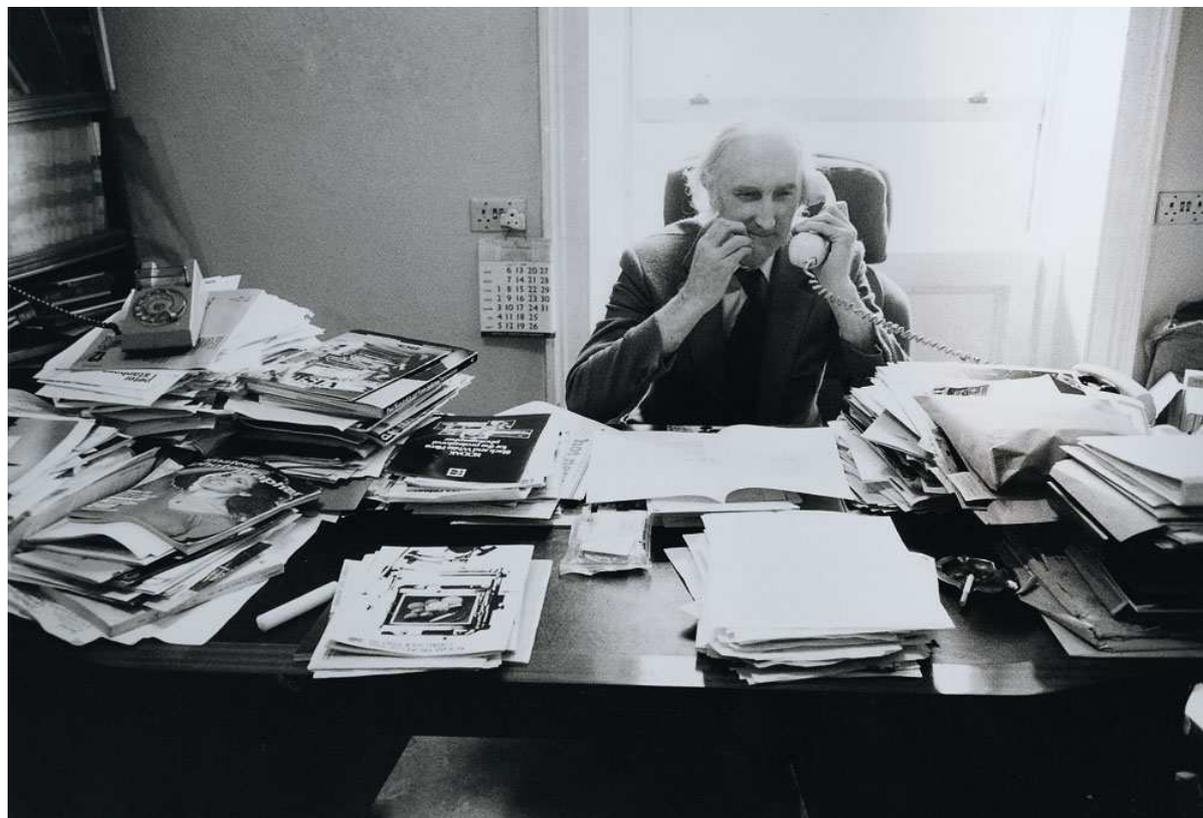


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Geoffrey Crawley, the world-esteemed former editor of British Journal of Photography, has died



Seventies' portrait of Geoffrey Crawley at his editor's desk in the Southampton Street offices of BJP.
Image © John Minihan.

Geoffrey Crawley, a former BJP editor, photographic inventor, author, and the man who uncovered the world's longest-running photographic hoax has died [further updates]

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Geoffrey Crawley, the world-esteemed former editor of British Journal of Photography, has died.

According to a report in *Amateur Photographer*, for whom he worked as an occasional contributor in his latter years, he had been suffering from a long-term illness.

Crawley joined BJP in the 1960s, working first as a contributor and then as technical editor, eventually becoming the editor-in-chief around 1967, a position he held for more than 20 years. From 1987, when the magazine was sold to Timothy Benn Publishing, he continued as technical editor, working through into his seventies up until 2000.

His reputation as one of the world's leading figures in photographic science was without parallel during this period, and in all probability, no one in the post-analogue age will likely command the same all round technical expertise and authority. In addition to his brilliant technical articles, he developed many chemical formulae, in particular Acutol, a range of monochrome developer chemicals produced by

Patterson. He also provided invaluable technical help to the industry during this time, advising Stanley Kubrick during the making of 2001 (after which the filmmaker kept in touch with Crawley, suggesting article ideas for BJP), and he foresaw the impact of digital long before it became mainstream, embracing the new technology with his usual vim. Among his many talents, he was an accomplished concert pianist, and probably could have made a career as a musician, but he will probably be best remembered for his work uncovering one of the greatest photographic hoaxes of the 20th Century.

