

# Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography



JOURNAL 6

# Expressions

Conversations in landscape photography



This journal is published by **aspect2i.co.uk**

Contact: **journal@aspect2i.co.uk**



© Cover Image: by Michael Pilkington

No part of this journal may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from aspect2i Ltd.

The copyright to all photographs and text featured in this journal belongs solely to the authors of the photographs. For permission to use any of the images included in this journal please pass your request to the publisher, who will then forward the request to the authors.

Copyright © aspect2i Ltd 2024. All rights reserved.



## JOURNAL 6

Introduction	4
Feature	5
Influence or inspiration? <i>by Denis Hocking</i>	
Travelogue	16
Hardships on Harris <i>by Andy Phillips</i>	
Featured photographer	24
Viveca Koh FRPS	
Broadening horizons	35
The Highlands of Iceland <i>by Paul Gallagher</i>	
How I got the shot	46
Developing a black and white image <i>by Michael Pilkington</i>	
The making of a photograph	53
My head in the clouds <i>by Michael Pilkington</i>	
End note	56

**A**t this time of year things begin to get exciting, certainly in the world of landscape photography. This year the anticipation for the change of seasons from summer towards autumn, closely followed by winter, is even more palpable given the awful summer we have all had to endure! No sooner had the trees and hedgerows transitioned into full leaf, then the rains arrived, and in most places, never really left again.

It has been the wettest summer in decades, with some claiming the most rainfall in a hundred years. Even without the rain, summer does not appeal to many of us who like to be out in the countryside with our cameras as everything is simply green, certainly in the UK. Hold tight everyone, because soon enough the temperatures will take a dip, the profusion of green will give way to golds and yellows, and the sun will stay low in the sky.

Summer winds and occasional rains were certainly a feature of a recent trip to Iceland for Paul Gallagher. This may sound like an adventure hampered by the weather, but that was not the case at all. In this issue Paul shares his experience of how weather was the very component that brought the Highlands of Iceland to life.

Continuing with the theme of weather, Andy Phillips recounts a trip to the Isle of Harris in December 2023 and how challenging conditions forced him to adopt a new approach to a place he is very familiar with, and the results are exquisite. We are also very pleased to feature Denis Hocking who shares with us the spiritual and cultural influence Japan has had on his photographic evolution and what it is about this fascinating country that has drawn him back many times.

We were very pleased to speak with Viveca Koh and invite her to become our Featured Photographer. She shares with us experiences from her travels and why she explores such diversity.

As always, Expressions is free to everyone, so if you know a budding photographer or a visual artist you think would enjoy what we are offering here, then please share this link with them [\*\*aspect2i.co.uk/journal\*\*](https://aspect2i.co.uk/journal).



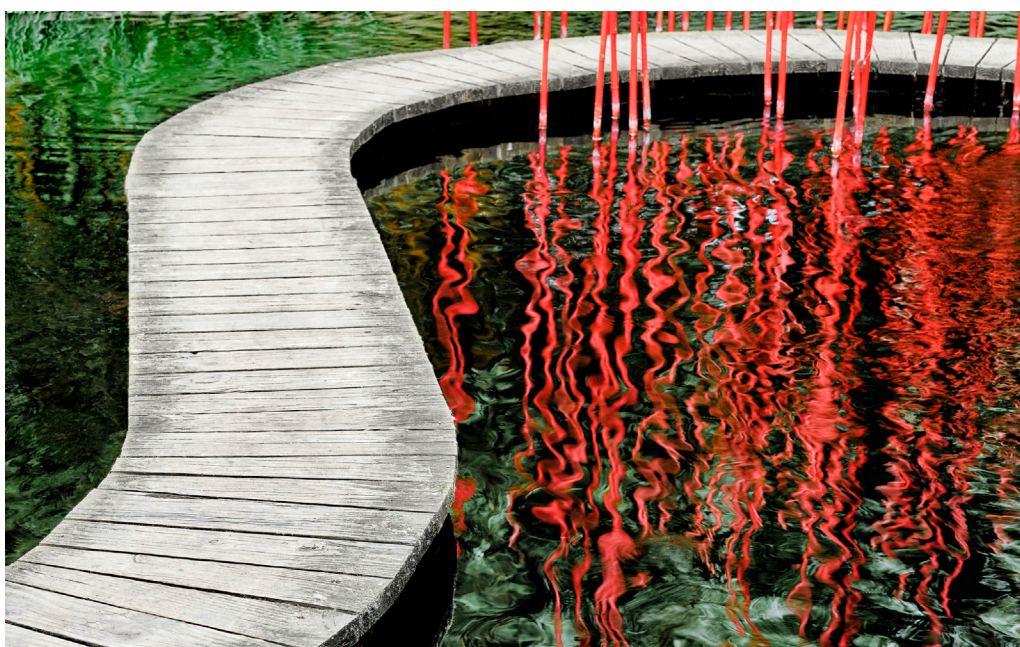
# Influence or inspiration?

*by Denis Hocking*

# Influence or inspiration?

*by Denis Hocking*

I was born and bred in the Lake District in the North West of England and spent my formative years scrambling around the mountains and wooing my wife of 55 years. I have lived in the four corners of England, Wales and France and have been fortunate throughout my life and business career to visit many countries around the World. During this time I have been influenced by many things in both my professional and personal life, but the one thing they all had in common is that they were transient and formed by necessity: parents, family, mentors, circumstance, faith, location, objectives, culture, climate etc.



© Denis Hocking

All were important, necessary and relevant for that moment in time and were essential in making me the man I am today i.e. a young at heart, fun loving old ....! I came to photography late in life after a successful business career and found, through photography, a gateway to the arts, a community of like-minded people and peace of mind: a sanctuary. When I decided to throw off the corporate overcoat that was hanging heavy on my shoulders, my wife, Fre, decided that new challenges were required to keep me from interfering with her day. She bought me a Canon 20D and a few Canon "L" lenses.

I had no idea what I was doing, but I found the ignorance to be refreshing. I approached the process of learning both the camera features and functions and the art of photography as a game. I became a child again: inquisitive, uninhibited and unencumbered by convention. Over time the game became a serious challenge to push the technology and myself in the pursuit of something worthy enough to be called art.



With more knowledge, I became more familiar. With greater familiarity, I became more demanding and those demands required greater knowledge. The virtuous circle was complete but, throughout the process which endures to this day, my excitement and enthusiasm for more is only matched by the desire to remain free to do my own thing.



