

ON THE 5<sup>TH</sup> OF NOVEMBER my home town of Lewes commemorates Guy Fawkes Night with a Bonfire celebration of epic proportions. Quiet streets turn wild with flaming torches and exploding fireworks, and swell with visitors eager to witness costumed locals processing through the streets.

Bonfire is a fiercely independent event. Funded and organised by Lewes' seven Bonfire societies, it's for the participants more than the onlookers. The elaborate costumes and colour-coded striped jumpers are a sign of belonging, a clue to which society you're with. Members march in remembrance, as a rite of passage, to celebrate the rebellious spirit of those who fought for our freedoms, and for the joy of it.

Photography is my way of understanding the significance of Bonfire to those who march through Lewes' hilly streets until their feet ache and their children fall asleep on their shoulders. There's a sense of intimacy within the ranks, a camaraderie less tangible than the eye-catching turbulent spectacle. Lewes Bonfire is full of dichotomies. Fire against darkness, order within anarchy, silence amid the din.

I've taken hundreds, maybe thousands, of photographs of Lewes Bonfire over the past six years. I've chosen these portraits because I feel an emotional connection to the subjects. They capture an elusive moment within the chaos.

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LEWES BONFIRE PORTRAITS CARLOTTA LUKE

## LEWES BONFIRE PORTRAITS



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOTTA LUKE





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*Previous pages: photogram of the ropes used to store and light rookies on Bonfire night*

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**I HAVE BEEN A PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER** for most of my life and a Lewesian for the last 15 years. Lewes has proved a rich source of creative inspiration, not just for my portraiture but in all my work, kindling a lifelong fascination with people's sense of place and belonging.

For a photographer, Bonfire Night is a challenging subject matter, what with the extremes of light and dark, the continuous movement of the procession and the jostle of the crowds—not to mention dodging exploding bangers! It's also hugely fun. I was one of Southover Bonfire Society's official photographers for three years, but even as a spectator I've never been able to leave my camera bag at home on Bonfire Night.

**CYANOTYPE** is one of the earliest darkroom printing techniques. It was invented in the 1840s as a method to reproduce drawings. The cyan-blue colour of the print gave its name to those copies, or *blueprints*. For this series, I printed the original digital file onto acetate to create a new negative. I then painted cyanotype solution onto paper and printed each image by hand.

The beauty of cyanotype is in the slight variation of each print. Somehow, taking a clean, precise digital image through this traditional hand-printing process echoes the complexity of Bonfire. Photographs can be reproduced, but each hand-printed cyanotype image is unique. Bonfire is so much about the past and tradition, following in the footsteps of our ancestors, yet for over 200 years, no two Bonfire nights have ever been the same.

**CARLOTTA LUKE**

























































































































