



## John Angerson Profile

- Born in Bristol in 1969, John Angerson started his career in his teens as a local press photographer, including covering the fall of the Berlin Wall back in 1989.
- John's personal projects and self-published books have garnered critical acclaim, multiple awards, and exhibitions in the UK and overseas.
- His work has been recognized by the British Life Photography Awards, Design Week Awards, Spectrum Imaging Awards and the Royal Photographic Society.
- In 2019, his book *English Journey* was awarded Best Photo Book of the Year by PH Museum, Italy, and Best of the Best by Germany's Red Dot Awards.
- Recent editorial clients include *The Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *Der Spiegel*, *El Pais*, *The New York Times* and the *Sunday Times Magazine*.

[www.johnangerson.com](http://www.johnangerson.com)



# John Angerson

What makes John Angerson interesting is his restless curiosity and inventive ideas. After a seven-year interlude since their last meeting, Keith Wilson catches up with one of Britain's most creative and versatile photographers...

All images: John Angerson



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any of today's photographers can be easily pigeon-holed into one of a half dozen or so popular genres: press, sports, wildlife, wedding, portrait, travel, documentary.

Anything else could be deemed as fine art – providing the images can be sold as limited edition prints. John Angerson began his career as a press photographer in the late 1980s, but now even he struggles to define his work. So let's go back, to when as a novice freelancer scratching out a living at his local newspaper in Northampton, John decided to drop everything and head to Berlin. It was November 1989, communism was collapsing across Eastern Europe and the Berlin Wall was being torn down in an uprising that reunited the city after decades of Cold War division.

Recalling the event to me the last time we spoke nearly seven years ago, John said: "I saw everything that was happening on TV and decided to go to Berlin. I had a hundred quid in my pocket, a knapsack with some clothes, a Nikon with a dodgy motor drive that jammed all the time,

a 28mm f/3.5 Nikon, a dozen rolls of Ilford HP5 and nowhere to stay!" The trip proved to be a turning point in his career as the subsequent portfolio of images resulted in him being named Young Photographer of the Year in the 1990 Ilford Awards.

John returned to Berlin in 2013 for a project to shoot the scenes of 10 events in European history since 1900 that, in his words, "changed our world, same date, same location. But that's another story!"

Now, in the first weeks of 2021, we're chatting again and I'm ready to hear the end to that story...

**So John, here we are again, what became of that story?**

Good hook! It ended up as more than 10, it turned into about 30! I haven't finished it as there's another date I want to add, which is the first death of COVID-19, which happened on my birthday in my local hospital.



**I've put all this time in and I've made X-amount of money, is it really worth it? I think I've overdone it**

**Previous page:** View across a field to the Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland where over a million people, mostly Jews, were killed. John took this photo on the anniversary of liberation on 27 January, 1945, now commemorated as International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

**Below:** Love, Power, Sacrifice. Over a 20-year period, John documented the Jesus Army, a Northamptonshire-based religious sect. Here, at Sheffield City Hall, two of the faithful receive the power of Jesus through the laying of hands.



**My god, really?**

I'm not sure what I'm going to shoot, we'll see. A lot of my colleagues think I should do a book on it. I've called it *On this Day*, but I've gone off self-publishing a bit, partly because it's so much work and all I seem to do is to be going to and from the post office! When you add up what you've made from it, you think 'I've put all this time in and I've made X-amount of money, is it really worth it?' I think I've overdone it. I've had enough of trying to do it myself because of the hours you put in.

**True, but the attraction of self-publishing is having control over every facet of the creative process.** Yeah, but I think there's a common





**Above:** East meets West. A couple embrace in the crowd following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, reuniting the city split by the post-World War II division of Germany.

myth about photography publishing: a lot of photographers new to the business naively think photo book publishers come to you, give you an advance, create this amazing book, and then you get a bounty of money from the reuse! That doesn't happen – publishers want money off you! You pay them for the privilege. But after my last foray into it, I wonder if that's not a better idea just to give the work to someone else.