© Denis Hocking

Over the years there have been many photographers, much better than me, who have influenced, advised and guided me, directly and indirectly, on my journey. I came to realise that the truly “great” photographers had virtuoso camera handling skills, an unconscious competence, but rather than

becoming camera operators, they used the camera for personal expression, to create art in their own way. I remain eternally grateful for their support and the fact that all of them encouraged me to remain a free spirit and I resolved to retain my philosophy that life is for living, living is for life.



© Denis Hocking

I never know what the next adventure might be or how it will unfold, but I know that by keeping an open mind and remaining optimistic it will be good to great, be amazing fun and not only inform and influence the photographs I take now and, in the future, but also inspire me to search for the difference in me as a person. I have talked about the many influences in my life which have affected what and how I do things. However, inspiration is different to influence and has a deeper, emotional and intellectual impact on my life and how I live it. Therefore, whilst the influences have been significant and many, my inspirations come down to two things which are intrinsically linked....plus my wife i.e. Nature and Japan.



© Denis Hocking

I first visited Japan on business approximately forty years ago. Comfortable in my corporate objectives, I was nevertheless excited, scared and intrigued by this alien environment which had just opened its borders to the outside World 116 years before my visit. This was a strange and unknown land, but the spirits that dwelt there seemed to cast a spell on me such that I have revisited many times, latterly as a photographer, often spending weeks away from the major centres and not hearing an English-speaking voice. Full body immersion and a cleansing of the mind. Forty years of regular visits and yet I still feel a foreigner, divorced from and unable to fully comprehend the ambiguous system full of secret codes and rules of conduct that are essential to everyday life.



© Denis Hocking

As a non-Japanese in Japan, I am always feel 'present' but, paradoxically, continue to feel isolated in a country that could not be more open, warm and respectful of their fellow human beings. Japan is unique in that it only opened its borders to the outside World in 1869 and, unlike the UK, the effects of centuries-long isolation from the rest of the World are still evident today.



© Denis Hocking

Unlike the UK, intense urbanization has occurred in pockets leaving large masses of open countryside and wild spaces, thrust upwards by volcanic and tectonic influences, that offer a wide range of landscapes, climates and micro-cultures. The northern tip of Japan, Hokkaido, and the mountainous areas of central Japan are exposed to the cold winds blowing from nearby Siberia resulting in large amounts of snow and creating a minimalist winter wonderland.

However, I can't talk about Japan's effect on me without referencing the co-existence and significance of Zen Buddhism, which was introduced from China and rapidly spread across Japan in the 13th



Century, and Shintoism; both are deep-rooted and hugely influential in the Japanese aesthetic sensitivity, life, traditions, culture and the arts. Deities are sacred spirits which take the form of things and concepts that are important to life such as wind, rain, trees, rivers and mountains. There is no absolute right or wrong; nothing and nobody is perfect.



© Denis Hocking

Great significance is ascribed to simplification, asymmetry, imbalance, empty space and imperfection and all are reflected in Japanese art and architecture. My long-standing emotional connection and love with Japan and the Japanese aesthetic became the building blocks that have inspired my love for art and photography. I am not alone in this regard as witnessed by the large collections of Japanese woodblock prints collected by Vincent Van Gogh and Claude Monet. Art is all around us; we just have to look for it. Beauty is found in mundane places and things.

“WA”, harmony, is arguably the most important value in Japan, is the foundation of Japanese identity and is well expressed in the Japanese Tea Ceremony which is considered a “once in a lifetime encounter” (Ichi Go, Ichi E). Light and shadow are the founding stones of the Japanese sense of aesthetics and are key elements in the traditional tea ceremony which starts with the structured and symbolic approach to the entrance of the tearoom. The ritual of opening the Shoji screen is intriguing as much as it is balletic; three precise movements, choreographed to progressively allow the light to enter the room at the same time as the room opens itself to the view of the participants.



© Denis Hocking

One's eyes are naturally drawn to the delicate hands and fingers as they seem to dance on the edge of the screen. In the past, I would have seen these actions as an opportunity to capture a beautiful and calming moment in time. Perhaps they still are? However, interest is better served by watching the light as it progressively enters the space, casting its illumination, penetrating the cold and back-lit hue emanating from the Shoji screens and softly highlighting the beautiful utensils with a special allure as

its strength fails and it struggles to preserve the last vestiges of its life.

This is where the story is for me.

Light and shadow, opposites and yet reliant on each other to exist. This is where eye, heart and mind harmonise. This is WA. This is the photograph. This is inspiration. This is life!



© Denis Hocking

All of the quotations below have had a huge influence on me, my life and my photography.

"I desire that photography, instead of falling into the realm of industry and commerce, should come into that of art". (Gustave Le Gray).

"Anything that an artist calls art, is art". (Marcel Duchamp)

"I hope that we don't ever see the day when a ready-made photo system, which guarantees good photographic compositions in advance, goes on the market." (Henri Cartier-Bresson)

"I am not interested in rules or conventions. Photography is not a sport". (Bill Brandt).

"Seeing is not enough; you have to feel what you photograph". (Andre Kertesz).

"To consult the rules of composition before making a picture is a little like consulting the laws of gravity before going for a walk". (Edward Weston)

"I'm too impatient to use a tripod". (Ralph Gibson)

"A good photograph is one that communicates a fact, touches the heart and leaves the viewer a changed person for having seen it" (Fan Ho)

"The golden rule in the arts, as far as I am concerned, is that all rules are meant to be broken". (Michael Kenna).

"I often think of my work as visual haiku. It is an attempt to evoke and suggest through as few elements as possible rather than to describe with tremendous detail". (Michael Kenna)

"A winner is a dreamer who never gives up". (Nelson Mandela)

"Nana Korobi Ya Oki" (Japanese Proverb: Seven times fallen, eight times standing)









# Hardships on Harris

*by Andy Phillips*

## Travelogue - A truthful account of an individual's experiences to or within a particular place

It is to be expected that occasionally photographers form an affinity with a particular place or landscape. It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint why this is, but there is a certain comfort in visiting the place, walking through the landscape, and of course the rewards it gives when making images. Since the inception of Expressions, we have been approached by photographers who have harnessed a deep communion with varying environments from beaches to woodlands and glens to deserts.

