

The Fireside and the Sanctuary by Mark Wright
Text by Gemma Padley

“As a child, I wandered through fields, along footpaths, and into wooded areas with my father, who explained things to me as we walked. I hope these simple but powerful connections [to nature] can continue for other generations, and not be lost.”

We all have memories of times we've felt especially connected to the natural world. Perhaps skimming stones across a river as an eight-year-old, or running through a field of golden hay bales on a warm August day. Or smelling the freshness of the air after rain. In the busyness that is everyday life, these memories can sustain and nourish us, serving as reminders of the preciousness and fragility of nature.

While Dianne Hogarth's comments above remind us of the simple pleasures to be found in embracing nature, her words hint at something more troubling – the threat of destruction as a consequence of human progress.

Hogarth, who lives in Lancashire, is one of several people photographer Mark Wright spoke to while working on *The Fireside and the Sanctuary*, an on-going project that considers the implications of fracking on rural communities and the landscape in northern England.

The highly controversial process involves drilling into the earth and pumping liquid and chemicals at high pressure to force open existing fissures in order to extract oil or gas. Since considerable shale gas reserves have been identified underground in parts of Lancashire and other areas of northern England, the shadow of fracking looms uneasily over residents.

Concerns about the environmental consequences of fracking have been raised, and tussles between the government and local councils have been hard fought. Uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness are rife among communities. But despite objection from anti-fracking groups the government seems intent on making fracking a reality.

Wright spent several months living within rural communities in northeast England, talking with local inhabitants and getting to understand their stories and fears before producing a series of contemplative portraits and evocative landscapes. Rather than getting caught up in politics, Wright's thoughtful images, inspired in part by the traditions of Romanticism in British landscape painting, offer a glimpse into the experiences, lifestyles, and habitats of the people in these communities, and are a moment of stillness in our fast-paced, ever-changing world.

While the very real possibility of fracking serves as a backdrop to the work, what also runs through the series is the notion of the natural world as a physical and metaphorical place of sanctuary, and a source of inspiration – not in a grand or epic sense, but in a quieter, less heroic way. One gets the feeling from Wright's series that this environment must be protected at all costs.

The work is not geographically specific, but rather universal, adds Wright, since the consequences of fracking would ultimately affect us all. “This violent, irreversible venture risks creating an everlasting scar on the landscape, and will spread if it is allowed to build momentum,” he says. “The community I photographed is standing up against overwhelming odds for a more humane and spiritual society.”