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“A stick to beat the present”?: Brexit, the British Empire and
beating the bounds in the modern English village



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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

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Abstract

This thesis is about boundaries: boundaries in ancient folklore, in modern politics, and psychological ones which separate the reality of what England 'is' from England as many might prefer to imagine it. In 2016, Vote Leave claimed Britain had lost control of its borders, urging voters to regain it through voting to leave the EU. In 2021, the Open Spaces Society claimed much the same of the boundaries of Britain's countryside, urging Britons to regain control through reviving beating the bounds: an ancient English walking custom devised to fortify borders against outsiders. Despite stereotypes of Brexit as a 'working-class protest' against EU bureaucrats flooding struggling Northern cities with migrants, Brexit was conceived by Britain's own oligarchs and arguably primarily delivered by the rural southern English 'middle classes'. And whilst historically beating the bounds indeed defended against the genuine threats that invaders posed, rural power dynamics today make for a very different landscape. I argue that Brexit and revivals of beating the bounds are linked not purely through ideas of insiders/outsideers, but in the opportunities they provide to 'do the boundary'. This describes any phenomenon which gives privileged people the chance to 'play' at defending borders, regardless of whether they had ever truly 'lost control' of them in the first place. I explore doing the boundary—in folklore, politics and daily life—in one majority-white, relatively privileged village in south-east England, conducting interviews on the topics of community, history and identity, and even taking part in their custom myself. This thesis seeks to use beating the bounds not merely to investigate Brexit, but to treat the English rural at large as a lens through which multiple visions of England—its grand and mythic past, its tense sociopolitical present, and now its uncertain legislative future—come together, clash and unravel one another.

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Introduction

People have a ‘well-known habit’, wrote Raymond Williams in his groundbreaking 1973 work of cultural geography, *The Country and the City*, ‘of using the past, the “good old days”, as a stick to beat the present’ (12). Whilst Williams was using the ‘stick’ in question as a metaphor for the ways in which the supposed virtues of a bygone rural life are placed on a pedestal in English literature, he might not have been aware of the way his words could be interpreted, in the field of English folklore at least, a little more literally. In centuries past, once a year, close to the Christian Ascension Day in April or May, an entire parish community would march around its perimeter and define notable boundary points such as trees, hills or riverbanks, either purely with their footsteps or, most often, through beating these features with sticks. Often referred to not only as processioning/possessioning but *marking*, *perambulation*, to go *a-ganging* or Rogation Day (*rogere* meaning to beseech, as in make a request of God), the custom had several practical as well as more spiritual uses: warding off encroachment of neighbouring parishes, strangers or lords; ensuring that everyone knew where they belonged and, therefore, which church to pay tithes to; defining the crops upon which God should bestow his blessings; and finally, cementing the knowledge of the boundaries in the memories of the children present, so that the defence of the parish could prevail throughout the next generation. As this custom—most often referred to as ‘beating the bounds’—has re-emerged across southern England in the last few decades, questions about what it means to revive folklore designed to demarcate insiders from outsiders, and to seemingly wish to preserve a culturally homogenous past over a more multiplicitous present, have inevitably emerged in-step, particularly since the advent of the EU referendum and the visible increase in racism, xenophobia and overall sociopolitical tension across Britain that it engendered. This thesis seeks to use beating the bounds not merely to investigate Brexit, but to treat the English rural at large as a lens through which multiple visions of England—its grand and mythic past, its tense sociopolitical present, and now its uncertain legislative future—come together, clash and unravel one another.

Customary walking has a place in many cultures: within the death rites of *konti* by the indigenous Yoemem of Mexico (Delgado Shorter, 2009: 279); within the ceremonies of the Yamabushi, the Japanese Buddhist monks who tread a circular route around their holy mountain home (Wittig Albert, 2009: 166); and, perhaps most famously, within the Aboriginal tradition of walkabout. Also called ‘processioning’, such

customs typically have a reciprocal function, not only recognising the walkers' proprietorship over the land being walked, but the land's proprietorship of the walkers too. As Susan Wittig Albert describes, those who procession 'do not merely possess the land but are possessed of it, members of its community, not just of humans, but of hills and valleys, soils, waters, weathers, plants and animals' (2009: 166). Indeed, processioning, in recognition of this, is sometimes referred to as '*possessioning*' instead (Bushaway, 1992: 126; Darian-Smith, 1999: 177). Dating back to the late Anglo-Saxon period, beating the bounds is one of the most ancient processioning/possessioning customs still practiced today. Likely imported from Gaul in the 5th century, the custom is perhaps the earliest method of communal mapping developed in the British Isles (Groom, 2013: 142; Roud, 2008: 176-179).

Although some urban environments have a history of beating the bounds, its roots are in rural ways of life. During periods of intense enclosure of England's countryside, such as in the decades directly preceding and during the Industrial Revolution, beating the bounds did not just represent a continuation of parish custom, but an attempt to reassert rights to land that was being rapidly privatised. During the 17th century, several beating the bounds events are recorded as encompassing the 'vandalisation' of new fences or boundary markers erected by recently installed landlords and foreign aristocrats, who were claiming common land for themselves at odds with centuries-long local tradition (Hindle, 2008: 225). Beating the bounds is therefore a phenomenon inextricable from protest, and as such is sometimes mentioned in the same discussions as those around other agricultural anti-industrial and anti-capitalist uprisings, such as the notorious Swing riots of 1830 (Clement, 2016: 124; Hobsbawm & Rudé, 2014: 66). Despite many of its original purposes being made obsolete by modern record-keeping, beating the bounds has reappeared during the 20th and 21st centuries not only in England, but also Wales, Germany and North America. It has, however, had a particularly marked resurgence across southern England over the last 30 years (Darian-Smith, 1995: 64, 1999: 175-189; Open Spaces Society, 2021).

Despite beating the bounds as a historical artefact having been studied by many scholars (Bushaway, 1982, 1992; di Bonaventura, 2007; Hindle, 2008; Houseman, 1998; Sharfstein, 2012; Whyte, 2007), its reappearance during the 20th and 21st centuries has received very little attention. However, the custom's preoccupation with defending borders and rejecting outsiders has led to the few

modern-day analyses and descriptions that do exist to align on a surprisingly topical theme: Euroscepticism (Darian-Smith, 1995, 1999; Fraser, 2017; Ireson-Paine, 1999). Two writers that have been particularly specific in their links between beating the bounds revivals and anti-EU sentiments were Eve Darian-Smith in her 1995 and 1999 studies on Kent during the opening of the Channel Tunnel, and Giles Fraser's article on morality and Brexit in 2017, with both writers analysing revivals of beating the bounds in southern England where the resurgence in general, according to the Open Spaces Society (in Darian-Smith, 1999: 178) appears most marked. According to others southern England is also the region that made the single biggest contribution to the victory for Leave at the 2016 EU referendum (all online, no pg: Bhambra, 2017a; Dorling, 2016; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2016; Williams, 2016). Rural areas of England voted Leave at higher rates than the national average (CLA, 2016); as Andy Beckett put it, through Brexit, 'power has leaked from the cities to the countryside' (2016: no pg). One of the key motivations for voting Leave was concerns about immigration; close to half of all Leave voters claimed this as their key concern according to a survey conducted by the polling company Survation (2016; Duffy et. al., 2021).

However, regional voting patterns analysed against actual immigration figures reveal that, in keeping with the relative ethnic homogeneity of much of England's countryside, it was—particularly in southern England—areas with the lowest number of immigrants that most strongly voted Leave. This suggests, as Alan Travis put it, that it was 'fear of immigration [that] drove the leave victory—not immigration itself' (2016a: no pg). The referendum also revealed the slippage in some Leave voters' minds between 'immigrant' and 'any person of colour', whereby anybody who was not white, including those born in Britain, could find themselves targeted with abuse about being 'kicked out' and told 'go home' (Agerholm, 2016; Etehad, 2016; Harris, 2016; Khaleeli, 2016). Despite the popularity of living abroad amongst retired white Britons, particularly in Spain, in such situations individuals are routinely described as 'expats', not immigrants (Remarque Koutonin, 2015). Ironically, many such 'expats' voted to leave the EU, and showed confusion, once stripped of their Freedom of Movement through Brexit, at finding themselves on the receiving end of bureaucracies with which those coded as 'immigrants' are well familiarised (Taylor, 2021).

Some scholars claim that Brexit was not the expression of a genuine disillusionment with EU membership, but instead a symptom of the difficulty modern British people have in coming to terms with the end of the British Empire (Barnett,

2017; Tomlinson, 2019; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019). As Dean Acheson famously claimed in 1962, 'Britain has lost an empire, but not yet found a role' (in Deliperi, 2015: no pg). Unable to cope with Britain's diminished global standing, Britain has arguably spent the last 50+ years pretending empire never happened, all but erasing this aspect of Britain's history from state education, culture and politics (Cobain, 2016; Gilroy, 2004; Tomlinson, 2019; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019). Nevertheless, a flurry of articles and books published in the years after the referendum claimed one reason for Brexit's triumph was a misplaced nostalgia for empire, particularly amongst the English (Andrews, 2016; El-Enany, 2020; Koegler, Kumar Malreddy & Tronicke, 2020; O'Toole, 2018a, 2018b). Whilst Scotland and Wales have been able to somewhat distance themselves from empire through nurturing their own distinct cultural and political identities, England, without its own language or national assembly, is still seen as fairly synonymous with the British state overall and thus the country least willing to 'move on' from past glories (Barnett, 2017; Kenny, 2014; Kumar, 2003, 2015). Out of all the four countries of the UK, only England and Wales voted to Leave, with England doing so by the highest margin; whilst Leave campaigns typically talked in terms that encompassed all of Britain, Brexit still had a 'distinctively English dimension' (Henderson et. al., 2016: 187), with the Daily Mail's pro-Brexit headline demanding to know 'WHO WILL SPEAK FOR ENGLAND?', before clarifying later in the article that they 'of course' meant 'all of the UK' (Daily Mail Comment, 2016).

Despite the proliferation in politics and media of stereotypes about Brexit being a 'working-class protest', some scholars argue that 59% of the people who voted Leave could be more accurately described as middle rather than working class (Bhambra, 2017a; Dorling, 2016; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2016)¹. As Zoe Williams describes it: 'For every one person who voted leave because the global rat race had left them behind, there was more than one person pretty well served by the economy' (2016: no pg). Whilst some people may have indeed voted to leave the EU in protest at what they saw as legislative overreach, it seems many others were under the illusion that Brexit would alter conditions of their lives that had little to do with the EU itself

¹ This idea of 'middle class' responsibility for Brexit has been problematised, such as by Antonucci et. al. in 2017 and most recently Jonas Marvin in the socialist journal *Salvage* in 2021 (81-2). Indeed, the social and economic categories that Dorling & Tomlinson, and by extension Bhambra, used to indicate class within Brexit are contestable. I have included this claim because of its usefulness in revealing the false simplicity of the 'left behind in Northern cities' narrative. Nevertheless, I have ensured that this thesis continually emphasises the instability of class as a definitive form of categorisation (insofar as class is not a primary theme of this thesis overall).

(O'Toole, 2018a; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019; Williams, 2016). This confusion is hardly surprising. Billionaire-backed Leave campaign figureheads such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage claimed Britain was being oppressed by the EU, comparing its leaders to fascists and consistently evoking the imagery of resistance movements during the Second World War (Johnson, 2016; Ross, 2016; Sheftalovich, 2016). Conveniently, this deflected attention away from the miseries caused by the last 10 years of domestic austerity policies, policies which a UN spokesperson had already judged to be 'human rights-violating' in themselves (Alston, Khawaja & Riddell, 2019: no pg).

Beating the bounds, in its ancient iteration, was devised to protect a precarious village community from the theft of land by local or foreign lords, and theft of resources by rivalrous neighbours or marauders. As Steve Hindle describes, in the rural areas of past centuries, 'territorial demarcation could be a matter of life and death' (2008: 223). However, beating the bounds revivals today are often still interpreted using this same framework of resistance against invasion and marginalisation, even though power dynamics in the English countryside today make for a very different sociopolitical landscape. Beating the bounds events in recent years have even been sponsored by such billion-pound corporations as The National Lottery (Beating the Bounds Walking App, no date) and the Virgin Group (Beating the Bounds St. Mary's Ewell, 2013), despite such companies being involved in disputes over misuse of public land themselves (Jackson, 2016). During the Middle Ages a community may have lived or died based entirely on the success of its crop yield and thus did not always have resources to share around; as such, the xenophobic motivations behind beating the bounds are easy to understand. However, for a privileged, majority-white village in rural England in the 21st century, such an explanation seems a little more disingenuous.

As historian Jason Todd puts it: '[B]eating the bounds served a range of purposes, but one of them was to indicate who was to be included and who should be excluded from an area. Policing the boundaries is often about the operation of power and this needs examining' (2019: 6). Rather than forming a reasonable response to genuinely oppressive circumstances, beating the bounds in modern times often appears to function as 'doing the boundary', a term I coin here to describe any action or idea which allows privileged white people an opportunity to 'play' at guarding borders, even though those borders were arguably never truly being encroached on in the first place. What links many of those who beat the bounds today with some of

the more privileged white Leave voters is not just a vague conception of ‘insiders’ versus ‘outsiders’, but specifically this desire to do the boundary, creating an imaginary scenario in which they are oppressed. This scenario not only gives them an apparently legitimate cause for any discontent, but also provides an outlet for frustrations in the form of protest. According to the work of legal scholar Eve Darian-Smith, this is precisely what was happening within the uniformly ‘well-to-do’ communities who revived beating the bounds in Kent in the 1990s. Studying reactions to the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994, Darian-Smith recognised that many English people saw the installation of the high-speed link between themselves and Calais as some kind of infringement on their national and sociopolitical identities, rebelling against this infringement through reviving beating the bounds. However, whilst they pursued this agenda, they seemed content to ignore arguably more pressing issues in their local area, such as extreme poverty (Darian-Smith, 1999: 42). And whilst Darian-Smith’s study connecting beating the bounds with anti-Europe sentiment back in the 1990s laid obvious groundwork for more ethnographic research, especially as Euroscepticism became increasingly visible in politics throughout the 2000s, very little has since emerged on the topic. It is an opportune time to revisit this theory now that Euroscepticism and anti-Europe sentiment have suddenly burst once more into the sociopolitical mainstream through Brexit.

This thesis represents fieldwork conducted at various points over the course of 12 months in one village in south England, pseudonymised as “Saxonbury”, that has been beating the bounds every year for over 50 years. Four research questions guide this work, which are introduced here since they correspond to four separate sections of the literature review, and in turn four distinct data chapters (the data chapters follow the 1-4 pattern exactly, whereas the literature review reverses the order of 1 and 2). Other subsidiary themes will feature throughout the literature/data that are not explicitly indicated within the questions; therefore, these points should be thought of as umbrellas rather than all-encompassing directives:

1. How do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large articulate ‘community’? How central do they view living in an English village ‘community’ to be to their sociopolitical identities?
2. How do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large articulate

their participation in beating the bounds?

3. What is the relationship between the sociopolitical identities of the residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large, and their beliefs about the British Empire and systemic/institutionalised racism in the UK?

4. How strongly do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large identify with how they voted in the EU referendum? What are their beliefs about the identities of people who voted differently to them?

