Shepherd's Bush (1971)
Mike Leggett

In many ways, Shepherd's Bush is the archetypal work produced at the LFMC during this defining period. It is a process film in which an obscure segment of 16mm film is loop printed and transformed by means of a simple device. The light source of the film printer, which burns the image onto unexposed stock, was slowly increased over a 15 minute period so that the resultant film ranges from complete darkness, through normal exposure, to completely overexposed (clear) film. Rather than leave the film in austere silence, a soundtrack was created to mimic the subtle transformation of the image. Working together with John Lifton, Leggett used a primitive synthesiser to set up a pulsating sequence that is gradually modulated by changing the parameters of audio filters. This added sonic dimension pushes the lower ranges of optical sound's capabilities, shifting from grating mid-tones down to extremely warm, deep pitches.

The screen at first appears empty as the soundtrack begins its atonal descent in total darkness. For the opening minutes the image is so underexposed as to not register. As the image lightens, grey and white forms appear, rushing through the frame impossible to grasp. Later we become aware of a distinct forward motion in the camera movement, which is actually tracing the contours of a sculptural installation of tangled white strips of material that are tied between trees. As the image approaches whiteout, the sound becomes slower and calmer, as though grinding to a halt.

Shepherd's Bush was one of the first films produced in the Coop's workshop at The Dairy (Prince of Wales Road) and was originally conceived as a systematic calibration test of the new step-printer. The 10-second length of raw footage was chosen simply because it contained a full range of tones through the grey scale. The film implies a 1:1 temporal relationship between its making and its viewing, without the intervention of editing or post-production. As with many of the works from the LFMC, viewers of this film must give themselves over to the experience of watching. It's soon apparent that it's not going to change very much. You have an idea of where its going but you have no sense of how long it will take to get there. In this process, the viewer becomes completely aware of the act of watching a film, a temporal artwork that does not refer to anything outside itself.

Mark Webber March 2006