

OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE



Brian Harte LBIPP qualified for a job that would have been well paid and easier than working as a social photographer. But he's not the type to find a comfortable niche. Ailsa McWhinnie talks to him



Brian Harte manages to pack more information and entertainment into a 90-minute conversation than the average stand-up comedian. His mind is always one step ahead of his mouth, and the only time he hesitates is to make sure he remembers the next point he wants to make – once he's finished with whatever subject he's currently expounding on.

His innate gift for engaging with people and bringing them out of themselves is apparent within minutes of our conversation starting, and it seems only right that he has chosen the route of the wedding and portrait photographer to make the most of this natural talent.

But it wasn't always all about photography. Initially, because of his interest in the sciences, Brian found himself studying optometry. But the

subject's strictness didn't suit his intense curiosity about the world, and he found himself losing interest.

"I wasn't allowed to think for myself," he recalls. To escape from the stifling nature of the subject, he managed – after a year out of his studies at Bradford University – to swap courses, and found himself in the second year of a media course that had a scientific slant, studying for a BSc.

As part of his course, he had to learn, not how to take a photograph, but how to develop a film and make a print.

"I borrowed a camera," he explains, "put a roll of black and white film in it, and shot it. I then turned up at the darkroom, where teachers and the other students started giving me advice. A week later, I bought my first camera."



He wasn't supposed to spend more than four hours a week in the darkroom, but he spent so much time there that everyone forgot who he was and assumed he was studying for the BA in photography.

He read every book on photography in the university's library. Once he'd bled that dry he moved on to the local college, then the city library, finally ending up getting his fix while sitting on the floor of the bookshop at what was then the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television (now the National Media Museum).

With all this knowledge absorbed and practised, it was time to test it out for real. As is the case for so many photographers dipping their toe in the water, it was a request from a neighbour to photograph her wedding that set him on the path which led him to his eventual success in the 2007 British Professional Photography Awards, where he walked away with a Fujifilm Licentiate award for

which the prize was a trip to the Wedding and Portrait Photographers International (WPPI) convention in Las Vegas. He was also runner-up in the Classical Wedding category.

This first wedding shoot soon led to another, which

Brian tackled by planning for every conceivable eventuality. "It was my best wedding for a long time," he admits, because of the preparation he put into it.

In the meantime, he turned down the offer of a graphic design job at catalogue firm

Grattan – one of Yorkshire's biggest employers. You see, Brian likes to scare himself. By doing so, he presents himself with challenges and problems to solve.

"I put myself in positions where it's uncomfortable," he explains. Like the occasion →





when he gave up a part-time job in order to force himself to go out and find people to photograph. But there's another explanation for his determination. "If I had become an optometrist my starting salary would have been £35,000. I'd have got a taste for money and I'd have sold my soul." Kicking back and getting comfortable just isn't his style.

As if further proof of this were needed, Brian goes on to tell a quite touching story that took place nearly a year ago. It started with a phone call, as these stories tend to. On the line was a young woman who wanted to book a photo shoot for herself. This in itself was unusual, as there was no occasion involved, and

the resulting prints were not to be given as gifts to friends or family. She had a phobia of cameras, Brian explains. "It was a genuine, diagnosed phobia – not just a case of not liking to have her photo taken. She suffered from body dysmorphia, and this photo shoot was to be part of her therapy to tackle it."

All sorts of thoughts began to run through Brian's head. What if she hates them and it makes her worse?

"I phoned up a psychologist friend who warned me that I could make her regress, but I said I'd rather take her photograph because I care. If she goes to someone else, they might not."

He approached the shoot with trepidation. After all, this



was a person who was unable to look at her face in the mirror.

The photographs on Brian's website that she was drawn to were all lit very hard – what Brian calls a 'slimming' light. "But there was no way I was

