



# High plains drifter

It may not be easy, but for some photographers the landscape and the natural world is the only place to be – cup of hot coffee and the wind in your hair, isn't that right? What about travelling the thick end of 1,000 miles only to find that the weather just refuses to break? Such is life, and Fran Halsall takes it all in her stride, but these are not easy pickings...

It is very tempting for the lay person to think that making a living out of landscape photography is a lot to do with going for some *really nice walks*. So you happen to have a decent camera with you, out it pops and Bob's your proverbial uncle. Not so. The reader can waft through Fran Halsall's new book *Light & Shadow* on a wave of daydream-inducing visual stimuli. Oh how easy it is to imagine we could just get in the car and away we go, literally tripping over income-producing images as we purchase more Ordnance Survey maps than could ever be deemed healthy (can anyone beat my own count of 83?). If only, if only... Of course, it is not – indeed all it takes is the back of a cigarette packet, a pen, plus some realistic calculations to discover that the landscape game is

## GLYDER FACH, ABOVE

'Snow-topped mountains are irresistible subjects, as their summits seem all the more impressive after a good covering. At this point directly below Glyder Fach's spikey ridge the sharp definition of snow-covered crags against the vivid sky stopped me in my tracks.'

going to be a tough one – no doubt about it. Obviously, Fran should not be confused with the British Olympic Swimmer of the same name by the way...

Back to the positives, however, and there is equally little doubt that Fran has had the pleasure of finding her way to some of the most stunningly beautiful places that these islands offer. *Light & Shadow* is a veritable Gazetteer of predominantly northern



All images © Fran Halsall. Top: Glyder Fach from Cwm Tryfan, Conwy. Above: Glen Affric, Highland





Image © Fran Halsall, Saltwick Bay, North Yorkshire

→ locations that any landscape addict (whether a photographer or not) really has to get to. Some places on her list do take a whole lot of time to access – I know that from personal experience: how long do you think it takes to get to the islands of Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides in a very old VW campervan? Suggestions on a postcard, please. The same can be said of most nice bits of Scotland in fact. When you add up what's involved: time, food, petrol, transport, accommodation, equipment... for starters, never mind imagination, skill and experience and it can be easily realised that it's not an easy grab. Travelling for days and getting only a few mediocre pictures in return would be soul destroying... However, success is something that can be achieved if you put your mind to it very seriously.

### Fast mover

Fran is a great example of this fact. *Light & Shadow* is her second book, and she's only 30. Her first, *The Peak District*, was considered the best outdoor book in the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild 2009 Awards. Her series North Yorkshire Limestone Pavements also won the award for best photography. Considering the fact that your editor often feels like a mere youngster in most photographic industry company, Fran

and indeed her achievements are enough to make me feel a little old. But it's not a goldmine: 'I haven't and I don't make lots of money,' retorts Fran when I suggest that her life in the wilds must be rather fun. 'OK so I visit lots of fantastic locations – that's why I do this job. But it's really hard to translate the time and effort into even reasonable return.' Fran has only been in this business for five years. She turned professional after graduating in 2001.

She was an art student who didn't know what to do next and had a tutor who kept reminding her that the photography she was producing had somewhat more potential than the fine art. In 2004, she began by bumping into publisher Windgather Press at a book signing. It was an accident, but Fran decided she better create a business, *pronto*. She would work on subjects such as Chatsworth House and Medieval Villages with Windgather. Later, thanks to an exhibition in a Derbyshire bookshop, Fran would meet the northern representative of publisher Frances Lincoln. They were looking for a book on the Peak District, and it was honestly one of those right time, right place instances. With *Light & Shadow* being far more wide ranging, Fran has high(er) hopes for return on the project, being about photography as an art and craft, about landscapes and the UK as a whole. 'The major



Image © Fran Halsall. Rannoch Moor, Stob Dearg, Highland



→ distributors take by far the lion's share of profits but take you to a new marketplace. It can be tempting to think about avoiding the Amazons of this world, but alas there is really little choice if you want proper distribution and awareness of your work.'

### No accident

Fran's business is made up of different elements. There's the two previously mentioned books as well as contributions to many more; there's direct commissions and commercial purchases; there's sales through stock libraries; there's fine art print sales; and even greetings cards. Fran's work has appeared in calendars for the likes of the John Muir Trust and magazines such as *Beautiful Britain* and the British Mountaineering Council's *Summit*. The cards are considered more as a communication tool: 'I see my business as an overall strategy – there are volume sales and also niche markets. I can shift in the region of 3,000 greetings cards a year. Those sales might yield a couple of thousand pounds' profit, but they actually serve as effective free advertising – 3,000 people potentially looking directly at my work. A number of clients and opportunities have come my way via the cards. It's not to be sniffed at.

