

FOR THE RECORD

1963

Born in Bingley, West Yorkshire, in a 17th-century cottage by Cottingley Bridge—once used by Oliver Cromwell. Parents: John Barry Dobson and Kathleen Mary Foster.

1969–1973

Attended Christ Church C of E Primary in Colne, Lancashire—just four classrooms and one inspiring headmaster, Mr. Frank Royal. It was a magical time: play, dance, kissing catchers, cricket in fields of buttercups. If I could revisit any time in my life, it would be these golden years. I will one day return to Colne, Nelson, and Burnley to shoot a deeply personal photographic project.

1974

Edge End Secondary School. A single year that felt like a descent into hell. Violence, vandalism, misery. I was desperate to escape. And I did—when my father announced we were emigrating to South Africa.

*The Pros & Cons of Hitchhiking - Part 1 (Notes)*

England in 1974: grey, grim, and cruel. A dreary school full of brutality. Four weeks in, I was tossed into a freezing canal—fishing rod in hand—by three school thugs. So, when our plane lifted off from Heathrow on Jan 15, 1975, bound for Africa, I felt only joy. Watching grey England disappear beneath the clouds, I knew I was leaving hell behind. But this escape would set in motion the inner conflict I still wrestle with today.

1975

Arrival in South Africa—a new life of sun, space, and apartheid. It was thrilling at first, but by my teens, I felt the disconnect. The state's insidious grip seeped into everything. I was torn—between my birth country and this strange, divided land. One vivid memory: staring at diesel smoke from the school bus and realizing for the first time, we are *the* polluters.

1984–1985

A transformative year in London. Reconnected with England. I roamed galleries, fell in love with Hogarth, and felt linked to another era—maybe a past life?

1985

Enrolled in Graphic Design at Johannesburg College of Art. Loved Pop Art, album covers, painting from photos. But sitting still, stuck at a desk? Not me. I dropped out in late '85 and moved back to England—this time for good.

1986–1989

Odd jobs in London. Bought a Pentax ME Super. Took photos like everyone else—until I tried Fujichrome slide film.

*The Pros & Cons of Hitchhiking - Part 13 (Notes)*

It began with a trip to Dubrovnik. Mediocre prints followed. But then—curious—I shot a roll of Fujichrome. The last five slides: Hampstead Heath in golden autumn light. When the film came back and I saw one image

through a slide viewer—it was a revelation. Deep colours, light, time-frozen into a shimmering stained glass jewel. I was hooked. From then on, I photographed obsessively. Pretending to be on National Geographic assignments. Imagining expense accounts. One day at the South Bank, I spotted a real photographer with an assistant. I asked dumb questions. The assistant laughed—and told me to check the AFAEP (now AOP) jobs book in Old Street. I did. The rest, as they say... By late '86, I knew: I wanted to be a photographer. A location shooter. To use the camera as a passport to the world. Adventure, craft, freedom. I began searching for the best photographers in London to learn from—and never looked back.

1989–1990

After four years under the tutelage of Duncan and other talented mentors in London, I was itching for something new. A different light. A different rhythm. In February 1989, I left London and set my compass east. By early 1990, I had settled in Hong Kong, a city pulsing with promise, and my professional career truly began. I found my feet quickly—Hong Kong moved fast, and so did I. Editorial and commercial work came steadily. The camera opened doors, and I walked through with confidence.

1990–1997

Hong Kong became my basecamp. From there, I crisscrossed Asia on assignment for both local and international publications, as well as corporate clients hungry for fresh imagery from a world still exotic to many eyes. I made extensive trips into China and across the Asia-Pacific. This was a great awakening—a rush of landscapes, languages, histories I had only glimpsed in books or films. China was a riddle I couldn't wait to unravel. Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos—they haunted me with their scars and allure.

The '90s were a golden time to travel through these places—countries still ideologically insulated, just beginning to loosen their grip. For me, these journeys were electric. I was intoxicated by the blend of youthful curiosity and heady adventure.

