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MERRIE ALBION: LANDSCAPE STUDIES OF A SMALL ISLAND (by Simon Roberts; Dewi Lewis, rrp £45) Using *A Tale of Two Cities*' opening line about 'the best of times' and 'the worst of times' as its epigraph, *Merrie Albion* offers a never-less-than-arresting photographic survey of Britain at work, rest and restlessness between 2007 and 2017. And what a decade it was, Simon Roberts's visual odyssey taking us from the fag end of New Labour and the cosmopolitanism of the 2012 Olympics to the Occupy movement and Brexit, with the nagging question throughout being one of belonging.

Roberts began pondering the notion of British identity, memory and attachment to place on his return from Russia in 2005. He'd spent more than a year there, producing *Motherland*, a body of landscape and figure studies of the post-Soviet nation. Fatefully, his flight home was delayed by the 7/7 terrorist bombings in London.

With such collections as *We English* and *Pierdom* to his name, Roberts arguably follows in the footsteps of forebears such as Tony Ray-Jones and Martin Parr to become one of the most astute observers of the British. Yet the scale of his panoramic pictures, often shot from the roof of a motor home using a 5 × 4in field camera, invites comparisons to Andreas Gursky. But it is *The Derby Day*, William Powell Frith's Victorian portmanteau canvas depicting a day at Epsom races, that is the stated guiding spirit behind *Merrie Albion*. Each picture is tied to a specific time, location or event, whether a Mela festival in Surrey, a teachers' strike in Southampton, Margaret

Thatcher's funeral cortège or the annual Eton boat procession. In a sequence from the 2010 general election campaign, commissioned by the House of Commons, Roberts captured Gordon Brown on the stump in Rochdale moments before the Labour leader's fateful encounter with Gillian Duffy, the local woman he subsequently dismissed as 'bigoted' unaware that his microphone was still on. Duffy can be spotted among the onlookers in Roberts's wide-angled vista.

There is a *Where's Wally?* quality to his photographs that warrants repeated reviewing. Closer inspection of his shot of a Baptist church outing to Brighton, for instance, reveals the party to be picnicking on the boundary of a naturist beach, suggesting a whole other scene just out of view. Meanwhile, the supposed jollity of a Diamond Jubilee street party on the same resort's Craven Estate is undermined by the presence of a woman dressed as Elizabeth II and wearing an expression of utter boredom. Elsewhere, passers-by are seen thumbing their mobile phones or out shopping while, high above them, the wreckage of Grenfell Tower smoulders away. The very final picture is of the cliffs at Beachy Head, a photograph taken in the week Theresa May triggered Article 50, according to the notes (these appear along with pieces by Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Nikesh Shukla, Tristram Hunt and AL Kennedy). Like the cliffs, this is an end or beginning, depending on where you stand. Roberts leaves us in little doubt about his own position on the matter ■ TRAVIS ELBOROUGH is the co-author of *Atlas of Improbable Places* (Aurum) ▷

To order *Merrie Albion* for £38.25 (plus £4.50 UK p&p), ring the World of Interiors Bookshop on 0871 911 1747