In 1979 he was contacted by Brian Coe, the curator of the Kodak Museum in Harrow, which marked the beginning of his journey into “fairy land”. Coe had been approached by Sidney Robinson, a fan of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (the author of the great Sherlock Holmes adventure stories, who was also a keen photography enthusiast and occasional contributor to BJP in the late 19th Century, and a committed Spiritualist), about the writer’s involvement in the 20th century’s longest-running photography hoax, carried out by two Yorkshire schoolgirls.

Doyle lent his considerable standing to effectively verify the authenticity of two pictures taken by Elsie Wright and her cousin Frances Griffiths, aged 16 and 10, capturing them playing with little fairies at the bottom of her garden in 1917. With his backing, and the eager support of Edward Gardner, a leading theosophist of the day, further pictures of the “Cottingley Fairies”, were presented to the press in 1921, causing a sensation that captured the public imagination and rumbled on over the next six decades.

Crawley undertook a major scientific investigation of the photographs and the events surrounding them, publishing his research in a series of articles in BJP between 1982 and 1983, finally proving them to be fakes, gaining the “confession” of Wright, and putting an end to the hoax, which eventually culminated in two films, *Fairy Tale: A True Story*, starring Peter O’Toole as Doyle, and *Photographing Fairies*.

As Crawley noted, the story revealed as much about society at the time as the technical prowess of the two schoolgirls. Recalling his part in the story in BJP’s Millennium edition, he told of how he had written to Wright with his findings, and how he understood why she had felt unable to reveal the truth once Gardner, Doyle and various experts had proclaimed them as evidence of otherworldly beings. The two became friends, and he wrote kindly about her and the myth surrounding the fairies in the conclusion of the article in 2000.

“Of course there are fairies – just as there is Father Christmas. The trouble comes when you try to make them corporeal. They are fine poetic concepts taking us out of this at times too ugly real world. Conan Doyle, after the horrors of the first world war in which his son died, wanted to suggest a realm where spirit forms just might exist.

“At least Elsie [Wright] gave us a myth which has never harmed anyone and it looks like continuing to fascinate and entertain well into the future. How many professed photographers can claim to have equaled her achievement with the first photograph they ever took?”

Crawley’s famous lens tests would often extend to multiple pages and issues, but as the previous passage suggests, he was also a very entertaining and thoughtful writer. In BJP’s Centenary edition of 1964 (celebrating 100 years since the magazine adopted its current title and moved to a weekly format), he wrote a “letter to 2064”, attempting to predict some of the likely changes. He speculated with curious accuracy the impact of electronics, and foresaw that “no doubt cinemas and televisions will be in three D colour”, but also considered how this would affect our understanding of the medium:

“In view of our doubts today as to what status the silver halide photo-sensitive system will hold in 50 or 100 years time, it is very difficult, regarding this as we do as primarily the photographic process, to decide to what extent we would consider possible electronic replacements for it in the future [as] truly photographic. Here again is an attitude that will no doubt cause as much ridicule as the suggestion that photography ended with Daguerreotype. After all, photography is the creation of an image of an original subject drawn by light waves, and presuming something of high quality and interest can be produced, by all means let us go about it the easiest possible way.”

Reuel Golden, who edited *BJP* during the 1990s, pays tribute to Crawley's enthusiasm for technology he has already predicted:

"I worked with Geoffrey for around six or seven years at *BJP*. His official title was "technical editor", but that doesn't really do justice to Geoffrey's intelligence, charm, eccentricity and photographic knowledge, which was quite rightly world renowned.

"Geoffrey loved taking pictures, but his overriding passion was the mechanics of the medium and working out how to produce the best results whether it was film, paper or a particular obscure lens. When the digital revolution came about, Geoffrey welcomed it with open arms and embraced it with the same enthusiasm that he had with silver halide. In fact, it presented him with new technical challenges and problems that in typical Geoffrey fashion he mastered in a matter of a few months.

"He was a one off, a unique talent, a supportive colleague and a man who enriched our daily working life. He was one of photography's greatest champions and will be badly missed."

