

The magazine for today's photographer

MAG
+ CD
£3.99

Digital

Take great kid shots!

Learn creative family portrait skills



Camera

PHOTO FIRST AID

Take better shots today!

Fixed – your biggest D-SLR and Photoshop problems

2009 Awards

- ✓ Buy the best digital SLR
- ✓ Hot lenses & printers
- ✓ High-end compacts



SHOWCASE

Low-light inspiration
from David Creedon



Luxury lenses
Finest specialist lenses compared

Canon 7D test
Christmas cracker or expensive turkey?



Still-life tips
Turn everyday objects into art



Documentary landscape photographer **Simon Roberts**

What's this? Landscape shots where you deliberately include day-trippers?
Simon Roberts discusses his unique take on England with **Geoff Harris**



Sunderland Fans, 2008

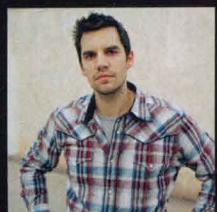
Local fans on their way to see a match with Liverpool at the Stadium of Light. "The atmosphere is almost one of pilgrimage," recalls Roberts. »



Blackpool Beach, 2008 (above)

Setting up a 5x4 camera really helped here. "I'd anticipated there might be problems in situations where there were lots of people close to the camera, but by the time I'd finished setting up, any curious onlookers had lost interest."

Interview Simon Roberts



Profile

● Born in 1974, Simon Roberts studied human geography at Sheffield University, before studying photojournalism.

● His photographs have been exhibited widely, most recently in Chicago and Shanghai.

● *Motherland*, his first monograph, was published in 2007 to critical acclaim. His second monograph, *We English*, is on sale now (Chris Boot Ltd).

How often have you waited until a landscape or seascape was empty of people before taking your shot? How often have you cursed the ramblers straying into your composition of a lonely hillside, ruining it with their brightly coloured cagoules? Partly because of our continued obsession with the romantic and picturesque, partly because of current photographic taste, the 'ideal' landscape tends to be seen as one devoid of people. So it's refreshing to meet Simon Roberts, who's much more interested in capturing our social and cultural landscape as it is.

Roberts' latest collection, *We English*, reveals his fascination with how the English interact with their landscape, particularly when it comes to leisure activities. The collection is replete with car-boot scenes, tatty local beauty spots and Saturday footie, as well as more conventionally picturesque pursuits such as fishing and trips to stately homes.

"Looking at leisure activities struck me as a thought-provoking way of exploring

Aintree, 2008 (right)

Ladies' Day in full, boozy swing. Roberts is very sensitive to the nuances of the English class system, but wanted to avoid clichéd photos of toffs. "I thought it was more interesting to shoot the ordinary punters," he says.

England's shifting cultural and national identity," Roberts explains from his base in Nottingham. "Landscapes say much more about who we are than, for instance, what we do in the workplace. Leisure activities can be aspirational, revealing as much about how we see ourselves as how we wish others to see us. And landscape is an intrinsic part of these leisure experiences. It's a commodity: we consume it and utilise it and make it ours, even though we rarely own it."

Painterly influences

Roberts was born in Croydon in 1974 and describes his upbringing as "quintessentially English". He'd always been interested in taking pictures, but chose to study geography at Sheffield University, as "my parents just weren't into the idea of me studying photography". Fortunately, his training in geography, particularly human and cultural geography, was to have a big influence on his later work. Following his degree, he returned to



his first love and did a training course to become a news photographer. "I quickly realised I didn't want to be a news reporter, but learned some useful skills, such as how to interpret a story."

Key early influences included Ansel Adams (Roberts visited Yosemite as a child) and Don McCullin. Socially aware, satirical photographers such as Steven Shore, Paul Graham and Martin Parr also fascinated Roberts, as did cinema and painting, particularly the work of Turner, Constable and the Dutch masters – painters who showed the human dimensions of landscapes.

Roberts' first major photographic project was *Motherland* (2007), the result of spending a year travelling across Russia. "I was ready to develop some of the themes I had found there," Roberts explains when asked about the motivation behind *We English*. "*Motherland* was an exploration of, among other things, the Russians' attachment to their homeland. This attachment to place was somewhat

mysterious – simultaneously profound and banal – and it led me to think about my own attachment to England."

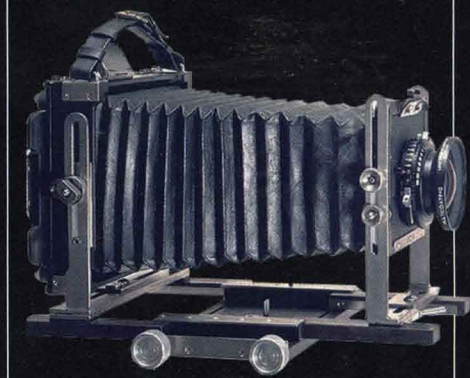
This is England

So why just England, why not other parts of the United Kingdom, too? "At the moment, with devolution, the Scottish and Welsh seem to have a stronger sense of national identity. It seemed more relevant at this point in time to look at England, whose cultural identity and ethnic mix keep shifting. It gave me a tighter boundary, too. And the title of the collection, *We English*, complete with the flag on the front is controversial, it grabs people's attention. We see a St George's flag fluttering outside someone's house and tend to think they're far-right extremists, but why should this be?"

