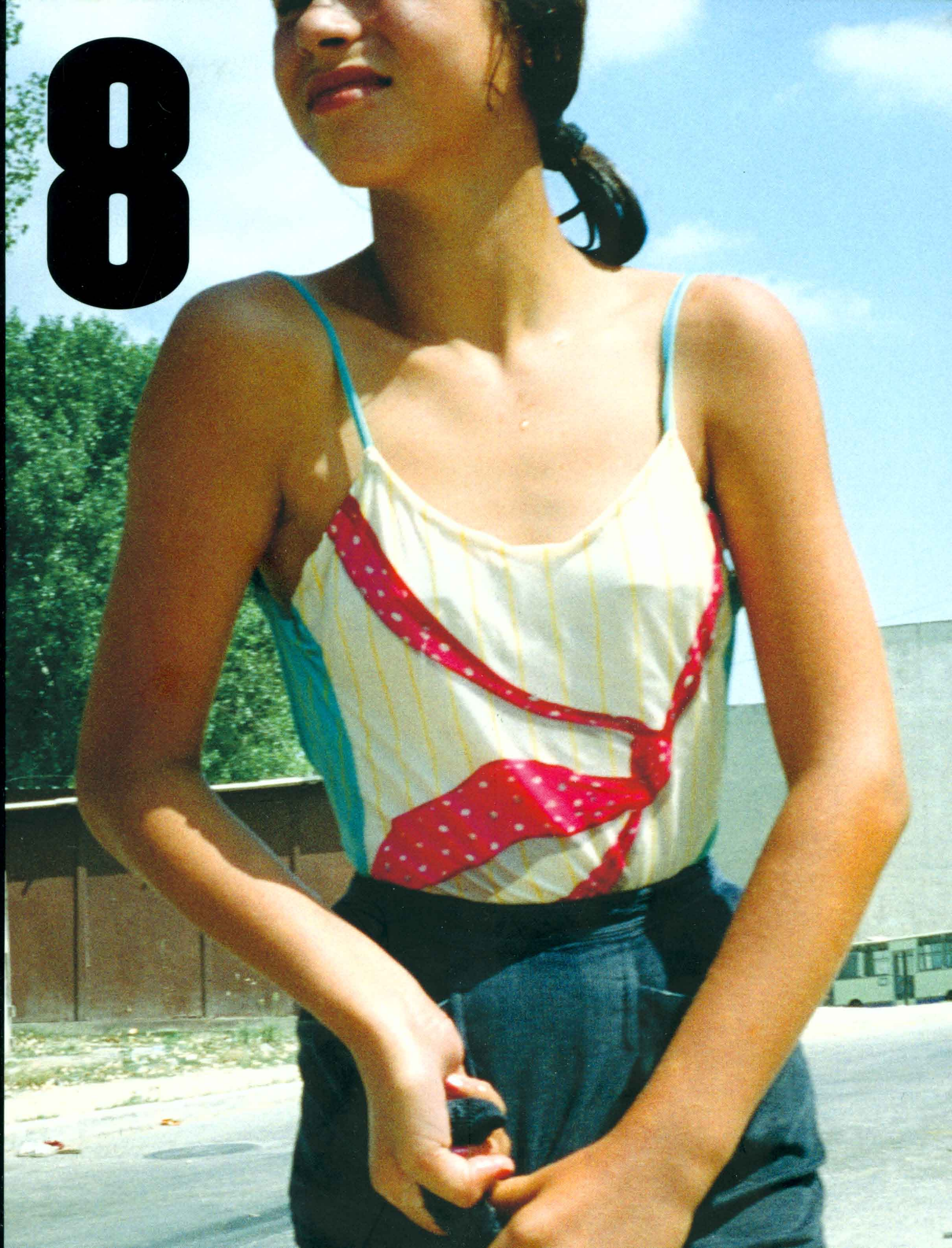


# 8







# WORK IN PROGRESS

## SIMON ROBERTS WE ENGLISH

After a year spent travelling around Russia, Simon Roberts returned to England with some 5000 photographs and no publishing deal. While we now know that the work was quickly picked up by publisher Chris Boot and would go to on to achieve critical acclaim as *Motherland*, at the time it was a risk, one funded entirely by Roberts.

Four years on, and Roberts has completed another tour of a country, this time: his own homeland, England, which meant he could squeeze the on-the-road part of the project inside five months. He was able to approach the project from the relatively comfortable position of knowing he had a publisher – Boot again – and when we meet he is deep into the editing stage, looking not just for the best images, but the ones that fit into a precise idea of the English at play.

