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NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE FRAME

From Bill Brandt to Simon Roberts via Don McCullin and Martin Parr – the English as captured by its greatest photographers

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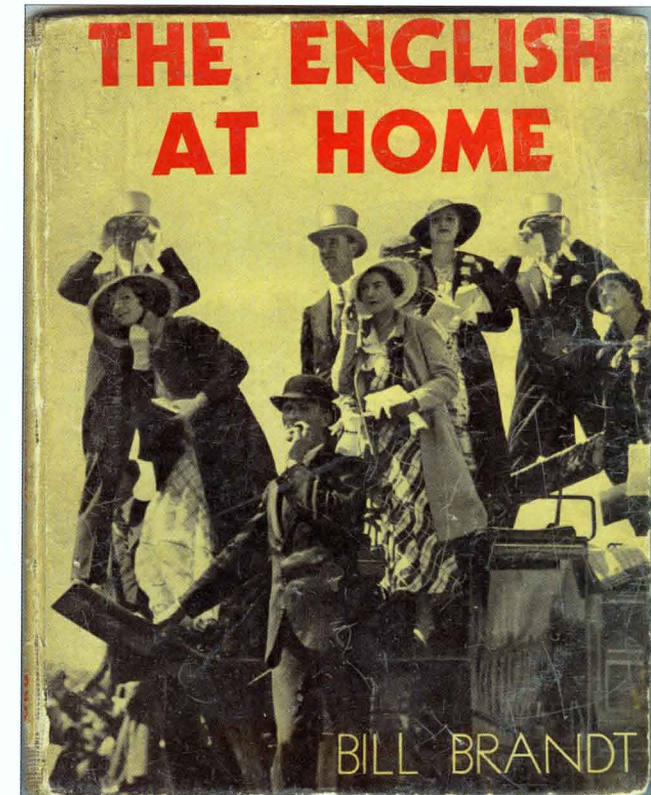
Now the time returns again

A new crop of photobooks takes a timely look at English identity. Peter Hamilton finds they continue a long tradition of national surveys, shot by some of the country's finest photographers, from Bill Brandt to Simon Roberts

Englishness has been a constantly recurring theme for documentary photography in recent years. In the last few weeks Chris Steele-Perkins has brought out *England, My England*, Simon Roberts has contributed *We English* and Sirkka Lisa-Kontinen *Byker Revisited*. Each slots into a different niche of the national question about who 'we English' are, yet all intersect within the larger Venn diagram

Above: *Tourists and residents overlook Whitby Harbour on a sunny Sunday afternoon, 1974* © Ian Berry/Magnum Photos.

Right: Bill Brandt's *The English at Home*, 1936, published by Batsford.



of photobooks about England or Britain. These books seek to define through their selection of images what is distinctive and also typical of both country and people. And although nobody can really decide whether Englishness is a form of Britishness, devolution has given us a British Isles in which Irish, Welsh and Scottish national identities jostle at their boundaries.

Photography can isolate and encapsulate the ephemera of national identity. It can offer depictions of particular individuals who can stand for abstract groups, and of places that signify heritage or custom. It has a long history of charting what defines Britain or England, going back into the 19th century and too long and detailed to be recounted here. But to be more than a medium for creating tourist postcards, it has to be marshalled to present a coherent view of this sceptred isle and its denizens.

People and place

Setting aside for a moment whether English national identity is better conceived as Englishness or Britishness, the photobook field divides into two camps. To put it crudely, one is about people, the other about place. The first category generally offers a form of visual anthropology, often stitched together from the authors' career in photojournalism, or woven from a more detailed and sustained documentation of a

community or locality. Sometimes these books are the result of a specific photographic journey, as in Ian Berry's classic *The English* (1978). The fruit of the Arts Council's first ever bursary, it provides a collection of photos that capture Berry's personal reaction to those who came in front of the lens. Yet his choice is far from random, for the book sits on the cusp of a breaking point. It was made at the end of a certain expression of traditional England – symbolised by society gents, Royal Ascot, a respectable working class on one side; and a new world of youth culture and more marginal lifestyles on the other.

