

Friday 24th June 2005. I'm flicking through *The Independent* newspaper. The Sudoku craze is sweeping the nation. Various celebrities are musing about their favourite Glastonbury festival. A feature article poses the question "What became of the Blues?"

My eye is caught by a striking photograph. It's a waist-up portrait of a man, who has the air of Mick Jagger in his younger days. Mouth open, he's wearing a singlet, his hands wrapped around a pre-digital age camera. It's a picture I've seen before. That's Keith Morris, I think to myself. It's several years since I've had any contact with him. I wonder what's he been doing that merits a half page spread in a national newspaper. Then the rest of my brain kicks in. It's the 'Obituaries' page. Keith Morris is dead.

'Keith Morris. Sixties and Seventies rock photographer turned technical diving instructor', says the banner headline. The rock photography I knew about. Keith was the only professional photographer to take any pictures of Nick Drake. Fantastic photographs. Most famously the one used on the rear sleeve of "Five Leaves Left." Nick, leaning against a brick wall, watching as a man, caught in mid stride, rushes by. The quintessential observer. The world moving too fast.

The obituary revealed Keith was missing, presumed drowned, after a dive to a submarine wreck in the English Channel. A scuba diver since the 1960s, he had become one of Britain's leading 'trimix' divers, using a mix of gases to go below 65 metres – the point where air becomes toxic. 'Trimix' enabled adventurous souls like Keith to undertake more risky dives. The obituary went on: "Superfit and determined to push the sport's boundaries, he specialised in diving in violent tidal systems where planning, experience and physical strength were crucial."

One of his favourite violent tidal systems was Corryvreckan, a ferocious whirlpool off the island of Jura in the Hebrides. Apparently Keith had become obsessed with it, undertaking more than 30 dives. "It's the most amazing place," he was quoted as saying. "There is this eerie growling sound created by water flowing through caves in the pinnacle. It makes for a spooky dive, especially with local stories about the Cailleach Uragaig, a Celtic 'hag of the deep', who lives at the bottom of the whirlpool."

Corryvreckan was better known to me as the place where the writer George Orwell had nearly drowned. Like many journalists, Orwell was my hero. After the war, he escaped to Jura, rented a cottage and wrote '1984'. One day, he went on a boat trip round the north of the island. On the way back, he misjudged the tide.

"Barnhill, Isle of Jura, Argyllshire, 8th September 1947. Extract from a letter to the novelist, Anthony Powell.

"..... Recently four of us including Richard (Orwell's young adopted son) were all but drowned in the famous whirlpool of Corrievechan (sic).... It was very unpleasant while it lasted, and it ended by our being literally wrecked on a desert island where we might have been stranded for a day or two, but very luckily some lobster fishermen saw the fire we lit for a signal and got us off. Richard loved every minute of it except when he was actually in the water."

(from *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*. Volume 4, pp. 432-433).

Because of Corryvreckan, Keith Morris made regular journeys to Jura. In 1984, I too went there. I rented a neighbouring cottage from the woman who had been Orwell's landlady, Margaret Nelson, and after a long, long walk visited 'Barnhill,' Orwell's rural idyll. The island's primitive roads proved too much for my old brown Mini and looking at the map, Corryvreckan looked like a hike too far, so I never got to experience it, even from the top of a cliff. Reading about Keith's passion for this ferocious whirlpool made me regret my lack of adventure.

Diving wasn't mentioned when I met him. With no tv or film footage to bring Nick back to life, Keith's black and white photographs appeared whenever stories appeared in the media, which was increasingly often. We agreed to meet on Hampstead Heath in London. It seemed an appropriate place as it had been the location of the 'Pink Moon' album photo session. To me, those photographs were the most haunting of all Keith's pictures of Nick. The beautiful youth now seemingly an old man. Dishevelled, he looked like a tramp. Seemingly the cares of the whole world on his hunched shoulders.

I arrived early and walked around, trying to locate where one of the pictures had been taken. It featured Nick sat on a bench, staring blankly into the distance – an image Nick's sister Gabrielle described as the most truthful picture of her brother. Looking at the background of the photograph, there was certainly a bench in approximately the same spot, but its relatively new appearance suggested the original had rotted away long ago and been replaced, its significance long forgotten. Today it would probably have merited a blue plaque. "Singer songwriter Nick Drake, 1948-1974, sat here."

