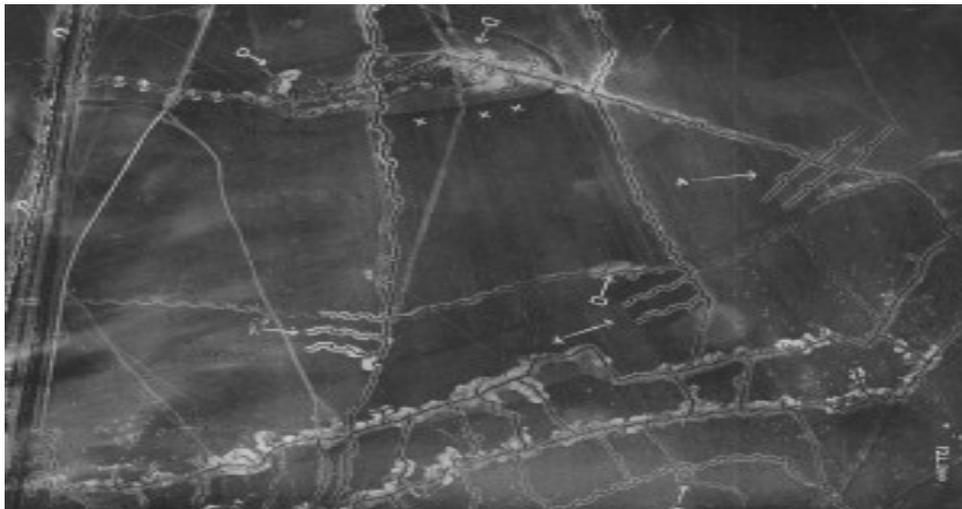


Figure 7 - Example WWI Area Surveillance Photo and Analysis

The usage of such photography carried over to the civilian world with organisations such as Ordnance Survey making usage of images in the production of maps. However, it was not until February 2005 when Google Maps was introduced that the public started to become familiar with Aerial Images as tools.

Today google "Satellite" images form a mosaic image set of the planet in varying degrees of resolution.

The realisation of the power and utility of airborne images and my own background and seeking a way to capture that Punctum and explore not just Camp 4, but others had an inevitable outcome – I purchased a drone; a DJI Mavic Pro 2.

The increased sophistication of drone technology along with the introduction of better cameras has led to an inevitable explosion in the use of these tools within; Technical, Creative and Hobby.

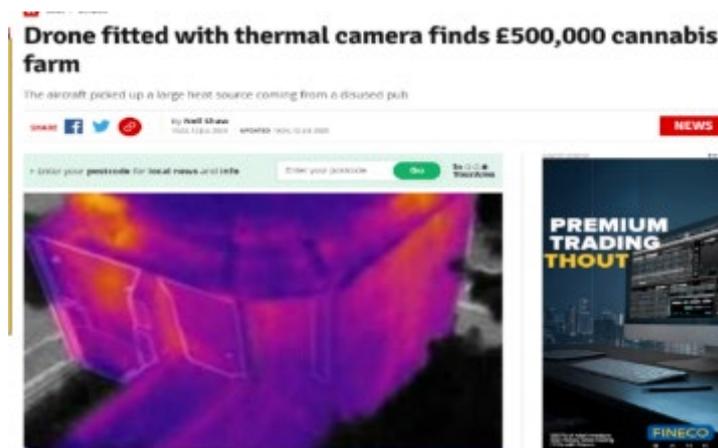


Figure 8 - Screenshot of Wales On-line Article of 12 Jul20

Within the technical field drones have found an increasing utility in the monitoring of crops, to carrying out site surveys of major building works, to finding missing persons, all the way through to the use of crime detection.

Within the artistic world, drone video is increasingly being used within the film and advertising industries. Drone Photography is now a recognised addition to the art form.