Though far less polemical, Berry's work is not so far from the spirit that inhabits Bill Brandt's *The English at Home* (1936). A compilation of images selected to make a point, it offers a series of contrapuntal views stressing how Englishness is visually expressed through a series of oppositions: rich/poor, urban/rural, high/low-culture, work/leisure, and so on. This was a strong current, an oppositional perspective on Englishness, and among its best expressions are Don McCullin's sombre *Homecoming* (1979) and its descendant, *In England* (2007), in which we find his bleak but often lyrically expressed perceptions of an England he equally adores and abhors. This is, despite its often savage depictions of poverty and pain, is an



Above: *Wimbledon*, 1967 by Tony Ray-Jones © National Media Museum. From *Tony Ray-Jones* by Russell Roberts, published by Chris Boot, 2004 (ISBN: 0-9542813-9-X), price £25. Visit chrisboot.com

Above right: Taken from *Hunting with Hounds*, 2004 © Homer Sykes, published by Mansions Editions (ISBN: 978-0954223328), price £30. Visit homersykes.com.

Right: *Westbay, England*, 1996 © Martin Parr/Magnum Photos. Visit magnumphotos.com.

elegiac vision that contains beautiful and sympathetic images of the human detritus of modern Britain.

McCullin's strong and moralistic vision contrasts greatly with another tradition of work on Englishness first exemplified by Tony Ray-Jones (1941-1972) whose now iconic but posthumous work, *A Day Off* (1974) is widely seen as the trigger that sent the bullet of a new sensibility through British photography. Martin Parr was and remains the most significant carrier of this strongly surreal take on the British approach to both leisure and heritage, and it informs his work to this day. Ray-Jones had focused on the seaside as a theatre for quaint British rituals around pleasure; and on actual 'traditional' rituals themselves as a mechanism for revealing the deeper structures

of Englishness (and this could also be said of Parr's approach). Greatly influenced by what was going in American photography in the late 1960s, by Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958), and a fan of both Gary Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz, Ray-Jones proved to have an influence far beyond the bounds of his own work, as a silent but effective prophet of the new vision.

Yet he was far from alone in looking for national identity in customs and celebrations. Probably the best study of English folklore and ritual remains Homer Sykes', *Once a Year* (1977). A detailed and fascinating compilation of customs as diverse as the Minehead Hobby Horse, Bacup Coconut dancers, and the Lothian Burry Man, it was the fruit of a student project begun in 1971 to document the 'vanishing

customs' of Britain. As Sykes recalls: 'I was fascinated by street photography. I'd done the Greyhound bus trip across America in the 1960s, and was in love with the work of people like Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, and I wanted to capture these odd and surreal rituals and customs taking place on the streets of Britain.'

The book offers the diversity of such rituals and their typically British settings as a way of seeing that even prosaic Britain is a place of magic and mystery. In 2004 Sykes published *Hunting with Hounds*, a closely observed documentation of another set of rituals that define a dimension of the English way of life. Hunting – whether fox-hunting patrician or plebeian lurcher – is treated as a custom that maintains an English rural way of life

threatened by the encroachment of the metropolitan health and safety culture.

Community ties

Many of the most successful photobooks about Englishness or Britishness are those that examine a community or locality in detail, often through the close links that the photographer has with the area. Sirkka-Liisa Kontinen's *Byker Revisited* is a fine example. Produced by the Northumbria Press (which is also responsible for Chris Steele-Perkins' *England, My England*, and his earlier *North-east Exposures: Rural Life in the North-East*), this is a well-made collection that charts the Finnish-born photographer's engagement with the Byker area of Newcastle since the late 1960s, work itself first published

