



press clippings

publication - the british journal  
of photography

date - 06.07.05

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## A LIFE AQUATIC

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Volume 152  
Number 7539



# In deep

A sideline in underwater portraiture has paid dividends for a company specialising in swimming lessons for babies. Diane Smyth reports

Having picked up *Visions of Science* awards and magazine front covers with his shots of aquatic wildlife, photographer Jim Greenfield was a little bemused when the specialist swimming club Water Babies asked him to photograph its tiny students.

But in just three years these photographic sessions have become a runaway success, and about 80% of Water Babies' students are now photographed. Greenfield has trained up three other photographers, and sessions are held in Yorkshire, Bristol, Edinburgh, Milton Keynes and Wales. In Yorkshire alone Greenfield shoots four sessions per year, each averaging 130 babies. As he remarks: 'It's a lot more peaceful in the North Sea.'

Greenfield isn't alone with the 130 babies and their assorted parents and carers, however, accompanied on each session by the Water Babies founders Paul and Jess Thompson. While Jess Thompson keeps careful note of which baby is which, Paul Thompson helps orchestrate the sessions, asking groups of eight babies

and their carers to come into the water at a time.

Babies are born with a natural reflex known as the mammalian dive-reflex, which means they instinctively close their vocal chords when immersed. This instinct starts to die off after six months, but until this point babies can dive thoroughly immersed in complete safety. Water Babies runs baby swimming classes, and after just 10 lessons its young students have built up enough stamina to stay under water comfortably for two or three seconds – just enough time to be photographed.

'We have quite a system,' says Paul Thompson. 'I put the baby under the water, get out of range, and Jim takes the shot. Then I collect the baby, give it back to its parent, and we start again. I'll give Jim a tip about the babies before I put them in – whether they tend to kick to the right, are strong swimmers or whatever.'

## Split second

Despite being well-used to the water, the babies are only underwater without Paul's support for a couple of seconds at

**Right: Keiran Green. All images © Jim Greenfield, courtesy of Water Babies. Jim Greenfield's photographs of non-human underwater wildlife can be viewed via his agency, at [www.imagequest3d.com](http://www.imagequest3d.com).**

**Below: Indra Aristotelous enjoys a brief introduction to freestyle, as Paul Thompson captures the moment.**



most, meaning that Greenfield has to move fast to get the shot. 'I use a Nikon F90 in an Aquatica housing, two flashes and a 20mm lens, which makes for quite a shallow depth of field,' he says.

'I'm really quite close to the baby, and that can make it difficult to frame the shot. The baby's only got to move back a few inches and it makes a huge difference, so I have to judge each shot very quickly. It's quite intense concentration so it's very mentally tiring.'

Greenfield takes more than 300 shots in a typical session, diving in and out of the water. 'I don't wear the scuba diving gear, I hold my breath and duck in and out,' he says. 'Wearing a tank is very noisy and would scare the babies – even when I'm only wearing a mask I turn away from them so as not to frighten them.'

And, as he adds, shooting underwater also presents technical challenges: 'If anything goes wrong it's difficult to fix,' he says. 'You can't just open



the back of the camera.'

As Paul Thompson laughs, however, one of the most persistent technical problems has been the blue backdrop against which the babies are shot. 'I spend hours smoothing out the creases and bubbles on it,' he says. 'It must add about an hour per session.'

#### Picture perfect

Despite these challenges, Greenfield manages to take acceptable portraits of the vast majority of the babies, and

only one or two prove completely unphotographable per session. 'We have a pretty low fall-out rate, and if we really can't shoot a baby in one session we just ask the parents to come back for the next,' says Paul Thompson.

Once the images are taken, the films are sent to Peak Imaging, a Sheffield-based pro lab. It turns around preliminary prints in two or three days, and sends them back to the Thompsons. They then pick out the best photographs and

put them into albums, ready to be viewed by the parents in sessions held just a week after the initial shoot.

'The parents have 20-minute slots to go through the photographs with us, and they can bring their whole family along if they like,' says Paul. 'It's much better if you go through the images with them, and we try to genuinely advise them.'

'We try to advise them on the best size for the image,' says Jess Thompson. 'We find

'I'm really quite close to the baby, and that can make it difficult to frame the shot. The baby's only got to move back a few inches and it makes a huge difference, so I have to judge each shot very quickly.'



that most parents want the biggest size, but are almost too embarrassed to ask for it. We just have to encourage them if that's what they want and the image will look good at that size. But we don't just try to flog the biggest size – we will tell them if it won't work.'

It's an approach that pays off – Water Babies' average print size is 20x30mm, where other underwater baby photography companies average 9x6mm. 'If you go through the images with them, they go for larger prints,' comments Paul.

**Marketing madness**

Given these large reprints, Peak Images avoids heavy retouching – wary that photo trickery will become obvious when blown up. The lab makes up the final prints on a Durst Epsilon, then Jess and Paul Thompson carefully package them up in orange-wrapping paper and Water Babies stickers, put them into custom-made blue tubes and post them out.

'It's a very big marketing

**Above: Sophie Henshaw. Left: Kim and Frankie Crocombe.**



exercise,' says Jess. 'We used to just put the prints between two sheets of acetate and taken them down to the pool-side but it was a nightmare – it's not the best environment for photographic prints.'

And once the parents get the prints, the Water Babies team

continues its focus on customer satisfaction.

'If someone doesn't like the print when they get it home, we'll change it,' says Paul. 'We lose money on it, but that doesn't matter – it's more important that every customer walks away happy.' **BJP**

**Contacts**

To find out more about Water Babies' photography and swimming lessons, contact the company on 01423 431 490 or visit [www.waterbabies.co.uk](http://www.waterbabies.co.uk)