



Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, Photographer

Mike Shaw

Frank Meadow Sutcliffe was born in 1853 in Far Headingley, Leeds, the eldest son of Thomas Sutcliffe, a painter in watercolours whose qualities of good humour, excited curiosity and infectious enthusiasm Frank inherited. Thomas encouraged his children to make full use of their talents - they produced their own illustrated story books on his printing press - and when Frank showed an interest in photography Thomas cleared the hayloft to make a darkroom, and gave him a huge mahogany camera. Frank's formal schooling was almost non-existent but the stimulating company of his father, whom he sometimes accompanied on painting expeditions in the countryside, more than compensated. As a teenager he was already mastering the difficulties of the wet-plate process of photography and taking photographs of his friends and neighbours.

In 1870 the Sutcliffe family moved to Whitby, where they had spent their summer holidays since Frank's childhood. The following year Thomas died of heart failure at the age of 43, and Frank found himself head of the family. He was 18 and apart from an unhappy period as a clerk in Tetley's brewery in Leeds had no experience of making his way in the world. Before his death Thomas had suggested that Frank should take up photography as a

profession, and with a sense of urgency he now began to transform an absorbing pastime into a means of earning a living and supporting his family.

To earn a living as a photographer in the 1870s almost invariably meant becoming a portrait photographer, including setting up a studio. A disastrous error of judgement led Sutcliffe to build a studio in Tunbridge Wells. This proved a total failure, and in 1876 he returned to Whitby with his wife and child. With the meagre resources he had left, he managed to rent part of a jet worker's shop; it was situated up a smelly back alley and became so hot on sunny days that sitters sometimes fainted. But it was a start, and Sutcliffe began to build up his business.

During the summer when Whitby came to life as an increasingly popular holiday resort, Sutcliffe worked in his studio from early morning to late at night, and when he went home continued mounting his photographs into the early hours of the morning. But he soon realized that he could not earn enough in the six weeks or so of the season to carry him through the rest of the year. The spur of financial necessity added to the pleasure of photographing his surroundings, and it was through reasoned desperation - as a friend later described it - that Sutcliffe began to take the photographs which were to make him famous.

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His photographs are striking visual images which reveal his great skill as a photographer, but more important is the sense of deep affection which reaches the spectator. Sutcliffe delighted in a love for Whitby, for Eskdale and its inhabitants, and for the surrounding moorland. His photographs reveal a close personal attachment to his subject matter. He cared about the people he was photographing - the fishwives, the fishermen, and the farmworkers.

In 1894 he moved into a new studio in Skinner Street, Whitby. His business as a portrait photographer was flourishing, and he found less time to spend on the photographs which by then had brought him worldwide fame. His work had been exhibited in London in the first one-man show to be held by the Camera Club in 1888; the Prince of Wales had purchased a print of 'Water Rats' - probably Sutcliffe's most famous photograph - and between 1881 and 1905 his photographs were honoured

with 62 gold, silver and bronze medals at exhibitions in Britain and all over the world, from Chicago to Tokyo and from Paris to Calcutta. He now put a good deal of energy into magazine and newspaper articles on photography. His excitement with the images produced by photography continued unabated, and around the turn of the century he became absorbed in working with the new range of hand-held Kodak cameras.

