

A platform for observation

How one photographer turned a single train station into a year's worth of stories.
Peter Dench finds out more

Photographing the same location every day for a year might sound repetitive – but not if you're Oliver Bennett, whose *People on a Platform* series transforms a single railway station into a compelling study of British life. For 12 months, Bennett embedded himself at Bristol Temple Meads, capturing the shifting moods, characters and quiet dramas that pass through its platforms.

'I've always loved railway stations,' he tells me. 'There's a real sense of drama to them. On a Friday night, the mood is electric – people are excited, heading off for the weekend. But come Sunday afternoon, there's this melancholy. Monday mornings? It's all about anxiety.'

Zen-like

That emotional texture became the guiding current of the project. Initially, Bennett worked intuitively – waiting, watching, slipping into what he describes as a Zen-like state. As the months passed, and he got the more obvious shots out of his system, he says, '...I started to notice the quieter, more unusual things. One of my favourite images came halfway through – the lady emerging from the stairwell, just her head appearing. It had a surreal, painterly quality I hadn't seen before.'

Despite the project's seemingly documentary nature, Bennett is clear: this wasn't about making social commentary or capturing news. 'I'm not trying to impose meaning. I like photography that's open-ended, where people can read their own interpretations. For me, the joy of a great photo exhibition is

the energy it gives you. You feel more alive. You start seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.'

The photos are intimate without being invasive. Bennett originally used a longer zoom to stay discreet, but quickly realised that closer, more contextual frames produced stronger results. 'Most of the images were shot between 28 and 50mm. Once I settled into the environment, I could blend in more easily.'

That blending-in was helped by a surprising ally: age. 'A friend joked I'd be invisible – just an old guy wandering around with a camera,' Bennett laughs. 'And it turned out to be true. I wasn't seen as a threat. People rarely challenged me. In fact, only two people over the whole year asked not to be photographed.'

Even more helpful was his badge from Network Rail. After an initial enquiry, Bennett was granted official permission to photograph on site. He explains, 'It was a classic quid pro quo. I offered to let them use some of the images, and in return they gave me access. Having that lanyard meant people thought I was part of the station staff.'

A former professor of cultural analysis, Bennett sees continuity between his academic past and photographic present. 'I used to write about culture – now I photograph it. It's the same curiosity, just a different medium.' His scholarly lens may explain why *People on a Platform* resonates on a deeper level. Viewers might notice recurring themes: solitude in crowds, the performance of public life, the tension between movement and stillness.

'There's definitely a strong sense of



Top: Saturday Morning, Match Day: Bristol City v Swansea City, March 2024

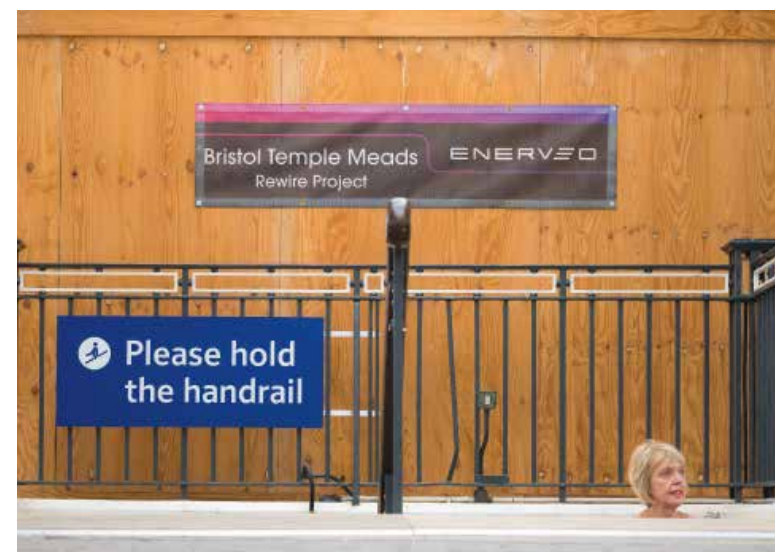
Top left: Friday Evening, January 2024

Right: Monday Morning, July 2024

Left: Friday Afternoon, February 2024

Bottom right: Friday Evening, Cheltenham Races Week, March 2024

Bottom left: Saturday Morning, March 2024



anxiety,' he reflects. 'Both at the individual level – will I catch my train? Will the person I'm meeting be there? – but also more broadly. We're living through a time of huge cultural unease, and I think that seeps into places like this.'

Other images reveal people in self-contained bubbles: reading, scrolling, daydreaming. 'I only really noticed it in the editing stage. It's fascinating how people construct these private worlds in public spaces.'

So how did he whittle down a year's worth of shooting into an exhibition of 35 prints? 'I didn't curate around a strict theme. I just chose strong individual images that, together, created a richer whole.'

Breakfast story

The resulting exhibition, staged at Sandwi, a converted engine shed café next to the station, has proved popular. 'The owner even cleared out all the café's existing artwork. Originally, it was going to run for three months – but they've asked to keep it for six.' And the reaction? 'It's been lovely. One of the cleaners spotted himself in a photo and now has breakfast under it every day. I'm giving him a print.'

Bennett's next stop is a similar year-long project at Gordano motorway services on the M5. 'It's a fascinating contrast. The people, the atmosphere – completely different from a train station.' He's already thinking ahead to a book – *Road and Rail*, perhaps – a title that could tie these two bodies of work together.

Though his observational approach has drawn comparisons as 'a gentle Martin Parr,' one contact quipped, Bennett is careful to avoid mockery. 'There's a fine line between laughing at people and laughing with them. I don't want to be cruel. Even the more eccentric moments – like the woman wearing a Christmas tree on her head – are treated with warmth. It's about finding joy, not ridicule.'

At its core, *People on a Platform* is about waiting – something we all do, and rarely reflect on. 'There's so much going on if you just slow down and look,' says Bennett. 'That's what photography allows us to do – pause, observe, and appreciate the unnoticed.'

People on a Platform runs until the end of October at Sandwi, Clocktower Yard, Bristol BS1 6QH. See www.oliverbennettphotography.com