

Taking photos, telling stories

An introduction to photographing events and actions for Quakers





Introduction

We are always looking for new ways to share the work, news and activities of our Quaker communities spread across the length and breadth of Britain.

Wherever we can, we try and send our photographers out to capture the spirit and action of meetings and their work. However, they can't be everywhere at all times! So our expert snappers have been through our archives to pull out some top tips on using photos to tell stories.

It doesn't matter what camera you have – it may be a high-tech SLR or just the phone in your pocket – taking a moment to consider your subject and story can make it easier for anyone to take a great photo.

So please read our guide and feel inspired. If you have any questions or, even better, any photos for us please email photos@quaker.org.uk or visit www.quaker.org.uk/photos.

Top tips

Telling the story

What is your image trying to say?

- What should the viewer focus on first?
- What do we need to understand from the picture?
- Are there faces or details for the viewer to connect with?

Think about the background of your image

- Does the main subject stand out?
- Does the background give context to the subject?

Taking the photo

Is the subject in focus (sharp) and understandable?

- You can stabilise yourself by sitting, kneeling or by leaning against a wall or a table to avoid shaking the camera.
- Turn off your flash where possible because this can sometimes overpower an image – try to use any natural light sources.

Think about how your image is composed

- People don't always need to be in the centre of an image, positioning them slightly to one side of the frame can make for a more interesting composition.
- If there is a symmetrical quality to your image, it may be better to position the subject centrally.
- Your camera or phone may have a visual grid that you can turn on to help frame your picture.



Key points

- **Framing** – The line of police (bottom) and the road curvature (left hand side) pushes your eye towards the main subject, the assembled people.
- **Quality** – The image is sharp with punchy colours.
- **Narrative** – It tells a story. The subject was a protest by multi-faith groups outside the DSEI International Arms Fair in Excel London. The photo shows the involvement of Quakers, plus the number of demonstrators that were there, the presence of the police and what happened.

The photographer's story

"I travelled to the DSEI demonstration by Docklands Light Railway. When I arrived I noticed that the view from the train gave you a view over the area where the demo was due to take place.

"In the afternoon there was a silent vigil and meeting for worship and I used the train to get an high-level view. It took me two attempts, going one stop back and forth to get it, but it was worth it: it clearly shows the diversity and colour of the demonstrators and how many people were there."



- **Depth of field** – One of the key things that makes this image work so well is the way that the photographer has shot through gaps in the crowd to give a real sense of being there amongst the people.
- **Image quality** – The image is in focus and pin sharp. It's well exposed and the colours in it are vibrant and punchy. There's a clear point of focus for the viewer to look at.
- **Messages** – The woman wearing a 'Quakers for Peace' T-shirt gives a clear indication to the viewer of who she is. There's also a banner with an readable message on it.

"When I took this photo I was trying to show the solemn stillness of the meeting for worship amongst the busyness of the Excel centre protests. I looked for a main subject in the crowd that reflected this – the Friend in the blue shirt. I then looked for an angle that gave this some context. The Friend's T-shirt, the 'choose life' banner behind, the traffic lights all help to answer the audience's questions of who they are, what are they doing and why they are there.

"As the photo is not explicitly and obviously an image from the DSEI protests, it can also be used in other campaigns and publications to illustrate silent protest and worship."



- **Framing** – The lack of a face in this shot doesn't matter, the story is there and told because *both* the sign *and* the Police van livery are captured.
- **Watching things unfold** – The photographer took photos as people were arrested but watched and waited for a decisive moment. The first images taken are not always the best ones to tell the story.
- **Quick thinking** – By changing position (following the van) the photographer increased the chance of a great shot. Don't take risks but be alert to this when you can.

"During the DSEI demonstration, police began to remove Friends who had felt led to block the road during the meeting for worship. I was snapping away on my phone, partly to monitor the police. Several arrestees were ushered into a van which was leaving. Running alongside, I was disappointed that the tinted window meant I couldn't see faces. But, perhaps seeing me, a Friend pressed their 'Quakers for Peace' sign against the glass, which was perfect! I took several snaps as the van was moving, trying to get the word 'police' in frame. It wouldn't have happened without quick thinking from the Quaker in the back of the police van - I never found out their name!"



Key points

- **People's faces** – There are hardly any visible faces. Faces are important in a photograph because they allow the viewer to connect with what's going on in the image.
- **Messages** – There are no banners or placards visible so what the gathering is about is lost. Is it a demonstration? Or is it a group of people waiting to cross the road?
- **Action** – There's very little actually happening in the image aside of the police officers walking out of shot. Why are people there? Why are the police there? What's actually going on? None of this is clear from the image.

Why it doesn't really work

In the image, the demonstration has been photographed from behind. You cannot see any banners or placards, so there's no context for what the people are actually doing.

A woman is captured, walking through the shot, looking uncomfortable, on the left hand side but this is the only human connection the viewer can make because of the lack of faces.

There's no action taking place in the shot and it's clearly been shot during a demonstration hiatus because the police are actually walking away and out of the scene.



- **People** – The only people visible in this image are distant and remote and thus it's hard for the viewer to connect with or understand what's going on.
- **Messages** – There are no banners or placards visible so any sense of why the turbine might be sitting on the grass verge is lost.
- **Point of interest** – Because the people are so remote the main item of interest in the image is the completely static wind turbine model. Due to over exposure the turbine is also quite washed out and looks bland and uninteresting.

This image was taken at the 2017 DSEI protests. However, as there is absolutely no contextual information, the viewer is left simply looking at a over-exposed picture of a wind turbine model sitting on a grass verge with some police officers doing something in the distant background.

There are no human faces for the viewer to connect with, and no real information – who, what, when, where, why – as to what the police officers are doing, where in the world the image was taken or why the model was there anyway.