**But you've been very successful and your new book *NASA STS-72* is getting plenty of attention...**

True. I had a big piece about it in the *Financial Times*, which was fantastic, but from the day it was published until yesterday I've had so many →

## \* RETURN JOURNEY

**IN 2019 AND 2020 JOHN'S BOOK *ENGLISH JOURNEY* WON SEVERAL INTERNATIONAL BOOK DESIGN AWARDS**

### **What was so special about the design?**

My designer came along with this idea of having 20 different covers, which I thought was financial suicide. With photography books, it's a small market unless it can appeal to a wider audience. With *English Journey*, the fact it was an unusual design and an unusual way of presenting the work opened it up to a wider market, not just people who were interested in photography. I had interior designers that were buying whole sets of 20.

### **Really?**

There were two interior designers in South Korea who bought two sets each! That's 40 copies. Then I had a guy in France who had this beautiful château, he wanted the set of 20. I think he wanted them because they looked nice!



orders, I just feel like I'm packing all day. I'm going to the post office every day, I've become a post room!

## **But isn't now a good time for this because work is so difficult to find?**

Exactly. This *NASA* book came about because of lockdown. It would never have happened otherwise, I would never have thought of it. The designer I work with, he's normally very busy, but he went quiet so he had spare capacity. I watched a Zoom with a photographer called Paul Lowe and he said, if you've got nothing else to do, find an old project and re-edit it and look at it again.

## **Good advice...**

I got all the astronaut negatives out from 1996, and realized that I'd missed so many. I think at the time when you shoot a project, you've got all those emotions connected to making it; you went through a lengthy process to get that picture, but it's not necessarily that interesting at the time. But 25 years later and you're suddenly seeing all these images as if for the first time, and I'm wondering, 'why have I never printed that?' You don't even remember taking half of them. So, I remastered it, like Pink Floyd going back into the studio with the original tapes! If it hadn't been for lockdown I probably wouldn't have had the inclination or the time to even look.

## **Yes, absolutely.**

But when you rely on your archives I feel like it's a bit of a cheat, that it's playing on nostalgia. I'm playing on my own nostalgia and I'm playing on other people's nostalgia – that isn't progressive. I'm desperate to go out and do something new!

## **Despite your misgivings about self-publishing, you've enjoyed some recent awards success for *English Journey*.**

Yes, I think the reason *English Journey* succeeded was in part due to the design. A key element of being successful is to delegate key things to other people you can collaborate with. It's never easy and can be stressful, but if the people in the team have a similar idea of what it could look like, and you have the strength to say, 'okay, you know more about this than me so go for it,' then you're more likely to succeed.



## **Your own journey has been interesting, starting as a press photographer, but that work is so far removed from what you do now.**

### **What sort of photographer are you?**

That's a good question! I think I'm like a general practitioner in that I find all avenues of photography fascinating. I've always tried very hard not to lose sight of why I decided to be a photographer, because I think it's so easy to fall down the road of saying it's all about the money: 'He must be a great photographer, he's got all the kit and a nice car, he's so successful.'

### **So how do you measure success?**

Success for me is making work that people question: 'What's all that about? Where's he coming from?' A lot of people don't do that, all they see is the picture of David Hockney and they go, 'Oh, wow! David Hockney. John must be successful because he's photographed someone famous.' My notion of

**Above:** For his award-winning book *English Journey*, John travelled across much of the route taken by JB Priestley for his 1934 book of the same name. This industrial park is the site of the former Easington Colliery, County Durham – closed in 1993 with the loss of 1400 jobs.

**Above right:** Another shot from *On This Day*, this time the scene at Aberfan in Wales, where a huge National Colliery Board spoil tip collapsed onto the village after heavy rain on 21 October 1966, killing 116 schoolchildren and 28 adults.