Following this introduction, I begin Chapter 1 by presenting my literature review. First, I explore Darian-Smith's and other works on beating the bounds and Euroscepticism in depth. I then examine how beating the bounds fits within wider human-geographical works around mapping, and within post-nationalism theories of what it might mean to live as a 'global citizen'. Then, I discuss the history of the concept of 'the rural idyll', specifically within British history symbolised by the English village, and its strong associations with 'community', 'community spirit' and 'community values'. I outline the peculiar hold the symbol of the village has always had on definitions of British or English national identity, and the repercussions this has for the 'belonging' of non-white people in the countryside and in the UK at large. I then turn to the topic of the British Empire, demonstrating how Britain's imperial history is continually misrepresented in politics, education and popular culture, and the effect this has on white British people's understanding of immigration and multiculturalism within the modern UK. I discuss English national identity and Brexit, exploring why Brexit was predominantly an English phenomenon, and the importance of the English countryside in particular to anti-globalisation, anti-Europe narratives. I also briefly examine how all these themes relate to English folk culture—defined here as any participation in English folksong, dance or custom in a 'grassroots' fashion—and folkloristics—the academic discipline dedicated to English folklore. I close the literature review with an analysis of various national narratives that have emerged in Britain over the last decade, particularly myths claiming that the London 2012 Olympic Games were a high point of multicultural harmony in comparison to the chaos and racism of Brexit, and stereotypes that paint Leave voters as uniformly unintelligent and racist, as opposed to Remain voters as clever and compassionate. Chapter 2 details my methodology.

The following section begins the data portion of this thesis. This is divided into four chapters. The first two chapters, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, are dedicated to exploring ‘everyday life’ in Saxonbury. Chapter 3, entitled: *“Well thank god I don’t live there!”: Doing the boundary in the everyday Saxonbury ‘community’*, intersperses extracts of interviews with participants on the topic of village life—written in the past tense—with my first impressions of walking around Saxonbury itself—present tense. Chapter 4, entitled: *‘Playful... to a point’: Doing the boundary in ancient custom*, follows a similar format, this time using my experience of beating the bounds as a narrative framework, and cutting between this and discussions with participants about the event before and after. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 are dedicated to more directly political topics, dispensing with the present-tense sections and instead following a more traditional interpretivist analytical style. Chapter 5, entitled: *‘I probably would’ve just put Churchill in a drawer’: Doing the boundary with Britain’s imperial legacy*, explores participants’ understanding of the history of the British Empire and racism in Britain in the modern day. Chapter 6, entitled: *“She just seems to want to trash her own house all the time, that’s all she wants”’: Doing the boundary through Brexit*, explores conflicts between Leave and Remain voters and the prospect of a new post-Brexit ‘global citizenship’. The final chapter, Chapter 7, contains my conclusion. The structure of this will be to first attend to answering the research questions directly, before providing an overall summary of my findings and speculating on how they might be made use of in future research. Lastly follows my bibliography. Each chapter title includes a quote: the titles of the literature review and methodology chapters are taken from academic sources; all data chapter titles use quotes from my participants; lastly the conclusion’s title is adapted from the first line of a novel. All quotes used in this way will also make an appearance within the text and so will be cited fully there.

Folklorists have been debating the true meaning behind ‘traditional’ English customs (meaning here of white and supposedly domestic origin) for centuries. Historically scholars have been dedicated to either the simple documentation of folk artefacts, or the attachment of spurious semi-supernatural origins to them (Frazer, 1993, originally 1890; Groom, 2013; Hutton, 1996; Roud, 2008). Most modern scholars tend to be too uncritical of English folk culture in particular, reproducing a very selective history of the English people as that often represented in folk songs, dances and customs. They also frequently fall into the same trap as past scholars in treating English folk artefacts as mostly vehicles of ancient metaphor (pagan

celebrations of spring, etc, see Roud, 2008, and Hutton, 1996), rather than modern social events communicating the needs and values of those who participate in them today. Whilst English folk culture is not by any means synonymous with English nationalism, it has often been co-opted—as indeed many if not all forms of white European folk culture have histories of being (Baycroft & Hopkin, 2012) —by white nationalists looking to advance an anti-immigrant agenda, proposing white folk culture as the only ‘true’ ancestry of England. Although most prominent English folklorists do not explicitly condone such co-option in their work, they usually also fail to acknowledge the frequency with which this happens. There are notable exceptions, of course. Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps explored domestic English folk culture’s historic intertwinement with nationalism and even Nazism (2013), as well as pointing out the stark reality that the vast majority of English folk enthusiasts and academics are white (Keegan-Phipps, 2017), and Pauline Greenhill (1994, 2002, 2016) highlighted the complex power dynamics to Canadian Morris dancing given the country’s status as an English settler colony.

English folklorists do not have to provide a disclaimer around English nationalism in all their papers to prove they are not English nationalists themselves; that would be an absurd demand. But an uneasiness amongst folklorists with tackling English folk culture’s frequent appearance in nationalist politics almost always co-exists with an unwillingness to acknowledge the exclusionary, violent and even explicitly racist symbolism of some forms of English folk culture in practice too (examples of which will be discussed in the Literature Review). What is perhaps most unique about beating the bounds amongst the wider English folk canon of music, dance, and customs however is its highly literal nature: symbols of power and violence are not in this case something one has to search for to locate. Indeed, historically beating the bounds did often involve not only the beating of children—the best method through which the knowledge of the parish’s boundary lines was thought to be made permanent—but violent physical altercations with outsiders along the boundaries the custom as devised to protect (Bushaway, 1982, 1992; Cleveland, 1881; Hindle, 2008: 224; Tratman, 1931). It is a custom dedicated explicitly to exclusion. In keeping, the very few analyses of the striking modern resurgence of the custom that do exist take the phenomenon mostly at face value, considering it an indication by those participating that they wish to have stricter demarcations between themselves and ‘the outside world’. More prominent folklorists’ apparent disinclination to write about

beating the bounds themselves may well be motivated by the difficulty it presents to anyone looking to take a much more magical—and in turn, perhaps inevitably politically naïve—approach.

If drawing sociopolitical boundaries—and, crucially, having those boundaries respected—is usually an exercise in power and privilege, then drawing such boundaries but disingenuously reframing oneself as the disempowered one in such scenarios is perhaps the most privileged act one can ever perform. In a new social landscape whereby privilege and oppression are being more openly discussed, Fintan O'Toole claims: 'Victimhood has been seen to be the currency of power—[i]n this sense, the far-right is the white man's #metoo movement. Not only am I not guilty, but I am in fact a victim' (2018a: 85). The roots of such psychological reversals—sometimes referred to nowadays as 'gaslighting'²—are long-reaching, from antisemitic conspiracy theories dating back to the European Middle Ages, to fears of miscegenation arising from 'racial mixing' through slavery and colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, to MP Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech about the supposedly slaughterous consequences of former colonial subjects coming to settle in Britain in the mid-20th century. Yet in some ways the 21st century has progressed little on this score, with the coinage by French white supremacist Renaud Camus (2018) of the 'great replacement' theory—the idea that politicians are plotting to replace white Europeans with Middle Eastern, Asian and African people—and the rise of the 'gender critical' movement over the last few years in Britain (McLean, 2021), which itself functions as a gender-based great replacement theory through the belief that trans people pose existential threats to cis people, a view particularly propounded by transphobic academic Janice Raymond (1994, originally 1979). This thesis is not about any of these phenomena explicitly, although they do provide a backdrop for some topics of discussion. Instead, this thesis posits that one of the primary causes of Britain's present sociopolitical tensions is an inability amongst many white 'middle-class' English citizens—cutting across both Leave *and* Remain camps—to reconcile the history of Britain as a global, oppressive superpower with the concept of a well-meaning, whimsical, folkloric England, instilled in them from through various cultural

²The term gaslighting is tossed about easily these days, sometimes seemingly used in sociopolitical critique merely to describe any situation in which someone has told a lie. The definition, when occurring within relationships, is often given as 'making the victim question reality', but it is more complex than this, see Summers, 2021. One crucial element however is that the aggressor attempts to persuade their victim that it is in fact *them* doing the aggressing. On this basis, the examples cited above could qualify.

avenues, likely since childhood. This thesis asks whether these two visions of nation can ever be reconciled.

I have never believed that there is such a thing as truly objective research and make no claims to have achieved it here. I wish to dismantle both nostalgic treatments of the British Empire *and* exclusionarily idyllic representations of the English countryside, and—unlike some of my more simplistic initial views on Brexit, which as will be detailed were greatly challenged—my belief in the importance of refuting the first two concepts has not really been diminished by this research process. Having such unwavering convictions is not unusual for a PhD student, although my personal beliefs perhaps go further in that I made very little effort to hide my views from my participants; often I even stated my views upfront. I could be criticised, fairly, for biasing my results further through this technique, since I perhaps ‘set the tone’ for a conversation that made participants, eager to please, alter their answers accordingly. However, looking back on the sheer number of occasions on which participants were happy to disclose opposing views even after I already told them mine, I feel this was not the case (or at least, not debilitatingly so). Part of the reason for this is that I approached all interviews as a knowledge sharing and generating exercise for both parties. I did not have strict itineraries and allowed participants to go off on any tangents they chose, often finding them more fascinating than discussion topics I had explicitly prepared. My views and phrasing shaped their answers, and vice versa. The best manner through which to explore divisive topics is often, rather than approaching them head-on as though in a fact-finding exercise, to encourage participants to see them principally through the prism of their ordinary, everyday lives; this may, after all, be the extent of how certain major political events, no matter how headline-grabbing, are directly experienced, particularly for the more privileged among us. Whilst this will naturally be explored in far greater depth in the Literature Review and Methodology sections, I felt it was necessary to explain them briefly here, as these beliefs and approaches are not limited to affecting the data chapters (indeed, are not limited to my research career at all) but in fact influence my writing throughout this thesis from its very beginning in some form or other. As Robert J. Sawyer said, refuting an age-old writerly wisdom, ‘You should write not what you know, but what you can find out about’ (2020). I intend to do both.

Chapter 1. “This is not a village, Katharine”: Literature review

1. 1. Beating the bounds of Britain

Taking back control

That cultural and political moves towards equality are often interpreted by privileged individuals as oppressive is a point that has been made by black intersectional feminist writers for decades (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1981). However, Britain’s imperial history lends this false victimhood complex a perverse twist. Paul Gilroy states that ‘the terrifying folk knowledge of what is actually involved in being on the receiving end of imperial power... finds expression above all in [Britain’s] intermittent fears of itself becoming a colonial dependency’ (2004: 92). Such fears found renewed expression during the 2016 EU referendum. Leave campaign figureheads claimed the EU was a neo-fascist project (Ross, 2016; The Sun, 2016) that enslaved Britain in the form of a ‘vassal state’ relationship (Poole, 2018). After Leave triumphed, Nigel Farage campaigned to have 23rd June enshrined as Britain’s Independence Day (Sheftalovich, 2016)—a term typically reserved for freed colonies, often those that have freed themselves from the British Empire in particular. As Fintan O’Toole explains, such reappropriation ‘reimagines the British conquest of the earth as an epic of suffering, not for the victims, but for the victors... [taking] the pain of the oppressed and ascribing it to the oppressors’ (2018a: 72). Nowhere was Britain’s ‘paranoid fantasy’ (O’Toole, 2018b) about EU membership representing a colonisation of sorts more visible than in the winning Vote Leave command to ‘take back control’. Its genius as a slogan lay, according to Anthony Barnett, disproportionately on the second word:

Had the Leave campaign demanded ‘Take Control!’ it would have raised a question: How? Of what? It would feel like a threat to start a battle. Instead its call was, Take Back Control. Back has a double meaning, to take powers away from Brussels and to restore to us something we once had. Softened with nostalgia, its appeal was inspired by a past when, supposedly, we knew who we were and governed our own lives (2017: 38).

Studying the opening of the Channel Tunnel in Folkestone in 1994, Eve Darian-Smith

noted the stark contrast in reactions on either side, with the French engaging in street parties whilst English newspapers described the prospect as a ‘European invasion’. Whilst much of the objection hinged particularly on Kent’s reputation as ‘the garden of England’ (1999: 70), according to Darian-Smith, the tunnel also reopened old wounds over ‘the loss of empire and more currently... the diminishing of Britain as a political and economic world leader’, which was ‘heightened by the growing power of the EU’ itself (1995: 65). That both prominent Leave campaigns, Vote Leave and Leave.EU, derided Britain’s close continental allies such as France and Germany, whilst simultaneously proposing markedly similar relationships to be forged with nations such as the US and Japan, demonstrated the significance of distance to international tensions. Britain’s historically contentious relationship with France is partly because of its proximity, and anxieties about France’s closeness are soothed by separation from it through Britain’s island status (1995, 1999; O’Toole, 2018a; Varley, 2019). But the Channel Tunnel and other links to the European mainland threaten to destroy these protective psychological boundaries—a theme made good use of in Aleem Khan’s 2020 film *After Love*, wherein a Dover-based woman discovers that her late husband, a ferry captain, was having an affair with a much chicer woman in Calais.

The contemporary local reaction to the opening of the tunnel in 1994 was particularly fascinating to Darian-Smith, as several communities around Kent revived the ancient boundary-fortifying custom of beating the bounds (1995, 1999: 175-189). Darian-Smith theorised that in the face of the proposed European incursion, reviving beating the bounds allowed residents to ‘establish new boundary stones articulating local control over Kent’ (1995: 67). The crucial symbolic role that the Channel Tunnel continues to play to this day was reaffirmed when a Leave voter mounted the roof of the Eurostar terminal at London St. Pancras station, waving a large St. George’s Cross flag to protest what he perceived to be unnecessary delays to the Brexit process in March 2019 (Wharton, 2019). Though beating the bounds might seem to ward off all outsiders indiscriminately, as Steve Hindle describes it is nevertheless ‘a ritual of demarcation’ allowing the parish to be chiefly ‘defined over [and] against *its neighbo[u]rs*’ (emphasis mine, 2008: 206). Both Brexit and beating the bounds emphasise the idea that it is our neighbours who are most threatening to us, since they are closest to and thus most capable of encroaching on our boundaries, thereby collapsing our sense of control over our surroundings altogether.

The 'left behind'

The connections between beating the bounds and Brexit itself are not merely something to be extrapolated from Darian-Smith's work alone. Giles Fraser cut out the middleman by explicitly connecting beating the bounds to Brexit in 2017. Describing the traditional English parish as the ideal size for 'moral community', Fraser called the process of beating the bounds 'Brexit-like', claiming that globalisation was 'washing away so many of our familiar boundaries' that it was only through reviving traditions like beating the bounds that English people were able to truly remember 'who [is] responsible for looking after whom' (no pg). Who should be looked after the most, according to Fraser, are 'our own', meaning British-born people, which is in turn coded as white people. White British people are at the top of what Georgie Wemyss has called 'a hierarchy of belonging' (2006: 15), their rights to belong in Britain never questioned and their behaviour considered a blueprint for 'authentic' Britishness. As such white Britons, like Fraser, have the opportunity to act as 'border guards' (Hickman, 1998: 290), policing and gatekeeping British social norms so that those who fail to meet these standards are framed as culturally 'other' (Clarke, 2017: 24; Younge, 2010: 92-94).

Beating the bounds has undergone a revival across (particularly southern) England, appearing to have begun in the late 1980s or early 1990s, and according to the Open Spaces Society hitting a high point of 50 different locales participating in 1993 (in Darian-Smith: 178). Although exact numbers for the present day are hard to come by, a Google search of the term "beating the bounds 2016" reveals, in merely the first 6 pages of results, over 25 different municipalities in England that beat the bounds in this year alone. Whilst occasionally beatings of the bounds may be organised in direct response to proposed new developments on common land (Rebel History Calendar, 2021), events more often have little to do with any actual development threats and have taken on their own status as a revived local custom. Nevertheless, OSS's official advice sheet for those beating the bounds still emphasises the traditional framework of resistance against invasion and marginalisation:

There are all too many interests keen to encroach on the margins of our commons and greens. If no one objects in time, it can mean common land is

permanently lost. So beating the bounds is just as important today. It reminds your local community that they have a common or green with a *boundary to be guarded* (emphasis mine, 2021: no pg)

As Darian-Smith's and Fraser's interpretations of beating the bounds suggest, participants in a way become real border guards patrolling the English countryside, warding off anyone who might encroach upon it, such as Europeans, immigrants, people of colour or anyone else who may be coded as an 'outsider'³. Fraser's article is rife with anti-immigrant sentiment, but his use of beating the bounds as an analogy does not merely extend to asserting the importance of prioritising 'native' rights over incomers. He also uses the custom as an opportunity to criticise Remain voters, beginning by analysing the roots of the word 'parochial':

First [the dictionary] will probably say that the meaning of parochial derives from the ecclesiastical parish, which is true. Then it may offer a number of unflattering synonyms: narrow-minded, provincial, insular, blinkered, illiberal, intolerant etc. These are just the sorts of epithets that remainers use for leavers. Yet... at the size it is, parochial is the perfect scale for our moral flourishing. I suspect that support for Brexit was partly motivated by the fear that we were outrunning older, deeper versions of social solidarity. Politicians should mark, mark, mark (2017: no pg).

