

Taken from the George Fisher of Keswick website

Contemporary mountain sport photography with a unique antique camera.



Instanto Outdoors is a project to photograph contemporary mountain sports, and mountain landscapes, using an antique Underwood Instanto camera previously owned and used by pioneering photographers George and Ashley Abraham.

The Abraham name is famously associated with Lake District photography. George Perry Ashley Abraham, the first of the family to enter the industry, was born in Devizes in 1844. He began work as a photographer in London with Elliot & Fry of Baker Street but later moved up to Keswick to take up an apprenticeship with Alfred Pettit at his newly established Art Gallery on Ambleside Road. Pettit however could never decide whether he wanted to paint or take photographs and in 1866 after 4 years at Pettit's gallery, Abraham left to start his own business (In the property that is now George Fishers of Keswick), concentrating on studio portraits but leaving himself enough time to pursue his principal passion – landscape photography.

George Senior was a highly competent photographer who would, in time, become a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society.

His sons, however, eclipsed his reputation with their dramatic rock climbing photography. George Dixon Abraham (1870-1965) and Ashley Perry Abraham (1876-1951) grew up during the development of rock climbing as a popular sport in its own right, as opposed to it being a training exercise for alpinism.

Heavily laden, they took large Victorian cameras and glass plates on to the fell sides and crags, perched on a rocky outcrop or ledge, perilously close to disaster, they were in pursuit of a dramatic landscape image or to capture a climber in action. The fascination for climbing led to a demand for increasingly dramatic images that had never been seen before.

Associates of such climbing pioneers as Owen Glynne Jones, they both became accomplished climbers themselves. Significantly, Glynne Jones was writing his classic work *Rock Climbing in the English Lake District* (1897) and asked the Brothers to supply images. Sadly Jones was killed climbing the Ferpècle Arête on the Dent Blanch in Switzerland in August 1899, but the brothers went on to produce companion volumes to the first seminal publication. *Rock Climbing in North Wales* (by George, in 1906) and *Rock Climbing in Skye* (by Ashley, in 1907). Much of their well known work was

done between 1890 and 1920 and a large selection of it is in the possession of the Fell and Rock Climbing Club of the English Lake District, which they were founder members of, and is cared for by The Armit Museum in Ambleside.

Succeeded in the business by Ashley's son, the Abraham photographic business lasted for over 100 years until the late 1970's when the photographic business was wound up. At this point camera equipment along with a vast collection of negatives, prints, postcards and counter books (catalogues) went to auction where local climber, and then owner of the Wasdale Head Inn, Ed Hammond secured the collection with the aim of preserving it for the future.

One of the cameras within the collection was an Underwood 'Instanto' Whole Plate Camera. These cameras were manufactured by E & T Underwood at their Brunswick Works, 130 - 2 Granville Street, Birmingham from 1886 to 1905. They were a popular model at the time, and constructed of seasoned mahogany, brass fittings and red or black leather bellows, and originally sold in three options for lens / shutter combinations. Lenses were either meniscus or rectilinear and could be sold with an optional patent roller blind shutter mounted behind the lens.

The camera used by the Abraham brothers didn't use a shutter. Exposure was judged by removing the lens cap, counting the required exposure, and returning the lens cap. The image was recorded on to 10 x 12 inch glass plates, held in dark slides to accompany the camera.

In 2013 a film maker, who was working on a historical climbing documentary, began the search for a camera that had been used by the pioneers of adventure photography to feature within his work. Having tracked the camera down to Switzerland, he began a dialogue with Ed Hammond who kindly donated it and the collection on long term loan to the Mountain Heritage Trust. It was also suggested that it would be exciting to see it used again.

Having known the film maker and the team at Mountain Heritage Trust for a number of years and as a full time professional photographer, familiar working with large format equipment in the outdoors, I was invited along to use the camera and explore how we could move things forward.

One of the first decisions was not to use emulsion on glass plates, as making your own plates is a difficult and unreliable process. Fortunately once a year Ilford produces bespoke sized sheets of black and white film and it was possible to have 10x12 inch sheets custom made.

Working in collaboration with Peter Guest at Image Darkroom (London), one of the UK's leading darkrooms specialising in hand processing and printing of black and white negatives, and with some trial and error, a working routine was designed that resulted in new images from the camera.

The next stage was to use it in the hills, so the opportunity was taken to shoot an ascent of Central Buttress of Scafell on it's 100th anniversary at Easter 2014 and, James McHaffie soloing during his 100 Lake District 'extremes' in 24 hours.

The Instanto has been reborn!

Thanks to support from Arts Council England's 'Grants for the Arts', Keswick Museum and Art Gallery, George Fisher, True Mountain and Famous Publicity there is now the opportunity to produce a new body of work based around contemporary climbing, adventure sports and landscapes with a camera that was used at the inception of adventure sports photography.

The exhibition will take place during the first few months of 2017 at [Keswick Museum and Art Gallery](#) and will coincide with several workshops Lake District primary schools looking at the science and art of photography.

29 July 2016 by [Henry Iddon](#)



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