



John Topham

Toddler, with attitude. 1933



John Topham's (1908–1992) first experiments with photography were carried out whilst he was a schoolboy in Yarm, near Stockton on Tees, in Yorkshire, towards the end of the First World War. He obtained photographic chemicals and 'printing out paper' from his older friends by swapping shrapnel and possibly live munitions (collected earlier when residing in Dover):



Mrs. Smith wakens the dockers of Limehouse, London, with her peashooter in 1931. (John Topham's first published photograph)



John Topham with one of his cameras. 1934



Electricity pylon in the front gardens of suburbia. Sidcup. 1937



The Thirties were the last of old England which Mr. Topham recorded so faithfully. The rich farming lands around London were being buried in concrete, roads, schools, housing estates, airports. The way of life that went with this was going, too.

Nursemaids in Rochester, Kent, have a good view of the flying boat tests on the River Medway where the Mayo flying boats are being constructed. The flying boat in the picture is one of the Shorts, Empire Class, "Cambria", arriving back after a test flight. 27 September 1937

Travelling salesman selling pots and pans from a horse and cart. Devon. 1935



"Smutty", as he was called, was prepared to put it into some "magic water" for me, a highly secret process, and make my print permanent - all for my Mills bomb. And so I parted with my Mills bomb — I was never happy with it anyhow...

After this hazardous beginning he soon acquired his first camera, a No. 2 Box Brownie, and easily persuaded his piano teacher to spend most of his lessons imparting his knowledge of photographic techniques.

... when I first owned this camera, I was forever trying out different angles — and unknown to myself — had managed to get some really excellent shots. My music master praised one which I took from the roof of our house, looking straight down into the garden — and when my mother saw it I got another "good biding" ... for risking life and limb...



Children playing with old tyres. 1935



Later, as a schoolboy in Sidcup in Kent, he received further valuable photographic instruction and criticism from another schoolmaster who had been an officer in the War and, after repeated attempts to become a trainee press photographer, Topham decided to enrol as a Royal Air Force Apprentice.

Topham's independent spirit and Force's discipline were not well-suited and he secured his discharge some years later. Following further unsuccessful attempts to find work in the picture agencies or newspapers (he was by now too old to be a trainee) Topham joined the Metropolitan Police in 1927 and was posted to "H" Division in Whitechapel. As a London bobby he enjoyed a degree of freedom of action and was able to indulge his characteristic curiosity:



An old homeless man pulling his tricycle of belongings along the shingle beach at Dungeness in Kent. 1935

Children waving to the steam train as it passes a crossing, 1936



I loved the river scenes and the dock life . . . talked to Salvation Army workers, to hotel keepers, students . . . I made friends with urchins, hot potato sellers . . . with tramps, stevedores, fishmongers, hawkers, with factory workers — with all sorts of people ... I was finding life — real life — for the first time . . .

Night duty was usually interesting, sometimes exciting. In any case one was more free to explore forbidden territories - tea with the nurses in hospital, bakeries,



A novel no parking sign on Finchley Road, London. 1938

Young children about to tuck into large buns supplied by the Guy Fawkes Charity. 1935

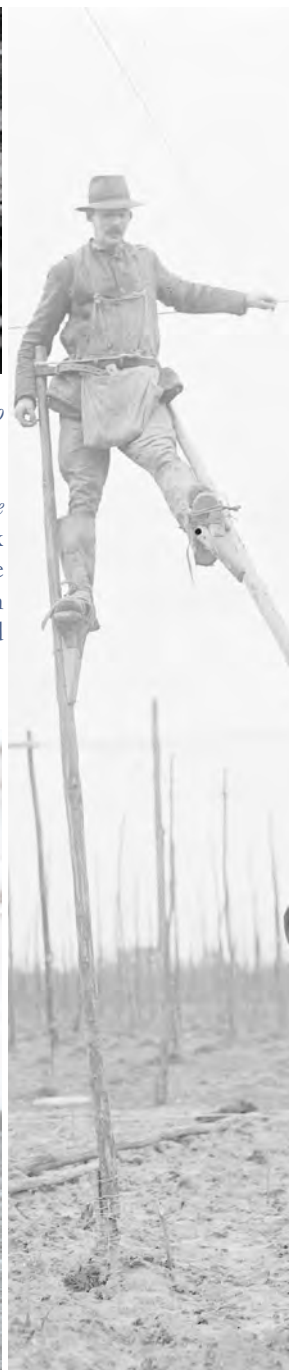


fish smoke-holes — and even watchmen's huts — to say nothing of going aboard a freighter on the riverside

Strongly influenced by both B. R. Bell's *The Complete Press Photographer* and the novels of Sax Rohmer, Topham determined to continue taking pictures even when on duty, risking both the Police Commissioner's wrath and observation by the local East Enders:



A man uses stilts to string the hop poles. 1937



Paying in night at the Rat and Sparrow Club in Eynsford, Kent. Men examine the pile of rats tails on the table. Members get paid according to the number of rats tails in their catch. 1939



Field workers with horses.



"Cor blimey, the copper's takin a pitcher - betcher its for the beak." ('the beak', cockney slang for police, judge or court, would suggest that the local East Enders suspected Topham was gathering evidence when taking photographs in uniform.)

His subjects included

... men on the dole, the bread queues, the Monday morning scene at the pawnshop, fires, accidents and sociological scenes and conditions ... I pitied the lot of the East Ender but there was really little I could do about it. So I pegged away at my pictures.

Topham's first picture to be published, in 1931, was of a woman "knocker-upper" who provided a service to the early risers amongst

the population by regularly awakening them by shooting peas at their bedroom windows with a pea shooter. He received five pounds from the Daily Mirror for the usage and it inspired him to chase the life of a professional photographer. This was followed by further successes in selling pictures and prints and by November 1933, having acquired a typewriter, a motor car, an enlarger and sufficient confidence to resign from the Force, Topham set himself up as a freelance photographer in Sidcup, Kent.

His career as a freelance press photographer spanned continually to 1973, throughout the whole of which he remained resolutely independent of the offers of staff contracts. During this time he built up an extensive



Mr Charlie Hever wearing a tar painted bowler hat in Eynsford, Kent. 1937



A railway worker gauging the lines in Sidcup, Kent. 1937

Children in tin helmets with gas mask boxes over their shoulders playing in the street just before the outbreak.



library of images, covering not only many of the major news stories of his times, but also everyday life in town and country, social deprivation or poor housing, agriculture, rural crafts and practices.

John Topham's 1930s negatives up to the end of 1939 are a key collection in the 60,000 images that TopFoto.co.uk is supplying to

Field worker taking rest in a cart . 1938



Europeana Photography with the financial support of the European Commission.

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The Dartford Carnival in Kent. The start of the balloon race. 1936



Children on the helter skelter at the fairground for the Abbey Wood fete in London. 1936



A page from one of the scrapbooks (April/May 1934) that John Topham kept for newspaper cuttings