In this Travelogue, we have the words and experiences of Andy Phillips exploring and photographing the Isle of Harris.



© Andy Phillips

Your photographic life becomes a lot easier when you're married to another photographer. It ensures there are no impatient foot-tappers behind you when taking photographs on your holidays. It's a partnership that just works. My wife Nancy and I spend lots of quality photography time together, mainly in Scotland, and in particular, the Outer Hebrides. I have photographed many lovely locations overseas, but Scotland just has a unique pull for me. The weather is not always photography friendly, but that's part of the challenge. Whatever the weather throws at you, literally, you need to have a workaround.



© Andy Phillips

We decided to go back to Harris last September. When planning your adventures and making advance bookings for accommodation and, in particular, ferries, you are in the lap of the gods. You must be prepared to roll with whatever happens. Our initial trip to Harris was unfortunately doomed from the outset. We had driven to the Uig Ferry Terminal on the Isle of Skye from Lancashire and settled into our nearby hotel ready for an early morning sailing to Tarbert on the Isle of Harris.





© Andy Phillips

During the night, however, Nancy became unwell. I'm a retired paramedic, and I recognise the signs and symptoms of a kidney infection, which, without strong antibiotics, might progress to something more serious. We were supposed to be heading for a remote cottage on the outer isles, so erring on the side of safety, and with some sorrow, I cancelled our cottage and ferries. We soon sought the medical help Nancy needed and headed home, repeating the ten-hour drive with Nancy snoring most of the way! Some people are just ungrateful.

We rebooked the same holiday scheduled for a few months later in December, this time, sailing from Ullapool. We again stayed at a hotel overnight close to the ferry port to reduce the chance of missing the early ferry. It blew an absolute hoolie outside during the night, so we continually monitored the weather and ferry sailings using the apps to give up-to-the-minute information and we discovered that ferries were being cancelled all over the Hebrides because of the arrival of Storm Pia. This storm was all over the news, and all over us! I was beginning to feel like a Jonah!

We are no strangers to the Hebrides as we have explored the islands many times on workshops and holidays; indeed, we even spent our honeymoon there. The weather conditions, according to the reports, were going to be challenging. It was predicted to be gale-force winds, sub-zero temperatures and heavy rain along with shortened winter daylight times. This gave us a potential few hours each day to try and get decent images, and even then, there were intermittent icy blasts of torrential rain. Careful planning of a schedule would be needed to maximise our time there. The skill was to estimate where we should be at the right time with the right tide and hopefully get some good light!



© Andy Phillips

However, on a positive note, because all the ferries had been cancelled, we had the place to ourselves. Storm Pia blew around for most of the week, delivering very dramatic skies on occasions. Bearing all this in mind, we decided to concentrate our efforts around one area of the Isle of Harris for the entire week, including Luskentyre, Traigh Bheag, and Seilibost. This would enable us to take photographs in the limited light and not waste time driving.



We had rented a cottage in Tarbert looking down on the ferry terminal, so it was easy to look out the window to see the conditions across the sea that the day was delivering. Additionally, we were also privy to several power cuts which blacked out Tarbert.

Scotland is our go-to place, and it's just so nice to load and go, throw everything in the car and head North, not forgetting the slow cooker! It's extremely pleasant after a day of photography in the wilds to have the pleasant aroma of a hot meal waiting for you when you get back, followed by a glass of vino.

My landscape kit these days is a Nikon Z7 with lenses 24-70mm, 100-400mm, and 14-30mm. I rarely use the 14-30mm and I tend to just leave it in the car, just in case. Luckily, I decided to squeeze it into the camera bag this time because I suspected I may need it.

We were on Luskentyre Beach when the weather went bonkers. It was continual bursts of every weather condition imaginable, including hail that stung as it hit your face driven by the winds. It was a constant struggle to keep everything dry. Filters were impractical, and I just took refuge, along with my camera bag under my Poncho, waiting for the light to re-emerge after the storm. I managed to get a few good bokeh shots of Marram grass at f2.8 with the rolling surf behind in between squalls. Then the storm paused to reveal a huge rainbow stretching from shore to shore, set against a very dark sky. We were sitting perfectly in its centre, and the only lens that would do it in one go was the 14-30mm.



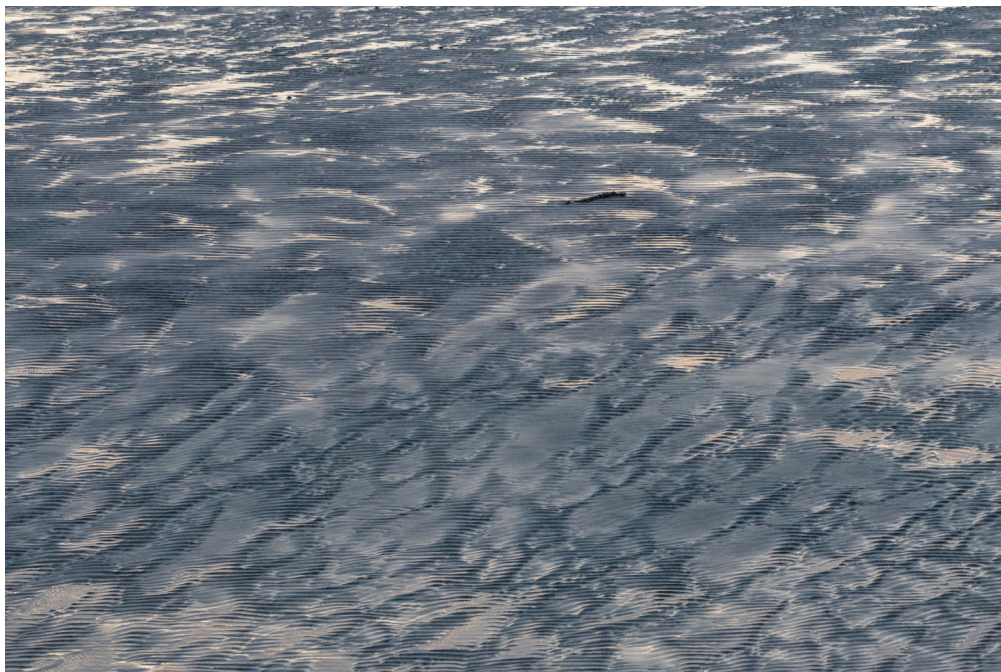
© Andy Phillips

Because of the challenging weather, I planned to shoot for detail in textures and soft light. Most days I was working beneath a blanket of thick cloud which light seldom got through. I endeavoured also to select the receding tides when possible, which would leave shallow wet sand giving me pleasant compositions with very subtle light. Filters were out of the question which ruled out the longer exposures, so higher ISOs were the order of the week.