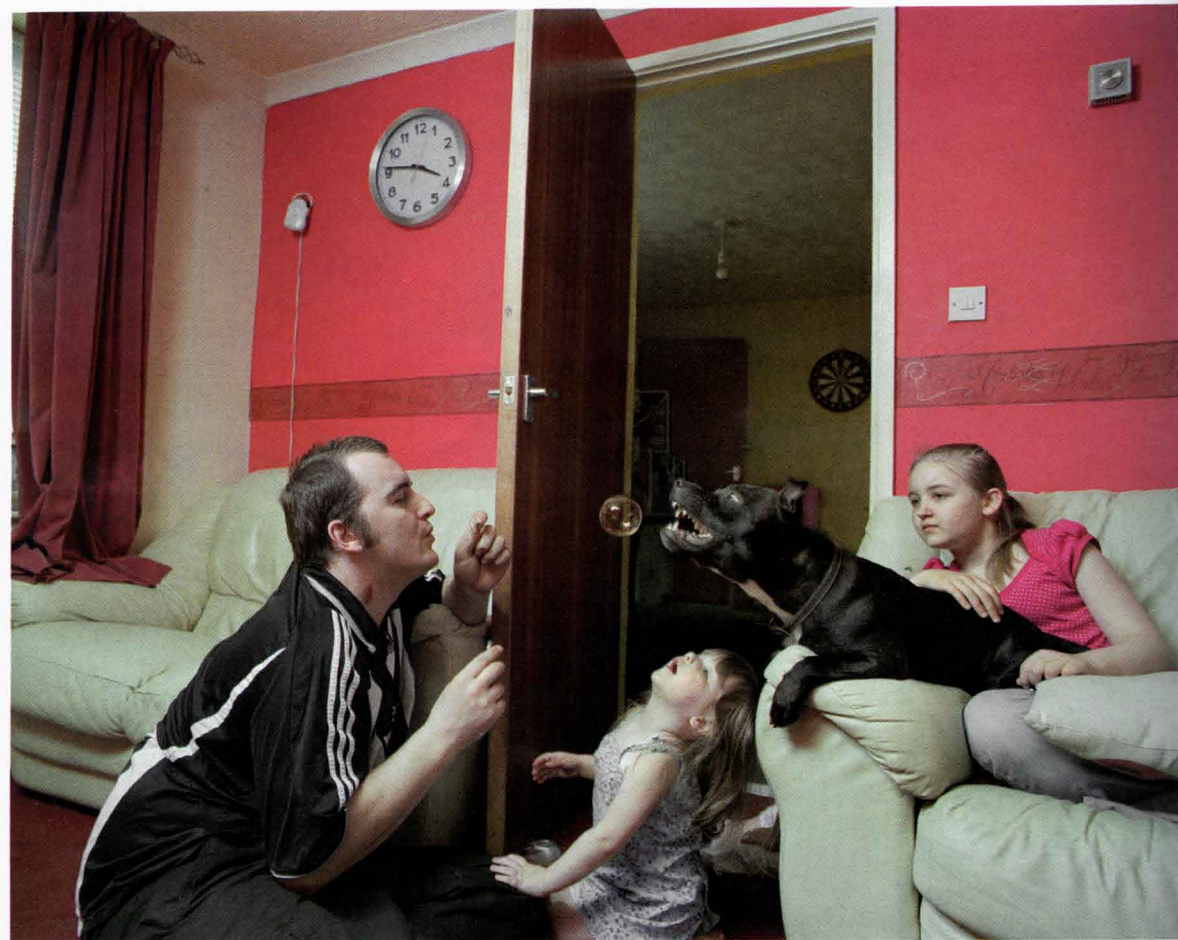


'The sympathetic studies of people and place that Chapman, Ravilious and Konttinen produced are also a crossover point to the photobooks on national identity that locate their approach in land and buildings.'

as a book in 1983. Mixing early black-and-white 35mm reportage with more recent medium format and panoramic images in colour, the focus is on the evolution in ways of life within a working class community. One can't help feeling that the monochrome people, streets and houses of the 1960s and 70s when Konttinen made Byker her home are more appealing, but this is to give in to the appeal of both nostalgia and the purer vision that Konttinen was able to bring to her work at that time.

Konttinen's book weaves together a patchwork of images made over 40 years, with a text that helps to understand and chart the very significant change this community has experienced: and in particular its emergence now as a multicultural expression of contemporary Britishness – something that calls out for colour photography. Though a degree of social change is clearly apparent in the similarly long-term study of rural Devon made by James Ravilious, over a period starting soon after his move there in 1973 and ending with his death in 1999, black-and-white was his medium of choice. Ravilious was trained as a painter and always wanted to use colour, but had to recognise the defeat imposed on him by the unremitting and endlessly varied greens of the English countryside.