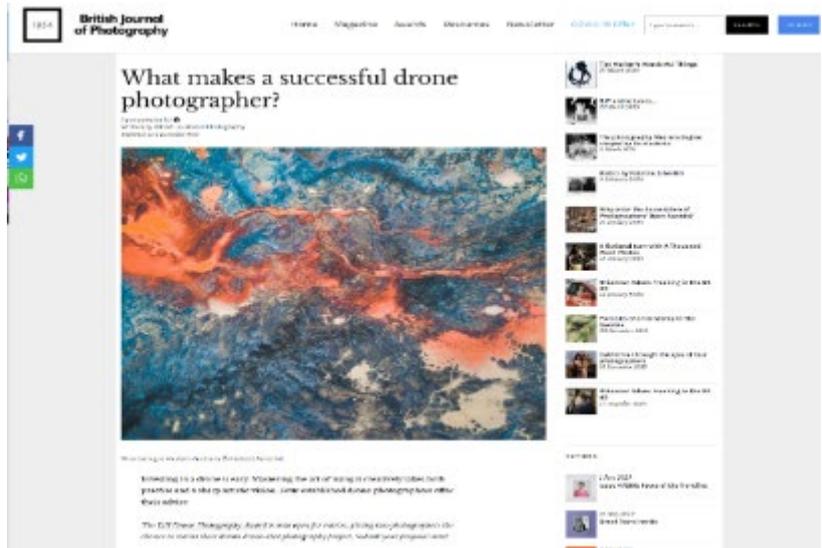


Figure 9 - Screenshot - British Journal of Photography 08Dec17 Article on Drone Photography

And with decreasing costs any one from 12 years old to a retired military software engineer can purchase a small drone; just for fun.

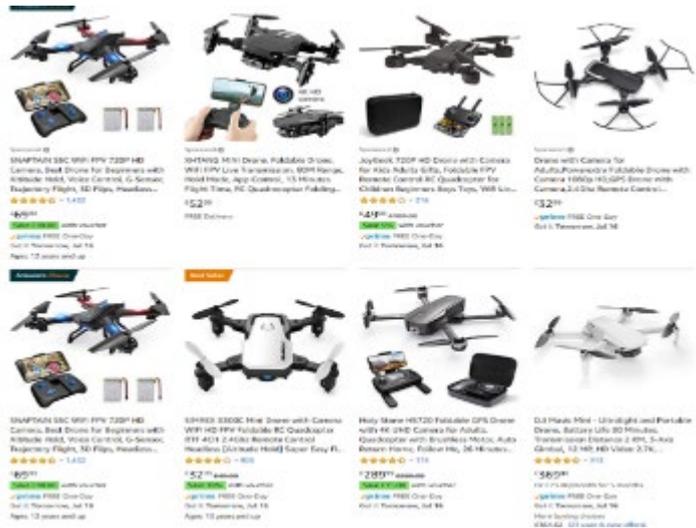


Figure 10 - Screenshot of Amazon UK - Low Cost Hobby Drones

My own drone use and operation within my current work and elsewhere is by necessity an amalgamation of the three major usages I have cited above.

As stated within the BJP article shown in the screenshot in Figure 9 – What Makes a Successful drone photographer – practice is the key to success. This applies to all drones and whilst I had practice with military drones the operation of commercial drone is quite different. This article quite rightly points out that any new item of equipment needs practice and in the case of drones it requires the photographer to learn new techniques.

The operation of drones within UK airspace is regulated by Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) owing to the potential dangers posed by drones to both aircraft and the public. All drones over 250g must be registered and operators are required to comply with a so-called drone code. This code can be summarised as:

- No flying above 400ft above ground level
- Stay away from people
- Keep the drone in site
- Do not fly the drone in dangerous location such as close to airports
- No commercial use of drones

To be able to use a drone commercially in the UK you have to get a Permission for Commercial Operations (PfCO) aka "Drone Licence". However, even with a License the drone pilot is bound by the same conditions as anyone else. However, with a PfCO you can apply and obtain exemptions for extended operation; something that has been done during the execution of this work.