Pioneering folklorist Bob Bushaway considers beating the bounds a demonstration that those 'within the boundary were part of a particular moral world and those without were outsiders' (1992: 126). Fraser's article, in associating small parish and village communities with moral purity, draws both on Bushaway's description of a moral divide between a parish and its outsiders, and on the Brexit trope of the 'left behind'. Used by a wide range of Leave campaigners and commentators, the concept refers to a mythical community of white, poor, usually Northern English voters who are considered uniquely abandoned by modern Britain, both through 'Londoncentric' policy-making and general social changes towards multiculturalism and equality

³ Listing these categories within which someone may be judged as an 'outsider' in Britain should not imply I consider them genuinely separate or even legitimate categories of 'outsider', merely that they are examples of ways perceived outsiders *are* categorised and separated. See Virdee, 2014.

(Barnett, 2017; Shilliam, 2018). In this vein, those who have been 'left behind' voted Leave because they desired to retrieve Fraser's 'older, deeper versions of social solidarity' (2017: no pg)—a traditional sense of 'community'—for which they are derided by their apparently more progressive Remain-voting counterparts. Building on this idea, in 2017 David Goodhart premiered his theory of 'Somewheres' versus 'Anywheres'. Anywheres, Goodhart argues, are the kind of 'middle-class' higher-educated white British (particularly southern English) citizens who believe that any feelings of national belonging are outdated. Goodhart describes the EU as 'an Anywhere project par excellence, and in its technocratic elitism and drive to transcend the national it has become another story of Anywhere over-reach' (2017: 91). Whilst some Remainers claimed they woke up the day after the EU referendum feeling as though they were living in a foreign country, 'they were experiencing, in political reverse, what a majority of people [Somewheres] apparently feel every day' (2017: 2). Both Fraser and Goodhart invoke Wemyss' hierarchy of belonging uncritically, appearing to believe that it is not only right and proper that white British people get the majority of if not all of Parliament's attention, but that anyone who criticises this viewpoint is snobbish, judgemental and out-of-touch with the cultural and psychological boundaries most ordinary British people require to survive.

Beating the bounds resurged primarily in the rural south of England, coincidentally also the area where support for Brexit was by some measures the strongest (Beckett, 2016; CLA, 2016; Dorling, 2016; Williams, 2016). As stated in the introduction, support for Brexit in the countryside was more decisive than the national average, with 55% voting for Leave in rural communities as opposed to 52% across England overall; 59% of Leave voters could also be described as 'middle class' (see footnote 1). This is despite the prevailing belief, particularly propagated by those wishing to 'deflect consideration of race in the motivations of the vote' (Bhambra, 2017a: no pg), that Brexit was instead the result of legitimate grievances by England's downtrodden. As Zoe Williams explains: 'For every one person who voted leave because the global rat race had left them behind, there was more than one person pretty well served by the economy' (2016: no pg). Whilst Darian-Smith makes little direct mention of class, she notes that the 'main advocates' of the beating the bounds revival around the tunnel are 'not natives of Kent but recent arrivals from London... in search of a sense of morality, community and locality in which to play out their rural fantasies' (1999: 179). In sweepingly depicting both Brexit and beating the bounds

revivals as protests against class-based oppression, Fraser ignores the evidence that the participants in both are likely to be 'middle-class' communities in relatively wealthy, white-majority areas of rural south England, communities that could thus hardly fit the definition of having been 'left behind' within the pro-Brexit narrative.

Pain, violence and sovereignty

'Sovereignty', a mainstay concept of the Leave campaigns, was typically described by Leave campaigners 'like a vital fluid' (Barnett, 2017: 173), as though Britain had apparently once had sovereignty but membership of the EU had gradually drained it away. In reality, in Leave campaign parlance at least, sovereignty was not only ill-defined and 'purely theoretical' (Cable, 2020: no pg), wrongly depicting any form of international cooperation as somehow damaging to it (Westcott, 2020; Verovšek, 2020), but it even represented in many ways 'the opposite of people taking control' (Barnett, 2017: 173), since in the same feudal framework that painted Britain as a 'vassal state' at the whims of a foreign king, regaining sovereignty simply spelled the domestic monarch regaining control, in no way also indicating the restoration of power to the 'common people'. So if Brexit, contrary to Vote Leave's and Leave.EU's claims, was not really going to give back control to the British people in any meaningful way, what in fact was the point of it for so many voters?

In 1990, on the matter of recent EU policy changes then-Secretary of State Nicholas Ridley stated: 'I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have the shelters and the chance to fight back' (Lawson, 2011: no pg). In the years that have passed since the EU referendum in 2016, war symbolism has not merely been used to compare Brexit to a heroic anti-fascist uprising (Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019; English, 2019; O'Toole, 2018a) but also to invoke the 'Blitz spirit'; a belief inherited from Britain's experiences in the World Wars that the British are uniquely constituted to simply 'keep calm and carry on' through times of great unrest. A BBC vox pop on potential post-Brexit food shortages (shortages that have now come to fruition in 2021: Sharman, 2021) featured the claim it would 'do the country good to go without food for a little while'. The comment was widely derided for framing wartime rationing with misplaced nostalgia (Farry, 2019; Read, 2019; SWNS, 2019), but it also provided a telling insight into instinctual connections between Brexit and self-harm in the eyes of certain Leave voters. Sadopopulism is a term coined by Timothy Snyder to describe a form of

governance premised on the infliction of pain and harm on its citizens (2017). Through Brexit, Fintan O'Toole argues, sadopopulism has been given an even more intensely masochistic flavour, whereby not only the Conservative government—having already punished the British people with over a decade of austerity measures—but now even the British people themselves seemed to desire to experience pain (2018a, 2018b). Whilst for tax-avoiding capitalists the appeal of the apparent removal of 'EU red tape' is easy to identify (Monbiot, 2020), the motivations of the ordinary British public for inflicting such harm on their economy are perhaps harder to tease. As O'Toole muses:

Three things seem to make cutting addictive. One is that it gives the pain you feel a name and a location. It becomes tangible and visible—it has an immediate focus that is somehow more tolerable than the larger, deeper distress. The second is that it provides the illusion of control. You choose to do it—you are taking an action and producing a result. It is a kind of power, even if the only way you can exercise that power is over yourself and even if the only thing you can do to yourself is damage (2018a: 130).

The use of the verb *to beat* within beating the bounds—as well as a typical usage of sticks to 'whip' the landscape—already implies physical violence. However, beating the bounds also contains the tradition of 'bumping', in which members of the parish, typically children, are themselves *literally* beaten, whipped, thrown in rivers or in the most typical iteration, thrown against a boundary stone itself. The alleged reason for this is ensuring children remember the route (Cleveland, 1881; Bushaway, 1982, 1992; Tratman, 1931); as Steve Hindle describes it, the map of the parish was 'transmitted from the memories of the aged through physical inscription on the bruised backsides and sore heads of the young' (2008: 219). However, Daniel J. Sharfstein has other ideas. He argues that 'the choice to mark the occasion with pain rather than, say, laughter... makes an unmistakable statement to the outside world': that of 'the *sovereign power of the owner*' (emphasis mine, 2012: 666). The fact that most bumpings are done to children further entwines the symbolism of beating the bounds with Brexit, with the statistics that over-65s voted to Leave the EU at over twice the rate of under-25s interpreted by some as a sort of inter-generational 'revenge' (Ronel, 2017).

Indeed, in an account of one of the longest-running beating the bounds customs

in Britain, occurring at Oxford and comprised of participants from one of the university's most esteemed colleges, Brasenose, Jocelyn Ireson-Paine complains about the fact that children themselves are no longer beaten during beating the bounds, apparently because 'EU law now forbids this' (1999: no pg), though there is no reference made to any legislation in particular. Following the traditional boundary route in the modern era requires Brasenose to enter the high street, let onto the shop floors of Marks and Spencer's and Littlewoods by wary managers who must 'step back to avoid having [their] eyes put out by the violently beating sticks'. Overall Ireson-Paine describes it as 'a great way to release aggression: if you're really feeling energetic, you can wear out three whole canes' (Ibid). Whilst some may describe Brexit as merely a masochistic exercise, Snyder reminds us that sadopopulism is still rooted in the promise that whatever hurt is inflicted on us, our government will inflict it doubly on our enemies: 'You hurt [but only because] you want someone else to hurt more' (in Campbell, 2021: no pg). It is a pitiful triumph summarised by the infamous taunt, supposedly to the EU: 'You need us more than we need you!'. This was brilliantly satirised by comedian James Acaster in a surreal sketch from his 2018 show *Repertoire*, where he takes the role of a British tourist, shouting the phrase over and over whilst trying to stop a slowly subsiding Leaning Tower of Pisa from crushing him.

Some interpretations of using violence and pain to assert community solidarity are a little more nuanced. Joanna Bourke has theorised that pain functions as a series of 'communicative acts' through which 'people-in-pain and witnesses to their pain may reaffirm communion and community' (2014: 47), which she summarises as 'pain talk'. As Sara Ahmed explains the importance to her chronically ill mother of her agreement 'to bear witness, to identify [my mother's] pain' (2014: 29), she admits it granted her mother's suffering 'the status of an event', which not only validated her but seemed to bring the two of them closer together in their own two-person community. Michael Houseman, in his article comparing different pain-based customs around the world, from beating the bounds in England to the *gisaro* custom of Papua New Guinea, states that 'inflicted pain provides a particularly memorable focus for a shared commitment to the ritual relationships the participants enact' (1998: 462). Citing instances in records in which victims of bumping appeared to receive 'special treatment' afterwards, Houseman claims the 'victims' integration within the celebrating community was ratified' (1998: 451) by both the pain they experienced and the fact that it was witnessed by everybody else.

Stephen King's novel (written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman) *The Long Walk* (1979) explores a similar theme, albeit to a far gorier extent. Referring to an annual ritual developed in a totalitarian America, the titular Long Walk forces a group of 100 boys to keep walking without stopping until 99 have died, either from exhaustion or from being shot by military attendants for failing to keep pace. The sole winner is indeed awarded special treatment in the form of the ambiguous prize: whatever he wants for the rest of his life. The walk is broadcast across the nation, and each boy's suffering and eventual gruesome death (bar one) not only consolidates the sovereign power of the state, as per Sharfstein's theory, but is cathartic for the people watching. Reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque (1984)—wherein state-sanctioned days of chaos ensure that citizens uphold the social structure compliantly for the remainder of the year—our protagonist describes the crowd reacting to the latest bout of torture thusly: 'Somehow they understood that the circle between death-worship and death-wish had been completed for another year and the crowd went completely loopy, convulsing itself in greater and greater paroxysms' (1979: 317), before they are seen to settle at last into a satisfied, trance-like communal calm.

Spiritual and (trans)national boundaries

Beating the bounds is not a purely communal activity, and indeed does not always require eyewitnesses to count. The custom's bodily approach to mapping can function as a kind of individual spiritual journey too, situated within theories of pilgrimage (Turner, 1973, 1974; Wheeler, 1999) 'experiential mapping' (B. Smith, 2013), 'deep mapping' (J. Smith, 2015), 'embodied mapping' (Morris & Voyce, 2015; Perkins, 2009), 'corporeal cartography' (Ali, 2014; Shrodes, 2015), 'cartographies of movement' (Dodge, 2013; Message, 2010), or even the wider field of psychogeography, particularly the work of Iain Sinclair (2002, 2005). To engage with all these interrelated philosophies is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, using a particular interpretation of pilgrimages, such as Lawrence J. Taylor's distinction between pilgrimages to the 'centre' and those to the 'edge', is useful here (2007).

According to Taylor, whilst mass pilgrimages are more likely to take the form of individuals from 'the edges' congregating in a centre of some concrete spiritual significance, pilgrimages to the edge—what beating the bounds arguably signifies—typically concern individuals in pursuit of liminality and personal growth (Turner, 1973,

1974). Tim Robinson's account of his journey around the coasts of the Aran Islands of Ireland, literally entitled *Pilgrimage* (2008, originally 1989), has been described by Ben Smith as a simultaneous 'beating the bounds... of "self" and "landscape"' (2013: 67). Claiming 'I am the pen on the paper... my pen is myself walking the land' (Robinson, 1996: 77), Robinson states a desire to move beyond the restrictions of ordinary printed maps, mirroring postcolonial theorists in their beliefs that they represent oppressive imperialist tools (Bassett, 1994; Probasco, 2014; Said, 1978; Yokota, 2011). Robinson instead tries to create a living, moving map, one that somehow exists in confluence not only with the ground he walks on but all space and time. Whilst watching dolphins swim around Aran, Robinson hits on an appropriate analogy for it:

I waded out until they were passing and repassing within a few yards of me; it was still difficult to see the smoothly arching succession of dark presences as a definite number of individuals... they were wave made flesh, with minds solely to ensure the moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world... Let the problem be symbolised by that of taking a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to its wave. Is it possible to think towards a human conception of this "good step"? (2008: 19-20)

As David Wylie describes it, the step would be 'good' not because it would be all-encompassing, but because 'it would tread upon the ground with a certain respect... to[wards] the manifold human and natural histories of the land traversed, [establishing] a continuum of land, body and text' (2012: 374). This explanation seems to connect more explicitly with the act of processioning/possessioning again: to quote Susan Wittig Albert once more, those who beat the bounds 'do not merely possess the land but are possessed *of* it, members of its community, not just of humans, but of hills and valleys, soils, waters, weathers, plants and animals' (2009: 166). However, through focussing not on a circumference of in its entirety, but on the granular force of the individual footstep, a wider metaphor 'of a certain way of living on this earth' (Robinson, 2008: 364) emerges from Robinson's writing, one which evokes Medard Boss's concept of 'bodying forth' (Boss, 1994, originally 1977; Craig, 1993). Although the limits of the body are realised in death, such inevitability also provides life's only possible conditions for awe and wonder. Bodying forth, like the good step, posits the quest for edges as only possible once one's own personal borders have been

relinquished⁴. As Boss further explains, 'the borders of my bodyhood coincide with those of my openness to the world. They are in fact at any given time identical' (1994: 102-103). In this vein, a pilgrimage around a boundary only reveals the fallibility of neatly segmenting the world into bordered spaces in the first place.

Robinson's constant eschewing of borders throughout his works hints towards an understanding of himself as a 'global citizen', an idea of a transnational citizenship 'viewed as a particular consciousness toward the wider world' rather than one's immediate national birthplace (Delanty, 2005: 98). As Robinson explains, 'to the footloose, all boundaries, whether academic or national, are mere administrative impertinences' (1997: 27-28): as such he claims 'the freedom of the globe's surface' (in Marland, 2014: no pg). However, according to Chapman et. al., '[c]apitalism, imperialism, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and ableism work to ensure that a designated few realise the dream [of global citizenship]' (2020: 13); as Lauriina Pernu more succinctly puts it: 'privileged citizens go global, others go home' (2018: 1). Robinson's description of boundaries as simply inconvenient speaks volumes here. Boundaries in the form of national borders kill people, most disproportionately people of colour (Albahari, 2006; Spijkerboer, 2007; Freerk & van Houtum, 2009), with migrants either dying as a result of a place's inherent 'borderiness' (mechanisms by which it is 'borderised' through policing and detainment, see: Anderson, 2000, and Walters, 2002) or dying en route before ever reaching said border. That borders are 'performances' of state control more than naturally-occurring geographical features transforms the border space, according to Paolo Cuttitta, into a 'theatre' inside of which is performed a 'border play' (2014: 196).