'Black and white,' he once told me 'is the escape route from the monotony of green, because its tones and extremes allow one to paint a more interesting and varied set of pictures.' The deep



Top: David McArdle with daughters © Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, from the book *Byker Revisited: Portrait of a Community* published by Northumbria University Press (ISBN: 978-1904794424), price £30. Visit amber-online.com.

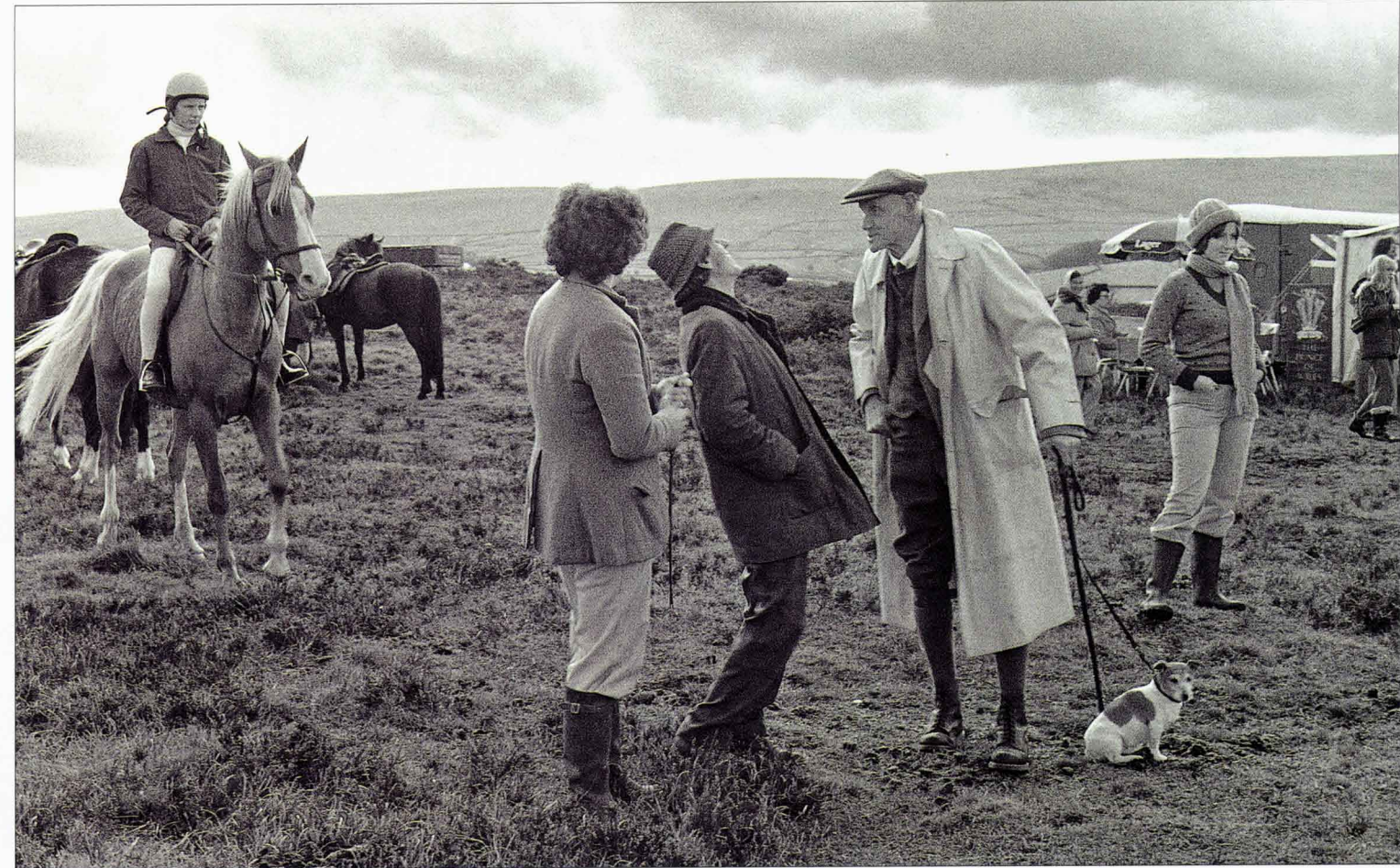
Above: Irwin Piper taking his sheep to slaughter, Dolton, Devon, 1981 © James Ravilious/Beaford Arts.



