



#### Bath House shoot, 2011

"Taken on a shoot for a soap and bath-product company. They wanted a fresh, contemporary look that didn't necessarily include the actual products. We used vintage clothes and shot on location in a wonderful 1920s art deco hotel."

\* Annabel Williams is an acclaimed portrait photographer, with over 25 years of experience.  
 \* Her lecture tours and photo shoots have taken her all over the world, and she often makes TV appearances.  
 \* Her photography books include *99 Portrait Photo Ideas*, *99 Digital Photo Art Ideas* and *The Annabel Williams Book of Wedding and Portrait Photography*.

# Annabel Williams

The celebrated portrait and wedding specialist talks to **Geoff Harris** about the joys of 'non-techy' photography

**W**e've all got our reasons for taking up photography seriously, but Annabel Williams is the first pro we've spoken to who went into the game because she couldn't find anyone to take a decent picture of her. "Back in the 80s, you either

came out looking like your mother, or took your clothes off – that was the choice," she explains with characteristic frankness. "I wanted to look like a model on the front of a magazine, but no-one seemed to shoot like that, so I decided to do it myself."

Annabel's DIY ethos and 'can do' attitude have served her well, because she's blossomed into one of the UK's finest portrait, social and wedding photographers. With over a quarter of a century of experience as a photographer and trainer

under her belt, Annabel now travels all over the world, and her work's been featured in numerous newspapers and magazines. She's also written several successful books about shooting weddings and portraits.

Annabel's big break came in the 80s, when she persuaded the BBC to let her do



#### Vineyard shoot, 2011

(Top and right)

"Shot in a French vineyard. This is the gorgeous 16-year-old daughter of the owner. I asked if I could shoot her as she'd never been properly photographed before. The bottom shot was taken in a rusty old Citroën van."



#### Bath House shoot, 2011

(Bottom right)

"This is the same girl who's pictured on this feature's opening spread. We used vintage clothes in the 1920s hotel."



#### Bath House shoot, 2011

(Far right)

"Taken on the Bath House shoot, but this time with 1960s clothes. The model's tall, skinny look works with the tall poles, and the purple dress looks great against the yellow ceiling and blue sky."



television makeovers. "My sister was a make-up artist, so we set to work on our friends and transformed them into models. The feedback was so great that I approached the BBC and got on *The Clothes Show*, which was hugely popular back then."

Annabel's skill as a portrait photographer quickly developed, and she branched out into weddings. "I was at my friend's wedding in the early 80s and her uncle was taking the pictures. He was a nightmare, so I took some shots to help out, and everyone loved them. I booked 70 weddings the following year. I wanted to do them candidly and capture the spontaneity, which of course is commonplace today. I got so much work because I was the only person shooting like that at the time. Soon I was featured in wedding magazines, which led to seminars and training."

#### DOING IT HER WAY

Annabel was something of a visionary when it came to wedding photography, helping to develop a visual style that is still in demand today. "I just came up with a totally new

### "Wedding photographers used to bore everyone to death by taking ages and standing them all in rows"

concept. This was in the days of the high-street photographer who posed people against a brown canvas background. I just hated that look. Wedding photographers bored everyone to death by taking ages and standing them all in rows."

Needless to say, the sometimes sexist old guard didn't react well to Annabel's no-nonsense approach. "I was ridiculed by many professionals," she remembers. "They criticised me for shooting on 35mm, saying I wasn't a proper photographer because I didn't use a tripod or a big camera."

"I lost a great deal of confidence trying to do it their way, but I just found it incomprehensible that anyone would take a picture of a child by standing in one place with a tripod and looking down through a camera that showed you the image upside

#### Bath House shoot, 2011

"I love the make-up and hair here, which were done by Karen Fundell. The image was taken in the same 1920s hotel in Morecambe, Lancashire, again using vintage clothes and jewellery."



#### IN THE BAG



"This bit shouldn't take long! I use a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a 70-200mm f/2.8 IS lens, and an EOS 5D Mark II with a 24-70mm f/2.8 IS lens. I also use a Canon 580EX flashgun for weddings, and a reflector. For editing, I simply use Adobe Photoshop Lightroom."