“I’m a safe bet, now,” says Roberts.

“*Motherland* was a success – it’s been very well received and exhibited widely. Chris really likes the new work; he knows there is an audience for it and that there’s a gap. It’s in a tradition of people like Tony Ray-Jones, Martin Parr and John Davies, whose books he also published, but there hasn’t been anything done like this for a long time. Also the fact that the work is quite beautiful, quite romantic...”

Roberts’ take on contemporary England is indeed beautiful and romantic, a view that focuses on green and pleasant land, literally overlooking housing estates where unemployment is taking its toll, or scrubby wastelands littered with syringes. His response to this implied criticism is sanguine and impressively pragmatic:

“Someone who has lost his job isn’t going to stop fishing if he fishes every



Blackpool (previous page),  
Lancashire, 25 July 2008

Brighton Beach (right), East  
Sussex, 25 August 2007

Photographing from roof of  
motorhome (bottom), Cleator  
Moor, Cumbria, 21 August 2008



weekend. In fact he might fish more. What he does, how and where he spends his leisure time is still important. People's view of where they live and what they do isn't going to change necessarily. In fact I would say it's going to become more important. This isn't a political statement. I'm talking about England in 2008, and of course, 2008 wasn't as bleak as 2009 looks like it's going to be. I'm more worried about whether people are going to have money to spend on a photography book!"

If *Motherland* is anything to go by, they will. His first book, with a print run of 4,000, has all but sold out. And despite/because of his concerns for the economy, Roberts has strategies in place to make sure his new work sells too. The run-up to producing the work has been enviably publicised: the project was launched on BBC news online on St George's Day. How did he pull that off (I ask on behalf of the 4,892 other photographers whose work didn't get that kind of inauguration!)?

"I know the picture editor of the BBC news website, which is the second most popular website in terms of traffic," he says. "Culturally it's got a diverse readership, and the web angle was important because I needed people to post ideas on my website. You can't post your idea to a print magazine; whereas you can if you have a link on a website

which has seven million people reading it every day."

While he was on tour, the *Times* published a weekly dispatch, taken on a digital camera, with an invitation to readers to suggest a location or event that Roberts could travel to the following week. Underpinning all this is the *We English* website, which played a key role with regard to representation. Roberts was concerned to make a work that was relevant to the people he wished to portray, that included at least a few of the country's quirkier customs – from the Mad Maldon Mud Race to pigeon-racing – and that would take him away from the tourist trail, deep into the hills, valleys and sand dunes of England. The dedicated website itself then becomes a kind of living archive, a trail of ideas and inspiration, saved for electronic posterity. Interactive resources are also beloved of funding bodies, and crucially the website has played a central role in what Roberts calls "audience-building". Some 3,000 people now subscribe to his newsletter, and if just 10 per cent of those people buy the book... that's a pretty good start for a photography title. Listening to Roberts, I tell him he could provide a masterclass in marketing and PR as well as photography (he was due to present a Masterclass at Derby's Format Festival this April).

"Marketing is seen as such a dirty



Tandridge Golf Course (top),  
Oxted, Surrey, 6 April 2008

Mad Maldon Mud Race (above),  
Maldon, Essex, 31 December 2007

A page from Roberts' scrap book  
(above right)



word. At the end of the day, photography books don't sell widely. After serialisation rights, the initial flurry, it can easily go off the radar so you have to push these things constantly otherwise, what's the point in doing it?"

The body of work that will comprise *We English* is not just being prepared for the published page. Roberts has conceived the work very much as an exhibition from the outset. Funding is an essential component in the creation of a body of work like this; no one paid for Roberts to live in a motorhome at random locations around England for the whole summer. Roberts is again highly motivated to make sure his funding bid is successful. After all, he has a wife and two small children to support and a mortgage to pay. For this work, his "good relationship" with the Arts Council lead to a £10,000 grant towards certain parts of the project's production and exhibiting, and he was also the recipient of the first bursary granted by the National Media Museum, worth £7,000. This latter was achieved by a shrewd understanding of Bradford's priorities: "They have a rich archive in their collection of Tony Ray-Jones and Bill Brandt, so for them it's interesting as part of giving the grant, they also get some prints from the final project. So they get an updated, more contemporary work on England for their collection.







Henry in the hedge (top), Oxted, Surrey, 18 September 2007

Caravan park (right) with view of Butlins, Skegness, Lincolnshire, 19 August 2007





Skegness beach (right),  
Lincolnshire, 19 August 2007

Victory Day picnic (bottom)  
in Ekaterinaburg, Russia,  
9 May 2005, from Motherland



"Before I applied for the grant, I spent time in their archive, to look at the original Ray-Jones prints. What's fascinating is that they've got all his diaries and notes for the England project. In 1965 he's talking about how difficult he is finding the editorial market. Reading this some 40 years later, you think nothing's really changed."