**Right:** From the current, ongoing *Lockdown Sanctuary* project, photographing local places around the UK where families have found solace during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

success doesn't involve making loads of money, it doesn't involve photographing famous people; it involves me going out and making photos of everyday things and people – trying to make people think again, basically to see the world the way I see it and hopefully make them think differently and enjoy what's all around us.

## **Which is what lockdown has required us to do, to focus more on our own surroundings...**

Exactly. I was in lockdown and I thought, 'what can I do that doesn't involve people?' In the first lockdown, we were told to only go out once a day, and me and Daisy, my daughter, went for a walk down our road. By pure luck she went a different way, we went through this fence and found this wood that we'd never been to that had loads of woodpeckers in it. We went every day, got some binoculars and it became known for us as 'woodpecker wood.'

## **And that was the inspiration for *Lockdown Sanctuary*?**

Suddenly, the idea occurred to me that there's all these spaces around that people are finding... That's my point, I've always tried to keep the feelings I had when I was 13 or 14, when you first realize how powerful photography can be, how well it makes you feel and what it can →



**I'm wondering, 'why have I never printed that?' You don't even remember taking half of them**









make other people feel. I always remember that is the core of the reason as to why I'm doing it.

**You use a lot of different cameras and formats, so where has Nikon been most recently used?**

Well, the *Lockdown Sanctuary* project has been shot on a Linhof camera, but with a Nikon lens! The Nikon 90mm SW f/8.

**That's for 5x4in, isn't it?**

Yeah and it's slightly wide-angle. An absolute gem. I've found that a lot of Nikon lenses are quite contrasty, so compared to my other lenses, this looks a lot sharper. You rarely see them now. In my early career, I had Nikon F3 and F4 cameras, and the F5 too, but then moved predominantly to medium and large format.

**What did you use when you went to Berlin for the fall of the Wall?**

That was a Nikon FM. Interestingly, there's a big East German centre at the University of Reading and they contacted me and did a small exhibition in 2019 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, so I had this call from a professor and they used some of the work – I went there to do a talk on



**Roll the dice and see what happens. It can go terribly wrong, but sometimes you get away with it**

**Above: The Wet F training pool at the Johnson Space Center, Houston. In 1996, John spent three weeks documenting the prep for the Space Shuttle Endeavour Mission STS-72.**

**Top right: A commissioned portrait of British artist David Hockney.**

**Middle right: Emmy Award-winning actor and former Dr Who, Christopher Eccleston.**

**Bottom right: Grayson Perry with his childhood teddy, Alan Measles.**

what it was like. I was so young at the time, I didn't realize the importance of what was happening. I didn't even have a place to stay! It's the sort of thing you do when you're 19, you think, 'I'll get a cheap flight and just work it out when I get there!'

**A lot of press photographers from that era would say that's how you should do it...**

Yes, and I think there's so many photographers today who came from that. The thing you hear from British press photographers is that a lot of them started in local newspapers and that was the training ground. Every town had a local paper, and there were nationals, of course, and magazines. There was this incredible network of photographers making money out of basically winging it.



### How much preparation goes into your portraits?

I prepare technically. It's almost like a military movement order. For example, if next week I had to photograph Grayson Perry, I'd have all my kit laid out and make sure everything was tidy, clean, charged, backups ready. Then I'd get in the car and I'd have no preconception whatsoever. I'd treat it like a documentary project. I'd have a vague idea of how I'd light it, what background, or where I'd want to do it, and then I'd just release every connection, I'd let them do the work.

### What do you mean by that?

A lot of people, assistants, who work with me, can't get their heads around the fact that I don't direct people. A lot of portrait photographers say it's a relationship between the photographer and the sitter. I don't buy that argument whatsoever. As a sitter we give the photographer what we want to give them. As soon as someone puts a camera in front of us we create a photographic personality. Particularly with photographing celebrities, they give you a version of themselves. I'm a big believer that my job as a photographer is to record as faithfully as I can that personality that they're giving me.