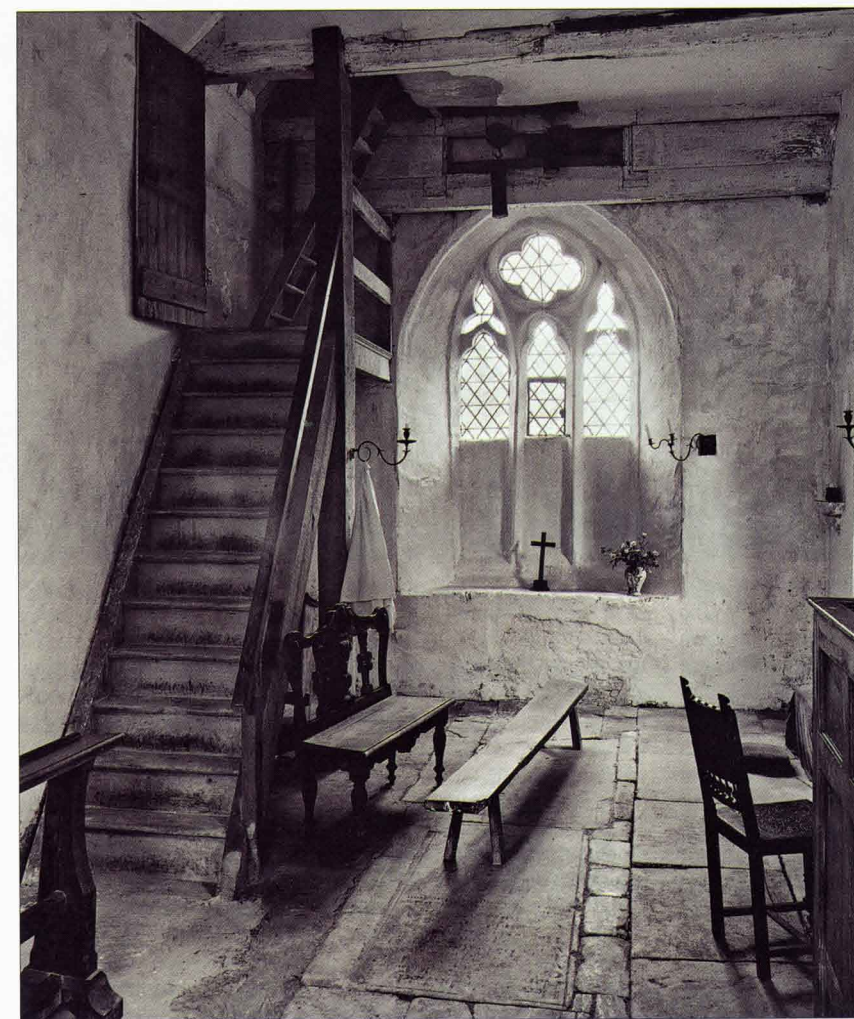
and empathic engagement of his photography with the people and landscape of the area manages to convey an important dimension of what many people recognise as a quintessential Englishness. In a few key books (*The Heart of the Country*, 1980; *A Corner of England*, An

English Eye, 1998/2001, and *Down the Deep Lanes*, 2000/2008), Ravilious grasped this facet of national identity with both humour and an eye for the everyday surreal.

His friend and fellow-Devonian Chris Chapman's documentation of the people and places of



Above: Bunny Spiller sharing a joke with the Coakers, Dunnabridge Hunter Trials, 1976 © Chris Chapman, from *Wild Goose and Riddon: The Dartmoor Photographs*, 2000, published by Devon Books (ISBN: 978-1-841140-90-2). Chapman also recently released a film on the area, *Wild River Cold Stone*. More images and a clip from the film can be viewed at www.chrischapmanphotography.com.



