

SIMON ROBERTS

At Ease

By David Matless, 2017

There is much variety in *Merrie Albion*. Simon Roberts' photographs move across city and country, region and nation, and track, from 2007 to 2017, a changing political landscape in England, Britain, the United Kingdom and the British Isles. On the British mainland, the decade saw a contrast between relatively confident and optimistic cultural and political narratives in Scotland and Wales, and prevailing doubt in England. There were moments of exception, for example around the 2012 Olympics, but this was an England whose relationship to the United Kingdom and Europe was tottering, and whose national stories were in question.

The majority of *Merrie Albion*'s photographs show English subjects, Roberts taking his position, choosing his moment, and printing emblematic scenes, landscape refracting Englishness. The term 'At Ease' offers one route through this England, conveying a country at leisure (the topic of many photographs), yet also invoking a military stance. What pleasures are taken here, what forms of relaxed readiness shown? Does the mood shift over the decade from buoyancy to anxiety? Is this England on manoeuvres?

At the Penshaw monument near Sunderland in 2013, women and children relax by the Doric columns of the monument to the first Earl of Durham, erected in 1844. Penshaw's outside Greek temple is visible to road and rail travellers on the A1 or East Coast Main Line, a 70 foot hilltop regional marker. Everyday people at ease overlook Herrington Country Park, the term here denoting not a former gentry space but origins in late 20th century recreational policy, open space under County Council management. Caravan site and playing field, lake and skate park, occupy sites of former industry. Roberts shows an ordinary prospect from an extraordinary feature, the monument in National Trust care since 1939. If Penshaw monument is sometimes billed as a 'folly', its origin shakes off a category suggesting delightful pointlessness. Penshaw was raised in political tribute to the first Earl, John Lambton, known as 'Radical Jack' for his commitment to the parliamentary reform of 1832. And a few miles away, in Sunderland, early on the 2016 EU referendum night, a 61.3% leave vote in the first area to return would herald another political upheaval.

Other *Merrie Albion* images show relaxed English scenes; Dickens devotees on Broadstairs beach, the Solent wall at Ryde, a child's leap at Eskdale bridge, a tea party on Alfriston green, Glyndebourne's picnic winners. Things to do on a day out, yet in different social worlds. A nation at ease sits at separate tables, Penshaw and Glyndebourne regions and worlds apart. The anxieties of leisure thus begin to intrude in *Merrie Albion*: which pleasures belong where? what's for the likes of us and them? Elite monuments might become demotic picnic spots, but leisure remains

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a terrain for the demonstration, even assertion, of social difference, with difference sometimes becoming division. Things to do on a day out: a parade for St George exercises one variant of Englishness, the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi Mela elsewhere in the West Midlands another.

Some of those at ease in *Merrie Albion* are enjoying military spectacle. An open-top bus tour of Imber village on Salisbury Plain, requisitioned in wartime and never returned to civilian life, passes signs warning of unexploded bombs. At Shoreham Air Show in 2007 a Battle of Britain flypast frames distant, accidental smoke from a crashed Hurricane, a pilot killed in leisure action. Re-enactment and enactment enfold. In England, World War Two keeps flying past, maintaining iconic stories into another century.

Englishness, like any other national predicament, can enfold past and present through patriotic commemoration and celebration. The 2012 Olympic opening ceremony showed one declaredly progressive variant, Roberts photographing the moment when pastoral England transformed to workshop of the world, with the dancing NHS nurses celebrating the post-war settlement still to come. Images in *Merrie Albion* also herald other cultural currents, surfacing to different effect four years later. Olympic 2012 appears perhaps the last hurrah of a millennial moment where governmental narratives (including Labour's 'Icons of England' online initiative, launched in 2006 and suspended after the 2010 election) projected a country officially open, tolerant and cosmopolitan.

