

The Application of Camera Work to Design Studies in Metal

Photography retains that magical property of being able to stimulate, excite and exhilarate the most blasé.

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My original intention was to give the boys instruction in the use of cameras and a little guidance on suitable subjects for photographs, then to turn them loose in the town and use the school's darkroom to develop and print the results of their efforts. The prints would then be mounted on boards for use as visual aids in the metalwork shop.

I soon ran into snags. The school darkroom had just been demolished as part of a massive reconstruction programme. The cost of commercial developing and printing, added to that of hiring cameras and buying film made the whole project very expensive and a request to the LEA for financial assistance met with refusal. As the entire project now had to be financed privately I had to reduce its scale and made do with three cameras. Another worry was that the weather might let us down; it being too dark in December to begin photography after school we had to trust to luck that a dry and sunny Saturday would turn up, which, happily, it did.

First I broached the project with members of my fifth form GCE class, sketched in the broad outlines and asked for volunteers. Of a class of twelve, ten boys expressed interest but of these three had regular commitments on Saturdays and were unable to participate. One boy was ill on the day we tackled the work, leaving six boys to take part.

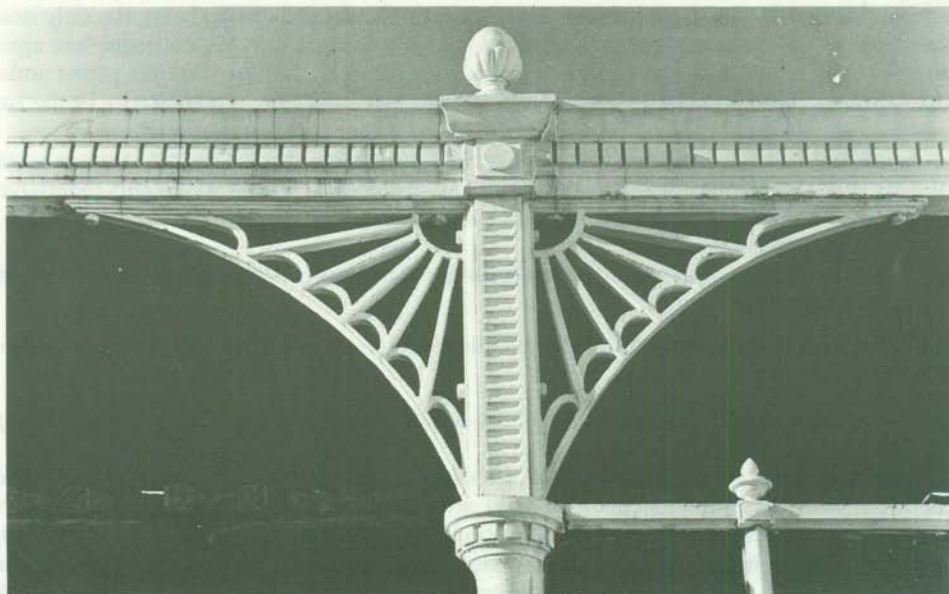
One had his own 35 mm. camera and one had an Instamatic. I was able to borrow another cartridge type camera which two boys used, while I used my Zenit 35 mm. with 37 mm. wide angle lens and 135 mm. telephoto lens.

In preparation for the work we made lists of suitable subjects under the headings of CAST IRON, WROUGHT IRON and MILD STEEL, and agreed to keep our eyes open for others. The lists rapidly approached one hundred items with a preponderance of cast-iron objects. As Colwyn Bay grew up with the coming of the railway, in what was a 'cast-iron' era, this is hardly surprising. We then drew a map dividing the town into three areas, one for each team of two boys. In each case one boy had some experience of photography and one was a complete novice. Each team was given a list of the subjects to be photographed and cards upon which to make notes. I suggested that the boys take photographs alternately and while one was photographing the other could note down the relevant information.

We met at school at 9.30 a.m. and cameras and film were distributed. Two twelve exposure films each for the cartridge type cameras and one thirty six exposure film for each of the 35 mm cameras. The boys went off to their respective areas and I had a roving commission from group to group. Martin, who is a railway enthusiast and model engineer (a rivet-counter by his own admission) and Paul, who had given up a ticket for the Liverpool-Leeds soccer match in order to take part, were given the railway station and



Cast Iron fence panel. Colwyn Bay Pier. Note: Victoria Pier Co. motif in centre of panel.



Cast Iron support bracket. Roof of Colwyn Bay Pier.

its environs for their area. There was no shortage of work here and their whole film had been used up by the time we met again at 12.15 p.m. Neil and Phillip, who had come on bicycles had a more scattered area, beginning in the Civic Centre at the eastern end of the town and working back past the Fire Service H.Q., with its wrought-iron gates, Eirias Site of the High School and then Eirias Park. Kevin and David had the Pendorlan Site of the School, the Dingle (a deep declivity between the two school sites) and then the promenade and the pier, both north of the railway. It soon became evident that they would have to wait for most of their shots until the sun rose to its zenith. I left them at Pendorlan waiting until the sun cleared some trees and illuminated the gates. Later I met them on the promenade waiting for the sun to rise above the railway embankment in order to photograph some of the iron work on the pier.

When we all met at the end of the morning the few exposures left were used up on shots of the group who had taken part in the exercise. It was obvious that the boys had found several subjects beyond those which we had listed.

A colleague had kindly offered the use of his darkroom for the necessary processing and had also given permission for me to take the boys in to help. Apart from saving a considerable sum of money on commercial processing this also made the project more valuable and interesting for the boys.

