

THE F/8 INTERVIEW: DANIEL MEADOWS



Left: Portrait from the Free Photographic Omnibus, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria. November 1974

Daniel Meadows has spent over five decades beautifully documenting the lives of ordinary people. Photography is at the heart of his work, but on top of this, and what makes him different from most of his peers, is his passion for storytelling. Whether it's through written notes, voice recordings, film or, of course, photography. Stories are every bit as important to him as the pictures.

Meadows was born 'In the middle of nowhere'. His father worked on what was once a grand estate in the countryside, and they lived in a tied house on land where very little had changed for centuries. It was an old-fashioned existence, and he had a sheltered and strict upbringing. His mother insisted that he stood up when she entered the room, even when he was an adult and had his own children.

He was sent away to boarding school at eight years old. Everyone around him was white and middle-class. He had no contact with girls, working-class people or those from other cultures. He

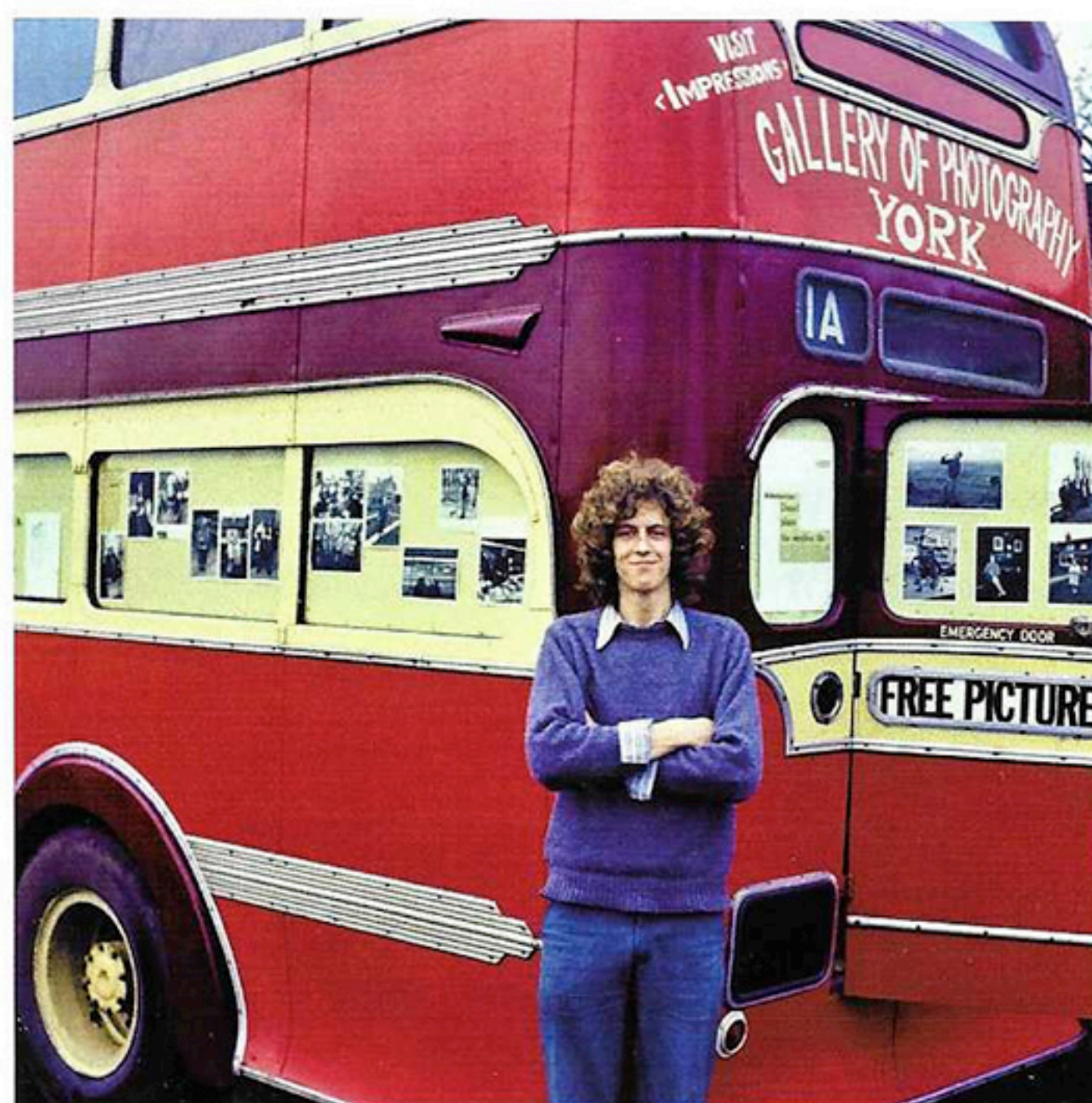
escaped by listening to the radio. There was Ray Gosling, a well-known radio and TV journalist who had a distinctive way of talking about the day-to-day life of ordinary people in Britain. There were also "The Radio Ballads", a series of pioneering radio programmes which used music, audio recordings, and a wide range of voices talking in dialect from across the country. Listening to this from the confines of his dull and conservative school opened up a new world for the young Meadows.