At Wootton Bassett, in 2010, Roberts photographs a civilian and ex-service crowd attending the passing of repatriated military bodies. People line to pay respect - at attention rather than ease - waiting in a Wiltshire town which, happening to be nearest to RAF Lyneham (the air base where 345 dead landed between 2007 and 2011), assumed a national responsibility. The town was awarded the prefix 'Royal' for its gesture, but this began as impromptu, unofficial mourning. Here is a twist in patriotism, signified also by the prolific public presence of the charity Help for Heroes, launched in 2007. Respect for military sacrifice, at times approaching emotional conscription, accompanies scepticism or hostility towards the political causes of conflict. Bodies from Afghanistan, and especially from Iraq, receive special respect for being led astray, even betrayed, by government. The many legacies of the Iraq war include an alignment of patriotism and anti-politics shaping the political landscape photographed in *Merrie Albion*.

In 1992, John Major, seeking to mark himself out from his Prime Ministerial predecessor (*Merrie Albion* features Margaret Thatcher's 2013 funeral), invoked 'a country that is at ease with itself'. The next Conservative Prime Minister, while sometimes claiming a one-nation mantle, didn't quite foster ease, bequeathing instead spectacular fallout. David Cameron is photographed walking to vote in 2010, through a Cotswold scene not unlike the cottage row featured inside the 2010 redesign of the UK passport, just beneath the statement that 'Her Britannic

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Majesty's Secretary of State Requests and requires' free movement of the bearer. In a time when migration was coming to dominate political debate, an unforgeable image of pastoral England was chosen to frame UK citizenship; not for the first time, English pastoral carried a hard edge. Cameron walked in 2010 to a hollow coalition victory and, seeking to bolster his diminished party authority and contain UKIP, would promise an EU referendum next time. After 2015's unexpected Conservative triumph, party tactics came back to bite, triggering geopolitical upheaval, with a losing Cameron dispatched.

And so, in July 2016, Simon Roberts found himself in Downing Street, photographing Theresa May. The ornate white cliff of a building facing May across Downing Street in Roberts' image is echoed in smoother form in the chalk of the Seven Sisters in Sussex, shot in March 2017 in the week when May triggered Article 50, formally commencing formal UK withdrawal from the EU. Brexit cliff-edge metaphors for Channel-facing land are crudely irresistible. A leisure stroll might turn vertiginous. Eyes down, look inward. Or perhaps the view is to people's liking?

June 2017 brought further electoral surprise, parliamentary arithmetic throwing any plans in the air, political geographies under review across the UK. Still, the edges of England may yet find themselves sharpening, whether on Channel shores or elsewhere. In April 2017, taking a party to the Cumbrian coast and looking across the Solway Firth to the Scottish hills, it became apparent that should Scotland leave the UK, and (re)join the EU, this could again be a significant geopolitical frontier, after 300 years dormant. Along the Cumbrian coast are Hadrianic fort sites, the coast a Roman frontier, the older edge of a European polity. In a strange inversion, Europe might in future be over Solway waters, England floating free. Will barbarism begin at home? The form and nature of the geographical freedom achieved is to be determined. And if Solway, or Seven Sisters, became new migration points, which way would migrants move?

In 2014 Roberts photographed a family contemplating flood, looking from Burrow Mump over deluged Somerset Levels. Flood management had achieved newly political status as a wet winter brought climate change, and the future likelihood of extreme events, to the fore. Flood events can be disaster and spectacle, and Roberts gets a perspective on the Burrow Mump family's perspective on altered landscape. As the geopolitical affiliations of England undergo revision, this Somerset image points to another possible reclassification, with the world entering a proposed new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, the flooded River Parrett laying down future Anthropocene deposits. England might thereby find itself, in a near future, outside any political union and in a new geological epoch.

Who, in 2007, would have thought it? Perhaps a new country, at ease, will easily emerge; or perhaps 2017's turmoil, terror and fire will remain indicative rather than exceptional. Simon Roberts' photographic record gains immediate

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retrospective value, indicating stepping stones on the way to the present predicament. Thinking back, Roberts' earlier collection *We English* included a stepping stone image, of families gingerly picking their way over the sixty stones crossing the River Wharfe at Bolton Abbey in North Yorkshire, in July 2008. Whether that picture of careful passage suits an English future, or whether *Merrie Albion's* daring 2014 child leaping from the rocks into the Esk in Cumbria is more apt, remains to be seen. The prospect form deployed by Roberts throughout his work, with implicit or explicit narratives in composition, the photographer prospecting the territory, sparks meditation on the English scene. Photographic prospects prompt both exclamation ("What prospects!") and a question: "What prospects?"