

THESE POOR CREATURES

INEQUALITY AND THE COUNTRYSIDE



**PHOTO
FROME**

festival of Photography
photofrome.org

One Day Forum
10am - 5pm 26 April 2025

A one-day symposium programmed as part of Photo|Frome Festival of Photography 2025, complimenting its theme of 'inequality'.

Organized by Jesse Alexander and Phil Hill. Made possible by the support of Falmouth University.

The Silk Mill, Frome, Somerset, BA11 1PT
26th April 2025

**PHOTO
FROME**
FESTIVAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

FALMOUTH
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‘These Poor Creatures’: Photography, Inequality and the Countryside

In 1822, journalist, economist and politician William Cobbett published *Rural Rides* – a travelogue made on horseback from London through the West of England. When he reached Frome he observed that:

"These poor creatures at Frome have pawned all their things ... All their best clothes, their blankets and sheets; their looms; any little piece of furniture that they had, and that was good for anything. [...] The population of this Frome has been augmented to the degree of one-third within the last six or seven years. There are all the usual signs of accommodation bills [...] new houses, in abundance, half finished; new gingerbread ‘places of worship,’ as they are called; great swaggering inns; parcels of swaggering fellows going about, with vulgarity imprinted upon their countenances, but with good clothes upon their backs."

As the **only UK photography festival located beyond a major town or city**, Photo|Frome was the apposite forum to explore how **rural inequality** is currently being explored in contemporary photography. Photographers and others who explore the representation of rural communities and experiences contributed towards a discussion on the relationship between photography and the countryside, asking:

- How does the representation of poverty and inequality differ in a rural context compared to that of an urban experience?
- To what extent does photography obscure or reveal rural poverty and inequality?
- What part can photography play in communicating these differences and idiosyncrasies?
- Whose stories and what aspects of the rural experience should image-makers be addressing?

Introduction

Jesse Alexander

‘Poor creatures’ might summarise how much documentary and reportage photography has – historically at least – rendered those who have found themselves on the wrong side of in-equality. As distinct from other media, photography and its practitioners tread a fine line between voyeurism, aestheticization, and raising awareness of atrocities and injustices.

This legacy has certainly been a concern of those who have put together the 2025 edition of Photo|Frome, and when Phil brought the writing of William Cobbett to my attention, his phrase seemed like the perfect starting point for a discussion of both of our ongoing research interests.

Around about the time when the founders of photography were making real headway with their experiments, Cobbett was deeply concerned with rural poverty, agricultural practices and economic policies. As a political campaigner, Cobbett sought to position his arguments through observation and conducted a number of excursions across the south of England documenting his findings. These culminated in his ‘Rural Rides’ book, which was published in 1830.

When he got to Frome, Cobbett observed that:

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The gentrification that that Cobbett described is one specific challenge facing some rural communities, and one that we are likely to explore further. But we are hoping to address broader inequalities today – others that won’t be felt exclusively by those living in rural communities, and some that will be better understood and more acutely experienced by those who do.

Inequality, and in particular rural poverty, is often described as being ‘hidden’, both in terms of its conspicuousness but also in terms of its representation: the topography of poverty is popularly associated with brutalist architecture, concrete and pollution. The backdrop of rural poverty is far more aesthetically forgiving, and even aspirational. To what extent do we still believe the pastoral propaganda that a simple, uncomplicated rural life is inherently more virtuous than an urban one? How does photography continue to proliferate these ideas?

In our first panel – ‘Working in and working from the Countryside’ we will hear from Tessa Bunney and Jennifer Forward Hayter, who have firsthand experience of this, and have represented this in their own work. Tessa’s projects have also looked at coastal communities, and we are pleased that there is some representation of issues faced by these communities within our discussions today.

After lunch we’ll consider communities, collaboration and connection in the countryside, and what role photography can play, with our most local photographer, Naomi Wood, and Kirsty Mackay – well known for her use of photography for social advocacy and justice.

