

## Bluebells at Muncaster.

As I sit at my desk and write this in the second week of May I am trying not to hear the howling gale outside which has been going on for hours, blasting off twigs and shredding new leaves which now litter the lawn. My garden is in a sorry state and I'm wondering whatever happened to spring. It has been like this all week and, with my Masterclass deadline looming, I had been wondering what to do. If I had any sense I'd have decided to go and look at waterfalls – after days of rain they would be pretty dramatic, but somehow I couldn't get in the mood. May is about may blossom and may flowers, lambs and spring sunshine...so I decided to go with the swing, and headed for a bluebell wood. People had often enthused about the bluebells at Muncaster Castle that I hadn't seen, so I bought a late entry ticket and headed uphill on a thoroughly nasty grey and windy evening. Far from ideal conditions, but my guess that it might just about work was just about right. For best results with woodland scenes I avoid bright sunshine when the resulting photos are spoilt by over-bright areas and distracting shadows. 'Dark grey cloud' (a phrase recently coined by the BBC weathermen) can work surprisingly well. During my visit the wind was a problem, although it did subside just a little between frenzied gusts. I set a higher ISO and a wider aperture than usual to try to minimise movement. Now, I don't say that my results are stunning, but I'm pretty sure they would have been a lot worse in bright sunshine. Perfect conditions would have been the haziest of sun, with backlit dew giving the bluebells some sparkle and no wind ....unfortunately, we are not talking Cumbria *this* May! .... But thank you, Muncaster, for at least providing a perfect bluebell wood.



Finding a focus in a bluebell wood is always important, and this leafy path did the job nicely! Photos that are just of a solid mass of bluebells can somehow lack impact. I was using my Nikon D200 supported on a tripod, with my 80-400mm zoom. My aperture was  $f/4.5$  and it was taken at  $1/20^{\text{th}}$  of a second, with the ISO at 320. I focused, using my spot meter on the far end of the path – generally I find that works better than letting the 'end' be out of focus.



I think I could have been more imaginative and tried taking this from a lower angle – it's easy to get lulled into taking everything at shoulder height! I'm not too sure about the composition, it's slightly skewed. The bluebells though were excellent – as the flowers get older they turn a paler powdery blue which make them easier to photograph. This was taken with my wider zoom, with an ISO setting of 200. The speed was 1/15<sup>th</sup> of a second, a little too slow, as the moving branches show! I might have compromised quality a little and upped my ISO.



I quite like this woodland scene which I've tightly cropped, but a hint of dappled light would have helped. Had it not been such beastly weather, I might have spent a bit more time and played around with focus, trying a very shallow depth of field (wide open aperture) to pick out one or two bluebells and leaving the rest as a blue blur.