The reality that white British people who have passed through borders to settle elsewhere are routinely described as expats, not immigrants, is critiqued by Mawuna Remarque Koutonin: 'Africans are immigrants. Arabs are immigrants. Asians are immigrants. However, Europeans are expats because... immigrants is a term set aside for "inferior races"' (2015: no pg). The recent complaints of UK residents being forced to return from Spain despite themselves voting for Brexit is a case in point, their apparent surprise reflecting a belief from 'the days of the British Empire when a British citizen could travel anywhere with a sense of entitlement' (Anderson, 2021: no pg). Brexit has revealed Freedom of Movement across the European Union to be a

⁴ This idea has existed for millennia within Buddhist philosophy. See Siderits, 2011, and Wright, 2017.

privilege, and not a fundamental right, and Michaela Benson described white British people discovering this as the process of becoming 'newly bordered' (2020: 501). Katie Walsh's *Transnational Geographies of the Heart* (2018), documenting the lives and loves of the British migrant community in Dubai, contains many examples of white people apparently experiencing 'new bordering', with participants not only becoming irate at the kinds of administrative processes many immigrants of colour may find themselves faced with for the entirety of their lives, but using these frustrations as justification for racist epithets:

[Y]ou have it all sorted and then some smug bugger behind the counter says: "no, no, law changed". My friend's sister speaks Arabic and she says she heard a 'dish-dash' [a derogatory term for male Emirati national] behind the counter saying, "what can we do today to shake things up?" It's as if these people decide to be objectionable!... It's a third world country behind the gloss (73).

'A real mood of protest and defiance'

Tim Robinson's refusal to admit his nationality whilst beating the bounds of Ireland is probably, according to Catherine Nash, 'a cathartic response to his position as an English writer' (1995: 208), since England colonised Ireland and suppressed the use of its native place names whilst doing so. Beating the bounds is itself a colonial artefact: pilgrims to America in the 17th and 18th centuries did not merely draw up deeds for ownership of the lands they encountered but revived beating the bounds to beat the unfamiliar wilderness into submission (di Bonaventura, 2007: 240-241). Yet all the colonial connotations to the revived custom are typically elided in favour of other narratives, be that it is in fact those who beat the bounds themselves that are marginalised, as seen above with Fraser and Ireson-Paine, or that the custom has nothing to do with power and is instead merely a leisure activity requiring no critical examination of any kind. The claim by one of the Kent organisers in the 1990s that beating the bounds is done only 'for fun, really' (1999: 180), comes up short to Darian-Smith then, but comes up even shorter now in a post-Brexit landscape in which there seems a newfound awareness of the genuine harm that boundary-drawing can cause.

Beating the bounds, even when done in the modern era, is not always and solely an expression of power. It can in fact still be a response to genuine corporate

and governmental encroachment on local communities' green spaces. Writer John Rogers describes beating the bounds on Leyton Marshes alongside the New Lammas Lands Defence Committee (referring to an old Celtic term for common rights to cattle grazing) in the early 2000s:

[H]ere on Leyton Marshes it wasn't just a quaint re-enactment of an old custom whereby the devil was beat out of the locality and youngsters were shown the parish limits, [but] carried a real political message... This still stands and the right to free access to the land and for it not to be fenced in is an important local right, especially at a time when more and more of London is being taken out of circulation by developers. But with the 2012 Olympics on its way, the London Development Agency have their hungry eyes on all the spare land they can grab, and without a word to anyone, they've decided that a chunk of the Lammas Lands would be a good place to relocate allotments from Hackney that are going to end up as a Badminton Court or something else equally useful... There was a real mood of protest and defiance [on the walk], however twee we must have looked with our ribbons fluttering in the wind (2006: no pg).

Indeed, the New Lammas Lands Defence Committee's most recent beating of the bounds in 2019 was subtitled 'Save Lea Marshes', referring to the damage done by the erection of what were eventually basketball courts by the official 2012 London Olympic Committee. Despite being originally offered compensation by the Olympic Committee, the community around Leyton Marshes by 2019 had still had yet to receive a penny (SLMAdmin, 2019), and the promise made that the courts would be made available for public use after the Games was also swiftly broken. As an update from the Olympic Committee itself reveals, the floors from the courts 'are sitting in storage at the Glasgow Emirates Stadium, where they may be 'available to NGBs (National Governing Bodies) across the UK at future major events', and as local activist Charlie Charman summarises: 'In other words they were never going to be played on by the amateur hoi polloi of Waltham Forest or Hackney' (2013: no pg).

The New Lammas Lands Defence Committee's example is also not the only modern iteration of beating the bounds where power dynamics truly resemble those around which the ancient custom was devised. The pro-immigrant campaign group Refugee Tales, in a form of protest *against* Brexit, took part in beating the bounds in

2016, citing the need to ‘stand up to those imposing borders’ that Brexit represented, sharing horrifying experiences of fleeing war and border controls along the way (Leaving to Remain, 2016: no pg). And Mike Carter, despite never using the term beating the bounds itself, arguably performed one in recreating the 1981 March for Jobs from Liverpool to London—originally organised by his trade unionist father, Pete Carter—in the months leading up to the referendum, intending to use the pilgrimage to find out ‘what had happened to the Britain’ of hope and unity that his father had apparently promised him when he was a child (2019: 12). But Carter, like Robinson, never considered how his own ‘invisible knapsack’ of white privilege (McIntosh, 1989: 10) may have assisted him in moving about the country—often even across private land—freely and without interrogation. Nor did Carter problematise the assumption that Britain was *his* to be promised in the first place, an assumption visible during several moments of his journey in which he ‘others’ people of colour, describing them in such terms as ‘a long way from home’ (2019: 70) and lamenting how they might have possibly taken jobs that could otherwise be fulfilled by British citizens (249).

Darian-Smith acknowledges that the building of the Channel Tunnel undoubtedly encroached on some of Kent’s public green spaces, and thus would be a reasonable target for protest. But whilst those in Kent may have perceived themselves as the victims of an incursion of sorts, their cultural and political status as white British natives placed them in a relative position of power. This, teamed with the xenophobic overtones of British complaints about the building of the tunnel overall ⁵, complicates assumptions about who is truly the marginalised party whenever a beating of the bounds is performed. As discussed in the introduction, historian Jason Todd perhaps summarised the inherent contradiction to beating the bounds best, implying that whilst the custom is traditionally perceived as having the purpose of protesting *against* power, the act of ‘policing the boundaries’ in this way is itself an ‘operation of power’ and as such ‘needs examining’ for the exclusions this will necessarily entail (2019: 6). Brexit, both in its representations in media and politics, and the professed motivations of many ordinary people who voted for it, often appears to involve a similar sleight-of-hand regarding who has power and who has does not.

⁵ One particularly baffling idea was that the Channel Tunnel would allow rabies to spread more easily from the continent to Britain. A fixation on rabies itself is telling, since it is a disease that according to Darian-Smith has long been racialised in the English mindset. See 1999: 141-159.

One of the central questions of this thesis, as outlined in the introduction, is on the face of it a very simple one: how do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large articulate their reasons for beating the bounds? Do they participate because of support of Brexit and/or a desire for greater boundaries between their community and Europe in general? Is it driven by a renewed fear of ‘outsiders’, in whatever form they take in the modern English rural psyche? Is it to reassert a singular domestic narrative of the English rural, one that exists outside of Britain’s colonial exploits and other flows of migration and movement? Or do they participate genuinely ‘for fun, really’ (in Darian-Smith 1999: 180), no matter how insubstantial that response seems to the critical mind of a researcher? Before answering these questions, it is important to first delve a little deeper into the history of the English village, inside of which beating the bounds usually takes place. Whilst the custom sometimes occurs in urban environments, its historical inextricability from rural politics ensures most revivals take place in rural areas, such as villages. And although no landscape is free of social meaning, the English village—symbolising moral purity, as noted by Giles Fraser (2017) above, and according to di Bonaventura (2007), exactly the type of settlement the puritan pilgrims were trying to replicate through beating the bounds of colonial America—has its own history of power, and must be explored first before wider issues of boundaries appearing through Brexit can be explicitly broached.

1. 2. ‘England is a village’

England’s rural idyll

“Rural”, claims Michael Woods, ‘is one of those curious words which everyone thinks they know what it means, but which is actually very difficult to define precisely. Attempts by academics... to delimit [the rural] have always run into problems’ (2004: 15). Ventures to classify exactly what the rural is has led to the development of quantitative score systems, such as for instance the ‘rurality index’ proposed by Cloke and Edwards (1986), although these have been criticised for their unnecessarily granular nature (Halfacree, 1993; Mormont, 1990; Woods, 2004; Yarwood, 2005), even by Cloke himself (1994). One person’s visualisation of the rural may be a ‘green and pleasant land’ but where does this leave the Australian outback, which despite evoking ‘days heavy with the menace of bushfire’ and ‘wilting gardens’, Australian

novelist Joan Lindsay describes as ‘*my days... in a way that the gentle green days of an English summer could never be mine?*’ (1962: 187) Some geographers claim that the category of rurality must be dispensed with entirely (Hoggart, 1988, 1990), but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage seriously in these debates, and indeed the question of ‘what is rural?’ in a strictly geographical sense is not relevant here. Instead, the rural is not so much a quantifiable space as it is an idea, or state of mind (Woods, 2004). If ‘rurality is not a thing’, the question instead then becomes one of, as Marc Mormont explains, ‘how each occupant of rural space [as defined by the occupant] feels—or *becomes*—rural’ (emphasis mine, 1990: 34-36).

One potential way of feeling rural is through engaging with the concept of ‘the rural idyll’. Perhaps most visible to international audiences through Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* franchise depicting J.R.R. Tolkien’s Shire, the peaceful green home of Frodo Baggins, the idyll utilises the imagery of the pre-industrial past to create an idealised countryside haven. Not only a visually beautiful place, but a repository of old-fashioned norms deemed otherwise lost in modern globalised society (Cloke & Milbourne, 1992; Tuitjer, 2016; Scutt & Bonnet, 1996) such as ‘community spirit’ and ‘traditional’ or ‘family values’ (Hughes, 1997; Kerrigan, 2019; Scutt & Bonnet, 1996; Rose, 1993; Shucksmith, 2016; Murdoch & Marsden, 1994), the idyll, Gesine Tuitjer explains, presents a place where ‘*the world is still alright*’ (2016: 44). Within English culture specifically, the phenomenon that best symbolises the rural idyll is the English village. Representing a pre-capitalist era of ‘social harmony’, the English village reinstalls feudal relationships, wherein a peasant works the local land and in return is supported by the resident nobility (Cloke & Milbourne, 1992; Matless, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2016; Tuitjer, 2016; Scutt & Bonnet, 1996). Historian P. H. Ditchfield began his 1908 compendium *The Charm of the English Village* outlining a ‘typical example’:

We see arising above the trees the village church, the centre of the old village life... Nestling amid the trees we see the manor-house... It seems to look upon the village with a sort of protecting air. Near at hand are some old farm-houses... Carefully thatched ricks⁶ and barns and stables and cow-sheds... There is a village inn, with its curiously painted sign-board... There is an old school which modern Government inspectors can scarcely be persuaded to

⁶ A somewhat archaic term for a haystack.

allow to live, because it is not framed according to modern plans and ideas...
The village green still remains to remind us of the gaiety of old village life...
[when] the merry May-pole reared (1908: 17-22).

The village is so central to English national identity that it has often been used as a synonym for the nation itself (Agyeman & Spooner, 1997; Kumar, 2003; Matless, 1997, 2016). As Agyeman and Spooner point out, the word country has a 'double meaning', referring to both the countryside of England and the nation as a whole (1997: 207). According to Alun Howkins, during the First World War, for 'the men in the New Armies... "my platoon" took on the resonance of "my village"' (2003: 30). Second World War campaigns such as 'Dig for Victory' and 'English Earth' reiterated that to be British was to belong at heart in the English village (Matless, 2016: 148), and a spate of books appearing during the interwar period extolled the virtues of a 'return' to village life, such as the works of H. V. Morton and C. H. Warren, with one of the latter's books literally entitled: *England is a Village* (1940). Despite the wide array of industrial national iconography Britain has to offer, the last decade of UK passports have seen their anti-forgery pages dominated by imagery of rural England, with one featuring a row of cottages in Bibury, described by William Morris as 'the most beautiful [village] in England' (in Warwick, 2003: no pg; Matless, 2016: 9-10). Such choices give a telling insight into the way England, and thus Britain, is represented both nationally and internationally.

Crucial to the staying power of the village in the English cultural mindset, however, is the paradoxical idea that whilst returning to village life is always aspirational, it is also now impossible. This is visible in Ditchfield's description, even when writing in 1908, of 'old village life' as something ghostly and already obsolete (17-22). Enclosure, beginning in the Norman Conquest but gathering immense speed around the 16 and 1700s, was a process by which local and foreign nobility purchased previously common British land and converted it for solely private use, transforming rural society from one revolving around class reciprocity, as stated above, to one based around ownership and rent. The rise of Romanticism in the 18th century is often considered a backlash to this period, industrialisation being seen not only to endanger lives but spiritual wellbeing too, with the cold rationality of an urbanised society considered incompatible with the 'natural' rural English sensibility (Joshua, 2007; Szabolcsi, 1970). Painters of the time John Constable and Thomas Gainsborough became best-known for their vistas of rolling English hills and thatched cottages,

paintings which are still widely considered amongst the best that the whole history of British art has to offer. William Blake's often quoted poem *Jerusalem*, the origin of the iconic description of England as a 'green and pleasant land'—and, through Hubert Parry's 1916 musical arrangement, considered by some to be the nearest thing England has to a national anthem (Desai & Martin, 2005; Silverton, 2016)—contains a disparaging description of England's 'dark satanic mills', attributed by some to the emergence of the looming towers of the Industrial Revolution's factories (Desai & Martin, 2005). William Wordsworth rued the loss of customary life in 1814, lamenting in the 'Solitary' section of the long poem *The Excursion*: 'Many precious rites / And customs of our rural ancestry / Are gone, or stealing from us'. In his signature 1770 poem, *The Deserted Village*, Oliver Goldsmith lamented: 'Even now the devastation is begun/ And half the business of destruction done/ Even now, methinks, as pondering here I stand/ I see the rural virtues leave the land'.

The notion that the village is declining or dead is a trope that has remained potent in the English cultural imagination long after the ebbing away of the Romantic period. Ethnographies conducted throughout the second half of the 20th century such as Ronald Frankenberg's *Village on the Border* (1957), Margaret Stacey's *Tradition and Change* (1960), Marilyn Strathern's *Kinship at the Core* (1981), *Childerley: Nature and Morality in a Modern Village* by Michael Mayerfeld Bell (1995), and more recently *The Threatened Rural Idyll?* by N. A. Kerrigan (2019), have presented the evidence that villagers certainly consider themselves relics of a somewhat outdated culture. Rural historians in the early 21st century (Burchardt, 2004; Howkins, 2003; Kingsnorth, 2008; Scruton, 2000) deplored the transformation by middle-class incomers of 'working villages' into tourist spots, with Howkins remarking: 'What we have here is perhaps the final moment in the battle between town and country—and the town appears victorious' (2003: 234). Several journalists around this period embarked on investigative journeys into whether the English village could even be 'saved' (Askwith, 2008; Page, 2004). As David Matless explains: '[T]he language of recent loss is... indeed as old as that [rural] writing in which it appears' (1994: 45). According to Tom Fort, the English village 'has been declared dead or dying so often that it seems almost heretical to declare that it is nothing of the sort. But I have to respect the evidence... it remains very much alive' (2017: 1). Indeed, Essaka Joshua demonstrates that the Romantics often lamented the 'death' of rural customs despite contemporary evidence demonstrating they were still very popular (2007: 49). Raymond Williams, in his

seminal book *The Country and the City*, describes the tendency to repeatedly defer the 'golden age' for the village using the analogy of an escalator:

Surt traced this ending to two periods: enclosure after 1861 and residential settlement after 1900. Yet this at once takes us into the period of Thomas Hardy's novels, written between 1871 and 1896... But now the escalator was moving without pause... Shall we go back to Philip Massinger, in the early 1620s... [or] Bastard's *Chrestoleros*, in 1598... Or shall we find the timeless rhythm in Domesday[?].... Or in a free Saxon world[?].... In a Celtic world, before the Saxons came[?].... Where indeed shall we go, before the elevator stops? (1975: 9-11)

As Williams explains, 20th and 21st century scholars' consistent portrayal of 18th and 19th century enclosures 'as a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder' (1975: 137) shows a misconception that this era was unique in this manner. As Guy Shrubsole demonstrates in *Who Owns England?*, the eradication of common land has continued, even perhaps sped up in the 21st century, since currently 25,000 private landowners—much less than 1 per cent of the English population—in fact own half of the country's total land. Indeed, if Brexit, Shrubsole asks, was 'all about reclaiming parliamentary sovereignty, why doesn't Parliament first *take back control of the land beneath its feet?*' (emphasis mine, 2019a: 64).