In our final panel, with Andy Thatcher, Denise Felkin and Jermaine Francis, we’ll be asking ‘who owns the countryside?’ which might include some thoughts on how photography confirms, or confers, ideas of private or collective belonging – and exclusion.

As the only current UK photography festival not located within a town or a city, we are confident you’ll share our view that Photo|Frome is the ideal platform to explore these ideas. Whilst these questions and concerns are overtly political in their nature, we respectfully remind delegates that the purpose of these discussions is to find, articulate and assert *photography’s* place within these discourses.

Speakers

Tessa Bunney has photographed rural life, working closely with individuals and communities to investigate how the landscape is shaped by humans. From hill farmers near her home in North Yorkshire to Romanian nomadic shepherds her projects reveal the fascinating intricacies of the dependencies between people, work and the land.

Tessa talks about the series Save our Sea: working with fishermen along the Teesside and Yorkshire coastline following the devastating wash-up of crabs and lobsters on which their livelihoods depend.



Denise Felkin is an Editorial and Fine Art Documentary Photographer based in Brighton. Denise collaborates with communities to share stories that speak out about current issues, reveal a truthful voice, and promote sustainability, unity, equality, inclusivity, and compassion.

Denise shares her photo essay 'In Site' to reveal a glimpse of an underground lifestyle with roots in new traveller communities, set in a zeitgeist of apocalyptic domesticity that existed in East London over two decades.



Jennifer Forward-Hayter is a documentary and portrait photographer from Dorset, photographing everyone from big stars with big egos to Russian Nazis hiding from the law.

Jennifer performs her irreverent 'masterclass' titled 'How to use Rural Visuals for Your Own Political and Financial Gain' including an appearance as Jeremy Clarkson.



Jermaine Francis is a London based lens based artist/ photographer and curator whose work visually explores our relationship to space and their historical, social and cultural narratives.

Jermaine's talk focusses on landscape belonging and historical narratives in visual culture.



Kirsty Mackay is Scottish documentary photographer, activist and filmmaker. Mackay's research-led documentary practice highlights social issues surrounding gender, class and discrimination. As a working class artist her own experiences allow empathy, connection and insight into the stories of the people and communities she photographs.

Kirsty will present her work on the UK's cost of living crisis, The Magic Money Tree. Working collaboratively with children, families and youth groups from across England, Mackay explores the impact of this crisis and shows us what poverty looks like in the world's sixth richest economy.



Andy Thatcher is based in Devon and currently finishing a PhD exploring common land through lens media, and his research has taken him to Newcastle, Switzerland and Norway – with a long detour through folk horror.

Andy talks about the different ways we might imagine common land along with its history, its importance to local and marginalised communities past and present, and the threats it faces.



Naomi Wood's practice explores the dialogue between place, care and identity. She lives and works in Frome, making images with and in the community.

As a working class artist born into and currently living in a rural environment, Naomi's talk will focus on her own experience making work outside of the major cities and how building community has become central to her practice.



<p>First Panel</p> <p>Working in and working from the countryside</p> <p>Tessa Bunney Jennifer Forward-Hayter (Chair Jesse Alexander)</p>	<p><u>VIDEO</u></p>
<p>Second Panel</p> <p>Community and connections: living in the countryside</p> <p>Kirsty Mackay Naomi Wood (Chair Phil Hill)</p>	<p><u>VIDEO</u></p>
<p>Third Panel</p> <p>Who owns the countryside?</p> <p>Denise Felkin Jermaine Francis Andy Thatcher (Chair: Jesse Alexander & Phil Hill)</p>	<p><u>VIDEO</u></p>

Jesse Alexander is Course Leader for MA Photography (online) at Falmouth University and is based in the Mendip Hills in East Somerset. Jesse is a photographer and writer preoccupied with the representation of place and the rural experience.

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Originally from Frome, **Phil Hill** is a photographer and lecturer based in Bedford. Phil's practice is concerned with narrative interpretation, connection, and identity. Phil has worked extensively with a range of clients internationally and now dedicates his time to producing long form projects and teaching.

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