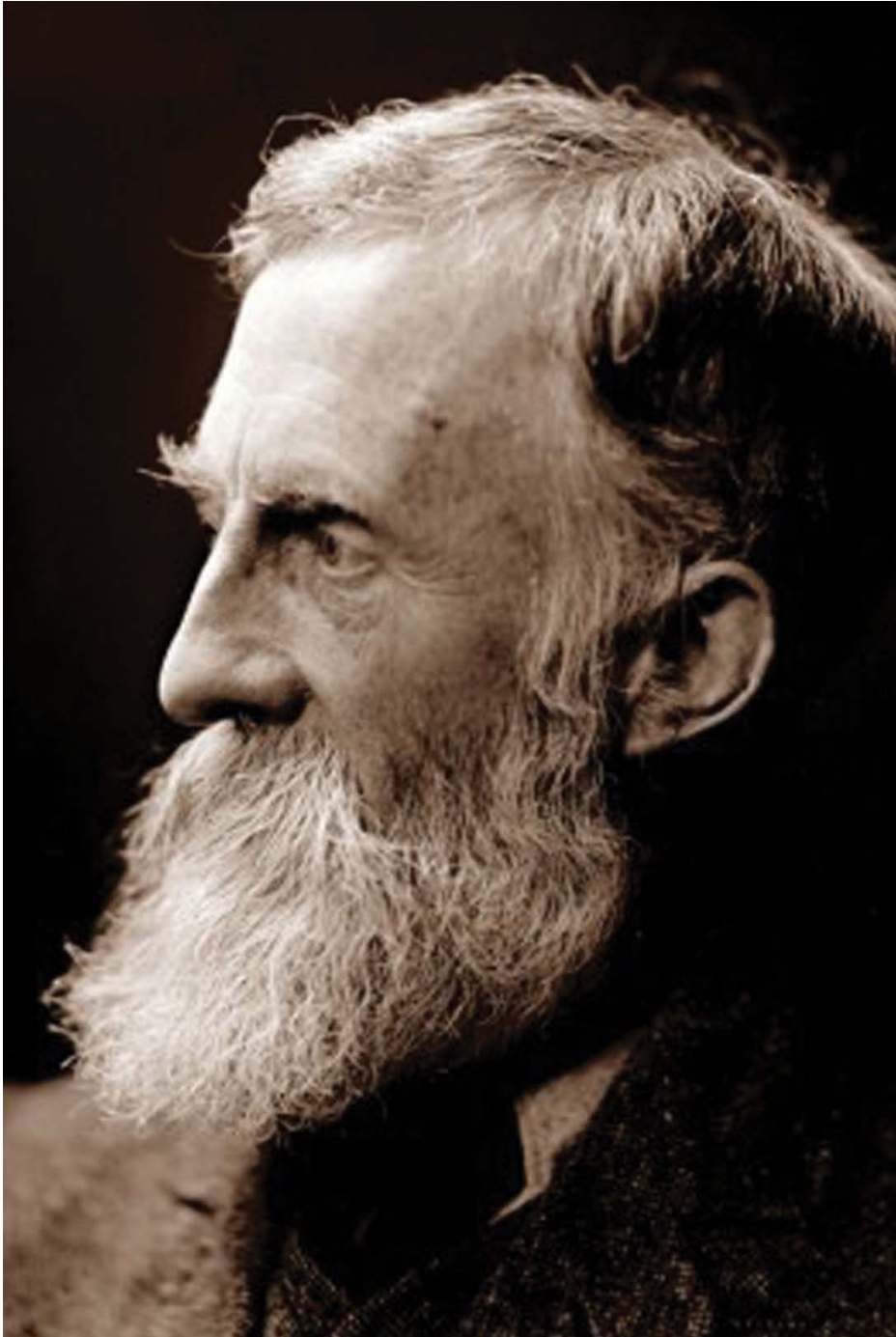
When in 1922 he sold his photographic business, his retirement lasted just one week, after which he became curator of Whitby Museum. In 1935, six years before he died in 1941, he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. It was a belated recognition of the talents of a photographer who set high standards for himself and, by treating photography as a creative medium in its own right and not as a debased form of painting, produced some of the most striking yet unpretentious photographs of the 19th century.



Find out more

Sutcliffe Gallery, 1 Flowergate, Whitby YO21 3BA,
<http://www.sutcliffe-gallery.co.uk/> (with online gallery of Sutcliffe's photographs)

<http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/iconic-images/frank-meadow-sutcliffe-1853-1941-iconic-photographer-15171>



Frank Meadow Sutcliffe



Dock End, Whitby



Limpet gatherers



Girls shelling mussels