Below: Daniel Meadows photographed by Andrew Sproton, co-founder of Impressions Gallery, York. Manchester, 1973

It was sound, that got Meadows interested in the idea of becoming a documentarist. Meadows also remembers visiting London for a Bill Brandt exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. He saw how Brandt used his camera to 'slip between the social classes as a passport to go places and see things beyond the usual confines of his life' Meadows found this inspiring: In his words, "It was an Alice in Wonderland experience, a way to step out of my horrible life into this wonderland."

The portal to this proved to be Manchester Polytechnic Photography School, which Meadows attended in 1970. Going from a country boarding school to an urban art school was life-changing for Meadows. By 'pure luck', he happened to be on the course with some great photographers, including Brian Griffin, Martin Parr, Charlie Meecham, Kate Mellor and Pete Fraser. Meadows became a part of this group, and the photographers worked closely together, often setting themselves group assignments. They have remained friends throughout his life.

At the time, Meadows was living in Moss Side in Manchester. This was a huge inner city area that was in the stage of being





Above: John Payne, aged 11, with pigeon Chequer and friends the White brothers, Michael (left) and Calvin, Portsmouth. 26 April 1974

regenerated and demolished. Because living there was so cheap, a mixture of people settled: artists, students, transient people and newly arrived immigrants from places like the West Indies, Poland, Ireland and the Indian subcontinent.

At college, one of his tutors showed him Irving Penn's "Worlds in a Small Room"; this gave Meadows an idea. Back then, you could rent property in Moss Side for next to nothing, so he rented a small shop on Greame Street and decided to use it as a pop-up studio. He used leftover Colorama from the fashion course as a backdrop to his studio and put a sign in the window saying anyone who came in could get their portrait taken for free.

The local community embraced this. Passers-by would come in to get their portrait taken. When doing so, they would chat to Meadows about their lives. Meadows loved this. He got to learn all about the neighbourhood from the people who were living there. He had the shop for about eight weeks. While taking people's