Chris Dickie, who followed Crawley's editorship in 1987, writes:

Photography's debt to Geoffrey Crawley can be divided into words and deeds: the latter his various darkroom formulations marketed by Paterson Products, the former his thoroughgoing and thoughtful reviews of equipment and materials, and the weekly "Ex Cathedra" unsigned editorials, often running to thousands of words over the opening pages of *BJP*.

His involvement with the magazine exceeded 30 years, first as contributor, then technical editor, then editor for 21 years, and latterly as the technical manager until 2000. Under his stewardship *BJP*'s technical coverage was second to none, due in large part to his own authoritative contributions, but supported by a formidable multidisciplinary team of writers that covered the entire field of imaging. When I succeeded him in 1987 I inherited a line-up that included L Andrew Mannheim (cameras and lenses), HJP Arnold (astronomical and remote imaging), Peter West (cine and broadcast), Barry Scott (patents), Graham Saxby (holography – and much else besides), Maurice Wooller (historic cameras), Reg Miles (video), and so on. Geoffrey tended to keep reviews of chemistry and materials for himself, which was understandable. Also, some of the 35mm cameras.

The history and culture of the medium, and its practice, were well catered for too, with regular contributions from Walter Nurnberg, Jozef Gross, Margaret Harker, Bill Jay, Michael Hallett, Colin Osman and Bill Bishop, among others. During his time the pictorial content of the Journal was less reliable: if a colleague described one of your photographs as worthy of a *BJP* cover you were supposed to feel insulted. In fact, technical content aside, Geoffrey devolved a great deal of the editorial role to his deputy and the art editor, adopting more of an overview position from his very large chair and desk. Neither did he appear in the office every day. He wrote everything longhand in fountain pen for transcription by his secretary, and once a week sat down with her to dictate the news items. Several years later, by which time Geoffrey had passed retirement age, they married and had a child.

His position as editor of *BJP* and his international reputation brought opportunities for diversion outside of the business of producing a weekly magazine. I don't believe for a moment that he seriously considered it necessary to debunk the Cottingley Fairies, but he will have found it an amusing interlude. Shortly after my arrival we published a research paper setting out photographic evidence suggesting the fine example of Archaeopteryx displayed in the Natural History Museum might be a fake. My suspicion is that we did so because it afforded

Geoffrey the opportunity to meet one of the authors, the astrophysicist Fred Hoyle, whose formidable intellect fascinated him, and not because the evidence presented was compelling.

Similarly, he jumped at the opportunity to assist the production team making a film about the controversies and urban myths surrounding the killing of JFK, helping in the analysis of archive stills of the “Grassy Knoll” and the famous Zapruder movie. He loved alluding to the dark forces at work and the possibility of Mob involvement. Occasional commissions such as this, and research work and royalties from his Paterson chemical range, provided additional income that will have supported his passion for sailing. He recounted pulling alongside a yacht, somewhere off the south coast, to discover a former prime minister and an international yachtsman in flagrante. He had a remarkably smutty sense of humour.

In the 15 years or so that we worked together I saw hundreds of his photographs, made in the investigation of a new camera or lens, or testing a new film or paper, or one of his own concoctions. He loved photography and knew its processes inside out – after all, he invented some of them – but he couldn’t take a picture for toffee. In his development of superior processing formulae he followed in the tradition of photography’s early pioneers and was held in a similar esteem as a result. But we’re not going to see his like again. Geoffrey Crawley’s time in photography spanned a sea change in imaging: from an analogue tradition, essentially unchanged over 150 years, to a constantly evolving digital rush. Until it becomes possible to construct a better imaging chip on the kitchen table there will be no more Geoffrey Crawleys.

Jon Tarrant, the last editor of *BJP* to work with Crawley adds his own tribute:

“Geoffrey was the most important BJP editor of the last 50 years, having occupied the chair throughout the rise of reflex cameras and digital photography. His knowledge was encyclopaedic and he was also a keen photographic chemist who formulated Paterson’s Acuproducs, from Acutol to FX-39. Geoffrey had worked behind the camera prior to becoming editor and it was he who changed BJP from a purely technical, word-heavy publication into a more varied, picture-bearing magazine. He was also famous for his work with the Cottingley Fairies pictures and for helping to analyse the photographic evidence collected at the assassination of John F Kennedy. Nobody else can claim anything like this range of experiences and expertise: Geoffrey was a very special person and I was hugely sorry when our ways parted.”

Do you have any personal memories or stories about Geoffrey Crawley? If so, leave a comment below, or contact the editor at bjp.editor@bjphoto.co.uk.

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