

# We English

## by Simon Roberts

### Brief

*We English* aims to be a rich, extensive and nuanced corpus of images that help create a new dialogue in the photographic analysis of contemporary English society and the challenging notion of Englishness, and which extends a rich history of British photographers documenting their homeland.

It was after spending two years producing a book about Russia and Russian identity (*Motherland* published by Chris Boot Ltd), I began in turn to think about my own homeland and about the concept of Englishness and all its complexities.

### Proposal

You could say that my upbringing was quintessentially English: modest, conventional, not in the least exotic. I was born in Croydon, South London, in 1974. My mother is a Northerner, hailing from Cumbria, who met my London-born father when they were both working in the capital. My formative years were spent in the provincial town of Oxted, in Surrey's commuter belt, where I attended the local comprehensive, played on my Raleigh Grifter bicycle and took photographs with my Canon AE1 camera, given to me for Christmas when I was 14. Holidays were spent walking in the Lake District (often in the rain) or visiting my grandparents in Angmering, a retirement town on the South Coast.

These memories of my youth are unremarkable. Yet they resemble those of thousands of other English men and women and spark off a host of associations and images. It is these recollections that form part of the inspiration for this project, *We English*.

*We English* will be a sustained photographic documentation of England in 2008. My aim is to create a photographic journal of life, specifically documenting landscapes where groups of people congregate for a common purpose and shared experience. It will be about what people do in their spare time, their leisure pursuits and pastimes and how people derive meaning and identity from these activities. It will also be about people's relationship with their environment, whether their immediate surroundings are urban or rural. Recreation will provide the basis for a wider exploration of people's attachment to place and the way in which the inhabitants of England derive meaning and identity from everyday events and activities. The project will focus on events that take place on a local level and at locations where everyday rituals are played out. (While traditional communities have weakened, our attachment to locality remains strong and provides an important expression of identity<sup>1</sup>.)

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<sup>1</sup> Recent research by the Economic & Social Research Council shows that the community that really matters to people is very geographically local. Source: ESRC- 'Britain in 2008'. Statistics show that two-thirds of people live within five miles of where they were born; local radio attracts 25 million listeners a week in contrast to an average of 13 million to Radio 2; and while 60-70% of us read a national newspaper daily, 80-84% will read a local newspaper. Source: Julian Baggini, 'Welcome to Everytown'.

Logistically, *We English* will take the form of a series of journeys around England in a motorhome (the main journey being from April until September when I will be joined by my wife and daughter). The journeys will be based on my own research together with ideas sourced via a dedicated website where the general public will be encouraged to post details about events in their locale and share information about their ideas on the notion of Englishness and how it relates to them. This collaboration will be important in dealing with the complex issues surrounding notions of cultural representation and will also enable me to access a broader spectrum of themes and geographical locations. Moreover, *We English* will be a pilgrimage of sorts, where I will seek out those places that I believe have helped shaped my own feelings of Englishness.

## Context

The project will extend, and reflect upon, a history of documentary photographic projects and the variety of approaches that British photographers have utilised to capture the lives of diverse communities across the country and explore issues surrounding national identity and the constantly shifting notion of Englishness.<sup>2</sup> The long and rich tradition of British photographers documenting their homeland, some of which could be seen in the recent exhibition at Tate Britain 'How We Are - Photographing Britain,' has seen work produced by the likes of Humphrey Spender, Bill Brandt, Tony Ray Jones, Ingrid Pollard, Martin Parr, John Davies and Jem Southam to name a few. However, the past decade has seen relatively little work produced by British photographers.<sup>3</sup>

*We English* will draw on aspects of human geography and on cultural geography, particularly<sup>4</sup>. The exposition of the interrelations between people and their immediate environment in the photographs will provide a richness of interpretation for the viewer, allowing them to reflect upon aspects of the photograph in a myriad of ways, looking, for example, at methods of representation (class, race, property etc), human behaviour in situ, artifactual analysis, diverse uses of space and the changing face of so-called natural landscapes.

Engaging with literal, physical landscapes is a way of engaging with social and cultural landscapes. Since landscape has long been used as a commodity, an aesthetic amenity that is there to be consumed, it makes sense to use leisure activities, no matter how banal they might appear, as a way into an exploration of England's shifting cultural and aesthetic identity. Whilst I hope to produce images that are nuanced and beautiful, even elegiac, they will nonetheless explore that ways in which landscape can also become a place of conflict, a place where received ideas about nationhood and quintessential Englishness are challenged.

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<sup>2</sup> I'm interested in the concept of Englishness, as opposed to Britishness, which has become increasingly complex since devolution. A recent study by the ESRC also found that many English respondents wanted to 'shrink' their British identity to a more localized English one like those of the Scots, Welsh and Irish. Furthermore, geographically England dominates the UK, accounting for nearly 85% of its population.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of more recent studies would be the work of The Caravan Gallery by Jan Williams & Chris Teasdale and The Folk Archive by Jeremy Deller & Alan Kane.

<sup>4</sup> The work will explore the connection between the imaginative geography of landscape and the 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson, 1983), where Anderson argues that England as a nation is not directly experienced by its inhabitants in the same, unifying manner but rather that the concept is tied together by a range of images held in the minds of its fellow-members.

I am interested in the reality of an England at this time of rapid social and cultural flux but am not seeking to overturn stereotyped images of traditional English scenes. (This has already been admirably achieved by John Kippin, Ingrid Pollard and others.) *We English* will yield contemporary visions of my country that recognise the narrowness of long-held mental images of England and explore the ambiguities and complexities of our place within the world around us in a manner that amplifies and extends meaning.

## **Outcome**

*We English* will be published in September 2009 by Chris Boot Ltd. The book will feature a collection of colour landscape photographs with an introduction written by leading observers on English culture. An exhibition of the work will comprise of a series of landscape prints sized 36x48" which I intend exhibiting in London in Autumn 2009.

## **Patrons**

*We English* is being supported with bursaries from the National Media Museum, Arts Council England and The John Kopal Foundation.

## **About Simon**

Simon graduated with a first class BA Hons degree in Human Geography from The University of Sheffield (1996) followed by a Distinction in Photography from the National Council for the Training of Journalists (1997). His photographs have been published and exhibited widely, with recent shows at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai and are held in a number of private and corporate collections, including the Deutsche Börse Art Collection and the National Media Museum in Bradford.

In recognition for his work, Simon has received several awards including the Sunday Times Magazine 'Ian Parry Award' (1998), a 'Getty Grant of Editorial Photography' (2006), and the 'Bright Spark Award' from the Magenta Foundation in Toronto (2006). He was a student on the 'World Press Masterclass' in Amsterdam (2003) and identified by Photo District News in New York as one of their 'PDN30 Emerging Artists' (2004). More recently he received the 'Vic Odden Award' from the Royal Photographic Society (2007) - offered for a notable achievement in the art of photography by a British photographer aged 35 or under - and bursaries from the National Media Museum (2007) and Arts Council England (2008). He was also featured in the Independent on Saturday Magazine's 'Talent Issue' (2007) as one of their rising stars.

*Motherland*, his first monograph, was published in March 2007 by Chris Boot Ltd and he is represented by The Photographers' Gallery in London and Klompching Gallery in New York. He lives in Brighton, UK, with his wife and daughter.

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