



IN CONVERSATION WITH

Fran Halsall

Immersed in nature as a child and introduced to photography by her grandfather, it was almost inevitable that Fran Halsall would become a landscape photographer. Few could predict, though, how masterful she would become

Interview by Steve Watkins

Knowledge is a wonderful thing. Most great landscape photographers have not only an eye for composition, but also an extraordinary depth of knowledge and passion about their subject and the process of photography. When these elements are brought together in a balanced way, the results are usually images that can stand the test of time, as well as immediate scrutiny. The photographs go beyond simply representing what was there at the time; they combine the elements in a way that adds several rich layers of narrative to the scene.

Landscape photographer Fran Halsall was encouraged to

engage with and look at nature from a very young age. 'As a child, I was dragged around the whole country by my parents. During drives, my Mum would be looking out of the car window saying "ooh, look at that tree" or "look at that beautiful cloud". She also taught me about plants and would always use their botanical names, which is why I know a lot of botanical Latin. There has always been this undercurrent in our family that nature is the most important thing and that everything else is dependent on it. So, that mentality runs through everything I do. I wasn't very happy at school, so I truanted a lot. Growing up on the

opposite Flimston Bay,
Pembrokeshire, Wales

above Slieve Binnian and the
Mourne Mountains, County
Down, Northern Ireland

edge of a green belt, I used to spend a lot of my time out from school walking around nearby fields observing nature – looking at trees, counting ladybirds, that kind of thing. I was very much at my happiest and calmest doing that.'

Fran was introduced to photography by her grandfather, who loved shooting landscapes, and he gave Fran her first book about the subject. 'It wasn't very good, looking back on it, but I think he knew the author. It was one of those books where I read it and thought, I can do better than that!'

Her interest in photography became more serious when she got her first SLR camera, at the age of 13, and at university Fran studied photography as a part of her art degree. 'I was trying to do environmentally aware work and to explore my position in nature. None of my classmates could understand it; they felt landscape was a dead subject. It's back on the agenda now as a high art subject. Landscape is so critical for our existence: for example, in terms of food security and water quality. It's not something that can be treated as a side issue. Photography, for me, became more and more about looking at environments that were less spoilt by mankind. This was a slightly idealistic view, so eventually that broadened and I started to look at where the landscape ends and the human influence begins.'

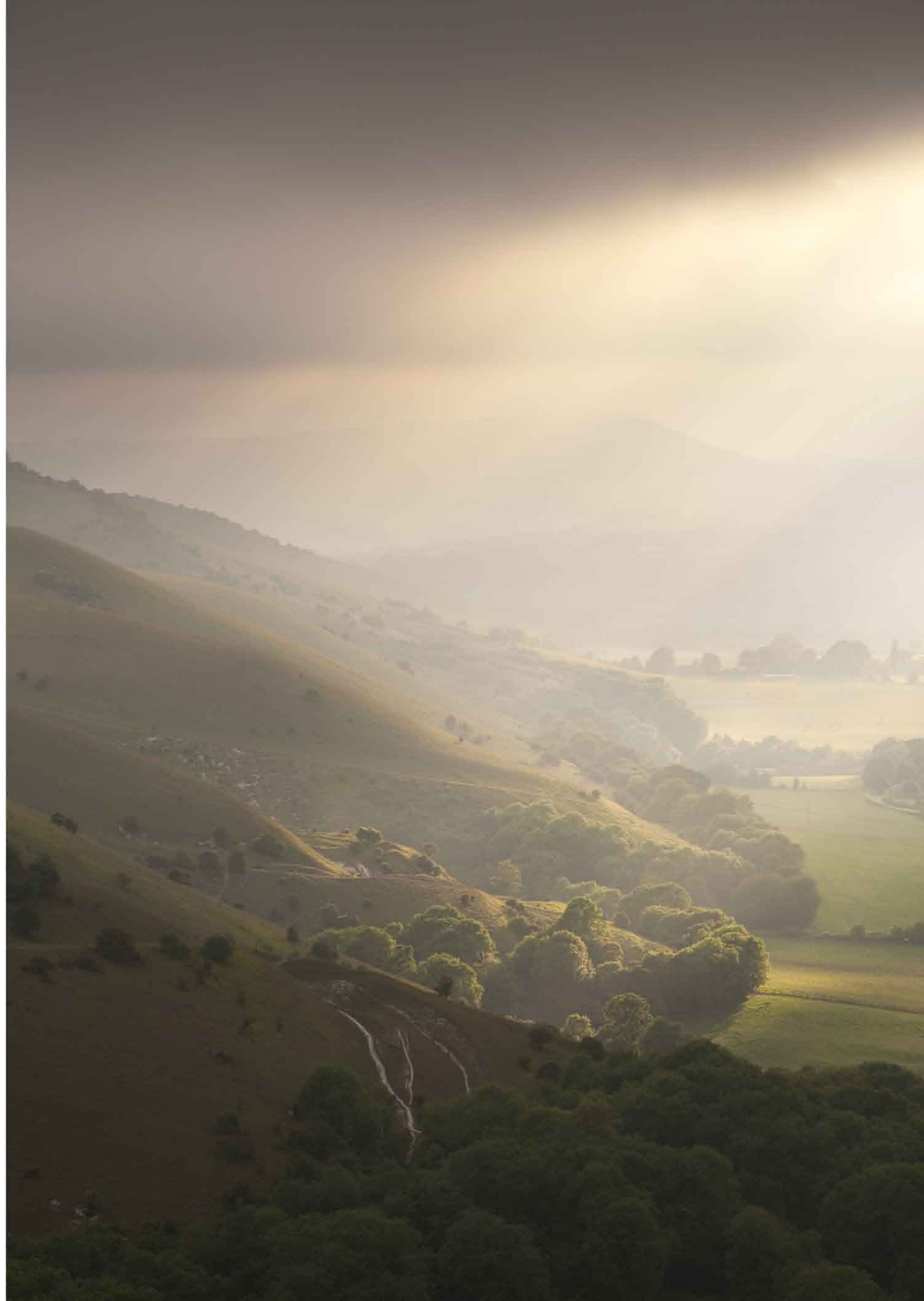
Although Fran has been a full-time professional photographer for the past nine years, she has recently set off on a different tack, by signing up for a Masters degree in landscape architecture. She is hoping that this will give her a more stable career path while, at the same time, freeing

