

Beverly Conley

Smithfield Market

Shortly after moving to London in 1990, I began photographing at Smithfield Market. I was fascinated by the strong thread of family tradition among the employees and by their work methods which had scarcely changed in 130 years.

I had no idea that the 800 year old home to the meat trade was about to undergo a massive face lift. New hygiene standards put forth by the European Union forced the remodeling that included temperature-controlled shops and sealed loading bays. These renovations I soon discovered would effect not just the buildings but the work itself.

In the not so distant past, tonnage was up, and meat came through the market all night long, and with it a lot more laughter. Down-to-earth porters with nicknames like Silly Billy, Caruso and Sexy George were more likely to exchange salty banter while waiting for the whistle that signaled the beginning of their day.

Times being what they were at Smithfield, the name of the game became "task and finish" or get your work done and go home. To change, to modernize, meant to risk everything for the men who, like their fathers and grandfathers before them, had Smithfield in their blood; it truly was a way of life. I wanted to document that world before it was too late.