We moved locations continuously, and on one particularly stormy day, we walked onto Traigh Bheag. It was quite a steep sandbank down to the sea, so I thought I was safely out of harms way from the incoming rollers. I still did that landscape photographer's trick of having one eye looking through the lens, whilst the other eye is keeping watch on my surroundings! My wife enjoys making videos of our photography jaunts, and she filmed my encounter with a rogue wave that had rushed around a set of rocks to my side, soaking me. I can still hear her peals of laughter.

I spent a lot of time on the high cliff above Seilibost with the long lens. This was because good light often appeared on the distant mountains. This made a change from previous years when I spent most of my time on the beach nestled in the marram grasses. This high vantage point proved very productive, as the backdrop constantly changed with different clouds and colours flowing through. It's worth mentioning that we were quite high up in very windy conditions, so I used my car with the boot open as a windbreak.

Sometimes it was just setting up the tripod and long lens and estimating from experience that something was about to happen. While doing this, you often seem to think you that you should be elsewhere, possibly missing out on some amazing conditions a few miles away.



© Andy Phillips

I like to photograph details within the wider landscape. If I see an epic vista stretching out in front of me, I will consider breaking it down into smaller parts first, in particular with a long lens. I always travel with a large golf umbrella which gets used as a windbreak for my camera and tripod. If there are several photographers in a group, then a gathering of brollies utilised by one photographer can net you great long-exposure images on windy days. During this stay on Harris, however, my umbrella remained in the car, too scared to come out. Otherwise, it would have been pulled inside out and carried off to Taransay the moment it was opened!

I don't tend to do any post-processing when I am away. I used to find that if I did this, on my return home, I would process them all again on my main computer with a larger screen. Looking through these Harris images, I could see that careful post-processing would be required, as various challenges were evident in the raw files. Challenges caused by the subtleness of the light on the beaches. I would have to be extra careful to retain these moments as I remembered them. A lot of the textures in the beach foregrounds were full of an unusual peat colour. I like to compare this peaty colour with my favourite single malt whisky, Laphroaig. This has a strong flavour derived from the local waters of Islay. My wife hates it and describes the taste as a mixture of dirt and TCP and I should be issued a certificate for drinking it. Cheek!

This account is just a tale about our most recent trip to Harris, and what we did to get decent photographs despite what Storm Pia threw at us. Yes, the weather was unpleasant and very challenging, but it produced some amazing light, albeit not for long. If I got chocolate box images on a daily occurrence, I know I would tire of it very quickly. This game of landscape photography is a constant source of wonder to me. Maybe we will see you on location one day. If so, stop and have a chat.



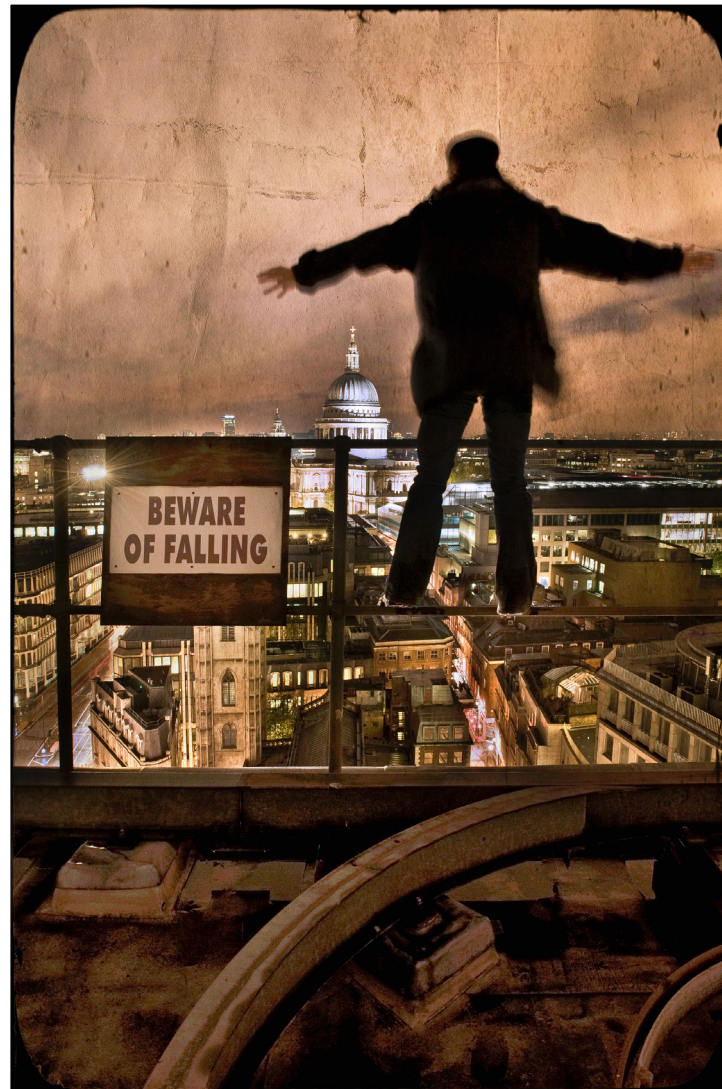
© Andy Phillips

# Featured photographer: Viveca Koh FRPS



## Viveca Koh FRPS

Variety in photography ensures that the very pursuit of making images remains exciting and allows us to experience new revelations. We treasure the opportunity of seeing other photographers' work and how they interpret the world about them, and sometimes we encounter a photographer with a wealth of experience and a rich and diverse portfolio. Viveca Koh is one such photographer. From projects using historic postcards to urban exploration of abandoned buildings to the landscapes and historic remnants on the Great Plains of America. It is clear that she is able to represent a plethora of subjects consummately in her work.



© Viveca Koh London Rooftop Selfie

**What first inspired you to pick up a camera and how did your photographic journey begin?**

My love of taking photographs started at a very young age, when aged around seven I was allowed to handle my Mum's Box Brownie camera, and very occasionally to take a photo with it (sadly I don't know what became of these, whether they were ever developed or remained as negatives in a packet somewhere). Later I used her Kodak Instamatic. I loved the small square photos with white borders and kept them in plastic sleeve albums of the same size, swapping their order regularly just for the pleasure of handling the prints. As a teenager I purchased a second-hand Pentax K1000 and began teaching myself how to use it through practice and by reading photography magazines, loving the whole process of 'seeing' a potential photo, composing then shooting, which has stayed with me ever since.

