

Snowdon's Peak

He's known for his portraits but there's a rich back catalogue of early work that goes largely unnoticed these days. David Corfield catches up with Lord Snowdon and finds a man who, despite disability, is still in surprisingly rude health...

Interview by David Corfield

Photographs by Snowdon

"Stop the dog! Stop the dog! WILL YOU STOP THAT BLOODY DOG!"

The megaphone in Snowdon's hand is so loud his hearing aid falls out onto his lap.

I sit, laughing uncontrollably whilst Antony Charles Robert Armstrong-Jones, 1st Earl of Snowdon, former brother-in-law to Her Majesty The Queen, curses his new neighbours and their ill-tempered pooch.

He puts down the ancient loudhailer and turns to face me. I brush off my smirk with a quip about dogs. "I can't bear them," he frowns. "Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?" It's been a few years since I was last here but nothing has really changed. The pictures still hang on the wall bearing some famous endorsements; the books still bear a lifetime of study (a

couple even on digital photography, but we shalln't talk about that – Snowdon protests they were sent to him by a hopeful publisher...) and the shelves are dotted with nick nacks and trinkets.

Wine is brought out – always a good sign – and I remark on the weight of the glasses. “Aah, yes, I designed them. You like?” Snowdon is always keen to hear what people think about his design work, but less so about his photography. It's a curious thing. I compliment him on the glass and the grape. He smiles. It's a nice, warm smile, with twinkling eyes and a sense of fun that defy his 78 years.

“Now, I photographed a Corfield once,” he states, taking our conversation down another unplanned path. “Lynne!” he calls out to his PA. “Lynne!” I hear footsteps.

“Yes?” she replies. “Ah Lynne, do you have that book, *Private View*? The one with Patrick Caulfield in?”

Lynne reappears holding a copy of one of Snowdon's early portrait books from 1965. He flicks through. “Ah yes, here!” he triumphantly points. “I peer over his shoulder and sure enough, he's right. “Yes, but his name is spelt wrong,” I remark. “No it's not, YOUR name is spelt wrong!” Snowdon counters. I ask how he worked that one out. “Because he's more famous than you!” he snorts. I can't help but laugh at his cheek.

Snowdon has an amazing memory for faces, but not for people. His favourite photograph? “The last one.” He never

gets sentimental over his images, and that's perhaps just as well as some of his early work for the *Sunday Times* supplement was particularly hard-hitting and challenged perceptions of the day. How did he prepare for his dealings with the mental hospitals and the homeless people, for instance? "I researched. You can't go into these things without preparation," he recalls. "I used this in here (he taps with his foot a leather box containing an elderly Rolleiflex twin lens reflex). "Took it everywhere with me. Loaded with HPS and pushed it to 1600." Snowden stops himself. He doesn't like talking cameras. In fact he positively resents giving manufacturers a plug. Except the Rollei, and the Zeiss Baby Box given to him by Sammy Davis Jr. Snowden loves this tiny camera, and painstakingly shows me how it works. It's about 8cm tall and takes 127 film, and gives 16 pictures measuring 3x4cm on a single roll. The lens is a Frontar, f/11 fixed aperture, with no adjustment or focus control. He fiddles with the pull up sports finder. He's absorbed in it. I watch him as he fiddles with the empty spool. "They make film for it still?" he asks me, almost as if contemplating taking it out on his next job. I explain how Kodak stopped 127 film production in 1995 but that it's still made in Eastern Europe somewhere. "Oh well, never mind."

He pulls out a Contax T2, the name blanked out with black electrical tape and hands it over. "I like this one. Is it any good?" There he goes again, questioning...

It's clear Snowdon has no intention of talking about his work. He's a stubborn man, and refuses to be drawn on questions relating to "The Firm" (the Royal Family), although he is immensely fond of the Queen. "She's quite remarkable, a charming, lovely lady," he smiles warmly at her portrait. Snowdon's been photographing the Royal Family since the 1950s and is still HRH's preferred lensman. Only last year he was commissioned to take her official portrait with the Duke of Edinburgh at Buckingham Palace, a place he knows better than most...

Snowdon shot to fame when he married Princess Margaret in 1960. He never let his photography suffer, though, even managing to take his Leica into the bathroom to snap his wife in her tiara whilst having a soak.

But it was him and a young Don McCullin who were to shake up the establishment with their hard-hitting, grainy images of suffering and solitude. In the 1950s the newspapers and magazines of the day were sparsely illustrated but as the decade drew to a close and the Sixties got underway a new breed of editor emerged, and with it a new style of magazine. The Sunday supplement was to become Snowdon's home for a while, and as he mingled with his society subjects as a member of the royal circle he would often be found in the darkrooms with the press snappers later in the evenings, sweating against

deadlines, spotting the highlights of eyes with potassium ferricyanide.

“They were good days,” he recalls. “We worked with some good editors like Denis Hamilton and Harold Evans who understood the importance of a good story, and a good set of photographs. It all changed when that horrible little sod Neill took over.”

Snowdon's dislike of Andrew Neill and the Murdoch era came at a time when his marriage to Princess Margaret was drawing to a close. The late 1970s, with Thatcher (another person he doesn't have much time for) and the whole vulgarity of the 1980s taking a grip, left him cold. He continued to shoot extensively for magazines both in this country and overseas, however, although by this time Snowdon had embraced portraiture as his *raison d'etre*. A daylight studio was constructed at his Kensington home where subjects would arrive, have tea, and perch awhile on his stool for a portrait. He became a favourite of celebrities and even became good mates with that most unlikeliest of fashion and portrait photographers, Terence Donovan. The larger than life Donovan appealed to Snowdon because he was a straight-talker. Snowdon likes that. “I am not Royal, never have been and never will be. I like people who are true to themselves. Donovan was never afraid to speak his mind to me and I miss him greatly.”

As the clock chimes Snowdon reaches for a book of Polaroids and passes them to me. "This is my latest book," he chirps, "all about Indian people. I went there a few times a couple of years ago and photographed some of the locals. A lovely nation, very energetic people. Chaotic and noisy though." Although not as noisy as the dogs that have started barking again.

Snowdon reaches out to shake my hand. He can't get up because of the polio that afflicted him as a child. It's causing him pain in his later years although he never complains.

A brief goodbye and as I look round he picks up the Rolleiflex. Then puts it down again.

He's reached for the megaphone...