A village eternal

The erosion of public access to English rural spaces, however, has not had a diminishing effect on its presence within British (and to some extent global) popular culture. Dramas set in the English countryside continue to be popular, such as *The Archers* (1951), *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-), and *Downton Abbey* (2015-2019), not to mention the monumental success of *The Great British Bake-Off* (2010-), which despite its name takes heavy influence from rural southern English imagery in particular. Even rural murder mysteries such as *Midsomer Murders* (1997-) and *Grantchester* (2014-) derive much of their entertainment value from the understanding that crime is

antithetical to traditional English village life⁷. Like the rural more broadly, the village is just as much an *idea* as it is an actual unit of human settlement, described by Matless as 'a mythic figure, one dancing in English... imaginations', and a symbol of 'values which are *by no means tied to a rural location*' (emphasis mine, 1994a: 7). This expands on Ray Pahl's landmark description of the English rural imaginary as a 'village-in-the-mind' (1966: 7). According to Matless, the village exists 'in non-linear time, or outside any time at all... miss[ing] questions of tradition and progress by finding a place outside time, in the eternal. There is a recurrent mystical theme in the English village imagination, making the village a spiritual place' (1994a: 80). Matless subsequently coins the term 'doing the English village' to describe how one might replicate 'English villageness' in any place or time.

Whilst Matless uses it specifically to comment on post-war writing, Bryony Goodwin-Hawkins develops 'doing the village' into a social process. Echoing Mormont above, she explains: 'If it is no longer adequate to read the rural as... being', it can be instead 'explored anew through *doing*' (2016: 309). As such Goodwin-Hawkins identifies instances in which she, despite being an Australian ethnographer, convincingly 'does the English village': 'It was a summer's afternoon... I was dressed in Morris dancing garb, a floral crown atop my plaited hair ...I passed a pair of walkers strolling down. They stared; they grinned. 'This is why I love England', one said to the other' (Ibid). An understanding of social relations as performances is rooted in Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu & Shusterman, 1999), and more specifically Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990). According to Butler, social life is a network of universally recognisable behaviours that individuals consistently perform for one another. An iterative process in which stereotypes and their articulation reinforce themselves *ad infinitum*, any definitive origins for the English village therefore, as in William's escalator (1975: 9-11), are consistently deferred. 'Snay Top', the site of Goodwin-Hawkins' fieldwork, is situated in the industrial region of the Pennines, and key to her research is the question of whether it in fact qualifies as a village. One participant indicates that he believes, like P. H. Ditchfield (1908: 17-22) that a village green is crucial and as such Snay Top, in lacking one, is disqualified. Yet Goodwin-

⁷ Edgar Wright's 2007 *Hot Fuzz*, following a metropolitan police officer relocating to an idyllic village and subsequently discovering it is maintained by an elderly mafia, is a brilliant skewering of this. A series of grisly deaths leads the hardboiled Sergeant Angel to spend much of the film unravelling what appears to be a complicated case of blackmail and extortion. However, it is eventually revealed that the victims were killed for no more complex a motive than ensuring Sandford wins the national Best Village contest.

Hawkins locates a nearby patch of land that was recently host to 'a children's parade, sack races and other games... a Women's Institute cake stall and a jumble sale' (2016: 317). It is not only the industrial heritage of the area, but the northern location itself which is the problem; according to Snay Top's residents, a village must be in the south of England to count.

This is a popular assumption. It was rural south England that Prime Minister John Major is thought to have referenced in his infamous speech portraying Britain, paraphrasing George Orwell, as a country 'of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist' (1993, no pg; Neal & Agyeman, 2006: 6). Angus Calder has called this concept 'Deep England', which in his definition 'stretch[es] from Hardy's Wessex to Tennyson's Lincolnshire, from Kipling's Sussex to Elgar's Worcestershire', excluding the midlands and north, with the 'deepest' areas of all being the Home Counties (1992: 182), especially Kent. This echoes the description of Kent as 'the garden of England' (Darian-Smith, 1999: 70) from the previous section. Again, when the countryside was valorised during World War Two, it was primarily southern scenery that was drawn upon, such as the Sussex South Downs (Howkins, 2003: 40-41, 110; Neal, 2009: 26; Neal & Agyeman, 2006: 6). A term closely associated with Deep England is 'Merrie England', which enhances the stereotype with more overtly medieval imagery (Burns, 2012; Judge, 1991; Mandler, 1997), again demonstrating Matless' contention that the English village imaginary does not progress in any linear fashion but instead exists 'outside time, in the eternal' (1994: 80).

Although in her 2012 account of her ethnography in 'Greenville', researcher Katharine Tyler does not use the phrase 'doing the village', the behaviour of the residents, and even Tyler herself, would seem to ensure it qualifies:

Picture a place that is suburban in terms of its residential landscape and close proximity to the city of Leicester rather than a 'typical' English village... It is in the face of Greenville's ambiguous village identity... that the white middle-class residents in my study reflexively defend their village status. In the course of so doing, they contend that it is the area's 'community spirit' centred on village activities that sustains Greenville's village identity... A few months into my fieldwork, I also began to perceive and understand this suburban place as a 'village' and came to see the residents of Greenville as 'villagers'. Nonetheless,

the ambiguity inherent within this perception of Greenville was reinforced to me when a good friend of mine came to visit... [who] grew up in an isolated hamlet in rural France... I stood surrounded by the suburban landscape of Greenville and told my friend that “this is a village”. She laughed and categorically stated “this is not a village, Katharine” (2012b: 39).

The timelessness and placenessness of the English village is what has allowed an English folk revival to take place in three very disparate eras in English history. Late in the 19th century, English folksongs, dances and customs were ‘rediscovered’ by the English population, leading to the first of three periods of time—1890s-1920s; 1950s-1970s; 1990s-2010s—in which English folklore was repopularised in art, music, literature and daily life. Following Hobsbawm and Ranger’s famous thesis about ‘invented traditions’, and the purposes they serve in forming a cohesive national identity (1983), the revivals have received a great deal of attention in academia, argued to be crucial glimpses into what it might mean to be English in the respective periods. Seemingly an extension of both ‘doing the village’ (Matless, 1994a; Goodwin-Hawkins, 2016: 309) and the ‘village in the mind’ (Pahl, 1966: 70), Georgina Boyes, in the title of her book on the first revival, calls it ‘the imagined village’, detailing how the academic Cecil Sharp and his contemporaries’ obsession with ‘the folk’—an illusory rural community of dim illiterates from which all folk customs were apparently derived—relied on elitist stereotypes that had little relation to reality (Boyes, 1993; Bushaway, 1982; Harker, 1980; Joshua, 2007). Whilst the second revival, housed primarily in folk music clubs, also incorporated urban perspectives, frequent disputes over who had the ‘right’ to adapt traditional songs still maintained a hierarchy based on the illusion of an untouchable golden age (Burns, 2012; Kennedy, 1950; Mackinnon, 1993; Rowe, 2006; Young, 2011). The BNP’s urging in the mid-2000s that their members ‘do some research to see if there’s a lost local tradition’ that can be revived in their local area in order to stick it to ‘the PC lunatic healthy and safety police and the Islamists’ (no pg; Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2013) led to the formation of the musical alliance ‘Folk Against Facism’ in 2010, intended to promote English folk culture across multicultural lines and including amongst its members the long-time proponent of a renewed, ‘progressive’ English patriotism, Billy Bragg (2006). However, to this day, English folk culture is ‘notably white’ (Keegan-Phipps, 2017: 14), and unless the iconic place around which it is so tightly wound—the English village itself—

becomes much more diverse in keeping, it is likely English folk culture will also remain this way for many years to come. Again, this is not to imply that English folk culture or the English village itself are synonymous with either English nationalism or racism. However failure to acknowledge such interpretations exist, both in academia and 'out in the world', leaves both phenomena far more vulnerable to further far-right co-option in the future too.

Inclusion and exclusion

Community, like rural, is a highly contested term, and again certain academics have recommended dispensing with it entirely (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). However, the same solution that was reached for 'rural' can be reached with 'community', in that it is best defined as a state of mind (Pahl, 2006); the crux is then how, why and where one *feels* part of a community. Like everything else the rural idyll offers, community is portrayed as in decline or lost in the disconnected individualism of the present, and Ernest Gellner's theory of how nationalism originated in the West is tied to the loss of rural community through the Industrial Revolution (1983). As Zygmunt Bauman avers: 'We miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to a happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise' (2001: 145). Just as one can 'do' any other aspect of the village, however, one can also 'do community'. Sarah Neal's description of her rural research participants seeming driven in community-building behaviours 'not by a notion of community *per se* but more by the notion of what was imagined to be happening—or should be happening—within rural communities' is a case in point (2009: 134).

As necessarily as there are individuals on the inside of a community, however, there must also be outsiders too. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson contend that community 'is *premised* on various forms of exclusion', and that as such 'the strongest sense of community is, in fact, likely to come from those groups who find the premises of their collective existence threatened' (1997: 13). Chris Philo's pivotal 1992 paper urged scholars to imagine the rural outside the realm of 'Mr Averages'—white, straight, (cis) and able-bodied men—and to instead turn their attention to 'other rurals' (200) i.e. other kinds of rural people. A current of feminist rural studies has since appeared, with scholars such as Annie Hughes (1997), Jo Little (1997), and more recently Tuitjer (2016), demonstrating that demands on women living in the countryside are still to this

day very strict. Not only are rural women still expected to be (heterosexually) married and raise children, they should also perform all forms of housework to a high standard (Hughes, 1997; Little, 1997; Little & Austin, 1996). Discrimination against employed, childless, unmarried, and particularly bisexual or lesbian women (the latter explored in depth by Gill Valentine, see: Valentine and Bell, 1995; Valentine, 1997), makes the rural an overtly misogynistic place. Whilst work on trans people in the countryside is limited, Miriam J. Abelson recently conducted a landmark study of rural trans men in America (2019). Within a more established canon, Cresswell (1996), Sibley (1995) and Halfacree (2003) have demonstrated how traveller communities are persecuted by rural authorities, with Cresswell commenting that: 'Mobility... [within modern life] appears to be a kind of superdeviance. It is not just "out of place" but disturb[s] the whole notion that the world can be segmented into clearly defined spaces' (1996: 87). The current Conservative government's recently proposed 'Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill' is likely to demonise travelling communities even further, with some travellers claiming it has the potential to 'wipe out our culture' entirely (Grant, 2021: no pg). The centrality of the sacred symbolism of the English village to these political moves, since travellers often set up their communities in villages or other green spaces, cannot be overstated.

Returning to the image of Bibury in the UK passport, Matless points out that the depictions overhang a statement that the document 'entitles free movement to the owner' (2016: 10). The equation of an idyllic countryside existence with free movement through national borders provides, for Matless, an unintentional irony; both as already discussed are far more easily accessible to white people than anyone else. Rural England is typically an ethnically homogenous place, with the ONS reporting in their 2011 census that only 5% of the population of rural areas do not identify as white British, compared to 22.8% in urban (DEFRA, 2013). According to Julian Agyeman and Rachel Spooner, the countryside is indeed 'seen by the majority of people of colour as a "white domain"' (1997: 1999; Tolia-Kelly, 2007), and as such racism in the countryside remains an underexamined issue. As Neal Chakraborti and Jon Garland state, part of the reason may be the 'curious belief that there cannot be racism in rural Britain because there are relatively few people of colour resident there' (2004a: xi). In reality, people of colour may decide against moving to or visiting rural areas *because* of existent racism. Photographer Ingrid Pollard's series *Pastoral Interludes*, an attempt to show the normalcy of a black woman's presence in the English countryside, is

subverted by her use of accompanying text such as 'Walks through leafy glades... with a baseball bat by my side' (1988). The Observer's poll in 2001 claimed that racial attacks were 10 times more likely to occur in rural areas than others (Rayner, 2001). As one of Chakraborti and Garland's interviewees explains: 'Sometimes the whole of winter passes and I will not go outside, all my life is in between these four walls, I don't go out the house... you're conscious of it all the time [in the countryside] *Indian male, Northamptonshire* (2004b: 394).

If the countryside is the 'repository of the "true" national spirit' (Agyeman, 1990: 232) then whoever lives in the countryside reflects the 'true' England in terms of Wemyss' 'hierarchy of belonging' (2006). Representing not only the disorder of the city but what are imagined to be exclusively modern migratory patterns (best dismantled by David Olusoga's landmark 2016 *Black and British: A Forgotten History*), people of colour 'stick out' because they interrupt 'doing the village' (Matless, 1994a; Goodwin-Hawkins, 2016), 'the imagined village' (Boyes, 1993) or the 'village in the mind' (Pahl, 1966) by revealing it as merely a white fantasy. As such, people of colour are kept at bay in rural imagery and even rural communities as much as possible. And as Phil Kinsman explains, 'if a group is excluded from the [rural] landscape, then it is excluded to a large degree from the nation itself' (1995: 301).

'Politics of the rural'

The English village has served as a political battleground for many centuries, but this has intensified over the last 30 years. A new 'politics of the rural' (Woods, 2005) has emerged, which intertwines the English countryside's long association with exclusion with a more formalised right-wing politics. The 1990s road protests, described by Sally Brooks as 'one of the most successful challenges to the rural establishment' (2019: 8), were an important starting point. When Margaret Thatcher unveiled a plan to build over 4000 kilometres of new road, a small community of environmentalists calling themselves the 'Dongas tribe' launched protests, apparently catalysing a new national awareness of issues of 'land ownership... and self-empowerment' (McKay, 1996: 135). But the Dongas also helped cement the idea of the English countryside as a white utopia to be protected. As explored in the section on beating the bounds,

England's rural communities have been a significant contributing force for conservative, anti-globalisation politics in England over the last few decades. Brooks' article traces the road protests to the foundation of the Countryside Alliance in 1997, formed in defence against the growing sociopolitical distaste for fox hunting, which would finally be banned outright in 2005. Claiming to 'Give Rural Britain a Voice', the CA was further catalysed by the foot and mouth epidemic in 2001 and new policies on wind power brought forth by the Conservative government, both of which fed a grassroots belief that Parliament was increasingly out of touch with the rural 'way of life'. The CA's receipt of support from Prince Charles in particular was criticised by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who asked whether the Royal could 'really not wonder that there might be a coded [racist] message behind all these "way of life" complaints?' (2013: no pg).

