

FOUR STAR

The decline of the rural garage

Jenny Graham



I began photographing rural garages because I loved the look of them - their colour, idiosyncrasy and variety. Growing up in America, images of garages seeped into my consciousness - forecourts, petrol tanks, big colourful signs, old cars, the varied paraphernalia of the rural automotive industry. There are so many visual delights in these places, to say nothing of their social and historical associations.

Every month, more rural garages close down, unable to compete with the supermarkets or the large multinational petrol stations. Like the closures of village shops and post offices, each loss deprives a community of another part of its character. Every garage is a microcosm of rural life, a place not only to have your car fixed, but also to advertise the village fete or put up a sign for a lost cat. The owners know their cus-



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tomers by name and don't run their businesses through a computer linked to head office hundreds of miles away.



Over a two-year period I photographed 36 garages and related businesses across Somerset. During the second year, I collaborated with the Bristol-based poet Ralph Hoyte, who wrote a series of poems based on his own visits to the garages. We created large banners of image and text to display at selected garages throughout the region and bumper stickers with slogans such as 'Get Vocal - Buy Local' to convey the importance of supporting village industries; the photographs, poems and banners were also exhibited at the Haynes Motor Museum in Sparkford, Somerset.

The project, which I called 'Four Star' for obvious reasons, was an enormous creative challenge, as I've never really considered myself a photographer. I am primarily a landscape painter who uses photography in a very 'un-technical' way to record textures and patterns that I wouldn't want to paint. But photography seemed perfectly suited to the kind of mechanical detail intrinsic to garages.

I used a standard SLR camera with no special lenses or filters and, more often than not, set rather lazily on 'automatic'. As I didn't use a tripod either, I was able to move around my subject freely; for dark interiors, I used a bounce flash. I had the film processed locally, scanned the images into Photoshop and adjusted colours until the image corresponded to my visual and emotional response to the subject. Professional photographers might have been critical of my approach, but my rather amateurish methods allowed me to respond to images and situations that might have been dismissed by someone with more experience and knowledge of the technical pitfalls.



I had, in the past, usually only worked with people who are interested in and familiar with the visual arts, so this project was a steep learning curve for my people skills. Although some proprietors were interested and sympathetic to the project, many others responded with bemusement, surprise or lack of interest. None the less, almost all were happy to talk about their businesses and allow me to wander around freely taking photographs. But why, many of them wondered, would I want to take pictures of rusting cars, disused petrol tanks and cluttered workshops?

This was not easy to answer tactfully as 'because I love other people's junk' or 'I'm trying to record a fading industry' is not always convincing to busy people struggling with rising running costs, increased regulation and awkward planning authorities. But in talking with and listening to them, I learned a remarkable amount about their world and its problems. Most enjoyed their work and felt frustrated by the changes that were making it harder and harder to stay in business.

Some of their stories were sad, some tragic; only a few looked to the future with hope and enthusiasm. Many would be the last generation to work in a business that might have started 80 years ago.



Since the completion of the project, two years ago, garages continue to close at an alarming rate. Soon there may be none left.

Some people may be pleased about this, seeing them as an unnecessary and untidy part of the rural idyll so beloved of city immigrants. But I think we will lose yet another part of the colourful and varied pattern of rural England.



Jenny Graham has been working as an artist in Somerset since moving there in 1984.