I started out as an artist and I wanted to have people seeing my work. That stays with you – there has to be the volume approach to getting work out into the public domain and then print sales and book sales are a level above. Commercial commissions and image purchases sit at the top of the tree.' It should also be noted that down at the cards level there's still

Image © Fran Halsall. Castleton fields, Derbyshire



thought and effort in evidence – there's a clear environmental policy and one range is printed using vegetable-based inks.

### Greater understanding

You can't just suddenly do all of this, of course. There has to be a foundation of skill to build on. Fran explains: 'Understanding how light behaves in relation to the camera underpins the creation of good images. An appealing subject taken in nondescript lighting is less pleasing than a mundane subject captured in excellent lighting. It is the range of illumination that paints the atmosphere of an image.' You can see how Fran's fine art background still finds good use in her current professional attitude. She continues: 'There is a huge investment of time involved in getting to know a location. Allowing the

### CASTLETON FIELDS, ABOVE

'The hardest part of arranging this composition was defining the right area of the landscape, while the mist shifted and rolled across the fields. The idea was to include just enough of the shapely trees to provide structure but not so many that the image became cluttered. The trees and walls are there to contain the mist.'

geography and the feel of a place to get under your skin leads to an emotional connection that becomes the foundation for perceptive photographs. This does





→ not happen on a day trip. Photographs are my way of illustrating the flow of natural processes at the point they become personally significant.’ Nor does Fran intend to improve on what the eye sees in the field: ‘I strive for a naturalistic style for the majority of my work – firmly believing that nature requires no improvement. I use a polarising filter and nothing else to enhance available light. Much of my time is spent waiting for the right lighting and atmospheric conditions for the subject. Therefore processing work is kept to a minimum. Rather than using graduated filters over the lens to even out the extremes of tonal range that the CCD sensor struggles to contain within one exposure, I prefer to do one of two things. Where possible I use the graduated filter option offered in Adobe Lightroom or, when the tonal contrast is too great, I manually combine different exposures in Photoshop. Either method allows me to faithfully reproduce the detail that the eye sees.’

What’s particularly interesting about *Light & Shadow* is its mix of content. It’s not just a picture book: image content is accompanied by technical and philosophical perspectives on each location – so balancing out the standard photographer’s tendency to either wax overly lyrical about what a wonderful

#### ESSENTIAL KIT

CANON EOS 5D MKI & MKII  
17-40MM F/4 USM; 70-200MM F/4  
USM; 100MM F/2.8 MACRO LENSES  
GITZO GT1531 MOUNTAINEER  
TRIPOD & GH1780 BALL HEAD  
B+W KASEMANN POLARISING  
FILTERS AND B+W UVS  
CANON TC-80N3 TIMER SWITCH  
WATERPROOF RUCKSACK  
MANY SPARE LENS CLOTHS  
COMPASS AND SUNRISE/SUNSET  
CALCULATOR  
10" SILVER / LIGHT GOLD  
REFLECTOR

EMERGENCY FOIL BLANKET  
HEAD TORCH (SAVED MY BACON  
MANY TIMES) PLUS SPARE  
BATTERIES  
SPARE GLOVES, SPARE HAT - YOU'D  
BE SURPRISED HOW MANY I  
LOSE...  
PROPER MOUNTAIN BOOTS ARE  
INDISPENSABLE FOR TOUGH  
TERRAIN  
WATER AND LOTS OF CHOCOLATE  
BARS AND NUTS

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place it was and how it made them feel, or indeed attempt to convince us of the particular need to open up to f9 rather than f16. There is a great deal of technical and artistic know-how presented comfortably to the reader in *Light & Shadow* and it’s well-written too – only sometimes do you ever feel that a harder-edged text edit might have been advisable. A photography book is more demanding than just taking a load of pictures. Fran admits: ‘The writing side was very challenging, but I had completed a similarly themed dissertation before and that was still bubbling in the back of my head. Originally, I didn’t think that it would

be what my publisher was after, but it was. I tried to ensure I was completing the written pieces alongside the images when out in the field – I didn’t think it was something I could produce just from memory after the event. Of course, there can be a lot of hanging around!’

So what of the landscape photographer’s greatest challenge – repetition? Fran offers: ‘It’s difficult, you must think of what has gone before. I am trying to avoid images you have already seen. You have to try to find your own way of putting your case, creating an identifiable style. Some places are liberal and poetic and that comes far more easily. Sometimes it’s very tough.’ Nor have all her journeys been productive: ‘Last summer I had a complete disaster in the Hebrides,’ Fran comments. ‘The terrible weather, I crashed the van, I became ill and eventually came home.’ Therefore not all carefully laid plans will necessarily work out: Fran explains: ‘You have to have a plan but with inbuilt flexibility. It’s essential to know an area, research it in detail but then you have to wait really... Landscape photography is a very saturated market. It’s hard to get your images to the buyers, you have to wait to build your contacts up, and for clients to decide that they value your style – that’s the key.’ tP