The evidence that Brexit would be devastating for rural communities in particular was obfuscated by the Leave campaigns, who claimed fishing and farming industries would be the big beneficiaries of Brexit (Casalicchio, 2020), neglecting to also mention how much these communities benefitted from EU funding. Cornwall's strong Leave majority and widely mocked appeal for Parliament match-funding the day after the referendum is a case in point (Worley, 2016). UKIP's blend of Euroscepticism and nostalgic populism (Brooks, 2019) was rooted in framing the countryside as 'the ethnic homelands of the English' (Reed, 2016: 228) and thus entailed opposition to any form of rural change, from immigration to hunting to pesticide regulation. Nigel Farage's eventual leadership of the Leave.EU campaign undoubtedly capitalised on this reputation and is likely to have contributed to such strong turnout for Leave in rural areas. Echoing the complaints of Alun Howkins in 2003 surrounding a turn-of-the-20th-century 'middle class takeover' of 'working rural life', according to Michael Woods rural politics has been unrecognisably transformed (2005, 2003, 2004, 2008, 2010), wherein material and economic policies for improving rural life are relegated in importance behind those based in mere aesthetics and symbolism. Brexit's appeal in the English countryside in particular perhaps demonstrates how such areas, politically-speaking, have mutated into 'white, middle class rural idyll imaginaries' in which serious issues of rural poverty—just as seen when the citizens of 1990s Kent beat the bounds against Europe but ignored the impoverished within their own community (Darian-Smith, 1999: 42)—'are invisibilised' (Neal et. al., 2021: 180).

But the white rural idyll imaginary of the English village also invisibilises something else: Britain's imperial past, which not only remains present in all of Britain but is particularly noteworthy in the countryside, since in this domain it is arguably denied and omitted the most uniformly. Many of England's country estates were built with the proceeds of plantations (Johnson, 2019: 20); recent attempts by The National Trust to acknowledge this were faced with a predictable backlash from the political and media right-wing (Young, 2020). As featured in the documentary series *The Story of England*, several artefacts from Britain's imperial past have been discovered in the Leicestershire countryside, such as a brooch from the East India Company (2020). The exclusion of people of colour from the countryside in itself is in part a fear of the legacy of empire, since their presence threatens to reveal the myth of the English village, and therefore England or Britain at large, as a settled and unchanging place. In her work on Greenville, Tyler uses the term 'screening out' (2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3, 2012b) to describe the behaviours by which her white rural participants erased the British Empire from their daily lives, most notably through treating local people of colour as unwelcome outsiders. Since the white villagers either did not know or—as is heavily implied by Tyler, *chose not to remember*—imperial history, the Asian villagers were judged by white villagers as intruders on Greenville with no reason to be in England at all. The tendency of Tyler's white participants to exaggerate the supposed cultural differences of the Asian community of Greenville 'parallel[ed] in part old colonial beliefs... that were thought to mark off and separate the coloniser from those colonised' (2012a: 42). This represents what Carolyn Pedwell has described as colonialism's 'affective afterlives' (2005: 20). Returning to the case of the road protests of the 1990s, it is no coincidence that Dongas is a Matabele word derived from the former British colony of Zimbabwe; as Brooks explains: 'That the radical "Dongas tribe" could name themselves such... is illustrative of the often unconscious intertwining of rurality, hierarchy and empire within English identity' (Brooks, 2019: 8).

How is 'community' articulated by the residents of Saxonbury, and by extension, residents of rural southern England at large? Are they aware of the exclusionary baggage that comes with the concept specifically when situated within the English countryside? How do rural residents' beliefs about their own community, history and folklore interact with their beliefs about an English 'national community' (if there can be such a thing), English national history and English folklore at large? As discussed

above, the English village has a crucial influence on the way England (and Britain), both as a historic and modern entity, is portrayed at home and around the world. Much of the allure behind it as a popular cultural concept is its representation of peace, permanence, and unchanging settled community. People of colour and immigrants are a threat to this representation, not only because they disrupt the uniformity of the village community with their ‘strange cultural differences’, but in their deeper historic associations with the British Empire, a centuries-spanning global power which reveals the English village’s more innocent, whimsical, folkloric account of national history to be, at best, a partial truth. The English village and the very particular—and fragile—definition of community it represents thus cannot fully be unravelled first without paying attention to the British Empire, its erasure from society in general but particularly the English countryside, in greater detail. It is to this subject that I now turn.

1. 3. Empire erased

Did you know?

In 2018, the UK Department of the Treasury tweeted:

Did you know? In 1833, Britain used £20 million, 40% of its national budget, to buy freedom for all slaves in the Empire. The amount of money borrowed for the Slavery Abolition Act was so large that it wasn’t paid off until 2015. Which means that living British citizens helped to pay to end the slave trade (in Olusoga, 2018a: no pg).

Britain is considered a pioneering figure in the international abolition of imperial-era slavery. Despite the evidence that abolition was just as motivated by slavery no longer turning a profit as it was a crisis of conscience (Hall & Rose, 2006; Rodney, 2018, originally 1972; Williams, 2021, originally 1944), white British abolitionists such as William Wilberforce, immortalised in Hollywood films like *Amazing Grace* (2006), are globally renowned as humanitarian trailblazers. Back in 2013, then-Prime Minister David Cameron claimed: ‘Britain may be a small island, but I would challenge anyone

to find a country with a prouder history, a bigger heart... [because] Britain is an island that helped to abolish slavery' (in Olusoga, 2018a). In 2018 Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg claimed that the British Empire was 'wonderful', citing the ending of the slave trade as the primary reason why (Bradley, 2018). MEP Daniel Hannan, a Brexiteer who allegedly 'wrote the script' on the Vote Leave campaign, cited Britain's abolition of slavery as a key reason why Brexit would be a success (Knight, 2016). At time of writing, the UK Citizenship Test, which must be passed before foreign nationals become British citizens, features the erroneous claim that whilst the slave trade operated internationally by the 18th century, it was always considered unacceptable within Britain itself ('UK citizenship test "misleading"', 2020; Olusoga, 2020; Sanghera, 2021: 71).

David Olusoga claimed that the Treasury's 2018 tweet shows 'what happens if we as a nation focus on abolition but stay largely silent on the centuries of slave-trading and slave-owning that predated it' (2018a: no pg). Despite the implication of the tweet that the compensation was awarded to slaves, in reality it was distributed solely amongst former traders. Misrepresentations of abolition are consistently used as a form of 'moral capital' for the British government, providing a smokescreen for ongoing overseas corruption such as arms trade and air strikes (Donington, 2017: no pg). Furthermore, abolition myths buttress a wider cultural set of assumptions as to what the British Empire actually was or did. Indeed, as recently as 2016, a YouGov poll found that 44% of respondents still believed that Britain's history of colonialism was 'something to be proud of' (Dahlgreen, 2016) . Some historical aspects of how modern Britain came to be either proud of or ignorant about its imperial past are very easy to pinpoint. For instance, between the 1950s and 70s what is now known as the British Foreign Office engaged in a project dubbed 'Operation Legacy', or what was described by witnesses as 'an orgy of burning' (Cobain, 2016: Loc 2381) of colonial records. Those that were not destroyed were retained in a high security converted manor house in Milton Keynes, where they remain to this day. That thousands of records of British officers torturing, raping and murdering colonial subjects were being covertly kept in this manner was eventually revealed by a court case brought in 2011 on behalf of the victims of the 'Mau Mau uprising', a massacre through which Britain attempted to suppress Kenyan independence (Elkins, 2005; Parry, 2016). But the suppression of British imperial history goes far beyond any individual court case or storage of government records of the time. As is claimed on the second cover of

Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* (2021), Britain's imperial past 'is everywhere: from the foundation of the NHS to the nature of our racism, from our distrust of intellectuals in public life to the exceptionalism that imbued the campaign for Brexit and government's early response to the Covid crisis.'

Until at least the late 1960s, British classrooms typically had atlases on their walls that indicated conquered British territories by shading them in pink. For younger British adults, their curriculum potentially lacked any mention of the British Empire at all, or featured distorted facts that tended towards showing Britain in an unrealistically positive light (Heath, 2018; Tomlinson, 2019: 67; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019). Any discussions of slavery for instance were often 'merely a necessary precursor to talking about Britain's role in its abolition' (Elledge, 2020: no pg). Sanghera claimed that history lessons left him 'with little more than superficial knowledge of the world wars, the Tudors and the Tollund Man... as if teachers went out of their way to avoid telling us about [empire]' (2021: 16). A survey of 50,000 students taken in 2020 by the Impact of Omission campaign group found that only 7.6% had been taught about the British colonisation of Africa compared to 72.6% of whom had learned about the Great Fire of London. Despite the fact that back in 1977 a government Green Paper asserted that current teachings on imperialism could not meet the requirements of modern Britain (McCulloch, 2009; Tomlinson, 2019: 111), any modern calls to redress the approach to empire in state education usually results in a backlash, with critics either dismissing such requests as 'colonial guilt' (see Jones, 2014, for Gordon Brown in 2005 and William Hague in 2012; see Weale 2016 for Michael Gove) or 'brainwashing' (Doyle & Ellicott, 2018). As recently as February 2021, the Universities Minister Michelle Donelan compared attempts to provide alternative viewpoints of the British imperial legacy to 'Soviet propaganda', claiming that 'the so-called decolonisation of the curriculum is, in effect, censoring our history' (in Hope, 2021: no pg).

An absence of proper discussions of the empire in lower education ensures the burden is placed disproportionately on higher education to fill in the gaps. Many academics who teach describe something akin to 'an uphill struggle at the start of each new academic year' as an influx of students, fresh from 12 years of British state education, enter degrees in history and international politics 'know[ing] very little about Britain's past' (Heath, 2018: no pg). Notwithstanding the fact that not everyone enters higher education, treatments of imperial history in universities themselves remain inadequate, with some institutions determined to maintain their reverence of slavers—

Oxford's statue of Cecil Rhodes is yet to be removed—and still focussing on teaching empire from white European perspectives (Gilroy, 2004; Olusoga, 2018a; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019; Tomlinson, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 2013). That this seems to make some white students feel entitled to reject learning about the British Empire even when the opportunity is offered is realised in an anecdote from Reni Eddo-Lodge about a white friend choosing to drop a module on slavery: 'I felt that her whiteness allowed her to be disinterested in Britain's violent history, to close her eyes and walk away. To me, this didn't seem like information you could opt out from learning' (2018: 3).

Abuses and excuses

As Bernard Porter claims: 'A multi-racial Britain was one of the main results of empire, but one for which the empire, despite all its high multi-racial pretensions, had very poorly prepared her people' (2014: 286). A case in point is the scandal of the Windrush generation, wherein migrants from former British colonies in the Caribbean were invited to work in Britain in the mid-20th century to ameliorate post-war labour shortages. Despite having automatically obtained citizenship through the 1948 British Nationality Act, such people were still treated like illegal aliens, denied their proper rights by the government, even deported, as well as subjected to lifelong racist abuse (Olusoga, 2018b). As Sally Tomlinson describes: 'Policy-makers and schools could not admit to, or were not aware of, their own ignorance of colonialism' and thus were unable to deliver an appropriate curriculum now that 'literally, the Empire had come home' (2019: 84). As a mixed-race man growing up in 1980s Britain, artist and activist Akala recalls the environment as one in which white Britons routinely discussed whether black Britons

should be sent back to where we came from. Now that where we came from had legally ceased to be part of Britain, our very existence here was seen as 'the problem'. So, after our grandmothers had helped build the National Health Service and our grandfathers had staffed the public transport system, British MPs could openly talk about repatriation... [But] the government and the education system failed to explain [to white citizens] that the wealth of Britain, which made the welfare state and other class ameliorations possible, was derived in no small part from... the sweat and blood and death of the colonies.

No one explained that our grandparents were not immigrants, but that they were literally British citizens, many of them second World War veterans, with British passports to match... Nobody told white Britain that, over there in the colonies, Caribbeans and Asians were being told that Britain was their 'mother country' (2019: 9).

Forever coded as 'newcomers' at best or, within MP Enoch Powell's infamous 1968 'Rivers of blood' speech, existential threats at worst, Salman Sayyid explains that 'ethnically marked ex-colonial subjects become permanent immigrants' (2009: 12), 'forever non-British' (Raj, 2003: 201) and forever at the bottom of Wemyss' 'hierarchy of belonging' (2006) regardless of their actual legal status. Indeed, politicians of colour such as Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and MP David Lammy are regularly subjected to the command by white British constituents to 'go back home'. After Twitter user Dazzer705 racially abused Lammy online, user DeeAbbo30102815 defended the abuse, claiming 'I am English, however if I was born in Japan, am I Japanese? You [Lammy] are black British, a term adopted in the 1950's [sic] which means you are still relatively new to being British. Daz has 1000yrs more experience' (2019). Raymond Williams' argument that national identity is a product of 'long experience' (1983: 195) is given a cutting twist by Paul Gilroy: '[T]his prompts the question—how long is long enough [for a black person to live here] to become a genuine Brit?' (1987: 51).

The Scarman Report into the Brixton riots of 1981 concluded that racial inequality threatened 'the very survival of [British] society' (in Stone, 2013: 143). Indeed, the 1993 murder of black British teenager Stephen Lawrence by a group of white men, and subsequent attempts by Metropolitan police to cover the murder up, is widely considered a watershed moment in Britain's postimperial racial tensions (Akala, 2019; Gilroy, 2004; Tomlinson, 2019; Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019). The subsequent Parekh Report in 2000 attributed Britain's racism directly to its 'selective amnesia' about the British Empire (2000: 163). The concept of a 'selective amnesia' is not necessarily the result of total ignorance, but perhaps represents a 'picking and choosing' of which facts of empire to accept and which to disregard, such as accepting that slavery was bad but nevertheless claiming the empire was predominantly a force for good, or that Britain's empire was good by dint of the fact that other European empires were comparatively worse (Burchill, 2019; The Times, 2017; Hannan, 2020). A perception that colonialism generally benefitted India or Africa for instance is a

pervasive myth, dismantled in depth for India in Shashi Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire* (2019), Christian Wolmar's *Railways and the Raj* (2017), and for Africa in Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (2018) and Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The enduring perception that the British Empire was benevolent also underpins modern Britain's relationship with fundraising, shaping popular cultural phenomena such as Band Aid/Live Aid and Comic Relief's 'Red Nose Day', which portray white celebrities as 'saviours' of a poor, starving Africa (Badshah, 2019).

Another popular defence can be described as the 'sold their own' argument (The Telegraph, 2014; The Times; 2017; Johnson, 2002), wherein the European slave trade is considered excused because contemporary Africans themselves also owned or traded slaves. Whilst this is true in a sense, not only does the contribution of this to the Atlantic slave trade remain small, it relies on the principle that all Africans were in fact 'one people', erasing the ethnic diversity of the continent that ensures by no reasonable definition did Africans 'sell their own' (Diouf, 2004: xi-xiv). Another justification is that, within the annals of history, Britons themselves have been enslaved at the hands of Danish and Norman invaders. Sadly, Porter himself flippantly concluded *The Lion's Share* by stating: 'I'm still waiting for [invaders] to say sorry for all that rapine and pillage inflicted on my part of England in Viking times' (2014: 327), ignoring the reality that the legacies of the Atlantic slave trade still damage modern lives in ways that the Norman invasion of the 10th century quite clearly does not.

Forgetting and remembering

Whilst some may argue that the core of systemic racism in Britain is the erasure of empire, others contend it is still all too celebrated. Even before Leave triumphed, the New York Times described Brexit as "England's Last Gasp of Empire" (Judah, 2016: no pg), later confirming that Brexit—echoing Dean Acheson's prophetic words from over 50 years prior—was the 'remnant of Britain's persistent post-imperial confusion about its proper place in the world' (Erlanger, 2017: no pg). In campaigning for Brexit, Boris Johnson claimed that Britain 'used to run the biggest empire the world has ever seen... [so] are we really unable to do trade deals?' (2016: no pg); The Daily Express, declaring Britain as 'the inventor of international democracy', stated that voting Leave would allow Britain to 'resume our rightful place among the great nations of the world' (2016c: no pg). In a post-referendum speech, then-Prime Minister Theresa May

proposed a new 'Global Britain', and Whitehall's post-Brexit plans for trade were initially dubbed 'Empire 2.0' (Farand, 2017). The British chairman of the Commonwealth Enterprise Group declared: 'When the UK joined the EU it tore up its previous agreements with Commonwealth allies', but that, '[l]uckily, these are old friendships'. But as Salil Tripathi somewhat understatedly pointed out: '[T]hose in the former colonies don't always carry such happy memories' (2018: no pg).

