

SHOOT LOCAL, THINK GLOBAL

Once known as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, the Black Country has fallen on hard times in recent decades, and remains home to pockets of severe economic deprivation. So it's not the kind of place you'd expect to find one of Britain's most progressive community-arts organisations, which for its latest project has commissioned four of the world's leading documentary photographers to record the everyday lives of people in the region... **Diane Smyth** reports.

Historians trace the Black Country's name back to the large seams of coal laced through its soil, but in the popular imagination, the term will always be associated with the Industrial Revolution and the heavy pollution it wrought on this loosely defined area between Birmingham and Wolverhampton. In the words of Charles Dickens' description in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, published in 1841, the factory chimneys "poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air".

The name may have stuck but the landscape has altered radically since the last coal mine closed in 1968. Much of the region's large-scale industrial manufacture followed in the 1970s and 80s, leaving cleaner air but also large pockets of severe economic deprivation, which has only been compounded by the latest downturn. The postwar influx of immigrants into the area also changed the makeup of the place, with nearly a quarter of the population in the boroughs of Sandwell and Wolverhampton now coming from ethnic minorities. It all makes for rich local history, but it's a story that has also been repeated elsewhere in the UK and beyond. "The Black Country stories of de-industrialisation are universal," says Martin Parr, who has been working in the region recently as a community artist. "I've been looking at global issues for the last 10 years, so I've been very much enjoying working on something local, but at the same time it's also relevant beyond the Black Country."

Parr was commissioned by Multistory, a forward-thinking community-arts organisation funded by the Arts Council England and Sandwell Metropolitan Council. Multistory's remit is to "work with artists and communities to tell stories about everyday life",

and when Emma Chetcuti, director of the project, approached Parr, her request was simple – to work with her, her team and the local population to record people's everyday lives.

"We wanted to make sure the local people were involved, that they were co-producers," she says. "One of the reasons that we chose to work with Martin is that his images are accessible to the local audience. But at the same time we were interested in getting an outsider's view and in working with a photographer with an international reach. Martin is one of the best British documentary photographers, so we knew we would get interesting pictures, but also attract attention to the area."

On the record

Chetcuti and Parr first met to discuss the project two years ago and the photographer "jumped at the chance", as he puts it, first beginning work in March 2010 in Sandwell, one of the region's three major boroughs. Last year he headed to Walsall, this year he will photograph around Wolverhampton, and in 2013 he will work in Dudley, the Black Country's unofficial capital. Chetcuti and her team started out by researching stories they thought would interest the photographer, but driving him from place to place and seeing him in action, they were able to get a much clearer idea of the kind of subjects he wanted to shoot. So far he's visited a sweet factory and other workplaces, as well as pubs, clubs,

¹ Martin Parr has been commissioned by Multistory to shoot the everyday lives of Black Country people over the course of four years. This image shows Norman Spoer, who won Best Pot Leek in the Sandwell Show, West Bromwich in 2010. Image © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos.





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cafes, fetes and street parties – communal places where people have always got together for work or play, but which may be less secure than they seem. “Every time we have gone there, there have been less shops in the high street and less pubs,” says Parr. “It’s important to record what’s going on.”

Parr has been criticised for his candid approach to portraiture, with his book *Last Resort: Photographs of New Brighton* causing an outcry when it was published in 1986 because of what some saw as its satirical portrayal of the working class. Chetcuti doesn’t agree, and says his directness attracted her to his work – and echoes a peculiarly Black Country ethos. “They’re honest pictures,” she says. “Martin gets up close to people; he’s interested in their lives. One lady said she didn’t like having her picture taken and at first refused, but Martin just said, ‘You haven’t come to terms with how you look’, and she laughed and said he was right. People in the Black Country tend to be quite open, and I think this directness helps make his work accessible to them. Martin always gives people who have had their portrait taken a copy of the print.”

In fact, Multistory has worked hard to ensure local people have been able to see the images, exhibiting

them first at The Public in West Bromwich (where Multistory is based), making them available online and printing them up into a newspaper that was distributed via the local paper to 48,000 homes in Sandwell. Parr showed all the images he had taken over his first 20 shooting days, arguing that in a project such as this, the documentary value of the work is more important than the aesthetic. “I often find that the value in photographs isn’t just great photography, it’s in its documentary value,” he says. “That’s what people will find fascinating in 58 years. I try to take interesting photographs and I always hope they are great, but anything helps provide information for the future – when you’re shooting like this you accumulate a lot of images, and at the time you don’t realise how much information is in them. In the future the archive pictures will be just as interesting as the pictures blown up into larger prints. Plus local people have an interest in documentary work, in seeing themselves, their husbands, their wives, their children.”

Other voices

“We hope that the public will bring their own images,” says Chetcuti, who is also collecting local stories and has employed an oral historian to interview

2 Making sticks of rock at Teddy Gray’s, confectionery manufacturer, in Dudley, 2010. Image © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos.