These memories live in me still—visceral, multi-sensory, filled with color and movement. My photography during this era was functional—it was my passport. I was a storyteller with a camera, constantly in motion. But a shift stirred in me. I began to feel the pull away from the observational reportage work I knew so well. I wanted to be part of the ideation. I wanted to shape narratives.

Advertising called to me—its creative possibilities, its polish. I wanted to conceptualize, to work alongside art directors. But Hong Kong, despite its energy, didn't strike me as a creative incubator for advertising photography. I remembered South Africa and the kind of visual imagination I'd seen there. I decided it was time to return to my adopted home.

1999–2008

The South African love affair resumed. After twelve years away, I returned more seasoned, more deliberate. Johannesburg welcomed me back, intense and alive. I landed assignments with the French and German editions of GEO—career milestones that satisfied long-held dreams. Their support allowed me to go deep—into the Karoo, a stark, poetic landscape I came to

revere. I eventually published *Karoo Moons*, a love letter to that arid, timeless place.

I spent a lot of time in the heart of Johannesburg, documenting the undercurrents, the pulse of a city in transition. These were intoxicating years. Mandela had been released. He was President. The nation vibrated with change. I chased stories of youth culture for the French press. Jozi was raw, unpredictable, bursting with contrast. I loved it. But the advertising world proved elusive. In Joburg, the ad scene felt like a closed club. Work flowed to the usual suspects. My pitches, my ideas, were often met with silence. Eventually, I got tired of knocking on doors that wouldn't open. I left Johannesburg and headed to Cape Town.

Cape Town. What a shift. I remember watching the second Iraq war erupt on television from a bar in Hout Bay. I wanted to go, to document it—but I couldn't afford the gamble. So I watched from afar, whiskey in hand, as the world twisted on its axis.

2008

By mid-2008, I'd wrapped a major editorial on South Africa's borderlands for French GEO. But the writing was on the wall. The golden age of editorial photography was ending. Budgets shrank. Assignments evaporated. I felt the shift deep in my bones. It was time to move again. My mind wandered eastward. I missed the scent, the chaos, the collision of old and new.

I chose Saigon.

2009–2017

Saigon was a rollercoaster—chaotic, feverish, addictive. I call them the “higgledy-piggledy” years. I lost my footing in many ways. The commercial world no longer made sense to me, and I struggled to find a new anchor. But a spark of something else began to flicker—artistic inquiry. A different kind of questioning. I began to ask: What do I want to say? What kind of photographer do I want to become?

I knew I had to reimagine how I worked. The old rules no longer applied. Confusion clouded me. My outreach felt futile. Doors didn't open. Saigon, for all its manic energy, started to suffocate me. I needed stillness.

I decamped to Vung Tau, a coastal town ringed by jungly hills. There, I walked. I sweated. I reconnected with my body and mind. It was a time of mental reset, a year of solitude and foundations. Around 2011, I dove into personal work. I experimented—abstractions, street scenes, visual poems. Eventually, I opened a small gallery in my Saigon home. To see my work on those walls, in my own space, filled me with quiet pride. For the first time, I began to believe I might actually be... an artist.

But Saigon took its toll. It burned me out. The relentless urban churn wore away its charm. I craved serenity. I began to dream of somewhere slower, somewhere green. Thailand? Malaysia?

2018–2025

Then I found Penang. Or perhaps it found me.

I settled on Pearl Hill, in a house tucked into a forested hillside. Jungle surrounded me. The sea shimmered beyond the trees. The air smelled of frangipani and ripe mango. Eagles soared. Monkeys chattered. Giant squirrels danced across power lines. Flying foxes emerged at dusk like winged monks. Even the pythons moved with grace. This, I thought, is paradise. A place to think. To write. To photograph. To dream.

Penang isn't just a sanctuary—it's a state of mind. From here, I plan. I reflect. I give thanks for the wild and winding road that brought me to this moment.

Amen.