

# 40 YEARS OF IMPRESSIONS GALLERY: A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY.

ANNE MCNEILL

***'TO MANY PEOPLE, THE IDEA OF THE 'GALLERY' PRESENTS AN IMAGE OF SELECT EXCLUSIVENESS, OF DOLLAR-HAPPY INVESTORS, OF SEEKERS OF THE EASILY AVAILABLE IN CULTURE. WE HOPE VERY MUCH THAT OUR GALLERY GOES SOME OF THE WAY TOWARDS DISPELLING THIS IMAGE, AS WE BELIEVE THE ROLE OF THE GALLERY IS BECOMING THAT OF A CENTRE OF EDUCATION, INFORMATION AND WE HOPE, ENJOYMENT.'***

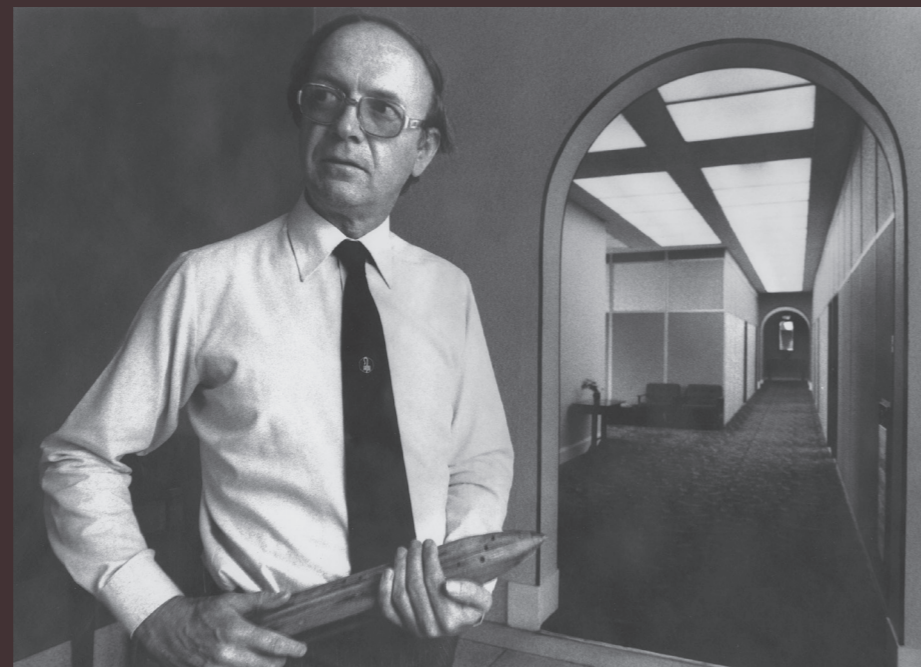
**IMPRESSIONS GALLERY REPORT, 1973.**

Impressions Gallery opened in November 1972, in a room above a shop in the city of York. As one of the first independent photography galleries in Europe we have played a vital role in British photographic culture and have earned a reputation as one of the UK's leading venues for photography.

Amongst the many photographs, old press releases, letterset leaflets and personal letters that sit within our grey archive boxes there is a typed document from 1973 by co-founder Val Williams, in which she writes:

*'The gallery was based on hope, a certain amount of good will, an overdraft, and the conviction that photography must be recognised as an important part of art and everyday life.'*

Seven years ago we relocated to Bradford. Moving cities was a bold and brave move. For two years we worked in partnership with Bradford Council to



*J.G Collins, General Manager at Illingworth Morris PLC, Salts Mill, Saltaire 1984  
© Huw Davies from Roads to Wigan Pier 1984*

build our bespoke gallery, in Centenary Square's flagship building. This new space with its urban, almost industrial feel has given us the freedom to show more ambitious large-scale exhibitions.

In August 2007 we opened our doors to international acclaim, with Sharpe's Wood, a photographic series of eerily beautiful woodland, shot on the edge of the city, by Bradford born and bred Liza Dracup.

Impressions Gallery is an independent charity which commissions photographers to make new work for exhibitions and books. We bring exhibitions of national and international importance to Bradford that everybody is welcome to come and experience.

Our work takes creative and artistic risks. We have always supported new and emerging photographers. Our first exhibition was also Martin Parr's - now a member of Magnum and arguably Britain's most well known photographer. In 2003 we commissioned 59 Productions, a fledgling company which has gone on to art direct for Danny Boyle's inspirational Olympics opening ceremony.

In 1990 we were the first gallery to stage an exhibition in response to AIDS. More than 20 years on we are still showing hard-hitting work: in 2010 Bringing the War Home contained powerful photographic responses to recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We have commissioned new work that explores different standpoints on notions of class, race, gender, identity, and politics. To mark our 40 years we are showcasing an exhibition from October 1984, Roads to Wigan Pier, which takes as its starting point George Orwell's seminal sociological investigation into the bleak living conditions of the working class in the North of England.

We have a long history of exhibiting woman photographers, such as the late Jo Spence's 1980s collaborative and pioneering 'photo-therapy' work, through to Trish Morrissey's imaginative reworking of family albums. We exhibit artists from culturally diverse backgrounds. Last year's visual stories by Joy Gregory, one of the most significant artists from the black British photography movement, looked at a combination of aesthetics and assumptions on black feminine beauty.

We work with mid-career photographers on solo retrospective shows. Two years ago, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to photography, Anna Fox's autobiographical and darkly comic Cockroach Diary & other stories exhibition was selected for the internationally prestigious Deutsche Börse Photography Prize. Next spring, it's the turn of 'local boy done good' Buttershaw-born Paul Reas.

We provide opportunities for local communities to join in. We want people, of all ages and backgrounds, to feel that Impressions is their space.

*'Belief in photography is the most important part of running a photographic gallery'* wrote Val Williams, 1973, and still true now. We have the belief to support artists in meaningful ways and will continue to support photographers based on merit rather than celebrity.

This is our past, present and future.

## BIO

Anne McNeill has been Director of Impressions Gallery since 2000. In the early 80s she studied photography in New York, and began her career in 1984 as a darkroom worker at the radical gallery Camerwork, London. For four years McNeill ran community photography projects in and around Brick Lane, East London. McNeill is editor of numerous books, has over twenty years experience of curating and writing about photography. In 1994 she was founding Director of commissioning agency Photoworks, Brighton and moved to Yorkshire to be Artistic Director of Photo98, the UK Year of Photography. From 1997 to 2003 she was a member of advisory panel for Arts Council England and sits on various UK academic validation committees. Most recently she co-founded Ways of Looking photography festival, 2011 and wants to start taking pictures again.



*© John Kemp from Roads to Wigan Pier 1984*

**IMPRESSIONS: 645 ARTISTS. 405 EXHIBITIONS. 40 YEARS OLD. 5 YEARS IN BRADFORD.**