## BEHIND THE IMAGE



"FOR THIS UNUSUAL WEDDING SHOOT I WAS INSPIRED BY A HALLOWEEN COSTUME!"

## Camera and lens

"I shot this at Key West cemetery in Florida, using a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III. The lens was a Canon EF 70-200mm f/2.8L USM, with a focal length of 70mm. I shot in Aperture Priority mode at 1/1600 sec at f/2.8. The ISO was set at 400."

## Location and model

"This cemetery is famous for having its tombs above ground. I met Maria in a bar one Halloween, dressed as a dead bride, with blood running down her face and carrying a bunch of dead flowers. I was so inspired I asked her to do a shoot!"

## Composition

"This shot is a good example of how I often shoot at an angle to create a more dramatic effect. There are lots of muted colours from the dead flowers, which create an amazing background. Note the quirky red shoes, too!"



down and back to front. Furthermore, I hated the sort of pictures these male pros took of women – all posed and trying to look sexy. They were pictures for men, not women."

## A HELPING HAND

Digital cameras have been a huge help to wedding and portrait photographers like Annabel. "When I started you had to work really hard to get the light right," she says. "Now, digital cameras pick up all the detail in the shadows and highlights for you. This wouldn't have happened years ago without artificial lighting, light meters, etc, which would slow the whole wedding down."

The downside is that now everybody thinks they can have a go at taking the

### "Nowadays, digital cameras pick up all the detail in the shadows and highlights for you"

photographs of someone's big day. "The bride's friends have a very good chance of getting good photos these days," says Annabel. "Many people buy SLRs because they see how creative they can be with apps on their phones, so want to go further."

"Also, most people tend to have a limited budget for weddings, and while they may want the best photographer in the world to shoot their day, they will often settle on a

friend, or a cheaper wedding photographer to fit within their financial limitations. The customers are now in control, and many photographers don't like that, but they need to be realistic."

## TIPS FOR MARITAL HARMONY

So if somebody is asked to shoot a wedding and they have never done it before, what are the most important things to think about? "First, make sure your equipment is working, test it, and take a spare camera. Then, plan everything with the bride and groom – talk through the whole day with them and come up with a timetable."

"The secret to successful shots is not to look like you're trying to control the day, but to show them how much more fun they will



need to be prepared for all eventualities if you want to avoid disasters."

Annabel prides herself on being a "non-techy" photographer, but that doesn't mean to say she cuts corners. Take lighting, for example: "I never use studio lighting or flash at a wedding, unless it's a shot in the aisle, or the evening reception," she says. "I much prefer natural light, and keeping things simple. I have just learned lots of ways to cheat, to be able to shoot anyone, in any weather, through sheer experience."

"I just focus and expose on the subject's face to get that correct, then the rest of the picture is a balance of light, colour and texture used as a background to the main event, which is the person."

## THE LIGHT IS EVERYTHING

Annabel is adamant that wedding and portrait photography is often portrayed as a highly technical subject, when it needn't be. "Provided you set up your camera in a simple way, you shouldn't have to think about it again!" she says. "It's different for landscapes and commercial work, but for people you just need to use your camera simply, so you can concentrate entirely on the people you are photographing."

Annabel does quite a lot of training, so what kind of mistakes does she see her students making time and time again? "Most people think that they need to know absolutely everything about their camera, and once I show them how to use just a few simple settings and get on with it, they never look back!"

"Also, at the beginning, many people don't really understand how to find the most flattering light. They tend to start with the person, whereas I start with the background, create myself a "set", make

## PRO INSIGHT

Annabel's top tips for taking pro wedding shots

- 1 Focus on people  
Develop a relationship with your subject – concentrate on them, not the camera. Make sure you set things up so you can do this.
- 2 Prepare first  
Check out backgrounds, locations and clothes before you start shooting.
- 3 Plan the day  
Make your shoot feel like the subject's own personal fashion shoot – plan it, and spend a day out together creating perfect pictures.
- 4 Keep things fresh  
With small children, always have plenty of breaks and change clothes and backgrounds often to stop them getting bored.
- 5 Watch the lighting  
Look for soft even light – under a tree, in a doorway, or under a porch – which creates really flattering light every time.

