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SIMON ROBERTS FRPS
WE ENGLISH

COMING UP FAST
ELZBIETA PIEKACZ

LEWIS BLACKWELL
PHOTO-WISDOM

ANGELS OF ANARCHY
MANCHESTER ART GALLERY

TECHNICAL
CANON COMPACTS S90 & G11

STEP BY STEP
CHROMA KEY



A PLACE CALLED HOME

Returning to England in late 2005 from Russia, where he had shot his monumental project *Motherland*, Simon Roberts FRPS soon set about photographing his native land. Travelling the country in a motor home, shooting on a large format camera, he created *We English*, a project on the English at leisure, for which he was recently awarded a Contemporary Fellowship. He speaks to David Land

“I started shooting *We English* in August 2007”, says Simon Roberts FRPS, “and I made a series of trips around the country on my own until April 2008. “Then from April until the end of September, my wife, who was pregnant, and our three-year-old daughter, travelled with me in a motor home.

“It was tough, but good fun. I like working in an intense way, having a fixed time period and living a project. I find it much easier to get into a rhythm shooting with that intensity, rather than dipping in and out of a project, as you just lose the flow.

“You could say *We English* is part pilgrimage, but I wouldn’t say it’s nostalgic. In fact, to the contrary: the inspiration for doing it was that I didn’t feel nostalgic toward England. I was very inspired by doing my last project, *Motherland*, where I was really struck by how connected the Russians felt to their landscape, to their homeland.

“It got me thinking about my relationship to England: I didn’t feel particularly English or, for that matter, British. *We English* was really an opportunity to explore my own country, to try and make some discovery, to look at this place I call home.

“I photographed from a slightly raised and distant perspective, often standing on the roof of my motor home, which gives the project a slight remove in terms of the photographic gaze. That was a deliberate decision I took at the outset, because I did feel slightly distant from the place.

“You could say that some of the pictures are romantic, so could be perceived as nostalgic, but that was only because there were certain scenes which I wanted to make quite beautiful because that’s how I encountered them. I wanted to embrace that notion of beauty. Then, there were places to which I returned that I had experienced as a child, such as the Lake District, so in that sense it was part pilgrimage.”



We English takes the much photographed people and landscapes of England, and re-imagines them on a monumental scale; creating a classic, elegant, dignified, quiet body of work: social observation without presumption. Roberts isn’t just ticking boxes: he’s seeing what’s there, in all its subtlety and complexity, producing work which is completely at variance with all the imagery of England to which we have become so accustomed over the years.

If it has a precursor, perhaps it’s in L S Lowry’s paintings of Salford’s working people; while Roberts himself cites the Dutch landscape painters, like Hendrick Avercamp, as an influence. “I’ve always loved those paintings”, he says, “ever since we had one of those cheap imitation posters in our bathroom as a kid. They’re so enjoyable, because there’s so much detail in them. They’re rich in social interaction and humour.

“The other thing is, I got so bored of the peopleless, empty landscapes that we’ve seen coming out of photography degree courses and art schools over the last decade. I really wanted to make sure that there was an interaction between people and place in my photographs.”

As a part of the project, through the *RPS Journal* and elsewhere, Roberts asked people to recommend leisure activities in England that he might photograph. He received about 400 suggestions on his project-specific website, www.we-english.co.uk.

“Whatever way you look at it”, he says, “a photographer is subjective: you can never be objective, and *We English* is of course ‘My England’. However, I was interested in developing a collaboration, where other people could put forward their ideas of things to photograph, and to some degree take part in their own representation. The ideas that were posted provide an interesting snapshot of England in 2008 in their own right. They illustrate what’s important to people, and explore their ideas on the notion of Englishness.

“A lot of people’s ideas referred to memory: how they experienced England in the past, how they remembered it from childhood, rather than necessarily the way it is now. It was also interesting how many people from abroad posted ideas about what they did when they grew up in England. Often, national identity is built up as much by an imagined notion of a place as it is by how you experience it.

“With the recent resurgence of notions of Scottishness and Welshness, it was much more interesting for me to look at England than at the whole of the British Isles. I was also keen to use the English flag, which has been appropriated somewhat by a racist connotation, and to wrestle it back, saying that there doesn’t have to be a racist undertone.

“If you fly the American flag, you’re not seen as racist; the same with Scotland and Wales, so why should it be any different flying the English flag? If

Above: Rushey Hill Caravan Park, Peacehaven, East Sussex, 21 December 2007.

Above: The Haxey Hood, Haxey, North Lincolnshire, 5 January 2008.

Left: Paul Herrington's
50th Birthday,
Grantchester,
Cambridgeshire,
15 June 2008.



you think about America, it was created by immigration, and that's celebrated to a certain extent. Of course, there are issues in the southern states with the influx of the Hispanic population from Mexico, but really this place has very much embraced its policy of immigration and the fact that it has been created by multi-culturalism. Why can't it be the same with England?

"In terms of the way I approached the subject matter, I wasn't seeking to tick off events which deliberately illustrated multi-culturalism. Rather, I was trying to find quite mundane landscapes, looking inside those scenes to see what the cultural mix of England is.

"You're supposed to look hard into the pictures to get an idea of the make up of the English population. In a couple of the pictures, in the Yorkshire Dales and Blackpool, you can see a huge diversity of people. There is one picture of Blackpool Pier where half the people in the water are wearing saris.

"Similarly, class wasn't an issue that I deliberately set out to tackle, but it certainly impressed itself upon me as I undertook the project. While there are places where classes mix, there are also leisure activities that are definitely class specific. At one point in the book, you go from a picture of Grange Park Opera, where there's a couple, the guy in a tuxedo and a woman in a ball gown, having dinner from their hamper, to another picnic, but this time it's the Epsom Derby, where there are the immense crowds of people drinking and having a good time – some next to a rubbish skip. So you have this interesting juxtaposition between two uses of picnicking, with differing social backdrops.