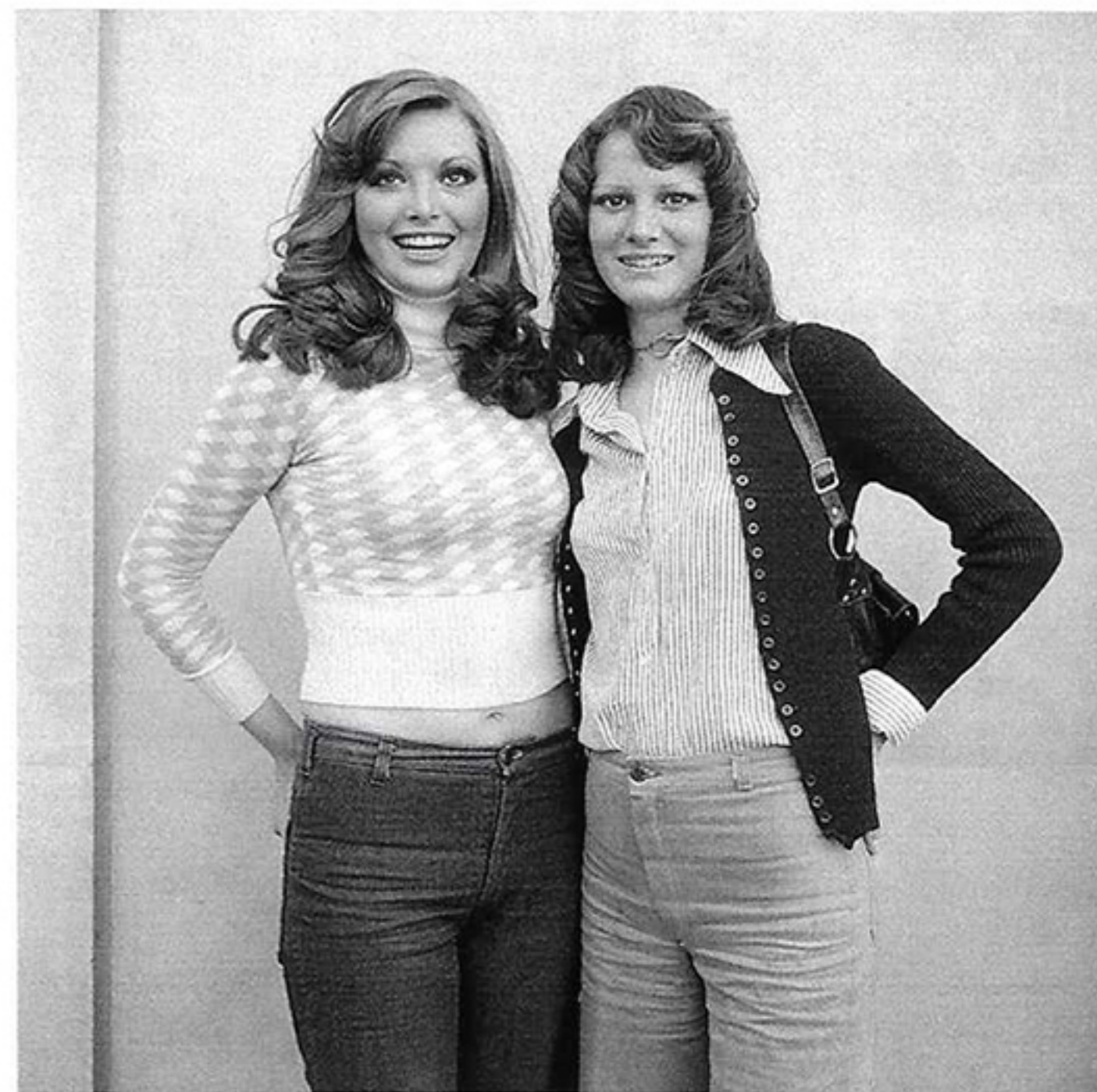
photos, he would also make audio recordings inspired by the radio shows he'd listened to back at school. A couple of them still survive.

Inspired by the shop's success, he decided to take the project further. He wanted to take the idea all around the country. His plan was to convert a double-decker bus into a moving studio and offer free portraits to members of the public he met on his journey. During his final year at college he wrote up to ten letters daily to institutions like The Arts Council, asking for funding for this idea. He also took a job at Butlin's holiday camp to save for the project. He eventually managed to scrape the money, and 'The Free Photographic Omnibus' was born.