Left: St Lawrence, Didmorton Gloucestershire, 1961 by Edwin Smith © RIBA British Architectural Library Photographs Collection. Taken from the book *Evocation of Place* by Robert Elwall, published in 2007 by Merrell (ISBN: 978-1-8589-4373-2), priced £35. Visit www.ribapix.com.

Dartmoor (*Wild Goose and Riddon*, 2000), offers another take on the hard lives of many of those who make their livings from the difficult landscape of this area. He has devoted most of the last four decades to living and working there (with land and livestock as well as cameras and film), and his engagement with it is organic but also very strongly seen in images of individuals and places that deliver a coherent and tightly composed essay.

The sympathetic studies of people and place that Chapman, Ravilious and Konttinen produced are also a crossover point to the photobooks on national identity

that locate their approach in land and buildings, in place as the focus of attention. Yet even this work has its connections to other currents that move among British photography.

The movement that Ray-Jones began and Parr continues is also one in which Simon Roberts is at home. His monumental study *We English* manages to combine a fascination with social rituals such as St George's day pageants and visits to the seaside with the type of huge-scale and distant large format 'grand views' that appear to come straight out of the American tradition: Joel Meyerowitz being the chief exponent of this approach on the far side of the Atlantic. In exploring his subject, Roberts (a photographer trained as cultural geographer), uses a visual language based in Dutch landscape painting of the 16th century to make multi-layered images about 'places where groups congregate for a shared purpose'; some are scenic landscapes, some the sites of go-kart



Above: Keynes Country Park Beach, Shornecote, Gloucestershire, 2008 © Simon Roberts, from *We English*, published by Chris Boot (ISBN: 978-1-905712-14-4), price £40. Visit Chrisboot.com or we-english.co.uk.

tracks and car-boot sales.

For Roberts, landscape is a site of leisure pursuits, and this viewpoint fits well with both contemporary social thought and the consumption-obsessed imagery of much current documentary. But he manages somehow to allow the sublime beauty of many of these settings through, and to make pictures of lasting quality. His work seems to me to be in stark contrast to that of Harry Cory Wright, who has built a reputation for beautifully seen large format photographs in 10x8 colour made on a wooden

Gandolfi camera that present a largely unpeopled landscape. The lyrical view of a Britain that we encounter in his *Journey through the British Isles* (2007) is largely topographical, but the visual sublime in which it deals is not entirely at odds with our conception of national identity, and contrasts well with the sand in the sandwiches school of over-hyped colour.

Outsiders' vision

Perhaps some of the most acute observers of Englishness are foreign. An outsider can stand

back from the society and look at it dispassionately, finding equally odd and worthy of note the things the locals take for granted. This was probably why the German-born Brandt found the juxtapositions of his *The English at Home* so much grist to his mill. Another fine example is the collaboration between Izis-Bidermanas and Jacques Prévert, *Charmes de Londres* (1952), which uses place in the sense of the great metropolis as a signifier of Englishness.

Though intended for a French market, it was also published in

English as *Gala Day London in 1953*, with an additional text by John Betjeman, a quintessential expert on Englishness. Izis deals in many ways with clichés about the English. There are foggy streets, Tower Bridge glimpsed through a grimy warehouse window, Thames-side activity, Battersea power station, street markets and the East End. But it is also a view that humanises the streets and offers a visual perspective that was influential for the *Picture Post* generation. And this is where I think we have to return to Chris Steele-Perkins'

