

# PROJECT PROFILE: FUN FACTORY 101

*Conor Masterson explains the genesis and fruition of an ambitious personal project to recreate a moment of local and national history and collaborative community spirit.*



To get a feel for the shoot search for Fun Factory 101 on YouTube.

As part of a personal project in December 2008 I recreated an old photograph taken outside my house in Camberwell, south London in 1907. The original image featured Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel in a crowd of Fred Karno's performers outside his house (which he used as offices and where I now live) and adjacent studios which he called the 'Fun Factory'.

Fred Karno was a famous and successful vaudeville theatre promoter and the original photograph is a classic Edwardian image with over 100 performers crowding in as well as locals from the street standing at the sides watching. In the years since Karno sold up in 1927 the old workshops were taken over by a biscuit factory and then a clock factory and for the past 25 years The Clockwork Studios has been a well known collection of studios shared by many different artists including painters, potters, a milliner and a set designer. I have been showing my photography there

at the bi-annual open days since I moved into my house.

Whilst the original image is an interesting enough photograph in its own right my main motivation in re-creating it was to create a communal moment that brings people together. I have come to know more and more people in the local community in the four years that I have lived there and I was looking for an opportunity to begin to document it.

The idea of recreating the original Karno image gained momentum until one day last summer when my neighbour, Bob, who is in his 80s pointed out someone in the original photograph who was a friend of his mother and who he remembered visiting his house on the street where he has lived since 1941. I realised that here was someone who was one degree removed from the original moment and that if I was ever going to do this photograph



Performers and locals outside The Fun Factory in 1907. Internationally famous theatre promoter Fred Karno used his studios to make sets and rehearse everything from slapstick to trapeze routines.

then I would want Bob to be in it. I decided then and there that it would happen at the Clockwork Christmas Open Day in December 2008. It had a nice symmetry as it was 101 years since the original and everything in the 1907 image indicated that it was winter.

In September I began to discuss the idea in more detail with the artists in the studios. There were no objections to scheduling it for the Sunday morning just before the studios' open day so my next step was to recruit people and to get them to turn up. Ouch. How to explain the elongated history and new idea to an entire street who were mostly unaware? It was an intimidating concept

but early on I decided to take a practical approach to organising the whole event.

It was a personal project that I would be organising on my own. The success would depend on having the core artists in the photographs as well as a handful of key neighbours and local supporters of the arts. Anyone else would be a bonus. It was also clear to me that a lot of people were unaware of the history and in fact to grasp the significance of re-creating something similar took engagement with the original image. My problem was that in London in 2008, many people are too busy to listen and take in this concept so I took a relaxed attitude to whether people took



Many talented performers passed through The Fun Factory, most notably Stan Laurel, highlighted left, and Charlie Chaplin, right, shown in this detail from the main picture.



Fun Factory 101 recreates the scene in 2008. © Conor Masterson

part or not! It was interesting to watch the positive and negative reactions to the suggestion of taking part. I know for a fact that some people who missed the point really regretted not 'getting out of bed' when they saw the final result.

As a personal project it was an opportunity to try things out so I decided to make a website in the form of a blog to inform people of what was going on and to explain the idea in more detail. The advantage of a blog is that anyone can add a comment to the posts and contribute their own stories. It is something that I am hoping will have legs as I add more research to it in coming months. I am interested in

seeing how people engage with these things especially in this modern age where almost everything I do as a photographer has to fit through the eye of the world wide web and exist there somewhere.

Over the period of weeks running up to the shoot I posted several pages to the blog explaining the idea. I created an e-mail list for announcing the shoot and for asking people to take part and I contacted a few local blogs for Camberwell and Loughborough Junction, near the site. I spoke to neighbours as and when I saw them and I posted flyers to the whole street and surrounding roads...over 200 flyers in all.

On the technical side I was hoping to mimic the original image exactly but sods law dictates that there was a tree on the original spot where camera must have been. That's was ok because I also realised that I would have to change the perspective slightly to make the whole shot work. The original had buses and cars belonging to the company. It made no sense to have modern buses in our shot as there was no logic to it, unless someone from the studio owned one, which they didn't! But one of the artists did own an old Land Rover and he offered it for use in the shot. He said that people could stand on it, which was perfect.

I would need more because if I managed to get over 100 people there or anything like 200 then a lot of people would be obscured. Simply putting up scaffold would not be an option as these were members of the public and it would be dangerous. Michael Harvey, an AOP member who has a studio around the corner, was then kind enough to offer his Land Rover to use in the shot when I invited him to appear as a local artist. Bingo! We would have some symmetry and just enough height available to us to have some variety in the crowd. I also wondered about a scaffold tower to achieve the higher viewpoint that I would need but this was not a big budget shoot with permission fees to be paid to the council so I managed to borrow one of those ludicrously tall Gitzo tripods from the ludicrously nice Charlie Crane via the ludicrously useful AOP list. (Thanks Charlie.)

The camera was always going to be my 5x4 wista. I was even planning to shoot just one sheet of film at one point because I think 'back in the day' film



would have been very expensive and one sheet was probably all they could afford. However I saw sense and planned on a few sheets of b+w mixed with colour. Yet another nice AOP member, Derek Seaward, was kind enough to sell me a box of the ultra-rare Type 55 Polaroid so I would be able to get an extra frame and a polaroid shot at the same time. This was an important consideration as crowds can be unruly even in the best of spirits so I really only expected the first frame to be useful.

The next part of the process was the wait. There was no way of knowing how many people would turn up. You can send out a hundred e-mails but I have found that even though people may be nodding along whilst they read it and actually putting it in their diary very few people actually commit to it and e-mail you back. I had to base my assumptions on the universally positive responses that I did get. I sent out a press release the week before that received some enquiries from the South London papers and one of them mentioned it on the end of a Chaplin feature they happened to be running. Getting closer to the time I had some volunteers to help me with the assisting

so thanks to Barry Woods, Sander Jurkiewicz and Glen Page.

I have a few great memories of the shoot itself. The first was that even though I stressed to people that I would be shooting at 11.15 and that they should arrive before 11 to be in the shot most people appeared closer to 11.30, I have a feeling they were all waiting around the corner to see if anyone would turn up! I remember standing on the ladder at 11.15 looking at 20 people scattered around this big empty area and then... they came! I had actually expected to be shooting at 11.30 and in true form I had over 150 standing in a very orderly manner at 11.30. It was a little surreal to look up and see so many people quietly waiting. I had organised three stewards to help me with the crowd control and it all fell into place very nicely using some radios and hi-vis vests.

Another strange phenomenon was the eerie silence when I was ready to shoot. It was pin drop quiet. When I asked everyone if they could see the lens it was very 'Life of Brian' as a chorus of 'yesss' came back towards me. I sensed this was a big moment. The only way to describe it was the feeling of this being a real

event that was important to the crowd. It really is rare to have so many people rapt and ready to be photographed without any chat or the smart alec responses common with weddings and other events where crowds are gathered for a large group shot.

The final memory that will never leave me is the spontaneous applause after I had shot the film and thanked the crowd. My neighbour Graham said to me later, "It's so rare to get your whole street out like that and for them to applaud themselves". At the back of my mind this was always my aim but I don't think I had really expected it to work so well.

In the aftermath of the day and the whole Christmas period everyone was completely buzzed by the experience. There was a communal spirit achieved that I have never come across, I only wish it could happen on every street from time to time to get people to meet more often.

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[www.conormasterson.com](http://www.conormasterson.com)  
**Fun Factory 101 blog:**  
[conor@conormasterson.com/blog](mailto:conor@conormasterson.com/blog)