

A view from the LPA

The Lincolnshire Photographic Association (LPA) has twenty member clubs spread throughout the county of Lincolnshire which covers an area greater than Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire combined. Five of the member clubs are not affiliated to the North and East Midlands Photographic Federation (N&EMPF). The LPA is an autonomous body that holds its own events, interest groups, workshops, competitions and has its own pool of judges and lecturers. What it does not have is a direct conduit to the Photographic Association of Great Britain (PAGB). Clubs needing access to the PAGB services such as exhibitions, accreditation, judges, lecturers and, in the past, insurance are members of N&EMPF. These clubs pay dues to both the LPA and to N&EMPF.

N&EMPF cannot be accused of not fulfilling its Constitution objectives. The services provided are good. However the problem lies in the fact that these services are not easily available to many clubs and many of these clubs are located in Lincolnshire. The problem is one of geography.

Much of what is written in this report is known to the team that carried out a recent survey on the perceived working of N&EMPF. Recent developments have helped to improve the discontent voiced by Lincolnshire clubs. Positive steps have been the setting up of the Newsletter and the improvement of the website. The running of the last Memorial Lecture online was the most welcome development with a large number of Lincolnshire club members attending it for the first time.

Although events organised by N&EMPF are of a high standard, they are held in places and at times that make attendance difficult. The return journeys from Barton, Skegness and Scunthorpe to Nottingham are 175, 162 and 140 miles respectively. Travel to places such as Long Eaton or Mansfield increase the distance further. The Memorial Lecture has been held in the past in Long Eaton on a Friday night in October. Faced with a five hour round trip in the dark and potentially bad weather conditions, it is not surprising that the event has been attended by very few Lincolnshire club members. For the first time last year by going online N&EMPF made the lecture available to all and it was well received.

It has been argued that N&EMPF's focus should be demographic and not geographic and as a result the location of N&EMPF events should be in areas with the highest concentration of member photographic clubs. Even though, on the face of it, this view makes sense it excludes clubs in the outer reaches of the Federation and Lincolnshire in particular. The use of Newark for the AV competition has addressed the problem somewhat but the solution is not perfect owing to the high cost of the venue available there and it doesn't help the clubs situated in the north of the region.

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to the geographic problem other than to concentrate more on the use of online content. Zoom knows no geographical boundaries and many clubs, hesitant at first, have embraced the technology. Many clubs use the online medium in preference to physical meetings.

One of the complaints raised by LPA clubs is that N&EMPF is elitist. It is not implied that this is intentional on the part of N&EMPF but it is said that the annual exhibition and the various competitions are skewed in a way that favours a small number of 'elite' clubs.

The quality of the work from the 'top' clubs cannot be faulted. However, taking the N&EMPF competitions for example, clubs with a small number of members with high expertise are excluded from taking part simply because it is impossible for them to supply the required number of high quality images that are needed for the entry. The competition format follows the PAGB model where only images of a particular standard, theme and format make the grade.

It is a case of how club membership is perceived and the nature of club photography in general. Is club photography a hobby or is it a sport? There are clubs that fall into either category. The majority of Lincolnshire clubs are based on membership that pursues photography as a hobby. In these clubs being a part of a group with a common interest is of prime importance. Abilities are not compared and competitions are a platform to get work seen rather than gladiatorial arenas. Clubs that have a sport attitude tend to be full of cliques and members not included in those cliques eventually drift off. Unfortunately, the members with higher ability also drift off and join 'prestigious' clubs and eventually the club dies.

It has been argued that N&EMPF propagates photography as a sport rather than a hobby. The hierarchy of N&EMPF member clubs can be likened to football's FA. In football there are various leagues. At the bottom there are the minor leagues such as the Conference League. At the top there is the Premier League. Clubs in the lower leagues sometimes get to play against the Premier League clubs but rarely make any impact. Any good players in the lower leagues will get snapped up by the higher clubs and if they are good enough, will end up in a Premier League club. In all of this the benefit to the bottom clubs is minimal.