Fortuitously for Roberts, a Bradford panel member who particularly liked his work was also a judge for the John Kobal Foundation and invited him to apply for a grant to secure ad hoc funding – another successful bid. With the money in the bank, it is then a much more reasonable proposition for Roberts to say to his wife Sarah, then pregnant with their second child, let's go and live in a motor home for five months...

Looking back, there were a few clues in *Motherland* to suggest the form the next work might take. The scene of a Sunday picnic in Ekaterinaburg pulls the viewer first to a bunch of balloons pinned to a tree, then over there to a campfire, here, to someone playing a guitar, someone else singing and in this way the image pushes the limits of what an 80mm lens can achieve. Such an image announces itself as a tableau, a site where a compressed narrative can bloom across the frame, where the eye has to scan repeatedly up, down and across the image to take in detail (in a

way it doesn't need to, for example in the memorably beautiful image of the frozen warship on the Kola Peninsula).

Roberts has now taken this technique a step further, changing to a 5x4 camera, an instrument whose very presence provided a strict framework he savoured. Making a conscious decision to move away from the individuals he had photographed across Russia, he found himself drawn to the idea of the collective; of how people interact with the landscape; of how the English spend their leisure time. To achieve this he decided people should occupy no more than one third of the frame, a decision which has led to some harsh editing. A pair of legs sticking out of a very English-looking hedge, for example, is unlikely to make the final edit, yet it is a great shot, surreally humorous and persistently intriguing. Another image likely to be rejected is one from Blackpool, redolent of the great American photographers, such as Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld in terms of colour and aesthetic – it doesn't fit closely enough with his chosen theme of "leisure".

A strikingly English image, with a swan gliding down a man-made waterway in the foreground (in fact it's a drainage ditch common to Lincolnshire) and a fairground ride in the background (it's actually Butlins at Skegness) may yet not make the edit because there are

Holkham Beach (top), Norfolk,  
17 February 2008

Enjoying the Ice (right),  
1630-34, by Hendrick Avercamp



no people in it. On seeing a fantastic image of bodies peopling a seascape, I ask if this is "out" because it looks like a Massimo Vitali?

"Absolutely! Vitali owns this territory and besides there is nothing in the image to say it's England; you can't see the coastline."

An underlying theme that unites many of the images thus far selected for inclusion presents itself as boundaries, often natural ones, that occur in the landscape: between sea and sky, land and sea, path and field. Many of the most memorable shots incorporate coastal scenes, yet I wonder how much of this statement is weighed down with personal memory and in so doing realise this is a huge part of the work's charm. Woolacombe beach, in Devon, where I spent a holiday as a five-year-old, provides now, as then, a perfect sandy playground. Holkham beach, here swathed in soft dusky sunlight, in Norfolk, brings together a game of cricket as well as a mother chastising her child for unfair play and an endless trail of people meandering down to the sea. The beach is Sarah Roberts' favourite place, and so the annual family visit there takes on a sense of pilgrimage.

A snowy scene plays out on a golf course, near Roberts' parents' home in Oxted, Surrey. In this one image there is a sense of the Englishness of

manufactured landscapes, a painterly quality that Roberts frequently brings to each frame and the personal association (the young Roberts would toboggan there as a child). We can already see how the book, or indeed the exhibition, will hold the observer in its thrall from a number of possible perspectives.

Roberts is far from complacent, however. He likens his working patterns to those of a juggler; always trying to keep many balls in the air. Currently, as well as scanning and editing the England work, Roberts is undertaking a lecture series about *Motherland* for the Royal Photographic Society ("It's a revenue stream"). Yet he is also looking ahead to try to fundraise for his new project, which will be, intriguingly, a portrait of the city of Bethlehem.

"It's an enormous amount of work, incredibly time consuming, and this is one of things young photographers don't realise – 20 per cent of your time is taking pictures and 80 per cent is banging your head against a wall trying to make things happen."

The resulting images show no sign of that struggle, depicting instead the peculiarly English outlook: "keep calm and carry on".

**Max Houghton**

We English will be published by Chris Boot in October. [www.we-english.co.uk](http://www.we-english.co.uk)







First day of the football season  
(top), Sunderland, Tyne & Wear,  
16 August 2008

Long Mynd (left), Church Stretton,  
Shropshire, 8 July 2008