



Backstage at Farley Farmhouse

Presented by Tony Penrose.

Fri 20th May 2016

We get very accustomed these days to having information and stories being disseminated in the media almost instantly. All too often, the material is blazed across the airwaves only to be forgotten almost as rapidly.

Tony Penrose's talk about his mother, Lee Miller, her life and legacy, to a well-attended audience, is a tale that represents the converse. Her life as a pioneering female war photographer went largely unnoticed, compounded by the post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) as we now know it, that blighted her life in the years that followed. It probably contributed to the near abandonment of her collection of photographs, largely taken on 2.25" Rolaflex film, which had been left in the loft at Farley Farmhouse.

They were only re-discovered after her death. That triggered a lifetime's work for Tony, of analysing and piecing together the story behind his mother's 10,000 vintage prints and 60,000 negatives and creating a fully cross-referenced archive of material. Some prints had been lost, as is inevitable with such a collection, but there were so many of historical significance that they had to be brought back from obscurity and made known to the world. That was best done by creating exhibitions at famous galleries around the world, not a trivial process by any means. Sheer determination and some serendipity in finding the right contacts were key to starting the ball rolling. Initially, various well known galleries in the US politely listened to Tony's plans before seeing him off their premises, it took years for word of mouth and the successes elsewhere for them to reverse their stance.

The task of developing, researching, maintaining, coordinating and preserving the archive is far too large for one person, so a whole team of experts had gradually been built up over the past 3 decades to carry out these functions. One of the most critical requirements was to prevent the physical deterioration of the film and prints. They had already been transferred to acid free housing, but a dedicated air-conditioned repository was really required. Reluctantly, some duplicate images were sold off to the likes of the J.P. Getty Museum in the US to help fund it. A process of digitising the images has also been undertaken, partly to help interface with our modern electronic world and partly as insurance against any further image degradation or loss.

Tony's talk also covered some of the many people in Lee Miller's life, most notably Pablo Picasso, who painted her six times and some of his exploits around Chiddingly. Also, of some of the harrowing events that she witnessed during the war, including the grizzly discoveries made at the concentration camps. Historical research and cross referencing additional material has enabled some descendants of those photographed to identify their forebears and thus add another piece to the jigsaw of Lee's life. She was always ahead of the pack and had reached Hitler's Berghof whilst the Allies were still several miles away, exposing herself to great danger from snipers and booby traps. A photograph of her in Hitler's bath, with her boots placed prominently on the floor facing towards it as a mark of victory, was particularly interesting. Souvenirs, such as Eva Braun's powder puff, offered a surreal sensory link to that era.

Such was the detail and breadth of material covered, as well as the clarity in which it had been presented, that when the talk ended there were no questions! It had been raw, atmospheric, sometimes harrowing and yet absolutely fascinating. Everyone sat there busily digesting all that had been presented and it took a while for questions to be raised subsequently. This write-up is but a brief summary and everyone agreed that the evening had been a remarkable success for the Society.

For further information about Lee Miller visit <http://www.leemiller.co.uk/>.

Leycester Whewell, EHADPS secretary, 4June2016