

MY HOME TOWN

Struggling to find your creative mojo after the dark days of winter? **Lee Frost** reckons the answer could be right on your doorstep

When was the last time you went for a wander with a camera in your neighbourhood and came back feeling inspired? The reality is, few of us ever do, and I'm as guilty as the next photographer. Book me on a flight to some far-flung destination or even pack me off to a different county for a few days and I'm as happy as Larry. But put a camera in my hand and drop me in the middle of my home town and while I'd like to say my creative juices flow freely, they barely manage a trickle!

It's the old case of familiarity breeding contempt. When you see the same things day-in, day-out, it's hard to look at them through fresh eyes. I see tourists wandering around my home town, admiring the architecture, revelling in the history and heritage, but while they do that, I'm usually on a mission to post mail, buy groceries, pop into the bank. Real life gets in the way – you look, but you don't see. >





an effective focal length of 35mm – would be scary. Third, and perhaps most important, what the hell would I take photographs of? Alnwick is my home town in that it's the closest proper town to where I live, but the only thing I've photographed there is the castle, which is closed during the winter. Beyond that it doesn't have any obvious redeeming features.

There are plenty of beautiful old buildings in Alnwick, plus a cobbled marketplace and a smattering of monuments – in 2002, *Country Life* magazine voted it the prettiest market town in Northumberland and the best place to live in Britain. But like all old market towns, it wasn't designed to cope with large volumes of traffic and so gets congested – which means all the best views are constantly obscured by vehicles. Many buildings are also spoiled on the ground floor by shop fronts that haven't changed since the 70s, in some cases, and desperately need a facelift! I won't name and shame!

My first outing with the X100 proved to be a disaster. I spent a couple of hours wandering all over the town, mainly to get a feel for the place, find a few hidden gems and hopefully bag one or two decent shots to get the project underway. All I ended up with was aching feet and a sinking feeling that having enthusiastically suggested the idea to Editor Elizabeth, I would now fail miserably to deliver the goods. I tried to kid myself that the dull, grey weather was to blame, but I've taken great shots in the same conditions many times before – I actually like overcast days for black & white!

A few days later I ventured out again, on a crisp, sunny morning. Winter sunshine is ideal for urban photography because the sun stays low all day and light rakes through the streets, creating photo opportunities in light and shade. The town took on a totally different feel and my confidence was boosted.

Alnwick isn't a particularly big town (population around 8,000), so I parked my car in the centre and simply wandered around for an hour, photographing anything that caught my eye. Big views were out, so I concentrated on details – anything quirky or eye-catching.

old haunts, I realised I needed a new challenge, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone – have a stab at photographing my home town and do it using the Fuji X100 (before Fuji asked for it back!).

Talk about being out of my comfort zone. First off, I normally use full-frame digital SLRs, not rangefinder cameras. Second,

During my wanders around Alnwick I discovered places I didn't even know existed, like this fantastic cobbled back lane between rows of terraced houses. The pattern of the cobbles and the converging lines make an interesting composition

I also use zoom lenses covering focal lengths from 17-200mm, so being restricted to a single focal length – the lens on the X100 has

< By the time we said hello to 2012, I was feeling creatively deflated. I'd spent weeks chained to a computer, preparing accounts, hitting writing deadlines and catching up on Raw file processing. Even the shiny Fuji X100 sitting on my desk wasn't enough to get me excited, so I decided it was time for action.

Living on the Northumberland coast, I have access to some amazing locations. But instead of re-visiting



I wasn't trying to create a photographic portrait of Alnwick, I just wanted to see what I could find that was photographically interesting, having lived in the area for over a decade but never tried to look beyond the obvious façade.

Working handheld with one camera and a fixed lens was actually quite fun. It limited what I could shoot and how I could shoot it, but not being weighed down by a heavy backpack and tripod was liberating and allowed me to shoot on-the-hoof. It also meant that I didn't stand out too much as a photographer. Saying that, I still got a few strange stares from locals, and I felt really self-conscious, to the point that I avoided taking some shots because I didn't want anyone thinking I was mad!

This reticence surprised me. When I'm travelling outside the UK I'll photograph pretty much anything, and if my antics attract attention I don't care. But for some reason, in my home town I suddenly felt really conspicuous! Fortunately, I found a way around it – head into town on a Sunday morning, when most shops are closed and there are few people around!

Above **This lingerie shop is in the old market square, and I've often thought how out of place it looks alongside a café, barbers, stationers and car parts shop! I couldn't resist a shot of its risqué window display – though I waited until a wet Sunday when no one was around!**

Right **I walked past this worn road marking in a hotel car park but something made me stop, turn back and photograph it. The tonal contrast? The texture in the tarmac? Who knows, but it shows that the most obscure things can make interesting images**

Below right **Another eye-catching pattern, this time in the window of one of Alnwick's town centre pubs. I got some strange looks from passers-by while kneeling on the pavement with my camera!**

The thing I enjoyed most about this little project was it gave me the excuse to explore parts of the town I would normally have no reason to walk down and in some cases didn't even know existed, so I got to know Alnwick more >





Above **After a brief snowfall I headed to Alnwick to see if it had created any interesting photo opportunities. This tree against the sky immediately caught my eye**



Left **Interesting details are everywhere once you start to look around – this shot was taken at the back of a charity shop**

Below left **Alnwick is home to some beautiful architecture, including this 18th century building known as General Lambert's Townhouse. Sadly, it has been empty for years and is starting to fall into disrepair, but it still makes a great subject**



◀ **intimately. It also forced me to look more closely at everything, and I discovered details that I had walked past maybe a hundred times but hadn't even see before – because there was no reason to stop and look. This proved to be a real eye-opener and made me realise just how much we miss when we're blinkered by the pressures and chores of everyday life. In fact, I've enjoyed taking these photographs so much that I'm going to keep the project going**

over the course of this year.

I wouldn't say any of the images I've produced so far are works of art, nor that I'll be printing them and hanging them on my wall. But as a creative exercise, photographing my home town has definitely been worthwhile because it has allowed me to get to know the place where I live better, and appreciate it much more. The process of overcoming familiarity to find inspiration in things I'd seen so many times before was also useful, and I'm sure the lessons I've learned can be put to good use in the future.

Opposite above **On a dull day this alleyway wouldn't have got a second glance, but on this occasion sharp winter sunlight transformed it into a wonderful study in light and shade**

Opposite bottom **I took this shot at Barter Books, one of the UK's biggest secondhand bookshops, housed in Alnwick's old railway station. It was pretty monochromatic in real life and made an interesting study in shape and tone**



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