

CHARLES, GEOFFREY (1909-2002), photographer

Name: Geoffrey Charles
Date of birth: 1909
Date of death: 2002
Spouse: Doris Thomas
Spouse: Verlie Blanche Charles (née George)
Child: Susan Charles
Child: Janet Charles
Child: John Charles
Parent: Jane Elizabeth Charles (née Read)
Parent: John Charles
Gender: Male
Occupation: photographer
Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Printing and Publishing
Author: William Troughton

Geoff Charles was born on 28 January 1909 in Brymbo near Wrexham. His father John Charles (1870-1941) served as Secretary of the Brymbo Water Company from 1912-1941. His mother Jane Elizabeth (née Read) (1874-1968) was a Queen's Nurse. He grew up with younger brother Hugh and sister Margaret in the Old Vicarage, a house near the railway, a subject for which he soon developed a life-long fascination. At Grove Park School he was encouraged to apply for a Diploma in Journalism at the University of London, from where he graduated with first class honours in 1928. Initially he worked as a reporter for the *Western Mail* covering inquests, dirt track and greyhound racing. Subsequently he worked for the *Mountain Ash and Aberdare Express* writing on council meetings and court cases. Seeking the bright lights he moved to Guildford to work for *The Surrey Advertiser*.

It was in Guildford that he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, then still a potentially fatal disease. After recovering in a sanatorium he returned home and started working on the *Wrexham Star*, a paper established in 1934 to rival the *Wrexham Leader*, published by Woodall, Minchin & Thomas. The *Wrexham Star* was a shoestring operation relying for sales on street corner vendors. Shortly after joining the *Wrexham Star* he reported on the Gresford Colliery Disaster. Gaining access to the lamp room he ascertained that the official figure of one hundred men underground was an under-statement. Shortly after Geoff purchased his first camera, a VPK Thornton Pickard using 2.5 by 3.5 inch plates. Amongst the first pictures he took were a sequence showing the re-lighting of the blast furnaces in Brymbo steelworks.

Ironically an economic upturn spelled the end of the *Wrexham Star* as their sales force obtained regular employment. The paper amalgamated with the *Wrexham Advertiser* in March 1936. Geoff was now a competent photographer to the extent that Woodall's Managing Director Rowland Thomas offered him management of their photographic section in Oswestry. Shortly afterwards he moved to Newtown to run the *Montgomeryshire Express* and contribute photos to the Welsh language weekly newspaper *Y Cymro*. The first story he covered for *Y Cymro* was of **Lewis Valentine** shortly before sentencing for his part in burning down the bombing school in Penyborth. **Lewis Valentine** declined to be photographed so instead Geoff took photographs of his daughter. These pictures appeared on 23rd January 1937. Later he was to team up with a promising young reporter named John Roberts Williams to photograph stories for *Y Cymro*. The two had first been introduced by a mutual acquaintance at Pwllheli football field in 1938. Geoff regarded John Roberts Williams as the man who made him realise and value his Welsh heritage. John Roberts Williams was best man at his marriage in 1939 to Verlie Blanche George (1907-1981). They had a son, John, and two daughters, Janet and Susan.

Work for *Y Cymro* almost ceased during the war years when his efforts were concentrated on the *Montgomeryshire Express*. He also served on the Demonstration sub-committee of the Montgomeryshire War Agricultural Executive Committee helping publicise and implement improved farming practices. His bout of tuberculosis precluded any possibility of joining up. Much of his work from this era was on 35mm film, shot on a Leica 111B purchased in January 1939. Unfortunately the majority of his early photographs were lost. Some thrown out during a clear-out at Oswestry in 1939 and others destroyed in a fire at Wrexham. Sufficient have survived to provide a distinctive record of the home front in Mid Wales during World War Two.

His work for *Y Cymro* resumed in earnest after the war when John Roberts Williams was appointed editor. Their work soon surpassed any other photo-journalism to be seen in Wales. The image of the elderly farmer-poet **Carneddog** and his wife forced to leave their farm in the Carneddau Mountains in 1945 due to the death of their son is his best known work. No other photograph has taken hold of the Welsh imagination as did this. His subjects varied widely, from sheep shearing to shipping, boxing to bee-keeping and cars to coracles. Over this period his work recorded far more than events and personalities - piece by piece, photo by photo a now vanished way of life is revealed - the farmhands living in the Llofft Stabal, the postman delivering letters on horseback or the retired quarryman demonstrating the 'car gwyllt'. The arrival of electricity in remote villages, a new militancy in the campaign for recognition of the Welsh Language and a mechanised revolution in agriculture are all recorded in his work. His photographs taken at the annual National Eisteddfod are amongst his most iconic. During the post-war years he also experimented with cine-film, the high-point being his collaboration with John Roberts Williams and **Cynan** - '*Yr Eitfediaeth*.' The film was shot in black and white and premiered in both Welsh and English (titled '*The Heritage*') at the 1949 National Eisteddfod in Dolgellau. Other films of his include *Tir Na Nog* filmed in Ireland; *Y Cymro* - a film about printing; a cultural trip to Franco's Spain in 1949 and Wales defeating Belgium in a soccer international, also in 1949.

If any of his photos should be singled out then those of Tryweryn deserve special mention. For a brief period Wales held her breath. Would this community be allowed to live or would it drown beneath a new reservoir to supply Liverpool? The village drowned, but not before Geoff photographed a poignant sequence of images that recorded a way of life and a community that disappeared simultaneously.

Geoff Charles retired in 1975 but continued to contribute articles and photographs to *Y Cymro* and *Farmers Weekly* on a freelance basis. He subsequently donated his

collection of over 120,000 negatives to the National Library of Wales and assisted in the gargantuan task of cataloguing and indexing them. His work was the subject of two major exhibitions at the National Library of Wales in 1984 and 1995. The onset of vinegar syndrome in some of his early negatives proved the catalyst for the digitisation of the entire collection. These are now available through the [National Library of Wales website](#). In 1985 he was inducted into the Gorsedd of the Bards at the National Eisteddfod in Lampeter taking the bardic name 'Sieffre o Brymbo'.

He married again in 1986, to Doris Thomas (1909-2000) and moved to Rhyl. In later years his failing eyesight proved a cruel burden. He died on 7 March 2002, and his funeral was held at Shrewsbury Crematorium on 19 March.

Author

William Troughton

Sources

Geoff Charles parts 1&2 - NLW sound recordings 99371239502419 & 99371239202419 (1982)

Barn, Mawrth 1995

Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Frenhinol Cymru 1939-1979, 1984 exhibition catalogue

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Geoff Charles](#)

Works

NLW: [The Geoff Charles Photographic Collection](#)

Additional Links

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