During shooting my Project, I developed a standardised set of techniques based on my experience as a photographer and a military operator:

- Free fly at 10 to 400ft over a site seeking points of interest.
- Fly the site boundaries with the camera pointing into a site at 45° taking images.
- Fly over a site in a grid pattern with the camera pointing down shooting overlapping frames so that they may be combined top form a larger image as if the drone were at a greater hight.



Figure 11 - PoW Camp 13 The Hayes Drone Flight and Result

Figure 11 above shows the location of my drone and the final merged image from that flight. In shooting the above I had the permission of the site owners. Under UK law an individual does not own the airspace above their property. In theory allows people to fly their drones anywhere. However, the reality is different and is covered by criminal law with regards to not flying too close to buildings along with civil law that guards the right of the individual.

In operating my drone, I have complied with the letter if not the spirit of the law in that on a few occasions I have been denied direct access or have not physically be able to access a site. In these instances, it is legal for me to launch a drone from a public place and then from hight photograph the site. This does mean though that I will not overfly buildings or bring the drone close to building such that I can see through the windows.

Camp 596 as shown in Figure 12 is a case in point. I was not able to obtain permission to take photos of the site but using the drone I was able to photograph the house from hight and outside the boundary. This action was a 100% legal in criminal law. It was also legal in civil law in that I did not approach the house and did not photograph people or take images that showed the interior of the property. The morality though may be questioned.



Figure 12 - PoW Camp 596 Nine Yews

Questions of video surveillance and society go outside the bounds of this work and it is unlikely that I will make any formal comment on this issue owing to my background and the work I did prior to taking early retirement

Placement

My work on this and similar projects is documentary / environmental landscape / Urban Exploration that utilises modern techniques such as drones combined with substantial research with site location and seeking to show the hidden and the forgotten. Thus, my work spans several different practitioners rather than conforming to a single style project or technique.

The obvious comparison between my images, research and period must be compared to works by Marc Wilson in Last Stand where he has researched and located former WWII defence structures. But this comparison does not hold in that within many of my sites as already stated the landscape in question has now gone. Therefore, a better comparison is again to Wilson in his current project a wounded landscape in which again he has like my self-undertaken considerable WWII research to locate sites. In this case Wilson is looking at places in the landscape where murders and war crimes took place during WWII and where the evidence as such is gone. Likewise, a comparison can be made to the work by Thom and Beth Atkinson in which they undertook a photo essay of former WWII Bombsites in London as they are now. This project resulted in a book Missing Buildings published by Hwaet Books in 2016.

Likewise, I have found inspiration in the work of John Kippen in his Cold War Pastoral. I would argue that Kippen in undertaking this book restricted to a single site and thus required research than Wilson and the Thomas's. However, this book has more immediacy at a personal level. Whilst serving at RAF Odiham we served as guards at RAF Greenham during the times of protest. I have trod in Kippen's footsteps on this project and seen the changes in the landscape that Kippen recorded some 20 years ago now... one of the sites was at the end of the former runway...



Figure 13 - PoW Camp 1001 Chrookham Common

All the works combine the research, history, its effect on the landscape and how the landscape looks now. The images include those that clearly show the scars of the past alongside the mundane and the modern. However, this is not the totality in that my own work also includes another dimension in the use of drones and aerial images.



Figure 14 - From Johnny Millers South African Series Unequal Spaces

In considering the drone photography, this is a new art form although such works as I say on a technical level go back around 150 years. But as art it is a field that is only now being recognised with companies such as DJI one of the leading drones manufactures in conjunction with the BJP promoting various awards.

Photographer working in the field of drone art such as Jonny Miller like myself and other practitioners are seeking through the use of drones to show the hidden such as environmental issues and inequality in places such as South Africa as shown in Figure 14.

Miller, Wilson and the Thomas's and others have all in the execution of their work like my own have had to undertake massive amounts of research to produce just a few images that reveal the unseen. Things that may be in plain sight but are not seen.

