

Independent

Life



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**Horses
for forces**

*Hot to trot with
the Met's mounties*

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**A night to
remember?**

WHY THE NET WON'T LET YOU FORGET



This is England

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 on its banks, we walk our dogs on the beach, drive motor homes and sleep on the road, or plunge into gravel pits filled with water, where we float on the inner tubes of tractor tyres. In winter we fish, watch birds and walk, or if it snows, we get excited and run outdoors with a sledge

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 drove around England in a motor home in 2008 with his pregnant wife, Sarah, and three-year-old daughter, Jemima, photographing people outdoors in their leisure time. "I decided to photograph England rather than Britain because since devolution 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 relationship with the landscape. Few 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 Skegness in Lincolnshire, where people have holidayed since the

nineteenth century. It's a bit grim. The sky is overcast and the water brown, there is litter and everyone is bundled up, wearing coats. The scene is mundane and familiar to many, but Roberts has managed to bring a lyrical quality to it. The sea 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 relied 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 quirky, he wanted it to be normal, an England that we could relate to, although there are a couple of eccentricities: the Mad Maldon Mud Race where contestants run through an estuary at low tide wearing fancy dress, and the Haxey Hood

in North Lincolnshire, 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 of fishermen lined up along a reservoir, each concealed in the rushes, unable to see his neighbour. At Keynes Country Park Beach, day trippers barbecue and lie on the grass. It is hardly a nostalgic vision; the setting is definably now, from the clothes down to the bumper pack of Walkers crisps. There are men with their tops off; bare bellies hang over the waistbands of their shorts above stockings feet – yes, they wear socks on the beach. People eat and drink, crammed together, rubbish bins are visible. It may be a pastoral scene, but there's nothing romantic about it.

"It's almost like an historical document of England in 2008. I am part of a lineage of other photographers, such as Martin Parr, Tony Ray Jones and Bill Brandt, who have captured the social, political and cultural landscape of Britain and England. But there has been very little done in the past decade. My gist is quite optimistic. I am not being critical. I tried not to be critical."

Roberts was influenced by the traditions of landscape painting, by Dutch and Flemish artists such as Avercamp, Bruegel and van Valckenborch, although he emphasises that he is not being pretentious. He wanted to capture their sense of everyday life within landscape art, rather than an idealised sense of nature and our place in it.

People are camping at Gordale Scar in North Yorkshire. A couple hang their feet over the river bank, another sit on fold-up chairs and two dogs play by the water. There is a story within each of his photographs; it is not central to the work, but is rather something that you find as you look up close, at who is sitting where, what they are doing and who they are watching.

At Fountains Fell in the Yorkshire Dales a couple sit in fold-up chairs looking out over the valley. They have a table between them, with plastic cups filled with tea from a flask. Their backs are to us. He is wearing a straw Panama hat and her dress is floral. Their Vauxhall Corsa is parked on the verge. Roberts came across the couple as he was driving through the valley. Called Les and Doreen Barnett, they have been coming to this spot every week for 50 years to sit and take in the view. In Hathersage, Derbyshire a middle-aged Muslim couple, wearing traditional robes, walk through the bracken by the rocks at Stanage Edge. They are on a walking holiday from their home in Leicester.

"We tend to think of these kinds of views as being inhabited by the white middle classes. I like that this photograph challenges the stereotype," says Roberts. "This couple spoke of feeling completely at ease in the area and described how they spend their holidays exploring the English countryside."

What Roberts discovered along his way is how attached people are to their place, how they return to the area they associate themselves with, such as three retired men in Nottinghamshire

who had worked together at the Ratcliffe-on-Soar coal-fired power station since 1966. They return to the power station every week to play golf on the employees course, which lies in the shadows of three 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 uses 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 far-right 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 realised 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 18 October. 'We English' by Simon Roberts is published by Chris Boot on 5 October, priced £40.



A breath of fresh air: ex-employees enjoy the golf course at Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station (far left); Fountains Fell, Yorkshire Dales (left); a Muslim couple hiking at Stanage Edge, Derbyshire (top); Skegness (above) SIMON ROBERTS



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