3 An indoor market in West Bromwich, March 2011. Image © Mark Power/Magnum Photos.



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people. At Parr's instigation she has also got three other photographers involved – two from Magnum Photos, Susan Meiselas and Mark Power, along with David Goldblatt from Johannesburg – plus the writers Alain de Botton and Margaret Drabble. Together they will create an ambitious body of work that will be exhibited and toured locally and archived for future generations. "Each commission is particular to an area in the Black Country, but we try to find projects that the photographer has an interest in," says Chetcuti. "Mark has been taking large format photographs of the urban landscape, for example, while Susan will focus on the lives of women and girls in the area and David is photographing ex-offenders at the scene of their crime, in an extension of a project he has started in South Africa. I'm looking at a total of four years' work. At the very least, it demonstrates that some of the more interesting projects happen outside of London."

"Emma approached me earlier this year and I said yes without hesitation," says Power. "I knew Martin had already been working with Multistory, and had nothing but good things to say about them, and he was absolutely right – Emma, and the whole organisation, are completely committed to helping me make the best

work I possibly can. They help me think through ideas without ever leading me where they might want me to go. I'm encouraged to make my work – nothing is impossible and, better still, everything is possible."

Power made his first visit in March, when Chetcuti and her team introduced him to "some interesting areas and a few colourful characters but, crucially, they also gave me the space to think". The photographer lives in Brighton, where the economic downturn has made little visual impact so far, so initially he was struck by how hard the Black Country has been hit. After spending a little longer in the area he noticed the plethora of nail parlours, tanning salons, hair stylists and tattooists. "I learnt that there was a successful beautician's course at the Sandwell FE college – I'm guessing that graduates leave and, at relatively little expense, start their own modest businesses in one of the many empty shops," he says. "Many of the immigrants from eastern Europe, particularly Poles [Power's last book was set in Poland, and he maintains a flat in Krakow], have done the same. I also couldn't help noticing that 'Gentlemen's Clubs' seemed to be doing good business."

To Power, the lap-dancing clubs reinforce a certain type of masculinity, while the beauty salons reassert

4 Mark Power, who has also been commissioned by Multistory, was initially shocked by how hard the economic downturn had hit the Black Country. He then started noticing the proliferation of beauty salons in the area and how hard locals work on keeping up appearances. Samantha's shoes, West Bromwich, October 2011. Image © Mark Power/Magnum Photos.



feminine roles, and show how local women try to look their best in even the worst of times. He's shot several short films in the clubs and salons plus a series of images of people's shoes, and will exhibit these pieces alongside his more characteristic large-format urban landscapes in the *Black Country Stories* show at the New Art Gallery Walsall this summer. He's also shot every chair in a Dudley foundry - "old friends" that have been patched and fixed many times over the years - and will turn this series into a newspaper. The final element will be a sound installation using the "often very romantic names given to beauty products".

"The exhibition will be complicated and multi-layered, because the situation itself is extremely complicated," he adds. "I was raised in Leicester so the Black Country doesn't feel completely alien to me, but nevertheless my idea was born because of the fact I came from elsewhere. It's an odd mix of familiarity and total bewilderment. But you'd be hard-pressed to meet finer, kinder people anywhere. Working here is an absolute joy."

Meiselas and Goldblatt have yet to start shooting, but the South African has already visited the area and hopes to start work by summer. The 82-year-old rarely accepts projects outside his homeland, and says he

felt he knew too little of the area to shoot landscapes, but decided it would be interesting to meet some ex-offenders and compare their stories with those of the former prisoners he's photographed at home. "I work with organisations, usually rehabilitation organisations, and ask them to put me in touch with ex-offenders. I explain the project to them and warn them of the dangers of taking part," he says. "If in the future they want to get married, or they want to get a job, it may make it more difficult so I never try to persuade them, and if they show any hesitation I tell them not to do it.

"If they agree, I photograph them at the scene of the crime, and then ask them to tell me their life story. In South Africa, there are very high levels of crime so I wanted to see the people behind it. I didn't feel able to photograph the Black Country; it has a whole culture and tradition I wouldn't be able to pick up in a few weeks, but I thought it would be interesting to photograph ex-offenders and see their similarities and differences. I met Emma and she was very interested, and we met a couple of groups who I hope can help. It's very brave of the people who are organising it and I am very glad to have met them." *BJP*

www.multistory.org.uk

5 Tipton, 05 October 2011.

6 Dudley, 07 October 2011. Both images
© Mark Power/Magnum Photos.

On show

Martin Parr's *Black Country Stories* will be exhibited at the New Art Gallery, Walsall, from 20 January to 07 April. Each photographer's work will be shown in turn before the project is completed in 2014. The final edit will be shown at the New Art Gallery, Walsall, before touring across the region. www.thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk



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