

# Silent whispers

**Photographers seem to have an odd interest in the empty and forgotten. Jo Scott set out to record a feeling, and rediscover an atmosphere, in the passage ways and Victorian grandeur of Manchester's Victoria Baths. Her Fellowship was the result**

*If only tonight we could fall, in a deathless spell.  
If only tonight we could slide, into deep black water.  
And breathe. And breathe.*

Talking about photography is often aided by using phrases that have gone before, in poetry or song – as above – because a visual response is not about the addition of objective, empirical variables. This problem – how you go about relating how a picture makes you feel – encompasses all photography and is ultimately why everyone goes around exclaiming ‘I don’t know why that one got in’ and so on. The individual response can be accidental, sub-conscious even, and certainly not always as predicted by the creator of the image.

So, where are we when the photographer gets hit by a particular atmosphere in a building and takes it upon themselves to get it across. How can we judge the success or otherwise of the project? It’s easy to appreciate the technical, craft-based elements of a set of pictures if you know what you’re looking for, but when the real *joie de vivre* of a picture is a ‘sense’, where are we then? →



→ Victoria Baths on Hathersage Road, Manchester, opened in 1906 and was described as ‘the most splendid municipal bathing institution in the country – a water palace of which every citizen of Manchester can be proud’. The civic pride was not just city spiel either – the building provided capacious facilities for swimming, bathing and leisure, and was built with the highest quality materials and boasted many decorative features including stained glass, terracotta, and mosaic floors.

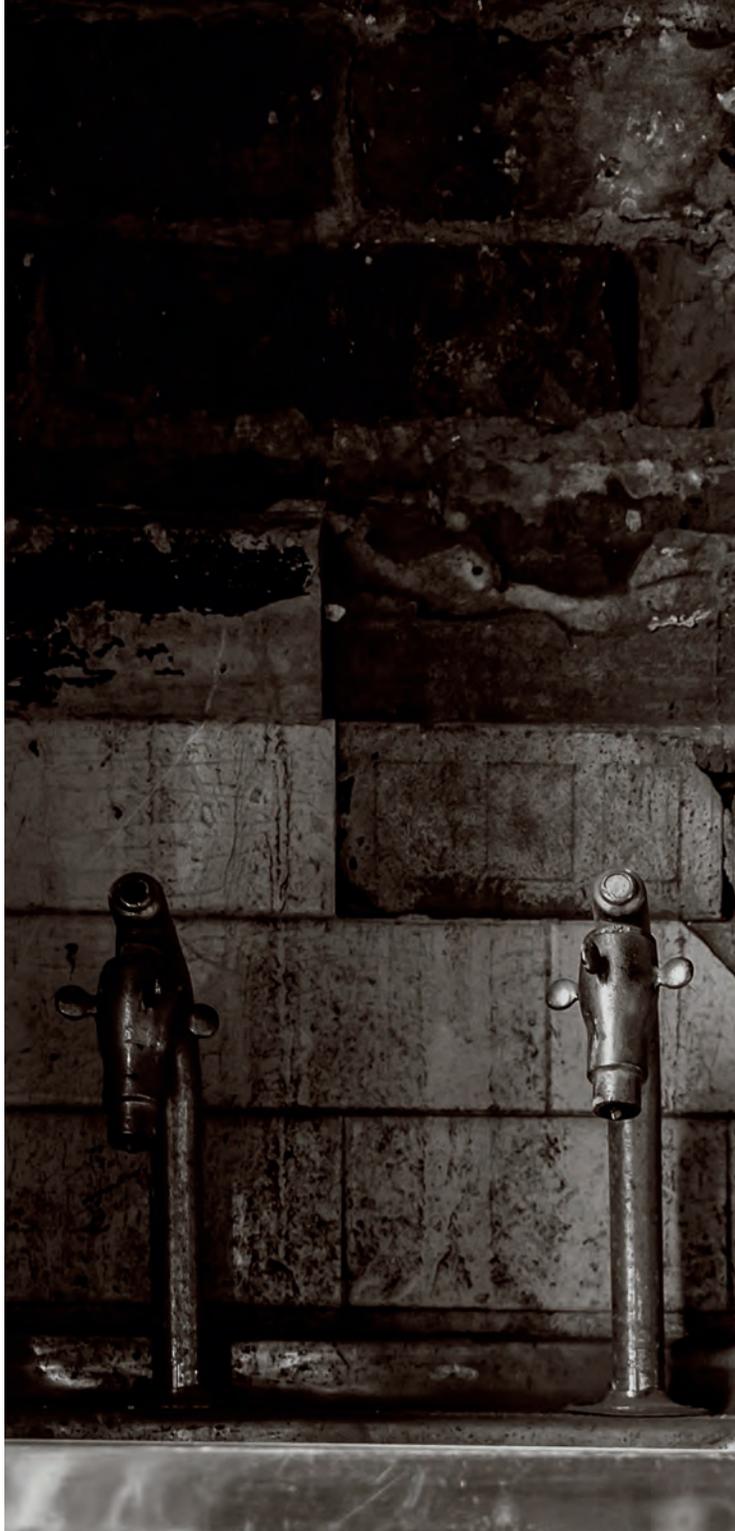
Victoria Baths served the people of Manchester for 87 years, and whilst the amazing central pool is perhaps the most obvious showpiece, there was also a Turkish baths suite, containing three hot-rooms, a shampooing room, a douche (shower), Russian bath (steam room) and a Rest room. In other words this wasn't necessarily a place to come and swim – you literally came here for a bath... to get *clean*...