In the summer of 1982, my Mum and I spent a week at an adult education centre in Shropshire learning photography skills including processing black-and-white and slide films in the dark room, plus making prints. I'd just left school and was feeling wonderfully free and happy, so I will always remember that week with tremendous fondness. I loved the magic of watching prints develop in the dark room, and I'd only need a whiff of fixer now to be right back there in the early 80s!

At some point I traded in my Pentax for a brand-new Olympus OM4-Ti, featuring spot metering which I believe was quite sophisticated at the time, and this helped me to understand the principles of exposure and accurate light metering. I still have this camera now, but if I could go back in time and keep my Pentax as well I would, as I regret no longer owning my very first SLR camera. I bought a full-frame DSLR in 2009, but I also love using an iPhone for photography and feel-good shots are all about the photographer's eye, not their equipment!



© Viveca Koh Cemetery Bench



**I understand that you are a panel member for the Royal Photographic Society and are an assessor on the Visual Arts Panel and the Licentiate Panel. What is it that you most enjoy about this role and do you find the work sometimes inspiring?**

I absolutely love being a panel member assessing Licentiate, Associate and Fellow distinctions for the RPS. Having worked through all three levels of distinctions myself and gained so much from the process, both in terms of confidence and ability, I felt I was in a strong position to assist others in doing the same.

Working towards an RPS distinction required me to think about my work in a completely different way, considering not only each individual image but how everything gelled together as a cohesive body of work. The statement of intent required for A and F added a further dimension. It's similar to working on projects (something else I enjoy) but I realised I was thinking deeply about the photos, and what I was trying to portray to the viewer. Prior to distinctions, I'd not written about my work but simply put it out there on Flickr/Instagram, perhaps with a title, to let others make up their own mind.

I hope that as an RPS assessor, sharing my experience with applicants during one-to-one sessions will in turn help them to be successful in gaining a distinction. I know people put so much time, effort, heart and soul into their potential submission; as an assessor I am in a privileged position and feel it's very important to encourage and nurture that as far as I'm able. I do find it incredibly inspiring to look at others' work and talk about their creative ideas, to get a sense of what makes another photographer tick. It's often a learning experience for me too.



© Viveca Koh Star Flight

Going back to you achieving your Fellowship with the Royal Photographic Society, I understand you applied for a Fellowship with the Irish Photographic Federation and produced a panel of images depicting postcards. Can you briefly describe this evolution and the narrative for the process?

I have a considerable collection of vintage postcards, and had previously experimented with utilising these as a separate overlay on other photographs, via layers in Photoshop. I've been working with added textures for a number of years now, and have refined my process over this time, so I was fairly confident I could produce a strong body of work around the theme.

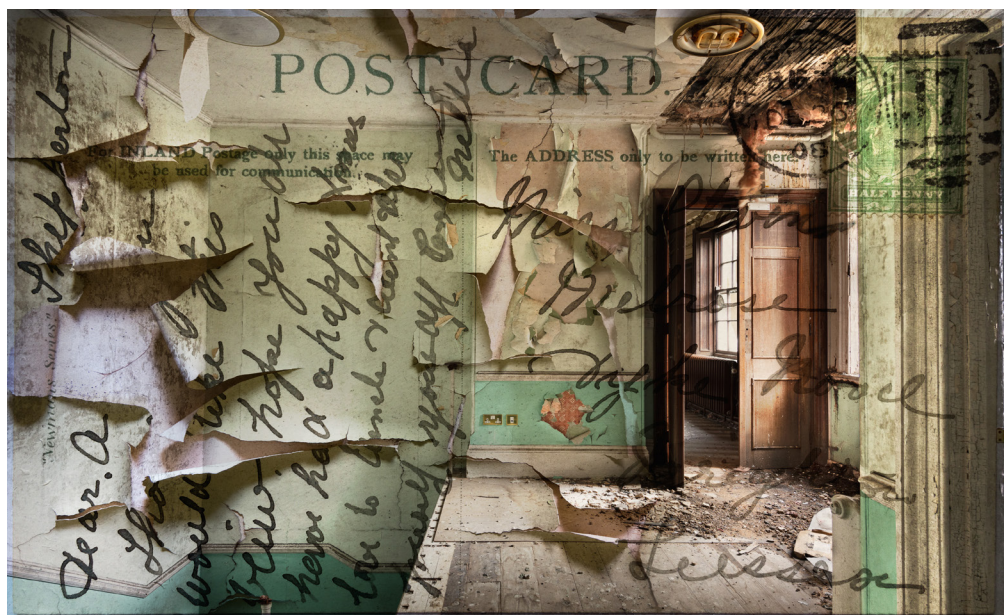


© Viveca Koh Postcard 4

From childhood onwards, I loved sending postcards home from my holidays, but now this has become a somewhat redundant activity since so many people have a mobile phone and will just post holiday pictures online instead of writing cards. This was the idea behind my panel entitled 'Postcards from the Past', which combined vintage cards with derelict scenes since these locations were also part of history.

My creative ability seems to be very up and down; when it's 'off' I can't do anything, and when it's 'on' I'm producing work in what can only be described as a state of flow. I created my entire panel of twenty images in the space of a blissful twelve days (I'm always happy when I'm working), aided by my previous experience with RPS distinctions, and a certain (some may say pedantic) level of attention to detail to ensure the work was of a very high technical and aesthetic standard.





© Viveca Koh FIPP Postcard 7



© Viveca Koh FIPP Postcard 3



**You clearly enjoy travelling. Can you share some of your experiences with us and any images that sum up the places?**

My two most recent trips abroad have both been to America, and weather-wise at two opposite ends of the spectrum. The first was snowy Montana and North Dakota, the second sunny Route 66 from New Mexico to Nevada, both with Paul and Michael at aspect2i. The snow fell on our first night in Montana and continued for the remainder of the trip, rendering the vast landscapes soft white with pops of colour emerging through the drifts, in the form of golden grasses and shapely Cottonwood trees. I don't consider myself a confident landscape photographer, so this felt like a gift to me, as the snow eliminated visual clutter and created an impression of often minimalist simplicity, and seemed to enhance the bleakness of these locations.



