

English Heritage: With the UK's General Election Ever Closer, Whose Culture Are We “Celebrating”?

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It was of course to be expected that, having [shown herself](#) to be a better representative of Scotland than Cameron, Miliband and Farage can ever hope to be of the United Kingdom, a rightwing paper should immediately come out with a [baseless smear](#) against Nicola Sturgeon. But that is Westminster for you, and yet again I feel shamed by our politics.

I loathe the efforts of politicians and media to persuade me that the Scots hate me or that I hate the Scots. What have we ever done that would generate such feelings? I am however experiencing a real abhorrence for Westminster and all it represents.

So I fear the outcome of the general election; I fear the deals made by politicians desperate to stay in power, deals that will further harm the disadvantaged poor. I fear the ideological belief in ‘austerity’ being the only way out of national debt, an austerity that will never affect those in power, whatever party they represent. I fear that we may end up with what we already have, that we may not seize this chance for genuine change.

I have no fear for Scotland. Whatever the outcome of the election, independence for the Scots is edging closer. Scots have talked about it, studied it and planned it for years. Whether their politicians are as prepared as the people I don’t know but, judging by the conversations taking place on the internet and surely within the many communities, they’d be daft to ignore their constituents. And if Sturgeon is anything to go by, they’re not daft.

Reading George Gunn’s [article](#) which highlighted the importance of culture, and understanding that debates on independence and land reform have helped the Scots to stay in touch with their roots, I realise how little we English actually know of our own culture. In so many ways we have accepted the views of the few at the top – witness the hunting and shooting people who bang on about ‘traditional country pursuits’ that simply must be allowed to continue. As I once [wrote](#):

“Little is recorded about those at the bottom, and when it is, it is normally recorded by the elite, the literate and educated. And rarely do they attach names to those that Bulwer-Lytton stigmatised as the Great Unwashed; those who grew the food, sheared the sheep, wove the wool, made the clothes, built the houses and did all those necessary things to keep the world of men ticking.

“There is never any recognition of how much the state depended on these nameless people, no admission that without them those in the palaces and great halls would have starved and gone naked. The temptation is always to write the history which is based on power and money, using the records of the powerful. This is how we remember history, and how we

teach it to the children."

There is no room for 'folk' lore. I once made the mistake, having read a fulsome review and being very interested in the everyday lives of ordinary people, of buying *A Social History of England* by Professor (and Baron) Asa Briggs. What did I find? Kings and queens, lords and ministers. Nary an ordinary, powerless and poor person in sight.

England's culture is missing. Possibly we move around too much in search of work, and in doing so have torn up our roots. Now London authorities are [relocating people](#) to other places so they can sell off social housing to developers. Thus we lose connections with families and networks, our ancestors and natural homes. Our culture, the people's history, belongs to the landscape, both rural and urban. That is true of any country. But it is always the poor that are forced by 'the economy' to migrate, the poor who are forced to lose their cultural connections.

Some refuse to let go. Take my part of England, the West Country. Like the Orkneys, Arran and Lewis, my stamping ground has a rich Neolithic presence. Our Bronze Age culture was shared with Wales and Brittany. With Glastonbury Tor looming over the Somerset Levels, the mythic culture of Arthur and Merlin are part of our landscape. But so is the Saxon King Alfred, first king of the English, not famous for sitting on a throne but for letting the cakes burn while hiding from the Vikings in the Somerset marshes.

In Dorset's county town Dorchester one of the [Bloody Assizes](#) was held, where the infamous Judge Jeffreys tried and condemned those 'rebels' who fought for Monmouth in 1685. Every time I go down Dorchester's High Street past the house where Jeffreys stayed I think of him with pity. He was a man of his time, doing what his king demanded. But he was also a man suffering from kidney and bladder stones, sitting there day after day rigid with pain while merciless in his judgements – a symbol of those men of power who use their own pain to inflict terrible pain upon others.

Dorchester remembers its Bloody Assize, but with little context. In Somerset it is different. Years ago, when English Heritage started to create what felt like 'theme park England' they set up a series of Heritage Trails, marked routes where the visitor could 'walk with history'. Why not, they thought, do a trail devoted to the Monmouth Rebellion?