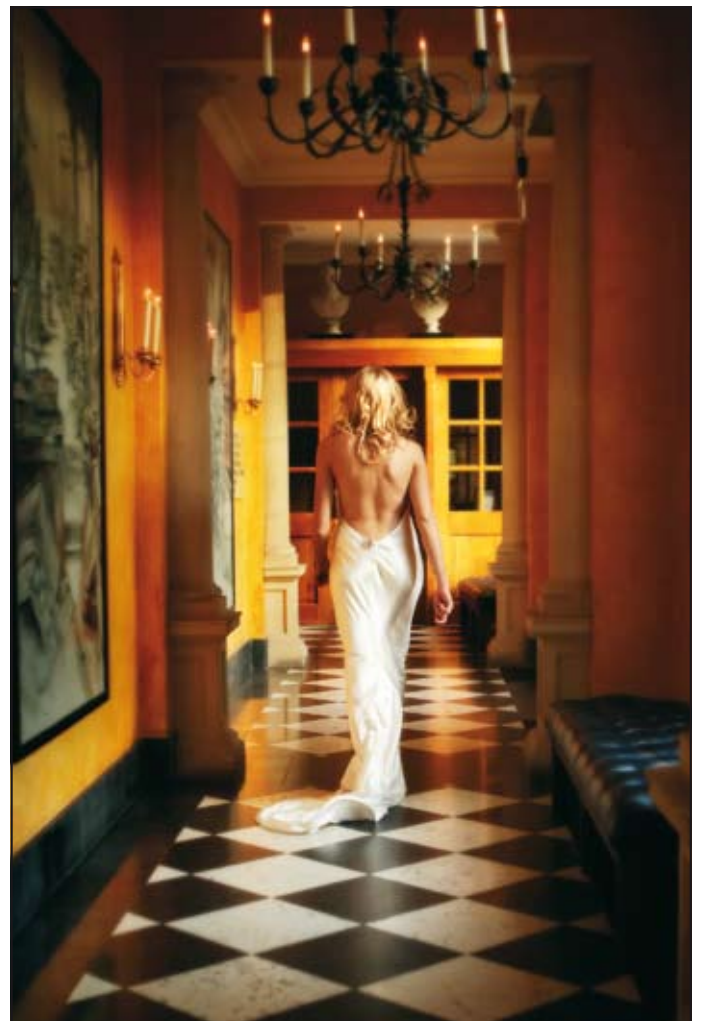
going to shoot her that way," he says. "I was going to show her as she is."

The shoot went well and both enjoyed it. But the real test would be viewing the resulting photographs. His client had chosen not to have any family or friends present; she wanted to be the first to see the pictures. So Brian gave a slide show in her house. With the two of them in a darkened room, he put it on. "I stared straight ahead and wouldn't look at her. At the end I turned round and there were tears running down her face. She gave me the thumbs up."

She subsequently placed a huge order for prints, but her follow-up email meant much more than that. In it she wrote, "Thank you for giving me something that nobody else has been able to: a photograph of me that I like."

Clearly not all Brian's photo shoots are as emotionally loaded as this, but the manner in which he approached it – making it fun and as relaxed as possible – is common →





Profile: Brian Harte



to all his commissions, whether portrait or wedding. “My attitude is one of perfectionism, and I always aim to make the time with me more enjoyable than the time they spend with their friends and family. Well, if I aim for that at least I know it’s going to be fun!”

He describes portraiture as the time when he practises his art – where the skills of lighting and composition are honed. “Weddings are where the adrenaline kicks in and you fall back on what you know. It can take you one of two ways – either into slight panic or, preferably, down a route where it’s completely creative and you’re coming up with ideas you’d never thought of before.”

Interestingly, he describes the results not as his photographs, but as theirs. “I don’t have any preconceived ideas. I study photography and I try to create inspiration so that

when I see my clients and how they act, I can make a photograph that belongs to them.”

Brian currently teaches photography one day a week to first year students on the HND course at Bradford College. “It’s very important,” he says. “And the first year students are the ones that need the most attention, because any bad habits they learn are hard to undo in the second or third years.”

He has two simple reasons that explain his enthusiasm for teaching. “Firstly, I like to help people out and give them a leg up – as long as they’re willing to do the groundwork. And the second reason is, if you can’t explain something to someone else, you don’t really understand it yourself.” So it gives him the opportunity to test his own knowledge and comprehension of the theories and concepts he teaches.

Despite coming away from our conversation feeling a bit



like I've just run a marathon, I'm enthused. And by the time you read this, Brian will be preparing for that trip to the WPPI convention where he will absorb ideas and advice from the world's best wedding and portrait photographers.

With Brian's warmth and determination, it will probably be him who is inspiring the next generation of social photographers. And possibly a few of the old stalwarts, too. □

Brian Harte
Tel: 0845 257 1758
brian@brianharte.co.uk
www.brian@brianharte.co.uk