Keith told me it was Nick, who suggested using Hampstead Heath as location. He decided he didn't want to feature on the front sleeve as he had on the first two albums. But the record company still needed his help in promoting the record. Keith explained: "I got a message from Island Records that he wanted some publicity pictures here, and the idea was that Annie Sullivan, who worked [as art director] at Island would pick me up, pick Nick up and we came here and just did the pictures of him walking round, sitting round, being here really."

Nick knew Hampstead Heath well. It remains one of London's lungs. Nearly 800 acres of rolling parkland with echoes of the lush Warwickshire countryside he had left behind. At first, after leaving Cambridge, he shared a flat in London with his sister Gabrielle. Then, during 1970 and 1971, he lived in a building called 'Danhurst' at 112 Haverstock Hill, London NW3. On the corner, at the junction of Park Hill Road and England's Lane where Hampstead runs down the hill into Camden Town. It's since been demolished. But today its neighbours remain. Imposing Victorian buildings, now as then sub-divided into flats.

The Camden Council Electoral Roll for 1971 lists Nick as one of the people living there. Whatever his deteriorating state of mind, he was still organised enough to register to vote. Only four of the names re-appear on the roll for 1970 – an indication of the ever-transient nature of London's population. Apart from two people with the same

surname, the roll (listed in alphabetical order) reveals nothing about the people and their relationship to each other.

Adams, Jacqueline
Boreham, Julian
Bragg, Angela
Cramer, Kate
Drake, Nicholas
Gordon, Eva
Higgins, Jennifer
Kiss, Ottilia JM
Lawlor, David
McMahon, Ann
Mannion, James
Mannion, Margaret
Prior, Mary
Reilly, Patricia
Schilsky, Claire
Smith, Heather

Friends of Nick's all thought the Haverstock Hill bedsitter was a dump. Conditions of appalling squalor, one told me. Another remembered huddling for warmth round a small "honeycomb" gas fire. Certainly Nick wasn't very good at looking after himself. Robert Kirby went round there to work on the musical arrangements for 'Bryter Layter.' It was much like other places Nick lived, he said. An unmade bed, a guitar, a carton of milk. Temporary. The sort of scene you get in film when someone isn't staying there long.

Keith and Nick first met in the spring of 1969 while Nick was still a student at Cambridge and recording his debut album. "It was with Joe Boyd in the offices of Witchseason (Boyd's management company). Nick was shy and boyish and likeable. I kind of got more into Nick the more I knew him. He was one of those people, who didn't talk a great deal. The more you found out about him, the more you warmed to him. Ours was a working relationship. We came together when there was a reason to work - like an album to promote, but I didn't see much of Nick in between. Very occasionally, I might get a visit."

Each time, the working method was the same. They would kick ideas around. Then go out with a camera and try and make them work. Keith thought Nick saw himself as an observer, certainly photographically. It's a theme that recurs in several pictures. The rear sleeve of "Bryter Layter" is a typical example. Keith remembered the shot being taken just round the corner from where he lived on the Westway. These days, it's called the A40M, an elevated stretch of motorway snaking its way out of London, part of a grand plan to speed cars out of the metropolis. Most days, it's now a car park at the rush hour. As the Westway opened in July 1970, the picture must have been taken a few months before "Bryter Layter's" release. Nick at the side of a road at night, illuminated by street lamps, with a single blurred car going past.

The observer idea was road-tested for "Five Leaves Left". The "famous wall shot", as Keith called it, was taken outside a factory as workers swarmed out at the end of a

shift. "Basically the idea was fairly simple. We wanted a neutral background, not a confused background. ie. a wall. Nick would be there, fairly static in an observer position and we were going to get people walking past, running past, going past however they happened to appear. We got there around going-home time and recorded people, some in droves. The one we ended up using just had the one person, who was running for a bus as I recall."

Keith identified the shoot's factory location as Morgan Crucible in Battersea, South London. I typed "Morgan Crucible" into an internet search engine and dozens of links appeared. According to the company website, work began on the Battersea site in 1856. The five original Morgan brothers formed a business they described as "Druggist Sundriesman and Hardware Merchants." Crucibles were one of the many items they sold. A century later, the Battersea plant was struggling to cope with production demands. By the early 1980s, the site had been re-developed and production moved elsewhere in the UK. Another website for film locations threw up the fact that the Morgan Crucible works was used as a location for the 1951 Ealing film "The Man In the White Suit", starring Alec Guinness. For good measure, the site included atmospheric black and white stills, showing the Guinness character and an imposing brick building with high walls in the background.