Although competition is essential to maintain a high standard of work it should not be the be all and end all. Everyone starts somewhere and joining a club is the first step for most budding photographers. These 'beginners' need encouragement and assistance. Not all (in fact most) photo club members can't afford expensive equipment and the hire of studios or workshops. They are unable to go to exotic places at the right times. It is not surprising that they are put off entering exhibitions where many, if not most, of the selections have been made with these factors in mind. The N&EMPF exhibition selection is flawed. The judges employed select a particular type of image. There is a 'fashion' each year and this 'fashion' is dependent on the judges' preferences and clichés that are currently in vogue. This means that if an entrant ticks all the current boxes the image is accepted otherwise it is rejected. This results in an exhibition that is uniform and the content does not reflect the abilities of the N&EMPF member clubs in general.

The question of 'What is the purpose of the N&EMPF exhibition?' arises. Who is it intended to be viewed by? Is it staged for the general public to see the work of N&EMPF member clubs or is it just to be viewed by friends and family of the authors represented? Logically, it should be the former.

Ideally, the exhibition should be held at a location that enjoys a large footfall by the public. The exhibition is a showcase of the Federation and people viewing it should be inspired to join a photo club.

The exhibition is currently held in rotation at two venues. They are the Art Gallery in Mansfield and Patchings Art Centre. Of the two, Mansfield is more accessible to the public. Patchings, on the other hand, is in a rural area on the way to nowhere. It is a location that will only be visited by artist types who happen to be passing by or visiting to buy artist's materials. It needs to be reached by car since there is no public transport. As a result only people that specifically wish to view the exhibition will do so. The way the exhibition is hung is far from satisfactory. The main hall often has art classes going on and visitors have to negotiate their way around them. The exhibition space above the cafe is only able to display a fraction of the exhibition thus limiting its scope to just the top images.

Many club members don't have a clue as to where Patchings is and how to get there. The general public don't visit because it isn't on the way to anywhere and isn't easy to get to. The only people who make an active effort to visit are the authors who have acceptances along with their friends.

There are a number of alternatives that could be researched. Lakeside in the grounds of Nottingham University is a location that has a good footfall and has hosted photographic exhibitions in the past. The Gallery of Contemporary Art is another location which could be approached. Again, a big footfall would be accessed if it was made available. There are exhibition spaces in Lincoln and Newark that could prove fruitful as well as locations further afield, such as Chesterfield.

At the moment many clubs are struggling. They are having problems with their meeting accommodation and as a result losing members. Photography (at club level) is perceived as an 'older' person's hobby and consequently the need to attract a younger membership is vital. N&EMPF needs to help the recruitment by showing the public that photography is for all and not just those who are retired on final salary pensions.

Photography is alive now more than ever but it manifests itself in online content of dubious quality. It is now possible to produce reasonable images with mobile phones and everyone has a camera with them at virtually all times. The PAGB and, by its association, N&EMPF needs to embrace this new breed of photographers and not push them away.

The outlook for the links between the LPA and N&EMPF are uncertain in the long term. There will be little change as long as this state of disease continues but as soon as the pandemic is finally over there will be pressures for a break up of N&EMPF, especially if the geographical problems are not addressed.

It has been discussed on several occasions at LPA meetings that the association should break away from N&EMPF and apply to the PAGB for recognition as a separate region. At the moment the uncertainty as to the status of member clubs prevents any action. Some clubs are on the brink of extinction due to lack of finances as a result of dwindling membership. Horncastle has gone and other clubs are finding that they are struggling. A couple of clubs have had to transfer to online meetings only as a result of their meeting premises no longer being available. However for the LPA to become an autonomous region the PAGB require them to have twenty member clubs. This is the present situation.

Hopefully, this number will remain but it is also hoped that N&EMPF will come up with solutions that will result in separation not being the needed option.

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