A night to remember?

WHY THE NET WON'T LET YOU FORGET
Green and pleasant or dour and dreary?
In a new book of photos Simon Roberts captures the essence of the English outdoors. **Hannah Duguid** reports

In summer we take our chairs to the river and barbecue by the beach, we walk on the sand, drive motor homes and sleep on the road, or plunge into a pool filled with water, where we float on the inner tubes of the car. In winter we fish, walk and walk or if we snow, we get out and run outdoors with a dog to slide down the hills. Who are we? Photographer Simon Roberts grapples with this question in a new book of photographs called *We, English*.

He grew up in England in a motor home in 2008 with his pregnant wife, Sarah, and their two-year-old daughter, Jemima, photographing people outdoors in their leisure time. "To decide to photograph England rather than Britain because even though there has been a greater sense of Scottishness and Welshness, I decided that I was only going to look at leisure and the outdoors. It's about people and their relationships with the landscape. Five of us do what we want for work. We work to achieve our leisure so it says more about who we are," he says.

The first place he photographed was the beach at Sikes Ness in Lincs. In the nineteenth century, it was a bit grim. The sky is overcast and the water brown, there is litter and everyone is huddled up, wearing coats. The scene is mountainous and familiar to many, but Roberts has managed to bring a lyrical quality to it. The sky and sky are huge, the view is elevated and looking down we get a vast sense of space.

There are two stories in his photographs: one is everyday, the other is eternal. Roberts relies on the public to help him define them. He set up a website where people posted ideas, telling him about places and events. He didn't want his project to be proprietary; he wanted it to be normal, an England that we could relate to, although there as a couple of centuries since the Mod and the Mud Maid Race where centurions run through the country in low tide wearing fancy dress, and the Hailey Hotel.

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In North Lincs, a 700-year-old tradition that began when Lady de Mowbray had her hat blown off and local farmers competed to catch it and return it to her.

There is a winter scene in South Yorkshire where fishermen line up along a reservoir, each concealed in the bushes, unable to see his neighbour. At Kew Green, near Leicestershire, they catch trout with know-how, but sometimes they are fishing where they are doing and they are watching.

There are others who have worked together at the Ratcliffe-on-Soar coal-fired power station since 1968. They return to the station every week to play golf on the employees course, which lies in the shadow of these cooling towers and is lined with electricity pylons. They could have found a more attractive place for their leisure – but the meaning of the place would be lost to them.

"People were connected to small geographical areas. I spoke to people in motor homes and often they were on holiday only a few miles from where they live. It was very local," says Roberts.

Roberts says the English flag on the cover of his book and this was a decision that he thought through with care. "I wanted to reclaim the English flag from right-wing politics. We are the majority population but the Scottish and Welsh have a stronger sense of identity - as minority cultures tend to. I have travelled extensively in Russia and was struck by how connected the Russians were to their homeland, their sense of belonging. I realized that I didn't have the same sense of home. So for me this project was about exploring my homeland. I wanted to get a sense of the history of this landscape and I was interested in how we remember our childhood through landscape, through green spaces or beaches. It's about how we think we remember a place."

Prints from *We, English* are on display at the Photographers' Gallery, London W1 until 11 October. *We, English* by Simon Roberts is published by Chris Beet on 5 October, priced £40.