

How an old dog managed to learn new tricks!

Whatever happened to Bill Bowman? He seems to have reinvented himself. Apparently you can't keep a good man down! Chris Wordsworth reports...

Older readers will remember Bill Bowman from the days when he was a colourful mover and shaker in the world of professional photography. He used to run three professional colour labs and then, as if that wasn't enough, he went into publishing, launching the influential trade magazine *Panorama*. At one point he was employing over 100 people. He also found time to promote the industry itself as a founder member and Chairman of the PPLA (for pro labs), later serving as President of the APL (for all labs) and winning an Honorary Fellowship for services to the industry.

So I was a little surprised to bump into him in Morocco earlier this year at Photo Training Overseas – a week of winter sun and high-powered workshops aimed at professional photographers. Was Bill just being sociable and enjoying the sunshine or had he switched roles yet again and to join the ranks of pro photographers?

To be fair, you could describe Bill's switch to photography as a return to his roots. In those distant days (if you can remember the 1960s, you weren't there!) he was snapping such icons as Donovan and the Zombies as a staff photographer on a pop magazine called *Fabulous 208*. "Those were wild and exciting times," he remembers, "and I was earning big money for a lad of 20". The lifestyle was hectic – picking up all sorts of freelance assignments wherever he could find them. In those days, Bill explained, he was 'on the picture desk' of several national newspapers and magazines, which meant turning up and standing in a queue with other young hopefuls. When the Picture Editor or his sub had a job, he would point to the lucky photographer and give a brief. Later a dispatch rider would pick up the film and captions at a pre-arranged spot.

So what eventually led him to move from taking photographs to the processing side of the business? "I once thought that I would be a good features photographer," he told me candidly, "but it was never to be." So you could say that Bill's latest move – into wedding photography – is a way of revisiting an unfulfilled ambition.

As often happens, chance also played a part. "After I closed my last lab, I spent a lot of time thinking about how to carry on with the later phase of my life," Bill explained. "Then two people in the village where I live *insisted* that I photograph their daughters' weddings – for proper fees too!"

For the first wedding Bill dug out his old 50-year-old Rolleiflex, a camera he bought second-hand when starting out in photography. As befits such a traditional (though excellent) camera, he decided to take a “mature, classical approach” to shooting the wedding. “I coped quite well,” he remembers modestly, adding that he sold four wedding albums.

Then came the big changeover –he started “meddling” with a digital camera. Although describing himself as “a film man through and through” he decided to consign all his old cameras to a box in the attic. Then after extensive research he bought a pair of Canon EOS-1 Ds digital cameras together with a collection of lenses and accessories, as well as new computers and software. So £20,000 later he was a full-fledged digital photographer – except that he now had to learn how to use the stuff!

He decided to ‘go back to school’ at the Canon Experience to pick up the rudiments of digital image capture. It was a steep learning curve. “Older people like me do find learning and new computer skills difficult to get into the memory,” he told me, “but I have persevered.” Last September Bill shot his first digital wedding and the hard work seems to have paid off. Once again the client was pleased and he sold four albums but his style had changed dramatically. “Now it’s more free flowing and I aim to produce interesting storybooks instead of a record of the wedding day,” Bill explained.

But as any successful wedding photographer will tell you, there’s a lot more to the business than creating good albums. You also need boundless energy, promotional drive and excellent people skills. Without doubt, all these qualities have been evident in Bill’s earlier ‘careers’ as freelance photographer, lab man, publisher and industry ‘politician’.

When I contacted Alistair Forrest, a former Editor of *Panorama* who now lives in Spain, he wasn’t a bit surprised by Bill’s latest career move. “He’s gone back to his first love – taking photographs,” Alastair told me. “Bill has strong opinions about what makes a good picture and equally, how to engage with his clients to bring out the best in them. I think it was this love of social photography that made him so forgiving of his prolab wedding photographer clients. Social photographers were never going to be his biggest customers but he treated them well and with humour, even when they were late paying their bills!”

Meanwhile Bill has big plans. “What I intend to do this year is promote like hell to get established again,” he told me. His main promotional platforms are a pictorial CD presentation (compiled by audio-visual ace Pete Rogers FBIPP) and a large website (these days seen as essential by most photographers).

Just as you'd expect, in both marketing vehicles Bill's approach is friendly and direct. "I have developed a unique, modern, bespoke style that fits today's requirements," he declares, "and my pricing policy is simple to understand. I won't tie you up with lots of different packages..." Then he lists his qualifications and affiliations – including 25 years as a member of the MPA. He ends on a lighter note: "I will make your day fun and enjoyable," he promises, "no stuffed shirt here!"

Is he going to succeed? Certainly he's on the way. "My promotions have brought me 45 weddings so far this year," he reports, "and 32 for next year. I'm also about to be made 'house-approved wedding photographer' to three hotels with a world-wide network." But if you still need convincing, here's a telling story from Bill's younger days.

Back when he was 'on the picture desk', the *Daily Express* sent young Bill across the Channel in a small cruiser to cover HRH the Queen taking a Dunkirk anniversary salute from big warships. Unfortunately the sea was very rough. Sick as a dog, Bill retired below decks and promptly fell asleep, completely missing the ceremony! He arrived in Dunkirk feeling very fed up with himself. But then he spotted the great Richard Dimbleby interviewing two women on film for the *Tonight* programme to be broadcast next day.

It turned out that the two women were sisters who had been separated during the war with one escaping to England while the other went to a concentration camp. Dimbleby had tracked them down and now they were joyfully reunited. Being a keen 'newshound' Bill took the pictures, got the captions and dispatched them to the *Express* that night. The story was published and Bill received the princely (in those days) sum of £200. What's more nobody asked what had happened to the 'salute' pictures! Moral of the story? You make your own luck.

Fast forward a few decades and Bill is still riding his luck. Recently he sent me an email. "Hi Chris... Got booked for a wedding in Cyprus..." he enthused. "The girl is so happy it's sweet... I met her at a Wedding Fair last year... She seemed to like what I do and jokingly asked if I would go to Cyprus... One thing after another and I'm booked!!!"

No stuffed shirt here!

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