John Topham’s (1908–1992) first experiments with photography were carried out whilst he was a schoolboy in Yarm, near Stockton on Tees, in Yorkshire, towards the end of the First World War. He obtained photographic chemicals and ‘printing out paper’ from his older friends by swapping shrapnel and possibly live munitions (collected earlier when residing in Dover):
Later, as a schoolboy in Sidcup in Kent, he received further valuable photographic instruction and criticism from another schoolmaster who had been an officer in the War and, after repeated attempts to become a trainee press photographer, Topham decided to enrol as a Royal Air Force Apprentice. Topham’s independent spirit and Force’s discipline were not well-suited and he secured his discharge some years later. Following further unsuccessful attempts to find work in the picture agencies or newspapers (he was by now too old to be a trainee) Topham joined the Metropolitan Police in 1927 and was posted to “H” Division in Whitechapel. As a London bobby he enjoyed a degree of freedom of action and was able to indulge his characteristic curiosity:

The Thirties were the last of old England which Mr. Topham recorded so faithfully. The rich farming lands around London were being buried in concrete, roads, schools, housing estates, airports. The way of life that went with this was going, too.

“Smutty”, as he was called, was prepared to put it into some “magic water” for me, a highly secret process, and make my print permanent - all for my Mills bomb. And so I parted with my Mills bomb — I was never happy with it anyhow…

After this hazardous beginning he soon acquired his first camera, a No. 2 Box Brownie, and easily persuaded his piano teacher to spend most of his lessons imparting his knowledge of photographic techniques.

… when I first owned this camera, I was forever trying out different angles — and unknown to myself — had managed to get some really excellent shots. My music master praised one which I took from the roof of our house, looking straight down into the garden — and when my mother saw it I got another “good hiding”… for risking life and limb…

Uncommon Culture
I loved the river scenes and the dock life... talked to Salvation Army workers, to hotel keepers, students... I made friends with urchins, hot potato sellers... with tramps, stevedores, fishmongers, hawkers, with factory workers — with all sorts of people... I was finding life — real life — for the first time...

Night duty was usually interesting, sometimes exciting. In any case one was more free to explore forbidden territories - tea with the nurses in hospital, bakeries, fish smoke-holes — and even watchmen’s huts — to say nothing of going aboard a freighter on the riverside.

Strongly influenced by both B. R. Bell’s *The Complete Press Photographer* and the novels of Sax Rohmer, Topham determined to continue taking pictures even when on duty, risking both the Police Commissioner’s wrath and observation by the local East Enders:

Children waving to the steam train as it passes a crossing, 1936

A novel no parking sign on Finchley Road, London, 1938

Young children about to tuck into large buns supplied by the Guy Fawkes Charity, 1935

A man uses stilts to string the hop poles, 1937
the population by regularly awakening them by shooting peas at their bedroom windows with a pea shooter. He received five pounds from the Daily Mirror for the usage and it inspired him to chase the life of a professional photographer. This was followed by further successes in selling pictures and prints and by November 1933, having acquired a typewriter, a motor car, an enlarger and sufficient confidence to resign from the Force, Topham set himself up as a freelance photographer in Sidcup, Kent.

His career as a freelance press photographer spanned continually to 1973, throughout the whole of which he remained resolutely independent of the offers of staff contracts. During this time he built up an extensive

---

“Cor blimey, the copper’s takin a pitcher - betcher its for the beak.” (‘the beak’, cockney slang for police, judge or court, would suggest that the local East Enders suspected Topham was gathering evidence when taking photographs in uniform.)

His subjects included

... men on the dole, the bread queues, the Monday morning scene at the pawnshop, fires, accidents and sociological scenes and conditions ... I pitied the lot of the East Ender but there was really little I could do about it. So I pegged away at my pictures.

Topham’s first picture to be published, in 1931, was of a woman “knocker-upper” who provided a service to the early risers amongst
library of images, covering not only many of the major news stories of his times, but also everyday life in town and country, social deprivation or poor housing, agriculture, rural crafts and practices.

John Topham’s 1930s negatives up to the end of 1939 are a key collection in the 60,000 images that TopFoto.co.uk is supplying to

Europeana Photography with the financial support of the European Commission.

The Thirties were the last of old England which Mr. Topham recorded so faithfully. The rich farming lands around London were being buried in concrete, roads, schools, housing estates, airports. The way of life that went with this was going, too. The Rat and Sparrow club where you got a small coin for each tail, the one, two, three, four horse ploughs were disappearing, all were no longer needed. Money had to be saved to buy a small car for a day out at the seaside or to visit relatives and friends. With a weekly sum saved a deposit for a small house could be found and the path to ownership started.
A page from one of the scrapbooks (April/May 1934) that John Topham kept for newspaper cuttings.