

March 2020

The Berwick Photo Centre

Cameron Robertson gave a fascinating talk about the Berwick Photo Centre, including the history of the small family business 1951–2012 and the huge collection of photographs, now in Berwick Record Office.

The story starts with David Smith, who left school in 1930 to become a journalist on his local newspaper, the *Perthshire Constitutional*. Once promoted to editor, he decided that every week there would be a full page of photographs, which he took himself.

He moved to the *Berwick Advertiser*, then served in the Royal Corps of Signals during WWII (the paper was run by women during the war, with his wife employed as chief reporter). He returned to the *Advertiser*, and in 1947 was appointed editor, then in 1949 he set up a Photo Department.

It was then common practice for journalists to send copies of their articles and/or photographs to other papers, but the *Advertiser's* owner Major Smail wanted to curtail this. So in 1951 David Smith left to set up a freelance business, the Berwick Photo Centre, which provided both a commercial service and as a press agency supplied news photographs locally, across the UK, and internationally.

David Smith's pictures appeared in many national papers, in prestige publications including the New York Times, and on the BBC. A notable example is that when scandal about local MP Lord Lambton hit the headlines, a small part of one of David Smith's apparently routine photographs of a Berwick Conservative Party meeting appeared around the world, showing the MP apparently dozing beside his wife.

Local news items included Billy Smarts circus elephant crossing the border; laying turf for Berwick rangers FC; the last pit pony in a pub; the 1951 opening of the May Fair; the Wooler shepherds' supper at the Angel; and the Queen's visit in 1956. Most of the photographs are crowd scenes, which were found to increase newspaper sales.

A Photo Centre photographer was often first on scene at accidents, acting as unofficial police photographer, so there are images of the 1953 train derailment at Goswick; a road traffic accident in a blizzard on the Great North Road just north of Berwick; the 1971 fire at Walkers garage (now Mike Hope's) in Wooler; and one of the first helicopter rescues from Holy Island causeway.

They also photographed celebrities: Richard Burton & Elizabeth Taylor at Bamburgh, before their relationship was made public; and Cliff Richard, the Moody Blues and the Beatles who at various times stayed overnight in Berwick on their way north. Photos also feature racing driver Jim Clark at

Chirnside. Local celebrities include fishermen pictured with their record salmon catches in the Tweed, and the last shift at Black Hall Pit in 1959. The photographers also recorded personal events: weddings, young men in uniform, dinner dances, night clubs, the aftermath of burglaries and injuries for insurance claims, and day trippers at Spittal beach – pictures which illustrate changing social conventions.

The Photo Centre operated first from premises above 120 Marygate, from 1952 at 10 Hyde Hill, which included a studio, and from 1953 at 17 Bridge Street. The Smiths' son Ian and his wife joined the business in 1965. The photographic equipment available in the 1950s required considerable technical skill: for each individual picture, a glass plate had to be inserted into a large, heavy camera. There was no colour photography: the camera captured a black and white image, so when a colour picture was required the plate was sent to a processor in Yorkshire with a list of hues and shades for hand-colouring, sometimes with pieces of fabric or a lock of hair to ensure a good match. The first colour photo in the collection is of a Miss Berwick in the 1960s.

There are 3–4 million photographs in the Collection, which was bought by the Friends of Berwick Record Office in 2012. Images are being digitised to make them accessible on the BRO database. An exhibition at the Granary publicised the Collection, along with the publication of two books of photographs, on the '50s and the '60s