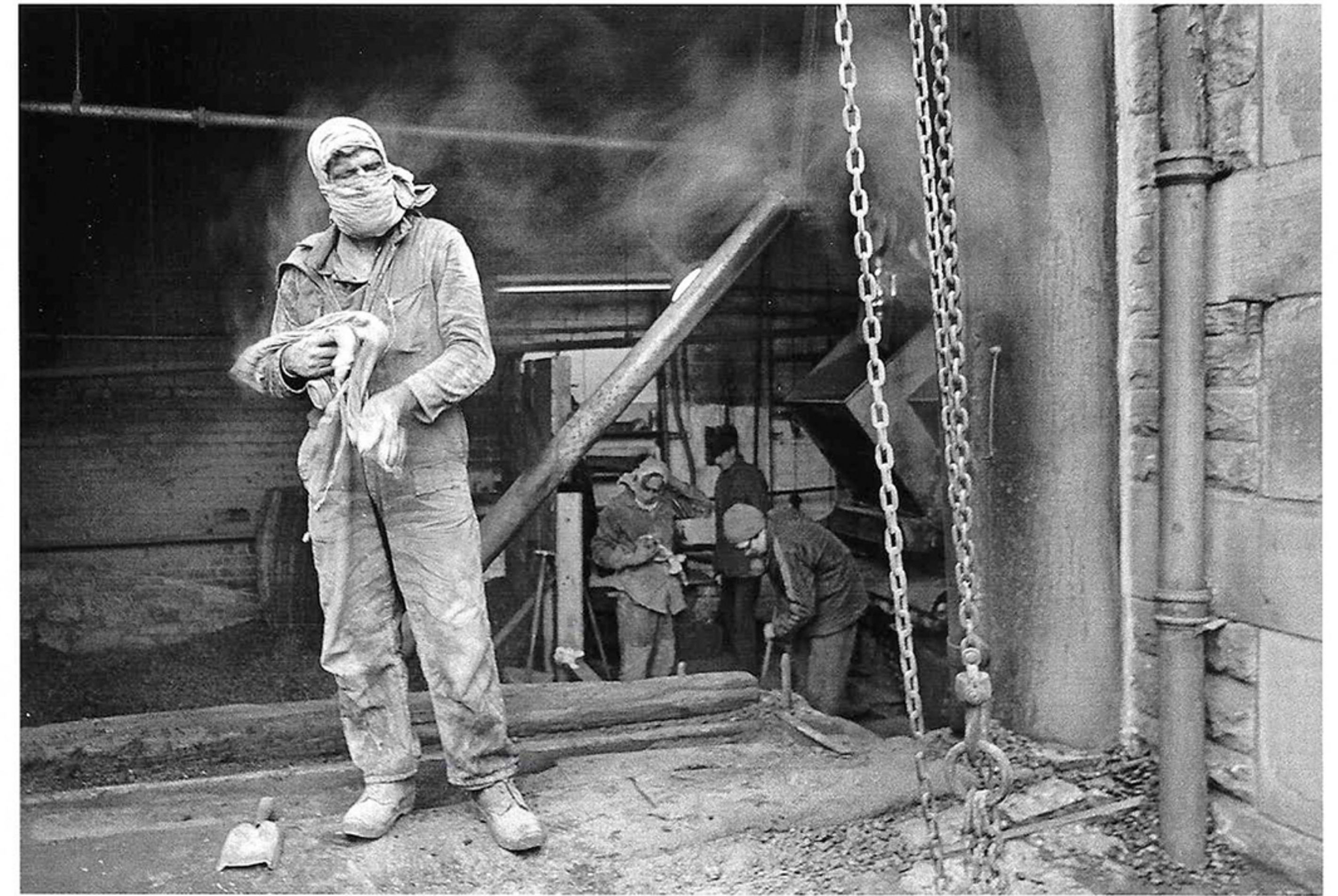
Once he'd bought the bus, he removed the seats to create a living space and a darkroom. Its windows were used as a moving gallery where he'd display the portraits he took as he travelled around the country. He loved the process. People would come and get their portrait taken, and then, when they returned to get their print, it would be a great opportunity to have a conversation with them. Meadows sometimes recorded those conversations, and they have since become important historical documents - an insight into a time and a way of life that no longer exists.

Meadows also loved the fact that talking to local people would also lead to recommendations and introductions to further subjects for Meadows to document - a local folk club, a social club or a Trade Union meeting. The camera allowed him to integrate into the communities within a very short period of time. By then, he had a second-hand Rolleiflex camera. Meadows loves the Rolleiflex - he's 6'5, so bending down to peer into the viewfinder meant he wasn't looking down on his subjects. "It was a very convivial tool," he said. Meadows visited over twenty towns in around 14 months and covered over 10,000 miles. The bus often broke down. It rained... a lot. Local authorities wouldn't always let him park. It was frustrating but on some days, the sun would come out, and people would turn up and queue to have their pictures taken and there'd be a real buzz about the project.

He would spend four weeks on the road and then return to Manchester for a fortnight to create an exhibition containing text and pictures. He would make two copies - one for the bus windows and one for the regional arts association where he took the shots. He had six exhibitions in total. Recently, Meadows tried to find the work that appeared in the exhibitions, and sadly, only one set of prints remains.



