



The English at leisure

Simon Roberts broke out of the editorial market with a year-long study of Russian identity that became a highly successful book. Now he's working on another that focuses on his own motherland. Diane Smyth meets him

'*Motherland* was so open-ended – it was me, travelling across Russia with a camera,' says Simon Roberts. 'Everything was a photograph, everything was possible. It was so intense, I just couldn't do it again. For my next project I felt I needed much more of a framework. I couldn't just wander around with a camera waiting for moments.'

Motherland was the Brighton-based photographer's first book, a study of Russian national identity, and that next project became

We English, an exploration much closer to home currently in edit. Shot on 5x4 during a six-month trip around his homeland, it needed tight parameters. Given the static, cumbersome nature of the camera, he was unable to snap spontaneously at any potential image he saw, and he also needed a central, unifying theme to help him look anew at the country he's known since birth.

'In Russia there's this very strong sense of the Motherland,

but I didn't really know what it meant to be English, so I wanted to explore that,' he says. 'I knew it was going to be landscapes, and I knew what size the people were going to be in the landscape – they weren't going to be too close. I wanted to say something about people's relationship with the land and how they interact with it. It was planned to be quite anthropological.'

'That meant it was more a case of finding the landscape I was interested in, setting up the

camera and then waiting for something to happen. In that sense it was quite set up, and one thing I was worried about was spontaneity – it takes a long time to set the camera up and I wondered what effect that would have on my subjects. What actually happened was that I'd set up somewhere and at first everybody would be looking at me, thinking "What on earth is this guy doing?" but then after a couple of minutes they'd get bored and carry on with what they were

doing. So I was able to get quite natural, spontaneous images.'

Leisure class

Given these interests, Roberts also decided to shoot people at play, rather than at work – keen to see what the English do when they're free to choose, rather than compelled by economic imperatives. As a result many of his images are, as he puts it, quite 'pastoral', depicting leisure in parks, fields, rivers and beaches. And they're also aesthetically

appealing, because he wanted to reflect his subjects' sense of enjoyment and pleasure.

'It wasn't so much a celebrating England as trying to see that particular place or landscape through the eyes of the people who use it, who feel some kind of attachment to it,' he says. 'Even if I don't particularly like it they do, so even though there is litter on the floor or building work, if I can create something beautiful out of that scene I can show there's some value in it.'

'In Blackpool, for example, there was a particular scene where there's litter on the floor and they're building a tide breaker, and I thought, "This is Martin Parr territory". And I had to stop and think, "I don't want to do something that's derivative of Martin Parr, but at the same time there are people who are attached to this space and enjoying their time there, so should I photograph it?" I decided I should, but that I should try to make it a beautiful picture rather

than something cynical. Some people will look and say, "Isn't it grim?" But I wanted to feel that I'd at least tried to create something with a bit of empathy.'

'Beauty is different for different people. When I shot *Motherland* I tried to find beauty in things that, at first sight to a Westerner, aren't beautiful, like a Soviet block of flats, because of course to the people who live there, there is an inherent beauty. So in that project, I tried to use pastel colours and careful framing to



Above and above left: From *We English*. All images © Simon Roberts.



Top: From *We English*. Middle: From *Polyarne Nochi*. Bottom: Roberts, with his wife Sarah, and child, in front of their motorhome; Opposite: From *Motherland*.

create a beauty. In *We English*, without creating chocolate box postcards, I wanted to show that there is beauty in these places.' Parr was just one reference point Roberts kept in mind, because as he points out, many photographers have studied

'*Motherland* was such a crucial project for me because it allowed me to move on from what I was doing and start to really explore what it was I had to say.'

idea of a road trip as a vehicle for making work and some of the photographers whose work I really appreciate – Joel Sternfeld or Stephen Shore – both worked that way. Doing it in a motorhome was cheaper than driving in a car and paying for accommodation, and meant I could travel with my wife and daughter.'

Roberts kept the site updated with blog entries on how the journey, and his work, was progressing. He intends to keep this going until *We English* has been published and exhibited – making the site a project-specific production, rather than an open-ended blog. But, most importantly of all, he used the site to generate content and feedback from visitors, who he encouraged to suggest relevant areas and events.

'I set up a site for *Motherland* and found the feedback people gave really interesting,' he says. 'In particular, it was fascinating to see what Russians made of the way I'd depicted their cultural identity. For this project I wanted to make it even more interactive, and get people involved from the planning stage. I have plenty of my own ideas about England, but I was interested in what it means to other people. I got comments from about 300 people, which I might publish, unedited, as an appendix in the book.'

Getting backing

The book will be published next year by Chris Boot, who produced *Motherland*. This time, though, Roberts had set up the deal before he started shooting, and he also put together a raft of funding from patrons as diverse as The National Media Museum, the Royal Photographic Society, the Caravan Club and O₂. Day to day the roadtrip was also helped along by a weekly spot in *The Times*, which included a shot by Roberts plus some text asking readers to recommend other subjects.

'At the beginning lots of ideas were submitted, but they were all over the place, so I quickly realised I needed to have a route planned,' he says. 'So every Monday *The Times* published a picture with some text stating

"Next week Simon is in..." to encourage people to suggest ideas in specific geographical areas. And it helped me cover costs. That's how you have to approach a body of work now – you have to have a multifaceted approach.'

'It was much easier to get funding for this having done *Motherland*, but it still took quite a long time. You have to be quite targeted in what grants you apply for – there's no point in applying for everything, and it takes quite a long time. Also I'd say some photographers need to just read the bloody instructions – the National Media Museum grant, for example, specifically says "This is not a travel grant" and yet half the applicants pitched saying they needed money for flights and travel.'

Roberts is also canny about how he shoots his projects. While working on *Motherland*, for example, he took some extra time to shoot a separate, though related, body of work on the Polar night in Northern Russia, which he subsequently sold as a separate story, and which is now marketed as a separate set of prints by his galleries. Currently he's editing the *We English* images, while contacting galleries for an exhibition in 2010, doing the last press and PR for the *Motherland* project, and starting to get together ideas and funding for his next project, an anthropological look at life in a city.

'It takes a lot of energy but this is the way I want to work now,' he says. 'A project every two years. *Motherland* was such a crucial project for me because it allowed me to move on from what I was doing [largely editorial commissions] and start to really explore what it was I had to say.' **BJP**

Online

For more information on the photographer and his latest project, visit we-english.co.uk or simoncroberts.com. Simon Roberts is speaking at BJP's annual event for pro photographers, Vision, on 07 November. For more information visit bjp-online.com/vision.