So, Roberts set off across England in a motorhome, complete with pregnant wife, two-year-old daughter and a 5x4 large-format camera. Roberts' decision to shoot in large format, rather than use a 35mm »

In the bag

"To take the photos for *We English*, I used an Ebony 5x4 large-format camera fitted with a 150mm Schneider lens. I shot with Fuji Pro 160-S film and then scanned in the images, cleaning them with Photoshop. I also use a Manfrotto tripod, and carry a Canon EOS 5D to create a digital scrapbook."





Lindisfarne, 2008 (above)

The entrance gate to Lindisfarne Castle on Holy Island, a site owned by the National Trust. "I liked this sense of literal and metaphorical boundaries," says Roberts, "of 'edges' that are created or unconsciously preserved."

Interview Simon Roberts

D-SLR, gave him a big advantage in our paranoid society. "Setting up a 5x4 camera is such a public spectacle that, after a while, people forget about you and just be themselves. With a 5x4, you can't be subtle and secretive, and I think this puts the public's mind at rest. And don't forget, when you put in the plate and take the shot, you're not actually looking at your subject through the camera anyway..."

That said, Roberts was careful to speak to families he was about to photograph, and use model release forms where necessary. "I never got accused of being a terrorist or paedophile, but the police did warn me about creating an obstruction!" The large-format camera also meant Roberts could use people at whatever size he wanted to in a landscape, without having to sacrifice detail.

The human landscape

Looking through Roberts' images, it's clear that this emphasis on people interacting with the landscape gives his work its

unique flavour. He describes how he honed his approach while researching the *We English* project in Skegness, in 2007.

"I decided to move away from photographing the individual and engage instead with the idea of the collective, of groups of people populating the landscape," says Roberts. "Photographing from elevated positions (often from the roof of the motorhome) enabled me to get a greater sense of people's interaction with the landscape and with one another. I also decided that the figures would be relatively small in the frame, although not always so small that you couldn't make

Cumbria, 2008 (right)

This shot of Lingmell fell, in the Wasdale valley, encapsulates Roberts' fascination with how the English interact with their landscape. Ramblers are a common fixture in his landscapes, making the scenes feel contemporary, yet oddly timeless."

out some facial expressions, what they were wearing and their activities. This way of seeing was influenced by looking at the work of 16th-century Dutch and Flemish landscape painters, who depicted winter scenes teeming with life."

Roberts sometimes takes this approach to extremes, preferring to photograph the gate to Lindisfarne, for example, rather than the highly picturesque place itself. "The gate is the entry point. I'm much more interested in who is using this landscape, so the 'hot spot' of the landscape is deliberately left out." Roberts is also keen to remind people that many of

Roberts on his photographic approach

"I decided to move away from photographing the individual and engage instead with the idea of the collective, of groups of people populating the landscape"



the English landscapes we assume are timeless and 'untouched' have actually been shaped by thousands of years of human interaction.

Class act

England being England, we couldn't avoid the dreaded C word when discussing Roberts' work – in other words, class. "It might look like I'm just photographing the lower and middle classes, but I also shot a number of events where the upper class are apparent – Grange Park Opera and the polo match in the grounds of Cirencester Park, for instance. And with my shot of surfers in Devon, which is quite an upper-middle class place, you can't tell who's who anyway. That said, at the Grand National, in addition to the toffs, there are 70,000 ordinary punters and I thought it was more interesting to photograph them. I just wanted to avoid those top hat and tails clichés."

Roberts is keen to point out that *We English* is resolutely not a catalogue of

quirky pastimes undertaken by eccentrics. He does, though, sometimes celebrate continuity in the countryside, as with his shot of the Haxey Hood – a 700-year-old glorified village ruckus to take possession of the eponymous hood.

So does Roberts ever use conventional digital SLRs or Photoshop? "For me, it's not a film versus digital debate, but a format debate. At the moment, I find large-format cameras work best for me. But I do use 35mm D-SLRs. For example, I used a Canon EOS 5D to help compile a digital scrapbook of scenes I returned to later. As for Photoshop, I mainly use it for cleaning scans, but I won't rule out using it more in the future. Photoshop manipulation doesn't bother me, as I'm not presenting *We English* as a work of journalism. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was documentary landscape photography." ■

SEE MORE of Simon Roberts' quirky landscapes at www.simoncroberts.com

Be inspired Simon Roberts' tips

- Be an author of your own work, not merely an illustrator of other people's ideas.
- Do your research and become a mini-expert on your chosen subject.
- Seek out mentors whose opinions you trust and have them regularly edit and critique your work.
- Don't be afraid to take calculated risks and don't compromise your vision just for financial gain.
- Be patient.