

## George Plemper talks about his photographic Thamesmead series 1976-1978



George Plemper with Mark? 1978 Photographer Unknown.

Born in Sunderland and brought up in the mining village of Castletown, I arrived in Thamesmead to take up my position as Head of Chemistry at Riverside School, Yarnton Way, at the start of the Autumn term in 1976. When I applied for the job at Riverside School I did not know where Thamesmead was; I had a vague idea that it was some sort of new town on the banks of the River Thames. It was a lovely day when I stepped off the train at Abbey Wood and I remember thinking, as I walked along the raised walkways by Yarnton Way, this is nice. A few years earlier I had seen 'A Clockwork Orange,' I did not realise that some of the scenes were set in this new town just to the north of where I was walking. Not that it would have made any difference to me anyway.

Riverside School, which was on the Bexley side of Thamesmead, emphasised the 'pastoral care' of its pupils. Pastoral care is the concept that education is more about the development of the whole person and not simply about the teaching of the 'three R's'. This appealed to me and I remember telling the headmaster of Riverside School, Dr French, that I wanted to use the camera to record the children's lives at school in a positive, affirmative way and by doing so reinforce the pupil's sense of self and self-esteem. These days it is likely that this sort of suggestion would be met with a look of horror or concern. Dr French however, simply smiled and told me he thought that this was a wonderful idea. When I told my colleagues that that I had a new job at Riverside School, Thamesmead they went quiet. Their silence was like thunder.

At first I lived in a rundown bedsit above a shop in the Blackheath Standard area. Thoughts of my first day at Riverside and the oppressive heat of 1976 kept me awake. I lay in bed watching two mice climbing up and down the refrigerator's electric cable. A cat appeared on the sill of the open window and scanned the room. The mice melted into the darkness. The cat jumped into my room. After the cat completed its patrol it disappeared into the night and I never saw the mice again.

When I first used the camera in the school yard the children looked on inquisitively – just what was going on?

After school I would walk through Thamesmead to Abbey Wood Station and get the train back to Westcombe Park. With the window of my bedsit blacked out using a sheet of Rexine that I got from my Dad, who was an upholsterer, I made a makeshift darkroom and I was able to develop and print my photographs which I gave to the children to show their parents a day or so later. Time passed and using 'Privet' Hedges<sup>i</sup> as my role model, I was able to foster a caring, trusting relationship with my pupils and, mostly, they seemed to enjoy having their pictures taken by me. Some children told me that they did not want their pictures taken and this was OK.

For my part, I was never comfortable in the classroom, sometimes it would seem that I was having an out of body experience and I would find myself looking down at myself in the classroom thinking that this was not the way I wanted to be. When I held the camera in my hand my world changed. Like Superman emerging from a 'phone box, I was much more confident and in control. I think that my pupil's preferred it that way.

During my first term at Riverside I learned that the council was allocating flats to people who they considered to be key workers and discovered that quite a few of my colleagues lived in, what was then called, Stages 1 and 2 of Thamesmead. Just before Christmas I was given the keys to 502 Raymond Postgate Court, in Stage 3 Thamesmead (Now called the Moorings). I moved into my flat in January 1977. I was one of the first people to move in to my floor; it was eerily quiet at night when the noise of the construction work stopped. Although I was disappointed not to have a balcony and access to fresh air (an open window does not count), in general, I was delighted with the flat. It was well built and communal hot water and heating was included in the rent. It was far better than my previous accommodation and better still it had a walk in cupboard which I easily converted into a darkroom. My prints were washed in the bath.

With its makeshift medical facilities, a single shop and the occasional 272 bus, Stage 3 Thamesmead in the mid-70s was a cold and desolate place to live. In those days I spent most of my time living alone and, although it was far from the truth, I believed that my only connection to the world outside of my head was through the lens of a camera. It was a time when my own sense of humanity was slipping down the drain. Only the images that miraculously appeared in my developing tray kept me sane; they whispered to me that I was mistaken.

Without any thought for the future, I walked out of Riverside School in the summer of 1978. After a short period of unemployment, I got a job as a research assistant at the Polytechnic of the Southbank in Borough Road and In March of 1982 I moved from Thamesmead to Burrage Road, Woolwich - strictly Plumstead my wife reminds me. For a few years I visited the Clockhouse Community Centre in Woolwich Dockyard and took photographs of the residents of this new estate. The rest, as they say, is history.

My photographs were the subject of a Half Moon Photographic Workshop travelling exhibition entitled "Lost at School" which opened at the London Institute of Education sometime in 1979. Sadly, the title "Lost at School" was controversial. Although the title was meant to refer to my own personal circumstances and state of mind, almost everyone took it to mean that I was referring to the children. This caused a bit of bad feeling with the members of staff at Riverside School who felt let down and this is something that I regret. A lot of people at Riverside were very kind to me. That's life I suppose.

George Plemper

May 2020.

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<sup>i</sup> A kindly teacher in the London Weekend Television sitcom series 'Please Sir!' 1968-1972