During the 2016 Rio Olympics, Conservative MP Heather Wheeler tweeted: 'EMPIRE GOES FOR GOLD: Now that's what I call winning!!!', attaching a world map of former British territories—a map apparently taken from a Wikipedia entry for British imperial history—overlaid with tallies showing how many more medals had been won by 'the British Empire' than the 'EU (post Brexit)' and the 'rest of world' (in Andrews, 2016). This is an example of what has been described by several critics as a kind of 'Empire of the mind' (Gildea, 2019; Matharu, 2019; Rickett, 2017; Whyman, 2017): a lingering sense of British superiority and ownership that relies on a misunderstanding of the nature of the 'trade' relationships the empire had with other countries at the time. Using the root of the term to 'pay tribute', meaning wealth that one party gives to another as proof of their submission, Tomlinson and Dorling explain: 'When others are forced to buy your expensive goods rather than making their own or buying from cheaper countries, they are paying tribute' (2019: 42). Nations can 'become addicted' to receiving tribute, and even long after the flow of tribute ends, maintain a belief that the fact that they ever received tribute in the first place is a demonstration of their innate glory rather than any exploitation. Slavery and colonisation are what made Britain rich and funded the Industrial Revolution, but as seen in the 2012 London Olympic opening ceremony, portrayals of such success as driven by a kind of innate British ingenuity are common (Akala, 2019; Baker, 2014; Gilroy, 2004). Accordingly, in the same 2020 study that found only just over a third of GCSE-age pupils learned about the slave trade, Impact of Omission reported that less than 10% of students actually learned about the slave trade's contributions to the Industrial Revolution itself.

'Colonial nostalgia is back in fashion' announced Kehinde Andrews shortly after the referendum (2016: no pg). In *Empireland*, Sanghera traced an alarming cultural current of such nostalgia, from the Oxford Union's launch of a 'Colonial Comeback Cocktail', the operation of 'new colonial tours' by Ampersand travel agency, the rash of positive portrayals of empire in film and television such as *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) and *Indian Summers* (2015-16) and the relaunch of the East India Company as a

swanky modern tea merchant, with Sanghera adding that ‘it makes no odds... that the man heading the business, one Sanjiv Mehta, is Indian-born’ (2021: 193). However, all these developments have been subsumed by Sanghera under the ‘selective amnesia’ label, which only serves to further entrench confusion as to how analysis should distinguish between positive portrayals of empire and no portrayals at all. As Robert Saunders suggests: ‘We need a sharper distinction between nostalgia and amnesia: between the longing for empire and the forgetting of Britain’s imperial past... there is a difference between the selective remembering of empire and its elimination from the historical record’ (2018: no pg). One plainly cannot be nostalgic over something one knows nothing about. However, in Paul Gilroy’s mind it may be first experiencing nostalgia which then leads to amnesia, as a personal love of empire and pain over its ending provokes Britons to cover up all reminders of its existence. Since Britain’s national story ‘has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn... [the] loss of imperial prestige’, rather than process these feelings, Britain’s imperial dreams are according to Gilroy instead ‘diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten’ (2004: 81).

‘Indigenous English customs’

Fittingly, less than 20 of the 136 currently digitised editions of *Folklore*—England’s best-reputed and longest-running folkloristics journal—feature articles explicitly referring to the British Empire, despite the earliest being published in the late 19th century when empire was at its height. Mirroring the strange belief that somehow the British Empire did not influence British daily life at home—expertly dismantled in Catherine Hall’s and Sonya Rose’s *At Home With the Empire* (2006)—Sadhana Naithani’s seminal work examining the folkloristic collecting of indigenous cultures by British colonial officers points out that the key ‘irony embedded in the standard [domestic folkloristics] discourse... [is] that the history of folkloristics in the United Kingdom can be written without reference to its colonial past’ (2010: 4).

Ironically for a discipline that refuses to mention it, the timings of the three folk revivals seem to correlate with changes in the status of the British Empire. At the point of the first revival, empire was reaching its peak in spread across the globe. Academics such as Cecil Sharp believed that the English were weakened by the resultant multicultural exposure and decided that integrating English folklore into the school

curriculum would serve reinstate a 'love of country and pride of race' into English children (Szczelkun, 2016: Loc 1154). The second revival began in the 1950s, when empire was conversely in sharp decline. With memories of the losses of the Second World War still fresh, English folk culture once again entered the mainstream but did so from a profoundly anti-nationalist standpoint, inspired by the protest genre of folk music emerging out of a post-Depression America. Whilst the vast majority of existent work focuses on the first (Boyes, 1993; Bushaway, 1992; Harker, 1985; Joshua, 2007; Kennedy, 1950) and second revivals (Burns, 2012; Mackinnon, 1993; Rowe, 2006; Young, 2011), tentative analysis has since emerged that identifies a third revival beginning at the turn of the 21st century, launching to fame such English folk performers as Kate Rusby, Seth Lakeman and Mumford & Sons. The re-emergence of widespread identification with English national identity during the early 2000s was considered hugely significant to the third revival also, most notably by the first academics to identify it as such, Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps⁸ (2013: 109). Whilst the British Empire had long since stopped being a distinct entity by this time, the war in Iraq in 2003 and the London 7/7 bombings two years later are likely to have raised public consciousness of Britain as a neo-colonial power, to which the third revival can easily be imagined as a response. Whilst the third revival as it pertains to the global music charts is widely considered to have ended, it is clear that the passion for English folk culture on the ground has not. Certain local customs invented during the last 30 years continue to be celebrated to this day, such as the Golowan Festival in Penzance, the Straw Jack parade in Carshalton, and even the Sticklepath Grey Mare Festival, a custom created as recently as 2017 (Gilbert, 2018).

There is also a pervasive idea within folkloristics that English folk culture is the victim of marginalisation itself. In their pioneering study of the third English folk revival (2013), Winter and Keegan-Phipps consistently note their interviewees' concerns about how often their music is misrecognised as Irish or Scottish; in 2008 Steve Roud bemoaned the 'almost total absence of academic support for the collection and study of folklore or cultural traditions in England' (xvi) in contrast to the plethora of studies of Irish, Scottish and Welsh folklore, echoing comments made in the discipline for at least 70 years (Kennedy, 1950: 9; Groom, 2013: 21; Hutton, 1996). But this idea is hard to justify. Morris dancing for instance is famous and celebrated across the world, imitated

⁸ Although they personally prefer the term 'resurgence' over 'revival'.

in countries as far-flung even as Japan (Wright, 2018) and with a wealth of scholarly attention devoted to it (Bathe, 1985; Bacon, 1974; Chandler, 1983, 1984; Davey, 2011; Garland, 2018; Middleton-Metcalf, 2019; Simons, 2019; Forrest, 1999; Wooders, 2015). The tendency for English folklore to be represented from within such a framework of marginalisation is complicated by England's postcolonial identity. As documented by Pauline Greenhill in her pioneering work on English folklore in Canada between 1994 and 2002, attempts to point out to her participants the problematic nature of their sartorial obsession with the colour white made her less than popular. In addition, every few years Morris dancing re-enters the mainstream media in England itself in reference to its ongoing usage of blackface, which defenders usually claim is an 'indigenous English custom' and therefore should not be criticised in reference to 'modern sensitivities' (Davey, 2011: 229). Members of Brasenose College's belief in their entitlement to occupy public spaces with sharp sticks is easily compared to Pauline Greenhill's story about witnessing a blackfaced Morris side as 'they charged around the room, banging their cudgels on the floor and brandishing them in the face' of individuals who had only come for a quiet tour of a brewery (2002: 232). Colonialism, in English folklore, is everywhere; one group of particularly prominent English performers actually does their beating the bounds in blackface (Holehouse, 2014).

Themes of indigeneity and victimhood, as already discussed, are a tempting distraction for white Britons looking to deny the realities of racism and the uncomfortable history of the British Empire. But in the unique 'olde English utopia' that English folk culture provides, this desire for victimhood can be appeased in a very practical way, providing through songs, dance and custom a kind of fairytale alternate history into which white Britons can retreat to avoid the very worst of their guilt and discomfort about the British imperial legacy. Visiting a May Day custom in 2018, journalist Brigid Delaney seemingly fused white privilege with Williams's 'long experience' (1983: 195) in her creation of the concept of 'privilege of continuity', a description of the uniquely powerful status that white English folklore participants had in not having had their traditions erased through colonisation and slavery. Wandering around the Wessex countryside, Delaney recounts:

What struck me most was how ancient and unbroken this place actually is. From the flints and old stone tools lying around the fields, to old worn paths across farms and the rights of way... the past... the deep, dawn-of-civilisation past—is everywhere... On May Day, the villagers got up before dawn and...

danced and drank as the sun came up....[Eventually] these dancers would die, and their [children] would learn the dance, and the rites of spring would continue... What I saw all around me was the privilege of continuity, [even though] colonialism... disrupted or destroyed ancient ceremonies [for other communities]. It's only when you stand outside the circle on May Day and see an entire village take part in rituals that stretch back to the time of the ancient Celts, that you feel a sense of loss, for what might have been in all the broken and colonised communities of the British Empire (2018: no pg).

As demonstrated above, English folkloristics is a typically insular discipline, declining to position its objects of study in reference to any concurrent political events, be those historical or modern, or taking place on either the national or global stage. Winter and Keegan-Phipps' work is a crucial influence on this thesis, not only in that they were the first to identify the most recent folk revival, but also to tie this both to the rise in identification of English national identity around this time, and an increased awareness amongst the English of globalisation. A smattering of other academic works, such as Lee Blackstone's 2017 study on English folk music as a 'moral idyll' from the racist political present, have related Brexit (and by association, the British Empire) to English folk culture more directly. Intriguingly *Buzzfeed* provided the most explicit connection in 2017, when contributor Chris Bethell travelled to Hastings' Jack-in-the-Green festival to ask its participants about national identity in the wake of the referendum. And Bridget Christie, writing in 2021 about attending an exhibition on English folklore in London, ended her contemplation on the joy she found in Morris dancing and Gloucester cheese rolling with the words (no pg): '[but] I have an Irish passport, thank god'.

I have already argued that the British Empire is present—or indeed present by its absence—throughout English village geography and culture. As such, both life in the English village itself, and the English folk culture such life is inspired by and in turn inspires, may be seen as a kind of 'retreat', an alternate identity for white Britons to adopt that seems comfortably divorced from the violent global legacy of British imperial power. That the English countryside and its traditions can be used in this way somewhat presumes that participants have knowledge of the empire to begin with, in keeping with Gilroy's theory (2004) about it being first 'nostalgia' that thereafter creates

'amnesia'. But a crucial introductory question to cover before the premise of discomfort and guilt is elaborated on is in fact: what do people in the southern English countryside *actually know* about the British Empire? What were they taught about it, and what did they learn of it as an adult? If they did learn more about it as an adult, what were their initial reactions to being presented with such knowledge? If they shared this knowledge, how did others—particularly those within their own 'community'—react to it? Secondly, how do participants connect the British Empire to the modern multicultural makeup of the UK, and to the systemic and institutionalised racism that has been explicitly exposed since the EU referendum? One could argue that having already dismantled several myths about Brexit through the lenses of beating the bounds, the English village and the British Empire, that there is therefore no need to provide a section discussing Brexit directly. However, despite being all of the interpretations of Brexit covered so far—a folkloric metaphor, a political moment intrinsically connected to the rural idyll, and an imperial hangover—Brexit has also proved to be in itself a somewhat originary moment for UK politics and culture. It is with all this in mind that I turn to the closing section of this literature review.

1. 4. Brexit, before and beyond

'Peculiarly English'

Slippage between 'Englishness' and 'Britishness' is a long-standing lexical problem. As Krishan Kumar explains:

'English, I mean British'—this familiar locution alerts us immediately to one of the enduring perplexities of English national identity. How to separate 'English' from 'British'? The reverse problem is nowhere as acute. Non-English members of the United Kingdom... are usually only too jarringly aware of what is peculiarly English, and are highly sensitive to the lordly English habit of subsuming British under English (2003: 1).

Along with all its remaining overseas territories, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland apparently represent the last surviving 'remnants of [England's] empire' (Tomlinson & Dorling, 2019: 5), since England is not only the most populous country in the UK but

also served as the core imperial administrator. With the invention of 'Britain', an imperial identity not contained within national borders but intended to be globally applicable to all British territories, issues with what precisely *Englishness* was felt by the wayside (Ibid; Asari et. al., 2008; Brown, 2017; MacPhee & Poddar, 2007). Whilst all other countries of the UK developed distinct national iconographies, England was apparently too busy running the empire to follow suit, and when various movements for colonial independence arose across the empire's dominions through the mid to late 20th century, questions of devolution within Britain began to emerge in-step. This led to a kind of existential crisis, with Kumar asking of the time: 'Who are we when the mission fails, or is aborted? If we have tied ourselves to a star, what happens when the star drops out of the heavens?' (2003: 251).

Englishness, having previously served as a taken-for-granted 'hegemonic component' (Winter & Keegan-Phipps, 2013: 3) of Britishness, suddenly became the subject of a flurry of scholarly works in the late 20th and early 21st century (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Colls, 2002; Dodd & Colls, 1987; Mandler, 2006; Morley & Robins, 2001; Rapport, 2002; Kumar, 2003; Perryman, 2008; Young, 2007). English history, English music, English art, English food and the English landscape all came newly under the microscope (Bragg, 2006; Irwin, 2005; Kumar, 2003, 2015; MacPhee & Poddar, 2007; Lewis, 2005; Paxman, 1998; Slater, 2007; Titchmarsh, 2007; Young, 2007). The surprise defeat of the Conservatives in 1997 by Tony Blair's New Labour and the accompanying much-mocked cultural movement 'Cool Britannia'—the most famous symbol of which perhaps being Spice Girl Geri Halliwell's Union Jack dress—together provided a new definition of Britishness apparently 'divorced' from empire and thus 'more pluralistic' (Samuel, 1989: xii). Nevertheless, polls conducted during the 1990s suggested that large numbers of citizens were in fact nevertheless beginning to identify themselves as 'English' where 'British' had been the prior norm (Keegan-Phipps & Winter, 2012; Kenny & Lodge, 2009; Kumar, 2003). English iconography such as the St. George's Cross received particular exposure during the Euro 96 and 2000 UEFA Euro Championships, leading Arthur Aughey to claim that clearly 'something happened to English national identity' around this time (2007: 1).

Ginger Spice's iconic dress found a morbid parallel in 2019 however, when Stormzy headlined Glastonbury wearing a Union Jack emblazoned stab vest that was dubbed the new banner of 'a divided and frightened nation' (Jones, 2019: no pg). As the punk band Benefits alluded to in early 2021 when they screamed: '*Wave your*

fucking flag! Bow down to that tatty flag!', flags symbolise something a little different in a post-Brexit Britain compared to their usage as a fashion accessory in the 1990s, with the Conservative government's deceptive attempts to attribute early Covid vaccine success to Brexit (Quatremer, 2021) and emblazon the AstraZeneca vaccine vials with Union Jacks (Bland, Stewart & Syal, 2020) being a recent case in point. Renewed political focus on the Union Jack specifically, however, obscures the fact that Brexit is an issue primarily of England's making rather than all countries of the union equally. Only England and Wales voted to Leave, with Scotland and Northern Ireland both voting to Remain by strong margins. As mentioned in the introduction, the EU referendum had a 'distinctly English dimension' (Henderson et al., 2016: 187). The publication in 2012 by the Institute for Public Policy Research of a seminal paper describing the emergence of English national identity as 'the dog that finally barked' identified a strong correlation between respondents self-identifying as English and those holding critical views towards the EU (2012; Dunin-Wasowicz, 2019). Jan Eichhorn has more recently claimed identifying as 'English' to be the key unifying factor in much of the Leave-voting population (2018: no pg). But a renewed identification with Englishness is at odds with the fact that England lacks its own distinct political identity; as Anthony Barnett put it: 'Unable to exit Britain, the English did the next-best thing and told the EU to fuck off' (2017: 123). The IPPR paper also noted support for stronger political boundaries between England and the rest of the UK, suggesting that the English public were becoming acutely aware of the reality that unlike the other British nations, they had no dedicated national assembly.