© Viveca Koh Old Car Montana



© Viveca Koh Montana Landscape

By contrast, the Route 66 trip was filled with glorious blue skies and sun-drenched scenes, the bright light somehow emphasising the decay of the abandoned motels, gas stations and vehicles, forlornly hunched in their surroundings and for me invoking the sense of a more cheerful past.



© Viveca Koh Glenrio Texas



© Viveca Koh Tucumcari New Mexico



I am currently processing the images in a variety of ways: some using an old colour postcard style with vivid turquoise skies, others high key portraying the strength of the bleaching sunlight, and will use monochrome too where I feel this suits the image in question. Additionally, I'm experimenting with a variety of aspect ratios after seeing an Instagram discussion on the subject from photographer Rachel Talibart, having not previously realised how much this simple adjustment can affect the viewer's perception of an image.



© Viveca Koh Truxton Arizona



© Viveca Koh Santa Rosa New Mexico

**You actively explore different genres of photography which must be constantly inspiring. Can you tell us about another genre that you find fascinating and why?**

I do like to try different genres of photography, so when I discovered Urban Exploration through a mutual friend in 2009 it was a new and exciting experience. I have a natural tendency to follow rules rather than break them, so to be sneaking into derelict buildings where I shouldn't be and taking photographs before getting busted by security and chucked out was probably the biggest thrill of my life.



© Viveca Koh Manor House

In terms of daring, my night time exploration of pre-development Battersea Power Station and the rooftop of a central London tower block were accompanied by the greatest adrenaline rush, but my favourite abandoned buildings were Hellingly and West Park asylums (now both new housing developments) and a beautiful manor house hidden deep in the Sussex countryside.

There is something incredibly poignant in visiting these places and finding evidence of the lives once lived there, seen in remaining clothing and small, commonplace possessions, medical paraphernalia and correspondence, even photographs and paintings. I always felt it was a privilege to be able to go inside these derelict buildings, to feel the history within the walls and record those lost places, perhaps for the last time before they completely crumbled or were reclaimed by nature.





© Viveca Koh Hellingly Asylum



© Viveca Koh West Park Asylum





# The Highlands of Iceland

*by Paul Gallagher*

# The Highlands of Iceland

by Paul Gallagher

To make any assumption that the Highlands of Iceland are an extension of, or similar to other areas of Iceland would be an entirely understandable error of judgement. Even if we are afforded the opportunity to see images of the Highlands, there do appear to be differences, but common qualities, namely areas of recent volcanic activity, vibrant green mosses and a plenitude of waterfalls suggest a similarity with its surrounding lowlands.

My introductory visit to Iceland was many years ago and my first sightings of the landscape from a plane had me concerned that this was going to be a barren place, open to the elements and a challenge to appreciate. Thankfully I was proved wrong and the pilgrimage along the south coast was invigorating and inspiring, and still is to this day. With a collection of visits under my belt, and having driven all of Route 1 several times witnessing the numerous variations in this epic landscape, a fortuitous opportunity arose for me to visit the Highlands. I was teaching a photographer large format photography in the UK, and through conversations about his life I soon realised he was living in Iceland, had a colossal knowledge of the Highlands and owned a specially adapted 4 X 4. A few months later I was in his company leaving the paved roads behind and being guided through some of the areas of the Highlands that had been out of reach.



© Paul Gallagher



© Paul Gallagher

To understand what the Highlands are like is to have an understanding of how Iceland was formed, and how it is still evolving to this day. In geological terms, Iceland is being torn in two as the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates of the earth's surface move away from each other which are positioned diagonally right beneath the country. Wherever this type of geological activity takes place on earth it results in large areas of volcanic and geothermal activity. As a result, Iceland has been the host to 130 volcanoes since it formed 60 million years ago, 30 of which are still active. This volcanic activity has created one of the youngest landmasses in the world and continues to perpetually change. Even today, an area on the Reykjanes Peninsula is in a transitional state producing fresh lava flows as Iceland's newest fissure volcano, Fagrad्सfall, regularly erupts. In some of the oldest parts of Iceland in the Vatnajokull region further east, the land is actually rising as millions of tonnes of glacial ice melts from the land into the sea causing isostatic rebound.



© Paul Gallagher

As geological activity has no concern for human life, this could result in the fishing harbour at Hornafjordour near Hofn being rendered too shallow to use in a matter of years.

Being a country of huge transition, along with being so young, is the reason its appearance is like no other and this is observed even more when you first experience the Highlands. The Highlands of Iceland are only accessible from late June until late September. Beyond these dates, and because Iceland is just outside the Arctic Circle, these higher regions become impassable with winter snowfall and remain frozen in time until the following summer.







It takes a dedicated traveller to venture into these parts. As there are no paved roads your first requirement is a 4 X 4 vehicle and the confidence to do what many of us would never consider rational: drive it through a river. As I mentioned, on my first visit I was comfortable sitting back and enjoying the experience of descending into the glacial melt-waters as they reached halfway up the car door and covered the bumpers whilst being driven by my guide. When it comes to committing your own vehicle to such a crossing, every scrap of your common sense tells you it is the most preposterous thing to do and you should stop on dry land and simply have a picnic and enjoy the views.



© Paul Gallagher

If seeing the Highlands is your aim, you will have to drive across rivers and take trust in the car that you have hired. Some of the road surfaces, particularly the ones passing over the huge volcanic ash deserts, are very smooth and driving them is akin to wearing your slippers on a deep pile carpet, others have stretches where routine maintenance has created a ribbed effect that vibrates the vehicle, and you, to such an extent that you feel dental fillings could be lost.



© Paul Gallagher

What I am describing here is an adventure, laced with excitement and seasoned by the weather which seldom remains changeless. The elevation of the Highlands could never be described as alpine, with its highest point reaching just under 3000 meters above sea level, but we must remind ourselves that we are positioned on a high plane within an island that sits in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. For anyone who has visited the south coast of Iceland before, we can all recount the huge ocean swell and associated waves it creates together with the raw power of the winds at the beaches. These winds are a feature of the Highlands also and play an evolutionary role in how the landscape looks.