Intent and Outcome

When I started my current landscape work my intent was initially to capture in visual form what I felt and experienced in viewing a forgotten aspect of local history. My initial failure in trying to capture not just the landscape but the inspiration and the ability to look at the history within a current landscape led me explore the issue of enforced landscape change in times of war.

The individual and their rights are in a time of war or emergency subjugated to the state. Within my work the very ground being captured was taken from the owners by the government. Likewise, the persons imprisoned within the camps were deprived of their liberty not once but twice. They were conscripted by one state and held by a different state. These people in turn were guarded by yet more conscripts; some of which were themselves former PoWs held in German and Italian PoW Camps. Eventually the people and landscapes were separated and expected to return to the timeline as if nothing had occurred. In many ways the very landscape serves as a reminder for the post war lives of the prisoners and guards. In many landscapes the traces of the past have been smoothed over, in other places the evidence of the past is still there to be seen. Places and sites exist where the old and worn has replaced by the new and this itself is a metaphor for the passing of one generation and its replacement by another that has no memory or visibility of the past and the suffering.

Dissemination

In carrying out this work I have attempted to create a checkpoint in time that captures the scene not 28 days or 20 years later but 75 years later. This checkpoint has been recorded in the establishment of a website and research material which may be found online at <https://repatriatedlandscape.org/> . However, this website only includes just over 20 sites of at least 2,000 sites as such this work has only just started.

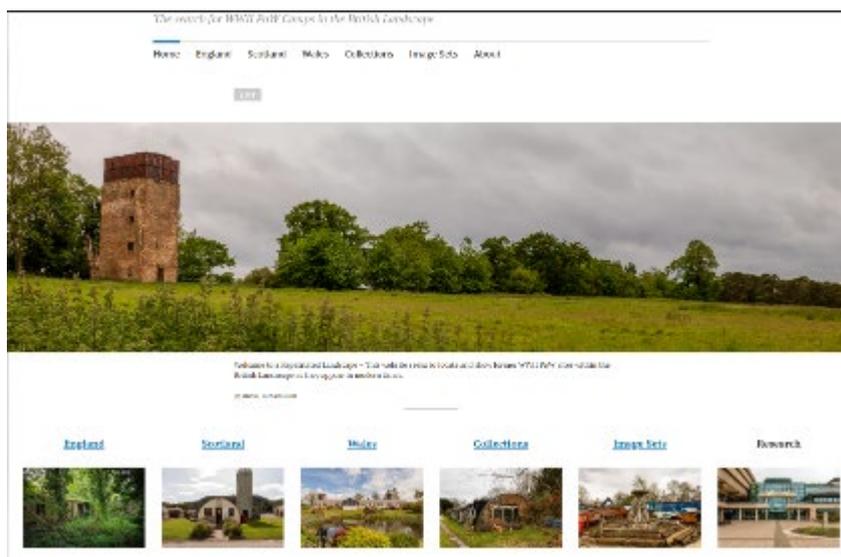


Figure 15 - Screenshot of Repatriated Landscape Website

In addition to the website and work which is intended to run for several years an exhibition is planned at former PoW Camp 21 Cultybraggan near Perth Scotland. The exhibition along with a presentation to the Royal Photographic Society are currently on hold on to the current Coronavirus situation. More Data is provided with Annex A to this document – Proposed Photographic Exhibition at Cultybraggan.



Figure 16 - Unused Nissen Huts at Cultybraggen

The website, the work and publicity is intended to make the invisible visible and remind people of the past within our landscape. The landscape does not need to be set in amber, but its previous usage and existence needed to be recorded and people made aware what is around them but unseen and forgotten. My own ideal outcome, or rather one of them would be the placing of a simple information board where these sites once existed. As tempting as it is to say that everything should be preserved the reality here is that four of the sites are being actively preserved and serve to inform the public and this is enough.

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