

– Coronation Day, Tenby –

The copperplate script in the tiled doorway spells SQUIBBS in letters the size of a man's shoe. An archetypal Edwardian shopfront with a pair of plate glass windows and a heavy glass door, Squibbs was the kind of photography shop found in almost every British town. It had a red-and-white awning and a yellow Kodak sign. Once a beacon of promise for holiday photographs, like memories of summers long gone, its colours and meaning have faded over the years. The day I visited, Squibbs was on the verge of closing; its neon-lit interior was as lifeless as a morgue. On the red baize of the main display case were two amateur flash guns, decades old with discoloured price tags. Between them lay a shiny booklet showing a colour photograph of a woman with backlit hair. Mirrored shelving lined the glazed cabinets on the walls. A cheerful girl with a pink ribbon in her hair still smiled out from the adverts for Colour Care enlargements, but the party had ended long ago. Pallid cardboard boxes presented a variety of exposure meters and flash bulbs that would never see the light of an exposure. Perfectly good cameras in greying vinyl cases languished unused, solemn reminders of yesterday's eager

promises. Spread around the shelves and walls were photographs of weddings, parties, children and babies, landscapes and sunsets and dogs. Old black-and-white photographs had given way to vibrant prints, the earliest of which had a magenta hue, while newer impersonal portraits with bubble-gum backdrops elbowed out the past.

The owner, Graham Hughes, was a kindly-faced man in his seventies who I'd known for about fifteen years. Gesturing towards the back of the shop, he told me about the darkroom he used to have and the equipment he had installed there, equipment which he had tried and failed to give away to a college. He showed me some postcards he had made from his photographs of local views. Shuffling through a dozen or so examples of a particular scene, he inspected his work from decades ago, each print slightly differing in brightness and contrast. The picture was of a wide, sandy beach under a billowing cloudy sky, dark headlands night-black in shadow under the glare of the sun, and in the middle foreground, tiny but discernible figures, a man and woman, out walking along the beach, struggling towards the light.

Stuck on the wall behind Graham was a black-and-white photocopy of a group photograph of about a hundred people gathered on the side of a hill. Thinking it would make an ideal gift for a friend of mine who collects group photos, I asked him whether I could buy a small print of this picture. He explained that it was



Graham Hughes, *Coronation Day, Tenby*, 1953

too difficult for him to provide reprints, but took the photograph down and placed it on the counter. Photographed in bright sunshine, its details were obscured by the sooty shadows of the heavily contrasting tones. An unexceptional photograph without obvious compositional merit, the photocopy showed it at its worst. Underneath the picture, CORONATION DAY, TENBY was written in biro. Graham smoothed out the slightly curled paper with the palm of his hand. ‘I took that on the golf links near Shanley’s.’ Built in 1929, Shanley’s South Beach Pavilion had a dance hall, a skating rink, an amusement arcade, a roof garden, and a cinema, which had shown the first talkie in Tenby. Graham had joined a group that tried to prevent the council demolishing the building, but it was leveled in 1981. He had

taken the photograph on a half-plate camera, and still had the glass negative. He spoke wistfully about the range of tones that could be printed from the negative, and wished he could show me a proper print of the picture. 'Photography was photography in those days.'

After searching through several drawers, Graham found the glass negative in a glassine sleeve. Gently holding the brittle paper in his left hand, he pinched the edge of the glass with his finger tips and carefully slid it out of its wrapper, placing the negative face down. The photographic emulsion, an oleaginous coating of black and umber and silver, covered the negative save for a thin margin of bare glass at the selvage. We both leant closer to see the light on it from different angles, looking at what lay within the reflective surface of the emulsion. Only a partial aspect of the negative image was visible at any one time, as the light caught a facet of the picture in its silver membrane, vanishing back within its depths before another aspect surfaced.

One of the corners was cracked and held together with Sellotape. There was a long scratch running along the top, and a little piece of emulsion had been chipped off. When Graham held it up to the light, we could see that the exposure had been technically sound; it would yield a superb print. I told him that I had a flat-bed scanner, which could bring out all the nuances and details, and he offered to lend it to me. After replacing the negative in its sleeve, he rummaged in another drawer for a shallow cardboard box, into