

Tish Murtha, photographic chronicler of unemployed youth in England's north east

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Tish – a documentary about the life and extraordinary work of photographer Patricia Anne “Tish” Murtha was recently screened by the BBC.

Murtha's vivid black-and-white photographs acutely capture neglected elements of working class life. Admirers of Murtha's work have expressed amazement at how she managed to attain such intimacy with her subjects. The answer is bound up with her own background.

Murtha was born in 1956, the third of 10 children of Irish descent, and grew up on a poor council estate in Elswick in the South Shields area of Newcastle in the north east of England. One of Murtha's sisters recalls how their mother tried her best to encourage her children to be creative in difficult circumstances.

Her early skill with a camera was recognised at college and prompted her in 1976 to go to the University of Wales, Newport. She studied at the School of Documentary Photography, set up by Magnum Photos member and documentary photographer David Hurn.

Hurn recalls that during her interview, when asked what she wanted to photograph, Murtha replied; “I want to take pictures of policemen kicking children.” Hurn said it was his shortest ever interview because he understood exactly what she meant and knew she would make a good documentary photographer.

Murtha embarked upon the first of a series of documentary projects, *Newport Pub* (1976), to capture life in poor working class areas. Here, she photographed everyday scenes of regulars at The New Found Out, in a deprived district of Newport.

In one image, we see a drinker rising to leave while finishing his beer, like a soldier leaving for the battle of everyday life as his comrades look on.

In another, an old man, walking stick in hand, seems to point accusingly at someone/something while a young man looks on over his pint.

The warmth and tenderness towards those facing social deprivation that would become synonymous with Murtha's work were already evident in an early shot of an older

homeless couple, Starky and Angela, in Newport.

Returning to her hometown, Murtha produced the *Elswick Kids* (1978) series documenting the lives of children and youngsters she knew playing and hanging out on her local streets.

In this photo, Murtha beautifully captured a moment in the lives of siblings Richard and Louise and their devotion to each other. This picture was used for the cover of *Elswick Kids* (2017), which is now out of print but some of which are reproduced here with the kind permission of her daughter, Ella.

Though not exhibited at the time, *Elswick Kids* led to Murtha's employment by a government-funded scheme as a Community Photographer by the Side Gallery in Newcastle.

When Murtha returned from Wales in 1978, Britain was experiencing a wave of industrial militancy. Strikes by one-and-a-half million public sector workers during the “Winter of Discontent” in 1978-79 paralysed the country. But without a mass socialist alternative to the discredited Callaghan Labour government, it was the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher that were able to exploit the situation, culminating in their election win of March 1979 and inaugurating the most right-wing government then seen in post-war Britain.

In 1979, the Scotswood Works at Elswick was slated for closure. The company was founded in 1847 by William Armstrong and through various permutations (including a merger with Vickers Limited) had produced locomotives, ships, aircraft and armaments. Murtha, unemployed and subsisting on a youth training scheme, was commissioned to document the struggle of its workforce against the plant's closure and the loss of their jobs and livelihoods.

The result, *Save Scotswood Works* (1979), was a series of photographs Murtha produced for the Tyneside Housing Aid Centre publications; *Do You Know What This Is Doing to My Little Girl?--Home Truths in the Year Of The Child* (1979) and *Burying The Problem* (1980), which highlighted child poverty across the Tyneside area.

During this prolific period, Murtha also created the

controversial *Juvenile Jazz Bands* (1979) and *Youth Unemployment* (1981). The former documents children's marching bands, then a significant part of social life on council estates and coal towns of the North East, Wales and the Midlands. Murtha initially worked alongside the band organisers, but soon turned against the ethos of the troupes and instead produced images that critically focused on the regimental drills and militaristic nature of the bands. Murtha was drawn to the impromptu Jazz Bands that sprang up, organised by the children themselves who had been rejected from the official troupes and the series pays them equal attention.

Youth Unemployment (1981) is Murtha's most acclaimed and political body of work. Her obvious interest and focus on the subject grew out of her own experiences. Many of the young lives documented in the series were Murtha's friends, family and neighbours. This closeness is apparent in many images. The series captures a range of emotions of young people in a world which offers them no future; from lethargic boredom to anger, as well as a sense of being misunderstood and "out of place."

During this period of mass factory and mine closures, Murtha's work documents huge social injustices in obvious sympathy with those facing them.

Murtha wrote an essay to accompany the series *Youth Unemployment*, titled "Youth Unemployment in the West End of Newcastle". Murtha's words are read by acclaimed actress Maxine Peake, while the viewer is confronted by her incredible images.

The essay is a searing indictment of the Thatcher government's policies in relation to the creation of mass unemployment amongst the youth:

"Cuts in social spending, including unemployment benefits, mean that the conditions under which they [youth] must endure their enforced idleness will rapidly deteriorate to become an intolerable burden, the consequences of which will be enormous. Society has withdrawn its contract from these young people, can they now be expected to live by its rules? They see no real future for themselves, even the 'right' to earn a living is being replaced by a compulsory dependency on sub-human terms."

Murtha drew the conclusion: "The sense of aimlessness and pent-up frustrations are reaching critical levels where they [the youth] will be transformed into an explosive anger, directed against the establishment that has been so careless of their hopes and needs."

After *Youth Unemployment*, Murtha moved to London where she was commissioned by the Photographers' Gallery to create a series on the sex industry in Soho for the group exhibition *London by Night* (1983). The series paired Murtha's images with text by Karen Leslie who worked as a

dancer and a striptease artist. Leslie was tragically killed not long afterwards when she was knocked off her bicycle in a hit and run incident.

Murtha's final series *Elswick Revisited* (1987-91) documented the impact of increasing cultural diversity in the area where she grew up, as well as signs of rising levels of far-right activity. In 2018, the Photographers' Gallery staged the exhibition *Tish Murtha: Works 1976 – 1991*.

On March 13, 2013, one day before her 57th birthday, Murtha died following a sudden brain aneurysm. She died in poverty, not able to adequately heat her own home. Her incredible talent was by now largely ignored by major galleries in a generally right-wing and reactionary artistic and political climate.

Following her death, Murtha's daughter, Ella, worked with the University of South Wales to compile the Tish Murtha archive, containing thousands of previously unseen images. *Tish* movingly follows this process while Ella struggled with the grief of her mother's fate.

Ella had one proviso for the director on agreeing to make a film, that her mother's politics should be central to the documentary. As with establishing her photographic legacy, the burden fell on Murtha's daughter, along with director Paul Sng (*Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché*), to raise funds for the film through crowdfunding. They raised £45,000 from more than 850 small donations.

On the film's release, Sng told the *Big Issue*: "There's a certain terror in knowing how messed up the world is. Tish confronted that terror and told us how bad things were and how they were going to get worse. That's incredibly courageous. Forty years later, these images and words have retained an urgency that speaks to the concerns faced by people struggling with poverty in the present day. The inequality Tish documented is seen in the 4.3 million children currently living in child poverty—the majority of them in the north of England."

Tish is a powerful reminder of the usually airbrushed realities of life in capitalist society and a determined, uncompromising attempt to document them. This film should have the widest audience.

Many thanks to Ella Murtha for her kind permission for the use of all photographs.

Tish is available on BBC iPlayer until April 2025.



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