### Grayson Perry is an interesting sitter. Did you know beforehand whether you would be meeting Grayson Perry the artist, or as his alter ego, Claire?

I had no idea what version of him was coming. That's a very good example. He was lovely. He did most of the posing, he's on a chair. That chair just happened to be there. I said, 'is there a chair anywhere?' Then he did the folding of his feet. I didn't direct him.

### What about the teddy he's holding?

The teddy was part of the story, which was about people's relationships with their childhood teddy bears, so that was the element that had to be in the story. It was for *The Times Magazine* and I photographed all sorts of people for that. Obviously, I've got to light it because the magazine wants it lit, so I go in with a vague idea of how I might light it, but Stefan, my assistant, gets infuriated with me



## SELF PORTRAIT

For the *Selfies* exhibition at Harrogate's 108 Gallery, John supplied an image inspired by his childhood interest in stamp collecting...

### Is that really your profile on those stamps?

Yes! This work was partly inspired by stamps within my father's collection: an usual stamp block of King Edward VIII who abdicated in 1936, together with my favourite book from my teenage years, *The Man Who Would Be King*, by

Rudyard Kipling, about two British adventurers in India who become kings of Kafiristan. Growing up in 1970s England, stamp collecting seemed to be everywhere. These paper marvels allowed a young mind to be transported into a world of travel and adventure. I went to the hairdresser with an image of King Edward VIII and told him to match his hairstyle, then my friend took my portrait on my 5x4 and then I used Photoshop to make the stamp block.

because we set it all up and then as soon as the sitter walks in I go, 'no, no, let's not light it like this, I have a better idea!' I think that comes from my opportunist approach and being willing to take gambles. During the actual photo shoot, gamble it. Get some interesting safety pictures first and then roll the dice and see what happens. It can go terribly wrong, but sometimes you get away with it.

### There's a terrific black and white of Christopher Ecclestone, what's the story behind that one?

Again, opportunist. The other shots from that set he was looking straight at the camera, then there was a brief moment when, I guess, he got a little

bit bored or looked away for a second, and that's where the documentary John comes in, and I know that's what I'm looking for. All the other stuff is like a build up to that. It's just pretending you're there for those, you pretend to yourself and the sitter that you're interested in them looking at the camera, you're looking for that photo personality, and then, very occasionally, the guard slips and that's the picture.

### Your portrait of David Hockney includes the background and lighting set-up in the frame. Why was that?

David Hockney walked in and he went to take his coat off and I said, 'no, please leave your coat on!' I thought his coat looked good with the scarf. That was the first frame I took, so I had a full length of him. Then I went into making portraits of him, much tighter. The magazine used the tight portraits of him, and then a month later I went back to the images and I thought, 'that is the best picture!' The interaction hasn't started, the relationship between me and him hadn't started. That is the true documentary picture. It's not the result of a process that we're going through together.

### Yes, he's just standing there unprepared, like he's waiting.

That's exactly what I was after, that moment when there is no celebrity going on, it's just a man standing in his coat. It doesn't need to be slick. The fact it's a bit messy and it's a bit wonky and there's crap everywhere makes the picture, whereas the other pictures are almost manufactured – I'm not really interested in that.

### You've had a wonderful career with great conceptual ideas. What next?

I have this need to be relevant. I just want to keep going. A friend of mine said to me recently when we were having a moan about everything: 'Listen here mate, we're not in prison, we're not bankrupt, and we're still carrying on. We're successful! Don't let anyone tell you anything else.' He's got a good point. I can still fill the car up with fuel. I haven't paid off the mortgage and I'm not wearing Pierre Cardin shoes. Just keep at it, I say. I've got this far, I'm sure I can keep going for another 10 years. **M**

**Next Month**  
Photojournalist  
Claire Thomas