It is a landscape of rhythms and patterns all fashioned by wind and water. The main features of this truly unbelievable place are the many volcanic craters and associated ash and lavas they violently erupted, but as time moves on their edges are softened and sculptured by the passing storms and wind. As the remaining glaciers continue to melt, thousands of rivers and waterfalls pepper the Highlands producing intricate patterns as they fan across the landscape heading towards the ocean.



On occasions I drove tracks that led me upwards to the rim of craters, now filled with water as blue as indigo, and as you turn to look at the landscape below, your eyes are met with a lattice of rivers cutting through both black and verdant green plains.



© Paul Gallagher

Throughout the differing areas of the Highlands of Iceland you are forever surrounded by evidence of volcanic activity. Landscapes that are monochromatic, covered in ash, showing very few signs of life as they have not yet had time to establish vegetation, remain lunar-like and barren. For many landscape photographers this may appear to be the least appealing environment in which to work. Furthermore, as there is very little colour and the ground is dark, when the cloud and rains arrive it can feel quite bleak and very remote. It is moments like this that make this landscape unique. You are immersed in a place with a scarcity of life, and other than the vehicle tracks, very few signs of mankind. Occasionally, out of the dark grey, you will see craters and volcanic vents surrounded by deep red rocks and stones, a testament to the incredible heat that changed the status of the rocks during the eruptions.

Only a few weeks ago I was high on the volcanic plains when mists and rain arrived. This soon gave way to breaks in the cloud as the storm skies gradually broke up and winds pushed through. From standing in a dark grey landscape, made even darker now that the rains had fallen onto the ground, the theatre of light that occurred was mesmerising. For the next hour, I witnessed shafts of sunlight that pierced their way through the clouds and raked across the landscape at a speed that looked like animation.



© Paul Gallagher

This is a landscape of contrast. As you approach the Landmannalaugar area you are presented with colours that, when photographed and presented to others, would understandably conclude you had been overzealous in your image editing, in particular, saturation. Lunar gives way to lush, and the verdant greens of the mosses cover the hills and mountainsides. Some are positively fluorescent and on an overcast day can comfortably fool one's mind into believing the sun had arrived. The geology in this region consists mainly of Rhyolite which is silica and quartz-rich resulting in a very pale and warm-yellow landscape.

This is not a landscape you merely visit, but one you plan to travel into, and when there you feel like you have left everything, and very often, everyone behind. It takes time to drive the miles of tracks, and whilst you are traveling, you are experiencing something different every kilometre of your journey.





© Paul Gallagher



Adventure is the best way to describe visiting the Highlands of Iceland. As with any adventure, there is a tinge of vulnerability, which instils excitement. Regardless of whatever an array of weather reports may claim, you are seldom convinced of what the conditions will be, but always assured that they will not remain static and benign.



© Paul Gallagher

The vastness of the place and absence of people leaves only one companion: your surroundings. It feels unfamiliar but you are undeniably conscious of its boundless beauty and awestruck by the powers of nature. With all this considered, it's time to reach for your camera and endeavour to communicate this with a photograph.

# Developing a black and white image

*by Michael Pilkington*

# Developing a black and white image

by Michael Pilkington

I had a unique experience offered to me many years ago. Something that I had never photographed before. A good friend of mine, Stuart, was involved with the Kent and East Sussex Railway (KESR). It is a historical railway company operating steam locomotives between Tenterden and Bodiam in Kent. He had permission to photograph the locomotives in the sheds and also the workshops. The entire operation is run by volunteer enthusiasts.



© Michael Pilkington

It is a fascinating environment which comprises two major subject matters. The locomotives with their carriages and the workshops used to maintain the engines and undertake full renovations. Whilst the sheds for the trains are huge, as you would expect for engines of this scale, the workshops are quite small and somewhat cramped in comparison. These are not clean or ordered workshops. Chaos seems to reign everywhere you look. I can relate to this environment as it looks like the interior of my garage. More importantly, from a photography perspective, I like complexity. Images that you can explore and stare at for more than a few seconds.

The image was taken in quite a dark environment with some light shining on this workbench from the windows high above. I had to use a wide-angle lens and get quite close to the subject to get everything that I wanted in the frame. Shooting like this did cause some optical distortion of the items at the outer edges of the image which would have to be corrected later.



As you can see from the RAW file, I had to expose quite a way to the left as some of the metallic objects were catching the light from the windows above and over-exposing. Because of the workshop being relatively dark and my need to preserve the highlights in under-exposing, this pushed the shadows all the way to the left of the histogram. However, I had decided that the final image I envisaged, would be printed fairly dark and in black and white, perfectly suited for this environment, so I wasn't overly concerned.



The RAW file

The first thing I did was to use the Adobe Camera Raw (ACR) de-noise function to eliminate any noise that might be present in the shadows as a result of my need to underexpose..

Now I had to plan how I was going to edit this image. It is always a good idea to think of this before starting to move any sliders. The first consideration, as always, is to try and achieve as much as possible using global adjustments, and only when these have been exhausted, to consider making more localised adjustments.

The lighter tones in this image need enhancing whilst being careful not to 'blow' the whites on the metal items that are directly reflecting light from the windows. Shadows can remain dark although some detail within them would be preferable. Overall, the eye needs to be focused on the middle of the image and then encouraged to explore from there to the other surrounding elements. So, that's the plan. Let's go!

I use ACR and Photoshop, so I will be converting this image into black and white in Photoshop. The reason for doing that is if you convert to black and white in ACR the colour space is changed into a less flexible Grey Gamma 2.2 file, unlike Lightroom which retains its original colour space. Before converting, I want to make some initial global adjustments to balance the light in the image so that I get preferable results in the conversion. Initially, I have 'pegged' the whites in using the curve tool so that they cannot exceed a value of 250. I can now increase exposure to bring up the mid-tones, together with the shadows and blacks to make the details more visible in these areas. Lastly, I have brought down the highlights and whites to make them less present.



Initial adjustments



Converting to black and white

In Photoshop, an adjustment layer was used to convert the image to black and white. I used the red and yellow sliders to further increase the light in the image. As I was so close to the subject using a wide-angle lens there is some distortion of the paint cans in the bottom left area of the image. I also felt the rag adjacent to the cans was too close to the bottom edge of the frame. Using selections, the warp tool and clone tools, I corrected these elements. In retrospect, perhaps I should have stepped a little further away from the subject and zoomed in more to eliminate these problems at the point of capture. The next step was to take the image back into ACR and make some more global adjustments.