"At the same time, I was thinking about how the Epsom Derby had been represented photographically. We often see images in the newspaper of people in top hats and tails in the Queen's enclosure. However, there are a few hundred people who wear top hat and tails, and 70,000 everyday punters who go in the central area of the racetrack, who are much more representative of the event itself.

"It's important not to be derivative, and to find your own voice, on what is quite a well trodden path. I was acutely aware that I was following in the footsteps of a number of successful, well known, British photographers who had photographed the English landscape. Part of my research involved seeing what had been done before, and trying to come up with my own photographic language. So, although some of the events and places are similar to those that have been photographed before, I wanted to make sure that the way I photographed them was different.

"It's interesting to note though that, in the last decade, there hasn't been a great deal of documentary photography done on England, perhaps because my generation of photographers has very much gone abroad to photograph. Actually, it's more challenging to photograph in England. Doing it was much harder in some ways than doing the Russia work, because you're having to tune into the mundane; scenes that you are very familiar with, or that seem normal and everyday."

It looks as though Roberts has imported some of the style and technique that he developed when photographing *Motherland*, which in itself derived from the monumental scale of Russia. He has come



back, and is looking at England from a different perspective, almost as though it were a bigger place.

"Certainly, there was influence from the Russian work", he says, "and it was that idea of the enormity of the landscape, and how in some ways people were dwarfed by this notion of Russianness. That was something that I wanted to explore with the England work. I wasn't so interested at looking at the individual, but much more in the collective, because

it seems to me that the collective says more about who we are than the individual.

"I had toyed with the idea of shooting 5x4 in Russia, but it was just totally impractical carrying that camera around with me, whereas in England it was possible. Part of the reason I wanted to use it is that everybody is a photographer now: everybody has a camera on their mobile phone, and a lot of people have high end DSLRs, so what differentiates me

from everybody else?

"Also, there's something about using that particular camera which is important in terms of getting the pictures that I got. The process of setting up the 5x4 camera was quite laborious and often very public, but this turned out to be a help in capturing each scene as it unfolded before me. I had anticipated that there might be problems in situations where there were lots of people close to the camera, particularly on

Above: Blackpool Promenade, Lancashire, 24 July 2008.



**Above: Ladies' Day,
Aintree Racecourse,
Merseyside, 4 April 2008**

**We English, Simon
Roberts,
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Reader offer

Until 31 Jan, you can purchase a signed copy of *We English* for the book's regular price of £40, inclusive of recorded delivery. Contact info@chrisboot.com, quoting code RPS1209

Until 24 Jan *We English* shows at South Hill Park Arts Centre
www.southhillpark.org.uk

12 March–5 Sept A major exhibition of *We English* will be on display at the National Media Museum, Bradford
www.nationalmedia-museum.org.uk

www.we-english.co.uk

beaches, but by the time I'd finished setting up, any curious onlookers had lost interest and turned away.

"Never at any point did people feel threatened by me. Often, they would come up and ask me what I was doing, and then I'd be able to engage in dialogue, and it smoothed the whole process."

Roberts shot on film with the same 150mm (standard focal length for 5x4 format) lens for all of the pictures, often photographing from the roof of his motor home to get an elevated perspective.

"To get the large depth of field that I wanted, I was having to shoot quite long exposures", he says. "With a lot of people moving about in a landscape, that often caused problems, because you'd just get a blurred mess."

"Because I was interested in the idea of the natural landscape, and how we've adapted it and consumed it for leisure purposes, I only wanted to shoot outdoors. This meant the weather became an issue, but at the same time I tried to use it to my advantage. The depiction of weather is terribly important in landscape paintings - just think of the atmosphere steaming out of a Turner, or the emotive clouds in a Constable."

"Of course, the unpredictability of the English climate has long been seen as one of the keys to our national character, so I deliberately made the weather part of the picture. If there was golden sunlight, I'd embrace it, but if there was mistiness or a cool sky, I'd use that too."

"It was quite a challenge shooting in the rather grey, miserable summer that we had - it was one of the wettest on record. There were some days where I literally couldn't shoot, and there were events that I tried to photograph that were cancelled due to the weather."

"The project works because I took a consistent approach. Sometimes, you have to admit that you've

missed a shot and move on. And of course it's not a shopping list: I wasn't ticking off a leisure activity in every county in England. It's more of a snapshot, to give you a sense of the people and the place, rather than a comprehensive archive."

"In some ways, it'll maybe have more value in 20 years, when people will look at the pictures and spot what people were wearing. There are a couple of pictures where it was only after I blew them up that I saw details like people wearing socks on the beach."

"I have a number of ideas for future projects, but *We English* will be my last nation survey; I think that it and *Motherland* work well together and complement one another. The next project will certainly be different in terms of geographical scale."

"For me, the book is the ultimate expression of the work and my intended message. However, the exhibition is also important. Because the prints are large, you almost become part of the scene when stood in front of them, enabling the viewer to discover a lot more detail in the pictures."

"I don't see everything I do as a book, but I do think there is something rather wonderful about the process of producing a book - the way that it is edited and put together, and the fact that it will, I hope, sit in archives and libraries as a historic document."

"There is this whole worrying scenario about the digitisation of history. How much easier is it to lose something that is just ones and zeros, over having something that is tactile, that will sit on a library shelf, can be sat with, looked at and spent time with, and touched?"

"I feel that this body of work fits into a wider history of photographic projects that have explored the question of who 'we English' are. It is but one piece in the larger mosaic of photography books about England."

David Land