up more time to indulge her photography without the commercial pressures that come with having it as her main business. 'In my head, perhaps stupidly, when I set out on my photographic career I was thinking of people such as Ansel Adams; about trying to become a spokesperson for nature. That was how I thought a career could be created, and certainly back then I had photographer contacts who were directly employed by the National Trust; that sort of model was out there. It wasn't that they were photographing beautiful landscapes all the time, they would be shooting people, too, but it would be about how people engaged with the landscape. I assumed that if I just became good enough, work would be available to me. Now, I realise that all of that has gone by the wayside; commissions are incredibly rare. I have been frustrated with the type of work that I have been doing, apart from my new book that comes out in September – that is exactly what I wanted to do. I feel like the opportunities for doing serious landscape interpretation work have become less and less, so I began looking at why I became a photographer in the first place, and what it is that I want. And photography is only one part of what I have always wanted to do, which is celebrate, understand and promote ecology, and the British landscape in particular.'

Fran's images are notable for their careful and considered compositions, wonderful light and realistic rendering. 'One of the nicest things that people have said about my work in the past is that it feels like you are there. When they say that, it feels like I have done my job. I am trying to offer

below Giant's Causeway, County Antrim, Northern Ireland

opposite Sun rays over the village of Fulking, West Sussex, England



people a way in to experience a landscape, even if it is one step removed through a photograph. That may then encourage them to go and experience it for real, or value what is represented within it,' she says.

Out in the field, Fran likes to take her time to assimilate a place before she starts taking photographs. 'Bearing in mind that it has usually taken me quite a while to walk somewhere, my first instinct is to put the camera bag down and have a cup of tea! And then I use that time, drinking a nice cuppa, to really look. I go with a strategy to photograph something specific but it is an entirely adaptable plan, so when I am there I am not thinking rigidly about how it should be executed. I do so much work with my 17-40mm lens that I know almost exactly what focal length I am going to use. I'll find something in the foreground and then try and connect it with a distant feature, going back and forth until it feels right. Then, I think about what position I need to be in. I am constantly roving my eye between foreground and background, and then looking at the sky. So, even once the camera is set up it is a case of waiting for all the elements to come together.'

Harmonising all the elements of a scene is a critical task for any landscape photographer, and Fran revels in the challenge. She says, 'you have to work at it, although there is a lot of instinct going on, too. Listen to your gut reaction to a place but then apply a bit of logic to it as well. I think many people go wrong by trying to include too much in a photograph. A skilled landscape photographer can go to a place and pick out two elements that are crucial to getting

across the message about that environment. I always think of it as a narrative going on between the two elements, and that dialogue may be between the land and the sky, or a rock and some heather, whatever gives contrast – because photography is all about contrast. Human perception works on contrast; you only really register something when there is a disparity. I think about texture, tone, and colour, and then that vague thing called feeling, which is probably a combination of all these things. Then, of course, there is shape and form. These sorts of things are ticking away in my head as I look to create that ultimate contrast.'

The book that Fran has been working on, in conjunction with the publishers Frances Lincoln, has been in the making for four years. 'The idea behind it was to write something that I would benefit from myself as a photographer, a way to know the landscape better. I realised that there is a niche for this, so I put all the knowledge that I have and all the love I have for the landscape in this one thing. Geology books rarely have nice pictures, and books with nice pictures generally have very little information about what I am actually looking at. So, it is the blend of the two.'

If Fran has succeeded in 'potting' even a portion of her knowledge, passion and enthusiasm for everything landscape into the book, then there will likely be new and experienced photographers alike queuing up to share in the inspiration. ■

To see more of Fran's work, go to fran-halsall.co.uk

below Ynys Llanddwyn and the Llŷn peninsula, Anglesey, Wales