Putting back some contrast

My first step with this was to balance out the tones in the image: bringing down the highlights and whites and lifting the shadows and the blacks. This resulted in the image becoming 'flatter' in appearance. Now, it was time to reintroduce some contrast. I do not use (and never use) the contrast slider as I want to address the bright and dark areas of the image to different extents. The contrast slider will equally affect the bright and dark areas of an image..

I have increased exposure slightly, brightening the highlights and whites and darkened the shadows by moving that slider to the left. However, as a result of this, the blacks have started to lose some detail. Some tones that were in the shadow part of the histogram have now been moved into the black part of the histogram. So, moving the black slider to the right a little addresses this.

Having completed all the global adjustments, I then turned my attention to localised adjustments. The right edge of the image is notably brighter than the left edge of the image so this will need to be balanced to draw the viewer's eye into the centre of the image as originally intended. The sheet of foil brightly lit in the upper part of the image acts as a distraction from its surroundings and will need darkening, and the white metal object hanging in the upper left of the frame will only serve to take the viewer's eye out of the image.





Masking brighter areas



Masking areas to bring down shadows to increase 3D effect

After making these specific adjustments, it was time to step back and look at the overall image to establish what else needed to be done at a global or even a localised level. Some small adjustments were made to lift the overall brightness of the image using exposure, highlights and checking that the white point in the images was at its maximum. This is always an important final step when editing your images. Lastly, shadows and blacks were adjusted to increase the tonal range of the image but also to ensure that some detail was retained in the very dark shadows.



Final adjustments

A photograph with such deep blacks and bright highlights would usually point you in the direction of printing this on a glossy paper which would best manage the tonal range. I did print this image on Epson's Traditional Photo Paper and it resulted in a stunning print. However, I also experimented and printed it on Epson's Fine Art Cotton Smooth paper which is a matte paper. It was not an obvious choice, but it worked well making for an 'artier' feel to the finished product. It is worth experimenting with different media and not always going for the obvious choice.



# My head in the clouds

*by Michael Pilkington*



# My head in the clouds

by Michael Pilkington

Sometimes you can get lucky when all the elements come together: weather, light, and location. The Italian Dolomites is a mountain range in the north-eastern part of Italy. It is not very high, with no mountain reaching beyond 3,500 meters, but it is extensive and can be explored by roads that twist and turn. When driving these mountain passes they afford you the opportunity to gaze up at peaks towering above you, and when you have reached the top, peer down into the deep sided valleys below.



© Michael Pilkington

The weather in the area can be very changeable, with mist and fog hanging in the valleys and sometimes shrouding the mountain tops. The scene before you is transient and can change rapidly, hiding then gradually revealing the craggy peaks.

A couple of years ago, on a particular trip, the weather was fine with clouds moving swiftly across the sky and it was somewhat warm on the valley floor. We were driving through the Falzarego pass and looked up to the summit of Mount Lagazuoi, which was in full view and clear of cloud. Positioned at the top of the pass is the Lagazuoi cable car that takes you to just below the summit at 2,732 meters.

At the summit, there are several flat short walks around the peak that present you with 360-degree views showcasing different pinnacles protruding from the surrounding mountain summits into the sky.

The cable car only takes a few minutes to ascend and is unnervingly steep, certainly in the final few metres just before slowly creeping over the edge of the vertical monolith. On arrival, and as the doors open, you immediately experience a massive drop in temperature. Coats are quickly zipped up, and gloves are donned. Fortunately, there's a respite from the cold in a café, which sells hot coffee or chocolate and some surprisingly good cakes. However, it's best to face the elements first, making these treats a later reward which you feel you would have earned. The real prize, though, is the views.

Standing on the viewing platform, you appreciate how high you are, and the absolute scale of the place. Superlatives like "stunning" and "awesome" do little justice to what you encounter.

On the day we ascended, the clouds were reasonably thick and some of the higher peaks were shrouded in clouds. However, gaps did appear through which the sun cast its rays, modulating the light on the landscape. It was also autumn, and wherever this happened, the larch trees that graced the lower slopes were ignited into brilliant orange flames, and the mountain tops were spectacularly illuminated.

It takes a lot of self-control to not click away whilst trying to absorb the grandeur of the landscape that is before you. However, a little restraint and consideration will result in more successful photographs. Looking back on this day, it was, for sure, a lucky day. Everything came together perfectly.

## End note

***“The whole point of taking pictures is so that you don’t have to explain things with words.”***

Elliot Erwitt

When we present a photograph in whatever way, do we really need to accompany it with words? At the very least, a title often sits with an image, and even in that instance, it sometimes appears to be attempting to influence the viewer’s response. The very worst manifestation of this is the small placards placed next to paintings in art galleries that are commonly a psycho-babble word salad with little or no explanation of the artist’s intent, commonly written after the artist has died, and by someone who had never met them.

An oratorical or written accompaniment can quickly say too much about what the photograph’s message means to the photographer, seemingly in an attempt to impart this to the viewer. Let’s be clear, no two people will interpret the same photograph in the same way. Their explanations may be alike, “That is a huge storm coming off the sea”, but their connection with the image will be borne of their own experiences of storms at the coast. It is these personal references that result in some liking a photograph and others not.

A real low point when experiencing words and pictures together is when a photographer is proudly presenting a collection of their work and with every image that is displayed comes a description of the compositional elements adhered to whilst creating the composition. This seems to be a deficiency in their ability to share their personal communion with the landscape, which, is probably diminished by the very act of adhering to compositional rules.

It is often said that the photograph is the photographer’s voice. If that is true, we should keep our words to ourselves and let the photograph ignite the conversation.

If you would like to comment on what you have read, you have something to add, or you have any questions that may help you on your way in your photography, then please get in touch. You may have had an experience you would like to share that you know others would be fascinated to hear, or you may want to contribute as a featured photographer or submit an article. Just follow the email link below and feel free to drop us a line with your thoughts or equally leave a comment on our **Facebook** or **Instagram** pages.

Lastly, if you have any photography friends who you think would like to read Expressions, please tell them to head to our aspect2i website where they can download their own copy entirely free via **[aspect2i.co.uk/journal](http://aspect2i.co.uk/journal)**.

We hope to hear from you soon and what you have to say!

E-mail: **[journal@aspect2i.co.uk](mailto:journal@aspect2i.co.uk)**





[www.aspect2ico.uk](http://www.aspect2ico.uk)

