

PIER CLOSING TIME



A journey through North Wales **MICHAEL BENNETT**



NORTH WALES IN SUMMER AND WINTER

Built in 1901 for a wealthy local arts benefactor and photographer, The Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno was due to re-open in 1979 after decades of closure. Its recently-appointed director Hugh Adams commissioned a project from photographer Michael Bennett, with the intention of capturing the atmosphere of North Wales coastal resorts in winter.

With a working title of *Anatomy of Melancholy*, an exhibition was scheduled soon after the gallery's refurbishment and re-opening.

Things didn't quite go to plan

Soon after photography began, Hugh Adams resigned, to be replaced by (unrelated) Clive Adams.

Bennett's delivered project was considered likely to cause funding problems by showing north Wales' resorts in too negative a light. The new artistic director's solution was to commission a return to the same places in summer, in the hope that the show would be more upbeat. Summer in the resorts brought more people but no fundamental change in character.

Fearful that the finished exhibition would be a catastrophe, Adams asked amateur photographers to exhibit their own work alongside Bennett's, to counter its perceived pessimism.

Renamed *The Road to Barmouth*, the exhibition opened in 1980. Following hostile newspaper reviews, on closure it was dismantled and forgotten.

It would have stayed out of sight forever had it not been for Val Williams and Karen Shepherdson, curators of *Seaside Photographed*, an exhibition first seen at the Turner Contemporary, Margate in 2019. Following a public call for submissions, Bennett sent images from the North Wales project.

Ten pictures were selected and shown as part of the first photographic show staged by The Turner Contemporary. The portfolio was included in the accompanying Thames & Hudson book, alongside works by Jane Bown, Martin Parr and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

About the photographs

The winter images were shot on 35mm and 6x6cm film cameras over a six-week period in early 1979.

Returning in summer the same year in a shortened timeframe and shoestring budget, Bennett used a Rollei 35S camera.

The tiny camera's limitations proved beneficial. With no automation, no autofocus, focussing by guesswork and a fixed wide-angle lens, the camera forced positioning close to subjects, its near-silent shutter allowing photography without detection.

It would be difficult to work in the same way in this millennium.

The original film negatives were digitised, restored and re-mastered for this book.

Many not included in the original show are seen here for the first time.



WHAT THEY SAID

“Starkly poignant”

Seaside Photographed review – a rush of revelation ★★★★★

“Seaside Photographed ... includes masterpieces by Henri Cartier-Bresson as well as works by artists whose names should be far better known. Michael Bennett’s black and white photographs from the late 1970s, for instance, show seascapes from Llandudno to St Leonards as melancholy and austere in every season, homing in on the weather-beaten faces of solitary workers – the signalman, the kiosk girl, the caretaker lugging the barrier to a pier in dark rain at closing time. They are starkly poignant laments.”

Laura Cumming, The Observer, May 2019

“Utterly uncompromising”

“Michael Bennett’s extraordinary Seaside in Summer and Winter (1980) inflects acute visual observations with satirical pessimism. This series ... was commissioned by Llandudno’s Mostyn Gallery, briefing Bennett to document the town in winter for an exhibition in the following year. The then progressive gallery director Hugh Adams actively encouraged a melancholic picturing of the North Wales seaside town. But at the point of delivery Adams had gone and the passive desperation captured by the photographer was not quite what was anticipated by the incoming director.

“To salvage the gallery’s position, Bennett was asked to return and record what was assumed would be a more optimistic summertime view.

“Contrary to the commissioner’s expectations, Llandudno in summer appeared in Bennett’s photographs as austere and alienating as in wintertime.

“The submitted work was ill-received, with the new gallery director openly loathing the work and the regional press printing numerous critiques.

“Partisan locals’ bewilderment is understandable. Bennett’s work is utterly uncompromising, with one photograph exclaiming in uppercase: “YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED”- warned of what? It reads as a ‘scare’ sign, alerting us to the dangers of a visit. Nevertheless, his work foreshadowed the huge decline in visitors in the 1980s, thereby providing a robust visual antidote to any rose-tinted assumptions about the British seaside.”

Seaside Photographed

Val Williams & Karen Shepherdson, Thames & Hudson, 2019

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DEESIDE