## Charlie, 2010

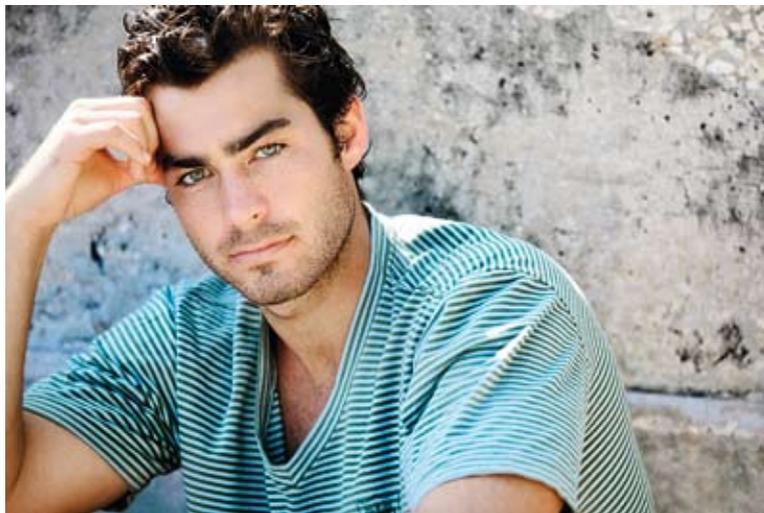
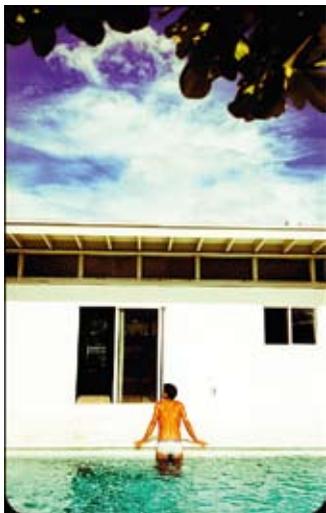
(Top)  
"Taken in Key West. I chose the pink dress and shoes to contrast with the chair. Charlie was saying how big her ice cream was going to be for doing the shoot!"

## Charlie and her parents, 2010

(Centre)  
"This looks relaxed and natural, but in fact I asked them to do it several times, taking shots as they walked through the sea. The clothes complement the shot, while the panoramic crop gives a sense of distance and 'family'."

## Sophie, 2011

(Bottom)  
"This is my best friend's daughter. It's shot at an angle to emphasise the spontaneity and movement of the moment."



### Yann, 2011

(Top)

"I was going to a shoot in Key West when I noticed this incredible car and perfect backdrop."

### Terje, 2012

(Above left)

"The pool and house reminded me of a Hockney image. Terje didn't want to be naked, as in the original, but it didn't matter!"

### Jared, 2010

(Above centre)

"This guy had never been shot before, but I've never met anyone quite so photogenic."

### The Naked Muse, 2011

(Above right)

"Shot for a calendar to raise money for diabetes. This guy's a poet, and he's in the 'opium bed', as used by Coleridge..."

sure it's in soft even light, then position my subject in that "set" and take a variety of shots there knowing that the background works wherever they are in it, and the light is always going to be flattering.

"A child can look really cute running around, but if there are patches of light over their face, or poles "growing" out of their head, it will not make a great shot. Getting it right is all about slowing down and realising that you can control what you are doing. Preparation is the key."

Annabel is very much a people person, and excels at putting a diverse range of subjects at ease. So how should less extrovert wannabe portrait photographers go about developing this confidence? "Just by being themselves," Annabel asserts. "And doing the kind of photography that feels right to them. You do need to have confidence to take good photographs of people, because you have to

**"You do need to have confidence to take good photographs of people, because you have to direct them"**

direct them and be in control. That's the biggest issue I have to deal with when training photographers. So many creative people just lack confidence. They actually love their work, but end up being so afraid of what other people will think of it, that this holds them back.

"Once you decide you can do something, it changes everything. You just have to pretend to start with, and then when it works, you realise you can actually do it." 📷

*You can view more of Annabel's work, and get more practical advice, by heading to her new Techy-Free Zone at [www.annabelwilliams.com](http://www.annabelwilliams.com)*