It's history encapsulates that of many leading swimmers of the early 20th century including Rob Derbyshire whose father was the superintendent and who competed in four Olympic Games. The baths also witnessed the acceptance of mixed bathing post-WW1 and by the 1920s sessions at Victoria Baths were held every Sunday morning enabling families to swim together for the first time.

Therefore, with such a cacophony of echoes in its walls, photographer Jo Scott really needs no further justification for her time spent here. She says: ‘As soon as I stepped inside I could hear the noise of the bathers shouting and splashing; I could smell the warm, damp atmosphere; I could even see

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Image © Jo Scott





→ the masses piling though the clicking turnstiles... yet the building had been closed to public swimming for 20 years.' On her first visit, Jo had a very strong reaction to the place: 'It was emotional – the silent echoes of the corridors rang loudly to me, its cold spaces sent shivers down my spine, especially as its crumbling empty cubicles stood open as if the occupants had just left.' The energy of the place, it seems, made Jo realise that a single image could wield a great deal of power and impact – and together would form a strong body of work. 'My vision was to create a set of work that collectively spoke of the building and how behind both the Art Nouveau opulence and the slow, steady decay you can really sense that Victoria Baths was a well-used place – the feeling was strong and the challenge to convey a feeling of life but I suppose sorrow and emptiness all at the same time through a lens.'

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Images © Jo Scott



→ Jo continues: 'For me the cubicles had a real sense of abandonment and dereliction. I wanted to focus on the peeling paint, but portray the sense of endless haunting cubicles along the length of the pool.' Indeed, the pictures will speak in very different ways depending on the viewer's personal experience. To today's middle aged and upwards, swimming baths with cubicles lining the sides were commonplace in childhood, perhaps even striking terror into the hearts and minds of many facing an old-fashioned style of swimming lesson. Whatever the result, the fact is the images are evocative – whether haunting or romantic comes back down to the viewer.

Coming to capture the many scenes of Victoria Baths was a bit of a curve ball for Jo. With an established portraiture business in play, what was she up to creating architectural-style images... with *feeling*? →

Images © Jo Scott



→ 'I actually went on a creative writing course and the idea came about to make images where you could sense and "see" people who had gone before through the portrayal of a building. A project on old and ancient buildings gathered pace – but originally it was to cover lots of different places. In my research I was in contact with the Victorian Society and discovered Victoria Baths. Perhaps then the self-doubt set in. It wasn't the technical aspects that I was worried about but whether the images could be strong enough to convey everything I wanted them to. I knew that I was effectively asking the pictures to do a lot of work. So that, in turn, made me do a lot of work and rise to the challenge.

'I didn't really have any notion of what – if anything – the project would do for me as a professional. I just knew it was challenging me photographically, obviously very different to photographing people. When you undertake to work in a new way, and with this it was all about the thought process of deciding *what* to photograph; how to get the place across in pictures, it's not going to

be all centred on changing the way you work on a day-to-day basis. I feel it has improved and enhanced the way I now work. I want to go out and pursue other fine art projects and hope that long-term they will generate commercial interest in what I can do. It's been a joy, teasing these pictures out of the building.'

It could be said that this project was actually about photographing people, it's just that (other than right) they're not quite there – but boy can you hear them. tP

See Jo's work at [www.joscottimages.co.uk](http://www.joscottimages.co.uk)

Images © Jo Scott