Martin had his own darkroom so he and Paul worked together on developing and printing the film which they had taken. Neil and I spent one evening printing the films which he and Phillip had taken. Phillip and Kevin spent another morning with me printing up the remainder of the negatives. The task of mounting the prints was carried out at school during the Christmas holiday. David, Martin, Kevin and Phillip being the only ones free to help on that occasion gave up the whole day to the work. My colleague had again come to our rescue and loaned us a dry mounting press. We mounted up the prints under the headings: CAST-IRON, WROUGHT-IRON, MILD-STEEL, GENERAL. In the last category we placed pictures of articles made of more than one ferrous metal.

In addition to the photographs rubbings had been taken by the boys of various metal objects such as plaques, grids, name-plates and ornamental motifs which lent themselves to this treatment. A selection of these too was mounted on cards.

The aims of the project were:

- (1) To develop an awareness of the use of metals, in particular 'ferrous metals' in their environment.
- (2) To teach them a little about the techniques of photography and the composition of pictures.
- (3) To produce prints and rubbings which could be used as a visual aid in the workshop.

That the first of these aims was achieved I have no doubt. The six boys who participated in the project frequently drew my attention to some ferrous object or other in the town which had escaped our attention. My eyes too were opened; I learned, for example, that a bridge which I pass under daily, bears a cast-iron plaque with the superscription "L.N.W.Rly.Co". This company was a forerunner of the L.M.S. which itself preceded British Rail.



Sewer vent pipe tucked in the trees and some fine cast-iron railings. Station square, Colwyn Bay.

Wonderment is a feeling all too rare in the lives of people today, even of children. By means of television and films they have already experienced vicariously much that life has to offer long before they leave school. In my view this is a sad deprivation. I shall always remember the tingling feeling of excitement engendered by my first flight. The anticipation that took one's breath away, then that heart stopping moment as the plane became airborne. Something of that feeling is always recaptured for me in the darkroom as the latent image begins to emerge when the apparently blank paper is placed in the developer. I am happy to record that I observed a similar excitement in the boys when they were working in the darkroom. Photography perhaps retains that magical property of being able to stimulate, excite and exhilarate the most blasé. The boys were extraordinarily curious and keen to learn. They quickly mastered the mechanics of the thing although the subtleties of print quality left them somewhat perplexed. What the Camera Club pundits would have called 'Soot and Whitewash', tended to be hailed as a masterpiece. Focus they understood immediately, and within the limits imposed by the cheap lenses of the cartridge cameras and the resulting rather indifferent negatives, produced some workmanlike, if small (4" x 3") prints. Composition was grasped quite readily if a little unquestioningly and wherever possible our prints displayed a centre of interest placed with mathematical, if monotonous precision on the intersecting thirds of the picture space.

Having had a few months in which to evaluate the worth of the prints as a visual aid in the work shop I think our third aim has been achieved, perhaps more fully than the first two. Most workshops, which must be well lit, suffer the inevitable consequence of large window space and little wall space. However, by using every square inch of space surrounding room doors, I managed to put up six sheets of small prints and four large (12" x 10") prints.

Each print was given a number and the sheet titles and captions were temporarily covered. Classes were divided into teams, each with a captain, and asked to identify the objects, state their location and name the material of which they were made. Some objects, like street name-plates, were immediately obvious. Others, for example a cast-iron letter box, while easily identified, were not so easy to locate. Yet others, like gratings, could be located only by close observation of the surrounding road surface, cobblestones in Station Square, or a broken kerbstone near a grating in a lay-by. Some of the observers were shrewd enough to notice such clues, others were not. The novelty of the topic aroused considerable interest and enthusiasm among the boys using the workshop and for weeks afterwards boys would tell me of yet another Victorian lamp-post which has so far eluded the eye of the planners, or of a wrought-iron gate discovered in some remote part of the town.

Apart from opening the eyes of the boys to the artefacts about them, photography, by virtue of its ability to isolate objects from their surroundings assists in the tracing of design changes over the years. One of our prints shows the base of a Victorian lamp post, cast in iron and lavishly decorated with the town crest and ornamented with acanthus leaves. This illustrates well the fusibility of the material and the boys readily understand that having once carved the pattern in wood then it is relatively inexpensive to reproduce the mould and thus cast an unlimited number of lamps. They usually then ask why these



Cast Iron 'Serpent' bench brackets. Colwyn Bay Promenade.

have largely been replaced with the concrete lamp posts which now decorate the town, and which, incidentally, won a Design Centre award when first they were designed. This leads to a discussion of the relative merits of the two designs. Which lamp casts the most light and over how wide an area? It is realised, for example, that iron lamps have to be painted regularly and the cost in paint and labour must be considerable, concrete posts require little or no maintenance. The question often arises: would it not be possible to fit the modern lamp to the old post? If this was technically possible would the two look well together? As the iron lamp post is usually a good deal shorter than the concrete would it fail to distribute its light over so wide an area? More generally does the austerity of its appearance enhance or restrict the quality of life?

Among our photographs we have some of benches in the parks and on the promenade. These benches consist of planks for the seat and back rest, mounted on cast iron brackets. Some of these brackets are cast in the form of a rather contorted coiled snake. This snake is quite unbelievable; no reptile frozen into such a position could have such a happy smile on its face. One wonders if the designer, like his snake, had his tongue in cheek, or did he too, like his colleague who tortured a pair of scissors into the shape of a stork in flight, win a prize at the Great Exhibition of 1851?