There was nearly another rebellion. The Somerset Tourist Board thought it a good idea. Somerset people thought otherwise. In their bones and hearts the Rebellion still sat like a festering sore. How dare they even think of doing this? It is a matter for private grief, not tourists. It's OURS!

English Heritage retreated and created a nice little trail around Taunton where the penultimate Assize was held. Not in Bridgwater, the seat of the Rebellion or Westonzoyland, the site of the Battle of Sedgemoor. The wounds and the ghosts are still there, out on the Levels.

In his [article](#) about the Scottish and UK Labour Parties, Dave Cohen wrote "There are pockets of non-[UKIP](#) self-determination in the north and south-west of England, some genuine feelings of injustice, but our (English) regions have never had anything forced on them to match, for example, Highland Clearances or the poll tax." Well, I don't know where he was during the imposition of the poll tax, but in the West Country there was genuine rage among poor rural families, knowing that the rich man and his wife in the big house were

paying no more than they were, but out of a vastly greater income.

And does Cohen not remember the London [poll tax riots](#) in 1990? That an English Labour man should have forgotten the English anger over one of Margaret Thatcher's most hated policies is odd. Or is this one of those pieces of English culture that has been airbrushed out while we looked the other way? Because, instead of the Highland Clearances, England had the Enclosures. The Clearances caused those vast tracts of empty Highland glens and mountainsides stripped of people, communities and ancient forests. But...

The 'traditional' English patchwork of green fields, all hedged and fenced, are the result of centuries of enclosures. It started in the 13th Century and continued until the end of the 19th. As acre after acre was claimed by landowners, hedged and fenced, the people lost their common land, their grazing rights. With woods walled off they lost their fuel supply. With nowhere to keep their livestock, no land with which to support themselves and their families, they hung on or migrated to the towns. Either way, it was a life of bitter poverty.

With the start of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of industrial landowners, the English countryside emptied into the cities, into the mills and mines. Perhaps because it took so long, it became the norm rather than a singular catastrophic event. Is that why so few of us know about it, let alone see it as something important in our history? But Clearance or Enclosure, the result was the same: the people were separated from the land.

We are taught to be proud of 'tradition', 'Ye Olde England', land of Shakespeare, poets and painters – and tourists. To get in touch with our history, why not watch a medieval joust at some castle, or a Civil War re-enactment? Visit the 'stately' houses dotted all over the landscape, be guided open-mouthed through salons and dining halls and look at the portraits of grand people, wall-papering the rooms and galleries. But never, never experience the cold cramped attics where the servants were stuffed out of sight, once they'd finished their sixteen-hour day.

It sometimes feels as though we non-city English are being condemned to living in an eternal BBC Classic Serial where even poverty, when it raises its ugly head, is romanticised. Where, in that word 'stately', is *our* history, *our* culture? Where do we find our true ancestors?

There are some. Down the road is a place called Tolpuddle, the birthplace of trade unions and home of the [Tolpuddle Martyrs](#). They were tried and convicted in Dorchester too. Dorset is proud of its Martyrs and they are very much part of our local history. Every year there is a festival organised by the [TUC](#). People come from all over the country but apart from the ever-faithful Tony Benn who, until he was too frail, came every year, Westminster politicians stay away. This is not the awkward history they want us to remember.

So this is the one thing I truly fear if Scotland becomes independent: that Westminster will have its way with the English; that our culture will go on being dictated by a very narrow view of what it means to be English; that England will become that heritage theme park, the countryside split between industrialised farming and the playground of the rich, with Cameron and his ilk careering around on their hunters or banging away with their guns, while the towns become shopping malls and the housing estates are walled-off ghettos. And London will be nothing but the home of financiers and foreign billionaires.

It is a nightmare with a glimmer of hope however, because I do know one thing – this election will most likely be the last of its kind. However hard the old guard tries and whatever dirty tricks and smears they use, we will no longer just be voting blue or red. England is beginning to understand what Scotland has and what we lack. Conversations are starting. Push us too far and we may yet follow Scotland in seeking our own independence from the ‘establishment’, because if there is one culture we do not want it is the culture of Westminster.

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