Over the years, I wondered if the man running for his bus knew he was part of a legendary rock photograph. I went back to the contact sheet of photographs taken outside the factory looking for clues. One of the shots shows Nick leaning on a lamp post next to a newspaper seller. "Budget Speech", announces the billboard. Budget Day in 1969 was Tuesday 15th April. Labour Chancellor Roy Jenkins presented what the Daily Mail described as a "dog's dinner of a Budget..... designed carefully to provoke minimum unpopularity". Opposition leader Mr Edward Heath said it was "a dead-end budget by a fag-end Government." A few clues to be going on with.

I contacted Morgan Crucible to see if they could help. Did they have a retired workers association or a magazine or website for ex-staff? The sequence of pictures Keith took that day might also yield some clues. Perhaps other people featured might remember their colleague. That is if he worked for Morgan Crucible at all. Of course, he might have been a random stranger passing by. Two days later, Victoria Gould, Director of Group Communications for the Morgan Crucible Company plc, now a multi-national employing thousands of people worldwide, replied to my email.

She explained that the company didn't have retired workers clubs in the UK. When the Battersea factory closed in the late 70s, some of the workers transferred to another of the company's plants in Swansea. She had checked whether any of them were still working there and the last of them retired in 1998. She thanked me for my "interesting question," clearly a welcome diversion from inquiries about industrial processes and share prices, and wished me well in my search.

Perhaps the "running man's" destiny was to remain unknown. I once went to a book signing by Nick Hornby for his classic football memoir "Fever Pitch". The hardback cover featured an arresting shot of a young boy dressed in an Arsenal football shirt. "Have you managed to track down the little lad?" I asked as he scribbled a dedication in biro on the inside cover. Hornby shook his head. You would have thought with all the publicity generated by a bestseller, it would have been easy.

The “running man” photograph certainly came to haunt Keith. In the summer of 2004, he was persuaded by Redferns, the London music picture gallery, to stage an exhibition of around 40 of his Nick photographs. Keith insisted on doing the prints, a rare occurrence for most photographers of his stature. He clearly felt a responsibility to Nick’s memory and to the Drake family. Joe Boyd went along to the opening and got chatting with Keith. At one point, he turned to Joe and said, “I wish I’d never taken these bloody pictures.” Joe asked him why. “Well, I’ve taken lots of good pictures, but the only thing anybody ever wants are these fucking Nick Drake pictures.”

His anger, whether fake or not, was justified. As well as diving, he excelled at photography. He learned his trade during the Swinging Sixties with people like David Bailey, and worked on the infamous underground magazine “Oz”, as well as for the London listings magazine “Time Out” and the medical journal “The Lancet.” Among the rock stars he photographed and helped make iconic were Marc Bolan, Led Zeppelin and Elvis Costello. But like Nick, Keith had been prone to bouts of depression. It stemmed from the death of his 15 year-old son Lee in 1991. Like father, like son, Lee caught the diving bug. While training in an inland lake, he got into difficulties and drowned. Like Molly and Rodney Drake, Keith knew what it was to lose a child.

By late 1971 and the “Pink Moon” shoot on Hampstead Heath, Nick Drake had retreated within. Ever the professional, Keith Morris worked hard to get anything useable. “I always remember the biggest problem I had was trying to get a shot of him actually looking into the camera or even in the vague direction of the camera. His tendency was look down or away. Anything but at the camera, and that kind of dictated the whole session. As a photographer, you’ve got a couple of choices. You blow it, or you can work with it and try and make something moody out of it, which is what I obviously tried to do.” In the end, the shot used in ads to promote “Pink Moon” was of him walking away from the camera, with a dog at his side. The dog belonged to Island art director Annie Sullivan.

As our conversation drifted to a close, I asked Keith about Nick’s death and growing cult status as a musician. He thought the overdose was an accident. “I wasn’t surprised that he died. I never saw Nick becoming a kind of grand old man of the folk/pop scene. But I was very sad. He was someone, if you knew him, that you were touched by. There was a great vulnerability about him. He was easy to like.” His answer to the second part of the question sounded ludicrous to me at the time. “I do think he’s one of the most important, if not the most important, British singer/songwriters that we’ve ever produced and I say that not forgetting the Elton John’s of this world, who have had much bigger audiences. Nick was very personal, very special and I think that if he had lived longer, then who knows. Maybe he would have had that sort of stardom.” Now he’s gone, I think Keith Morris was right.