

In search of 'England': Brexit's 'undiscovered country'

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**The stone fidelity they hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us....**

An Arundel Tomb, Philip Larkin

As I write this, seemingly moments from the reality of a 'hard' Brexit, my partner and I have commenced our own leaving. Living outside of England – and likely the UK – has always been an aspiration, but events of the past few years alongside Brexit's spiteful denouement have expedited our intentions. Where this destination will be is as yet unconfirmed; Ireland, France, Canada, the Netherlands but a few names on the list.

Emigrating is hardly a trivial matter. Despite Brexiteer's delusional presumptions that millions around the world are subject to a Damascan moment at their first taste of 'Rosie Lee' and make a beeline for jolly England, this is not a decision taken lightly. Even in the privileged position of highly qualified professionals, it requires long and careful consideration.

For my partner, an artist and creative producer, this has involved some painstaking research of the industry in potential destinations. As we looked at, initially, Ireland and Scotland, her discussions with arts organisations and contacts in both countries illustrated some quite profound differences in the cultural environment on our doorstep. Whilst a recurring theme across the UK and Ireland is the role of the arts in supporting culture and celebrating cultural identity, within England the emphasis tends toward diversity and inclusion. In Scotland and Ireland however, there seems greater focus upon preserving and promoting traditional art forms and practices.

This observation illustrates an enduring issue in relation to Brexit. For many years now, a growing swell has emerged of the erosion and homogenisation of English culture and a failure to support and celebrate its distinctiveness and intricacies. From 'Wetherspooning' of

traditional pubs to standardization of English High Streets, these concerns are something to which I am truly sympathetic.

In 2009, whilst studying for my MSc in London, we visited the Aylesbury Estate in Elephant & Castle. Famed for being the initial focus of Tony Blair's urban regeneration agenda, our visit uncovered an issue which epitomises part of the Brexit debate. A diverse community segregated between multiple cultures, intervention in such places has focused on inclusion promoting the value of this diversity; the fabled 'melting pot' of vibrant cities. This however was also seen as a devaluing of traditional English culture synonymous with forces hostile to such diversity.

The denigration of English culture is an issue too often brushed aside, and easily dismissed for having roots in some slightly dodgy – and other truly heinous – values. This is fair criticism; I still however laugh out loud every time I watch Carry on Up the Khyber. Yet much of this culture is curious, esoteric, even exotic. It represents highly individualistic stories in the evolution of place.

Whilst living briefly in Bedford a few years ago, I was introduced to the Bedfordshire Clanger; a suet crust pastry filled two-thirds savoury and one-third sweet. Virtually unheard of outside the English South Midlands, the Clanger was the choice meal for workers in the Bedfordshire brick pits whose schedule and conditions required a 'meal-in-one'.

The interesting thing about the Clanger is literally one bakery in the county – and therefore probably the UK – produced it. This seems a fitting analogy for our evanescent English culture. Not because it's fading as a result of homogenisation, denigration, or attrition, but because it was forsaken in the first instance by the English themselves.

I'll digress slightly here to tackle something I've longed to discuss: fish. I grew up on the coast, in Worthing, a tourist town with a long history as a fishing centre. In my 20+ years living there, the number of people interested in the fishing industry you could count on one hand. Fishmongers in town, peddling wares brought fresh from the sea that morning, rapidly dwindled. Similarly, the number of active fishing boats in local waters declined. This was not due to the Spanish

stealing our stock, but because no-one actually cared. It was part of Worthing's history, but this was held in scant regard by a community getting fat on the growing swell of burger and fried chicken shops. At least, until it was politicised by the anti-immigration brigade. Similarly superficial is the form of English patriotism Brexit relies upon.

Back in the '90's, during the Gulf War, The Henty Arms pub in my village displayed its support for British troops rather illustratively. There is no harm in this; the problem was for the febrile patriots patronising such establishments, this sentiment extends as far as military action, international football tournaments – presuming England qualify – and St George's Day should they remember.



The Henty Arms, Ferring, West Sussex, circa 1990

<https://picclick.co.uk/Sussex-Postcard-Henty-Arms-in-1991-Ferring-141544737061.html>

Celebration, even awareness, of their distinctive local stories is however woefully absent in many cases. Of long run traditions they will later mourn for their passing. Of histories handed down to deaf ears more concerned with illusions of sovereignty entombed in palaces they never enter.

The absence amongst English arts support for more prominent funds protecting our stories and traditions may be a fair accusation. But whilst we have been mourning the loss of English identity to the 'horrors' of multi-culturalism, we have seen a renaissance in literature, in poetry, in music, in film documenting the trials and troubles of

traditional English communities. How many of Brexit's victim class have read Fiona Mozley's 'Elmet', Ben Myers' 'The Gallows Pole', or Liz Berry's 'Black Country'. Have patronised the renaissance in English folk music. Have watched films by Ben Wheatley or Shane Meadows. Or even visited a theatre in the north of England, overrun with working class kitchen sink stories. The voice of the English dispossessed is in abundance, it's just the English dispossessed don't value it.

Just west of Worthing sits the cathedral city of Chichester. It is here Larkin wrote his revered verse, The Arundel Tomb. Yet this melding of contemporary and middle ages' Sussex history remains an undiscovered country for our unique brand of patriots in The Henty Arms. The closing lines quoted above, many will recall, end 'what will survive of us is love'. Perhaps a more accurate representation here would be 'what will survive of us is that conveniently appropriated for the sake of cheap political gain then capriciously forsaken until its exploitative value is again realised'. And England will remain an undiscovered country, one which has always been within reach.

Oh, and a final note on the Bedfordshire Clanger; don't, it's truly disgusting...

Disclaimer: The views expressed within this blog are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Centre for Brexit Studies and Birmingham City University