Above: The Brasher sisters: Lyn (left) and Stella, Southampton. May 1974



Above: Member of the Weldone gang from Brierfield taking off his rags ('fent'). Barnoldswick, Lancashire. Easter holiday, April 1976

Once this project had ended, Meadows sold the bus to pay for the time to write his first book, "Living Like This", which combined the Omnibus photography and written-up interviews with the people he had spoken with on the journey. The book was published in 1975 alongside an exhibition at the ICA in London. Meadows then worked as the photographer in residence for the Borough of Pendle in Lancashire. Nowadays, it's inconceivable that a local council would pay a photographer to document the lives of its residents, but this wasn't altogether uncommon back then. Meadows loved this work as it gave him more opportunities to go to places with his camera and tape recorder.

Unlike his portrait work in the shop and on the bus, his photo stories were shot on 35mm Olympus OM1 and OM2. During this time, he did photo stories about theatre groups, the area's architecture, and a photo story about weavers - the work was diverse, and Meadows loved it.

While doing a photo story on a steam-powered mill, he became friendly with one of the mill workers, Stanley who introduced him to many local people. Meadows returned this favour by teaching Stanley how to use the darkroom and introducing him to the local college where he did evening classes. Stanley was made redundant when the mill inevitably closed down a couple of years later. He went off to Lancaster University to study history. Meadows was delighted that he had managed to help Stanley move his life in a different direction. When talking to Meadows, it's easy to see where the empathy one finds in his photography comes from.

Another project he did for Pendle Council documented the final years of the textile industry. An exhibition, "Shuttles, Steam & Soot", was exhibited by Camerawork and toured the country in 1978. Many of these photo stories have since been published by Café Royal Books. They can also be seen on Meadows' comprehensive website (danielmeadows.co.uk).

In 1983, Meadows moved from the north of England to south Wales to teach David Hurn's documentary photography course in Newport. Later, he moved to the Centre for Journalism Studies at Cardiff University, where he stayed until his retirement in 2012.

While in Cardiff, he worked under former Independent newspaper editor Ian Hargreaves, who opened a door for Meadows at the BBC, where he became creative director of 'Capture Wales', a community digital storytelling project. Meadows and his team went to schools, youth clubs, libraries and social clubs with a van full of computers inviting local people, ten at a time, to make two minute films based on their personal archives. People would bring in old photographs, cine films, videos, etc. and be taught how to combine this material to make short films telling their stories. This was a hugely successful project. Its stories were published on the web and broadcast on television. It won a Bafta Cymru in 2002. 'BBC Capture Wales' is the thing that Meadows is most proud of because it offered a rare opportunity for participants to tell their own stories in their own way. Meadows has always loved the idea of collaborating with his subjects.

A few years ago, Meadows was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. This has made using a camera increasingly difficult, but Meadows has remained busy, meticulously cataloguing and organising his huge body of work. Recently, this was acquired by the Bodleian Library in Oxford, Ensuring that five decades of recorded interviews, films and photographs are easily accessible to scholars, anthropologists and anyone interested in the lives of everyday people. Meadows' manifesto has always been unwaveringly single-minded - to let ordinary people be heard. To tell the stories that historians have previously ignored. So understandably, he's delighted that academics, through the Bodleian Library, are using his work as a resource - "It's still living and breathing and being used."

Back in the 70s, when people asked the then-20-year-old Meadows why he wanted to take their photo, Meadows often said, "I'm going to put you in the history books." Little did he know that 50 years later, through countless exhibitions, press articles, photography books and having his work held by one of the most esteemed libraries in the world, just how true to his word he would be. His latest book: 'Daniel Meadows Book of the Road' celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Free Photographic Omnibus. It is published by Bluecoat Press.

Interviewed by Steve Reeves

Next page: From the series: James Nutter & Sons, Bancroft Shed, Barnoldswick, Lancashire. The engine house with Stanley Graham, mill engineer. Maintenance, repairs to gland packing on high pressure cylinder. June 1976

Below: From the series: Peter Tatham, steeplejack. 150 feet up, atop of the stack and shortly after starting the demolition process, Peter Tatham, poses for his portrait. The arm, right, belongs to Eric Heginbotham ('Higgy') who, along with Andy Berger, were Peter's assistants. Disused city incinerator chimney, Salford. September 1976