- **Visual Clutter** – The angle of view, means there is an excess of visual clutter in the shot – street furniture, traffic cones, tents and a seemingly abandoned pushchair. None of it tells us anything meaningful about what is going on.
- **People** – Two people are visible in the distance. Neither is particularly engaged with the photographer, and both are looking away so we cannot see their faces. Thus, there is no sense of connection to pull the viewer in.
- **Messages** – There are no banners, placards or visual clues of any kind to explain why the tents are there.

There is very little that's right with this photograph. There is no obvious subject for the viewer to focus on so the eye is inevitably drawn to the partially obscured flags and empty pushchair in the centre of the frame.

There are no people or faces or action for the viewer to connect with and the image is entirely static, boring and dull.

The image is over exposed and looks washed out. The colours have lost all intensity.



Key points

- **Activity** – The woman in the centre has been captured mid-sentence, talking and moving her hands while presenting. This makes the picture more dynamic and helps to pull the viewer in.
- **Framing** – The blurred heads on the left and right sides of the foreground neatly frame the woman speaking. In addition, there's enough detail in the background faces to see that people are engaged and paying attention.
- **Decisive moment** – The woman was saying something funny when photographed, which means that the smile on the face of the man in the back has also been captured.

The photographer's story

When photographing an event it is good to be mindful of both what you can see in the camera and what's actually going on around you.

People's reactions are as important as the actual content but the key to capturing this is recognising the decisive moment.

What this means, in simple terms, is that by watching the reactions and the speaker's behaviour the photographer has managed to capture an image that is both interesting and that leaves the viewer wondering what it was that gave the man opposite a reason to smile. All of which makes for an engaging and interesting image that pulls the viewer in.



- **Faces** – Because the two young women in the image are looking, partially, towards the viewer, the shot has a high level of engagement and draws people into it.
- **Ephemera** – Ephemera are written or printed items in the workshop that might be looked at, read or pointed at by participants. Including them often makes the picture helpfully and clearly communicate what is going on.
- **Positioning** – When you're taking photographs try to look for angles/viewpoints that aren't obvious. Changing your location will often give you a great and striking image.

"When I shot this workshop, which was mostly young teenage women, it was difficult to get a single shot that summed it up as an event (the *Razor wire and olive branches* schools pack launch). This was largely because it was quite static, with people simply sitting in a circle talking about the contents of the pack, which was out of view.

"During one part of the workshop the packs were given out to pairs and they took turns reading from the materials. I'd agreed with the organisers beforehand that I could sit in the middle of the circle while they were doing this and I shot this image from a low angle on my knees."



- **Location** – Because the workshop is packed with people the photographer has stood outside the room and shot through the door, giving a sense of the activity and a clear pointer to indicate what the event is and what's going on.
- **Depth of field** – The photographer has shot the image in such a way that the people within the room are blurred, but still clearly visible which makes for a visually interesting image.
- **Colours** – The colours on the flyer and inside the room are punchy and vibrant, and visually it's an attractive image which captures some of the excitement of the event.

The room that the event was being held in was cramped when the photographer arrived due to an enthusiastic audience. This can make it hard to move around to get a good image.

Rather than disrupt the workshop, the photographer stood outside the room and took a photograph of what was going on inside through a plate glass door, incorporating the notice signposting the event within.

The resulting image is colourful, and visually interesting and manages to capture both the workshop title and the action.



Key points

- **Context** – When you're photographing a workshop, if you can, include ephemera in your image – this might be in the form of posters or materials created within the workshop.
- **Lack of visible interaction** – Although the woman in the shot is clearly interacting with others, it's hard to see this in the image because the other people aren't visible.
- **Action** – Although this is, in many ways, a nice picture of a Friend attending an event, it's fairly static. Consider whether the image might have been more dynamic and engaging if the woman had been talking when it was taken.

Why it doesn't really work

This is actually a great picture. The lighting is good, the colours are quite vibrant, the person photographed is framed nicely by the person to the left hand side and she is looking out of the shot towards the viewer.

The problem is, however, that whilst it is a great portrait of the person, it doesn't really tell us anything that is useful.

Because there's no context, the viewer has no idea as to who she is, what's going on, where the image has been taken or why.



- **Group interaction** – Try to capture the interplay that happens between people at workshops, discussions, arguments, animated faces, frowns and smiles. The interaction will tell the viewer what's happening.
- **Movement** – one person is out of focus due to her moving as the photograph was taken.
- **Know your camera** – Getting the settings right on your camera isn't always straightforward but it is something that's worth working at. Once you know automatically what settings to use in a given situation, you have the freedom to concentrate on what's in front of you.

This image was taken during an activists workshop. Although there is a discussion taking place in the group, the person speaking (the woman in dark pink) has her back to the camera and so there is very little sense of interaction. Essentially, the image has become a picture of people sitting in a circle.

When shooting indoors, in low light, make sure that your camera is steady and there is not too much movement. You may be able to adjust the settings on your camera or phone to compensate for this as well.



- **Distance** – A common photographic saying is, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough." This is especially true when capturing a keynote speaker.
- **Context** – You won't always have control over the backdrop against which you photograph people but it's worth trying to coordinate with the organisers beforehand if you can. If the projection screen in this image had the event name on it, the photo would have context and meaning. As it is, the text in the image (on a sheet of paper stuck to the wall on the right) but it is so small that it cannot be seen clearly.

Although this speaker is addressing a workshop audience, the viewer has no idea what the workshop is or what she is speaking about.

Because the speaker is centred in the frame, and quite distant, most of the image is empty walls and a blank projection screen.

The speaker, our actual subject of interest, is very small and she almost gets lost amongst the heads of the audience in the picture foreground.