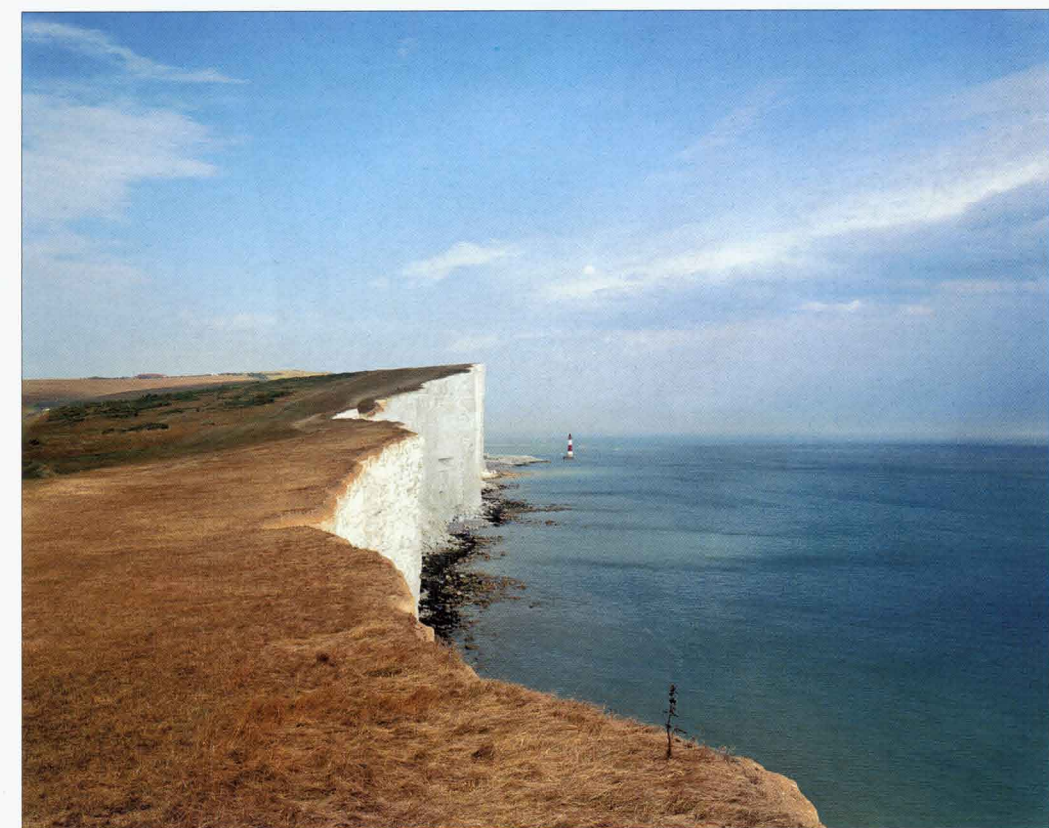
England, My England.

Made in the great tradition of humanistic reportage by a gifted photographer who was born in Burma, then transplanted to England by his British father at the age of two, its view of the last four decades of British life is that of a man coming to terms with a place in which he lives but in which he is unsure he is at home. The book contains some strong and touching images, and is very good on some key points in the difficult evolution of a multicultural nation, but its focus becomes less clear as



Left: Blackpool, 1982 © Chris Steele-Perkins/ Magnum Photos, taken from the book *England, My England*, published by Northumbria University Press (ISBN: 781-904794-38-7), priced £30.

Below: Beachy Head, East Sussex, from *Journey Through The British Isles* © Harry Cory Wright. Visit harrycorywright.com.



the decades roll by. Steele-Perkins is a fine colour photographer, but his black-and-white images (including some from his superb project on *The Teds*) outweigh them in depth and impact. No doubt many derive from reportage assignments, but others are clearly personal and the book needed the hand of a strong editor. I hope this is not his last word on this subject.

Perhaps we English (or even we British) look out at the world with a particular set of visual preconceptions. We like fair play

and we are pragmatic, something evident in Ravilious' wonderful images of the small farmers of rural Devon. We like community, and family, the social glue that runs through these same pictures and those of Kontinen, Chapman and Berry. We are very individualistic, for there is also the deep quirkiness to the English that sets them apart, so well captured by Parr and Sykes. Perhaps this is why we love the rather small-scale delights of English churches, so beautifully grasped by the little known but masterful Edwin Smith, image-maker of so many 1950s

and 60s books for the general market (see Robert Ellwall's *Evocations of Place*, 2006).

At the end of the day, the English famously have a sense of humour, something which touches so many of these pictures and books. Few English photographers are lauded as 'great' in the conventional histories of photography, that is to miss just what makes English photography so notable. By not taking itself too seriously, it has always managed to look at Englishness itself, and the rest of the world, with unjaundiced eyes. **BJP**