Echoing the conviction of Tom Nairn, whose work *The Break-up of Britain* identified an appetite for a separate English political identity as early as 1977, the IPPR claimed that Parliament had 'failed to engage seriously with the changing attitudes' regards a unique English national, political and cultural identity (2012: 32). Scotland's previous decision to remain as part of the UK rather than become its own sovereign state in 2014 now seems likely to be reversed post-Brexit, as First Minister Nicola Sturgeon repeated her claims of desiring Scottish independence, and former European Council member Donald Tusk stated that an independent Scotland would be 'enthusiastically' welcomed back into the EU (Carrell, 2020). A breakup of Britain, long discussed by political commentators but always seeming implausible on economic grounds, now appears more likely (Denham & McKay, 2021; Hazell & Renwick, 2019; Henderson & Jones, 2021). Academics Anthony Barnett (2017) and

Michael Kenny (2014) have claimed that a fully devolved English government would not necessarily be a bad thing. Indeed, according to Kenny it may be all that is required to finally rid England of ‘the baggage of the British [imperial] past’ (2014: 15).

England? Never heard of it

Just shy of five years after the 2016 EU referendum, Professor at Birmingham University Christopher Painter tweeted:

How did we regress from a vibrant, creative society, enthusiastically embracing the future during the Blair era—epitomised in the opening ceremony of 2012 London Olympics—to the reactionary, introverted country, clinging onto worn-out myths, that we now appear to have become? (2021)

The 2012 Olympics created an ‘affective atmosphere’ of togetherness and pride into which the entirety of the British public was clearly intended to be subsumed (Closs Stephens, 2016: 182). This atmosphere was mostly successful, even by the standards of academics usually critical of nationalist politics: David Olusoga considered the Olympics ‘the high-water mark’ of multicultural harmony in Britain (in Knolle & Poskett, 2020: 5), and Sathnam Sanghera declared it as a time when being British ‘meant a great deal’ (2021: 105) to him personally. As Rachel Connolly tweeted, the strange thing about the 2012 Olympics years later is that it still ‘gets spoken about it as if it was a cultural movement’, rather than a government-orchestrated affair (2021). This is perhaps not all that surprising. According to Angharad Closs Stephens, the Olympics represented an explicit attempt by British politicians and corporations to blur the ‘boundaries between “everyday life” and orchestrated displays of power’ (2016: 184), creating an event which had all the hallmarks of a grassroots cultural phenomenon, whilst in reality being a highly securitised demonstration of Britain’s political might. Although, as discussed, there were no direct references to the British Empire—the voiceover on the Windrush set piece only described ‘others’ coming ‘from other lands’, in Gilroy’s mind only ‘cement[ing] the arrival of colonial citizens as an invasive encroachment’ (in Thompson, 2019: no pg)—imperialistic themes were still on full display by reviving the idea that ‘the whole world could be visited through a journey to London’ (Closs Stephens, 2016: 184), as well as by the constant submission

by interviewers of questions of heritage to athletes of colour, questions that were not similarly posed to their white counterparts (Baker, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2016).

It seems Painter is in denial as to what life in Britain in 2012 was really like. Only two months before the ceremony, then-Home Secretary Theresa May announced the unrolling of the 'hostile environment' policy, claiming to the Telegraph that 'the aim is to create here a really hostile environment for illegal migration' (in Kirkup & Winnett, 2012: no pg). The infamous 'go home' campaign, in which vans threatening arrest were driven through areas with high immigrant populations, followed shortly after in 2013. That Remain-voters can claim 'not to recognise' the UK of today simply shows that, for the past 10 years of a Conservative government at least, they 'weren't paying attention' (Younge, 2019a: no pg). Indeed, Stuart Heritage has semi-sardonically placed blame for Brexit on the complacency engendered by the 2012 Olympics itself: "Wow," remainers thought... "this is great. Everything's great. Nothing bad will ever happen again." And so they sleepwalked into a referendum they were convinced they'd win, and then couldn't understand why they lost.' (2019: no pg). The late Dawn Foster called this 'centrist thinking', and claimed it is

focused on two false premises. The first is that the 2012 London Olympic ceremony represented an idyllic high-point of culture and unity in the UK, rather than occurring amid the brutal onslaught of austerity, with food bank use growing and the bedroom tax ruining lives. The second is that the UK became divided by Brexit and the 2016 vote, rather than it being a symptom of long-term problems: the decline of industry and the public sector begun by Margaret Thatcher and continued by Tony Blair and David Cameron; vast inequality of opportunity, wealth and health; and the number of people being routinely ignored in a system with a huge democratic and electoral deficit (2019: no pg).

After journalist Caitlin Moran tweeted that the semi-finals of the UEFA Euro Championship in 2021 were a 'cultural game-changer on the same scale as The Beatles', Dean Tāne replied reminding her that the England fans had previously booed their team (booing which Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself supported) for taking the knee during the national anthem to protest against racism. Tāne concluded: 'At least if England win the final then FBPE Liberal Twitter [a subsection of Twitter-using

Remain voters] can finally shut the fuck up about the London 2012 Olympics' (2021). In the torrent of racist abuse hurled at the three black England players that missed their penalties in the final of the championship, Wemyss' 'hierarchy of belonging' (2006) was on full show: Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka were celebrated as English when they were winning, but derided as n****rs and told to 'go back home' the moment they lost. Countless white people showed support of the black players and shamed the abusers, often with the claim that this torrent of racism was not 'my England', evoking Remainer assertions that they 'did not recognise' the England portrayed through Brexit. Cambridge Analytica/Vote Leave whistle-blower Shahmir Sanni however rightfully took issue with this, and tweeted:

This narrative that racism "isn't English" rather than stating clearly that racism is a systemic problem is a well-versed tactic of white supremacy, and wholly adopted by white liberals not serious about racial justice... "This isn't the English thing to do", "They do not represent all of us", "This is a violent minority" [a]re all TACTICS to absolve oneself of responsibility... [Those who say it] are always ensuring they do not appear critical of a countrywide, deeply ingrained problem [and] all of the highest engaged tweets about racism [in reference to the abuse of Rashford, Sancho and Saka] are white liberals trying to portray England as being -above-... the racism of football hooligans [in order to] feel good about themselves... [But] you can't separate yourself from a state-wide, electorally supported system. You just can't, sorry... The only response should be: ALL of England is racist (2021).

Shame, solidarity and other ways of feeling

Novelist Zadie Smith summarised reading essays by white, 'middle-class', highly-educated Remainers on the topic of Brexit as 'Londoners speaking proudly of their multicultural, outward-looking city, so different from these narrow xenophobic places up north' (2016: no pg). In her discussion on 'feeling Brexit', Closs Stephens claims that 'collective affects of "shame" are powerful and comforting because of the ways they in part rely on ideas about how some people are more progressive, developed and enlightened than others' (2019: 408). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage too heavily with the matter of 'class', since class has been problematised by

scholars in recent years as an unstable form of categorisation (Antonucci, et. al. 2017; Marvin, 2021). But it is notable how easily the sheer instability of class identification in the UK is revealed in discussions around Brexit. 'Working-class values' were apparently a factor in the EU referendum, with 60% of Britons now apparently identifying themselves as working-class, and working-class voters having turned out to vote in the referendum in higher numbers than is typical for general elections (Butler, 2016). However, if in fact, as discussed above, 59% of those who voted for Brexit could be more accurately described as 'middle class', how can we explain Brexit as driven by 'working-class values'?

According to Friedman et. al., there is a growing tendency in Britain for people to 'misidentify' themselves as working class, even when some if not all of the most socially recognised aspects of 'working-classness' are absent from their lives and experiences (2021). The study noted that 'privileged class' participants, mostly men, routinely called themselves 'working class', and concluded that this was likely partly due to the fact that 'working-classness can be read as an assertion of 'ordinariness' that wards off possible suspicions of snobbishness, smugness and elitism' (2021: 4). That the EU and Remain-voters at large are snobbish elites is, as already discussed, a common stereotype; during the Leave campaign Michael Gove famously claimed the UK had 'had enough of experts' (in Mance, 2016). But if Friedman et. al.'s findings are accurate, Brexit may well have gained some of its momentum from 'middle class' people 'misidentifying as working class', and perceiving the EU as part of that class structure which oppresses them. Such 'misidentification' gestures back to O'Toole's initial conceit of Brexit above all being the pursuit of 'exuberant victimhood' (2018a: 86), and, teamed with increased levels of anti-immigrant sentiment in the English countryside, may well go some way to explaining the high Leave-voting turnout for rural areas, where the repackaging of traditional rural foods, clothing and lifestyles into 'middle-class fantasies' may further blur the lines of identification (Burchardt, 2004; Howkins, 2003; Kingsnorth, 2008; Scruton, 2000).

One's vote in the EU referendum has apparently replaced traditional party loyalties in terms of how British people politically identify themselves. These 'Brexit identities', as Geoff Evans and Florian Schaffner call them (2019), have extreme 'social and emotional intensity' (no pg), and have only further intensified in the years since the referendum. According to Evans and Schaffner's multiple polls, when respondents were asked whether: "When I speak about the Remain/Leave side, I

usually say ‘we’ instead of ‘they’”, the proportions from both camps rose significantly over two years, with the amount of Leavers agreeing leaping from 44% to 65%, but the proportion of Remainers exactly doubling from 35% to 70%. Whilst just after the referendum, the strength of Leave-based identities initially dropped, ‘the strength of the Remain identity increased dramatically’, with the proportion of Remain voters agreeing with the statement: “I have a lot in common with other supporters of the Remain side”, reaching a stunning 93% just after the referendum. The term FBPE, as mentioned above, is an acronym for ‘follow back, pro-EU’, commonly used as a hashtag on Twitter by people who use their Remain vote as a shorthand for meeting others who also voted Remain, asking other ‘like-minded progressives’ to follow them on what they call #FollowBackFriday (Martin, 2021a; Rawdin, 2021). Such Remain voters, in contrast, tend to dub Leave voters as ‘backwards’ and ‘thick’ (Daft Guru, 2021; Martin, 2021b; Phoenix T. Cat, 2021), and otherwise dismiss them as a uniform community they wish to have nothing to do with, either on social media or in real life. Whilst intending to show pride and solidarity, the FBPE hashtag has been co-opted by typically younger left-wing individuals—as demonstrated with Dean Tāne’s response to Caitlin Moran above—as a shorthand for instead deriding those who feel superior to others simply for having not voted Leave (Bailey, 2019; Clarke, 2017; Jones, 2020).

Indeed, voting Remain by no means represented backing a progressive, far-left agenda: the head of the Remain campaign, David Cameron, had already overseen six years of devastating austerity policies by 2016. Through casting anyone who opposed ‘the neoliberal status quo’ as ‘irresponsible’ (Bailey, 2019: no pg), mainstream Remain rhetoric did not merely demonise the stereotypically right-wing but delegitimised any left-wing argument for Brexit too, seen for instance in the ridicule of then-Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn’s vision of a progressive ‘soft Brexit’ (Jones, 2020). According to Philip Cunliffe, pro-EU arguments often centre a ‘phony cosmopolitanism’, imagining an organisation that is actually ‘none of the things that are projected onto it’ (2018: no pg) by the typical Remain voter, who usually ignores how the EU polices the movements of people of colour, assisting in the abuse of migrants in Libya and Turkey for instance (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Long, 2018). Although it may present a grave issue for Britons who have family overseas, other Remainers who complain about the removal of their Freedom of Movement may do so through irritation at border controls making their overseas holidays less convenient (Baccas, 2018; Henry, 2018; Williscroft-Ferris, 2020) rather than any more substantial disruption to their daily

life. In this way, Cunliffe derides FOM as simply a programme of ‘the same middle classes and elites interacting seamlessly across Europe’ (2018: no pg).

Where can we go from here, when such stereotypes and misidentifications of Brexit and who voted for it and who did not, abound? Sara Ahmed’s encouragement to ‘feel our way’, seeing emotions as central to political identities rather than an afterthought (2014: 1), is a useful starting point. Conveniently, it has since been expanded by Closs Stephens, who claimed that we should specifically be ‘feeling [our way through] Brexit’ (2019: 405). Pointing out that the EU referendum’s initial polling, which wrongly predicted a comfortable Remain majority, was rooted in ‘political science’s ideas about rational subjects acting on the basis of self-interest’ (2019: 406), Closs Stephens herself investigates Brexit through the opening of an experimental dance play called *The Populars*, which the Director claimed was designed to address the referendum through questions around ‘family, lovers, quite human things really, rather than policy or GDP’ (Ibid). Whilst Closs Stephens does not include any details about the voting choices of the people involved, she notes that all the performers in *The Populars* were ‘young people (under 35)’ which ‘*felt significant*’ (emphasis mine: 414) since 75% of people in this age group voted to Remain (Ibid). In their thesis of ‘Everyday Brexits’ (2017), Ben Anderson and Helen F. Wilson contend that the emphasis on Brexit as either a past moment in time (the referendum) or (at the time they wrote) a potential future calamity, elides the reality that Brexit is already happening each day, becoming ‘less dramatic and less disruptive as [it] becomes part of the background of ordinary life’ (2017: 294). Eschewing a reliance on the heightened emotional displays of the referendum, political rallies and debate, discovering ‘why’ people voted the way they did may depend just as much on paying attention to the nuances of everyday interactions, understood here not just as Ahmed’s ‘emotional stickiness’ but the physical ‘forces of encounter’ (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010: 2) that through Brexit draw bodies, and therefore emotions, together and apart in the first place (Closs Stephens, 2019: 205). As beating the bounds is a method by which *all* members of a community may transgress political divides and interact and move as one entity, it is this more fluid approach to investigating Remain and Leave motivations, rather than relying on common stereotypes, that may prove most useful for my—and indeed potentially all future—Brexit-based social research.

Throughout this literature review, I have attempted to connect four concepts: the

xenophobic symbolism of beating the bounds; the iconic legacy of the English village; modern Britain's relationship with its past empire; and Brexit both as a historical hangover and the birth of a new framework for sociopolitical division. Despite how nuanced I have tried to be in presenting these, the question of how strongly residents of Saxonbury identify with how they voted in the EU referendum—and, in turn, how strongly they identify others with *their* vote too—was originally posed in the belief that the answer was a foregone conclusion. This damaging presumption will be dismantled in-depth in the coming chapter.

Chapter 2. 'Things we really did not want to know': Methodology

Moral geographies are 'the idea that certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others' (Cresswell, 2005: 128; Driver, 1988). The moral geography of the country being good and pure and the city being evil and dirty ensures certain bodies and values are considered 'in place' in the countryside and others 'out of place', as already discussed. David Matless was perhaps the first theorist to relate the term of 'moral geography' specifically to the English rural (1994a, 1994b), demonstrating how the behaviours of people in certain natural beauty spots in England were strongly policed, noting a plea of a local leader in Norfolk that nobody encourage 'visitors to come to the Broads *for the wrong reasons*' (emphasis mine, 2016: 13).

The metaphor comes to bear specifically on beating the bounds when reflecting on Bob Bushaway's description of beating the bounds as a manner of creating a 'particular moral world' (1992: 126). Beating the bounds as a custom originated quite literally as a tool for defending borders against outsiders, who were believed to be untrustworthy and thus might 'misuse' precious local resources; an idea common to modern anti-immigrant rhetoric, such as that seen throughout the Leave campaigns, too. It is thus no surprise that the three sources most heavily drawn on in explaining the modern meaning of beating the bounds in my literature review—Darian-Smith's analysis of the opening of the Channel Tunnel (1995, 1999), Fraser's post-referendum article (2017) and Ireson-Paine's violent account of the custom with Brasenose College (1999)—all interpret it as a form of resistance against oppressors once more, but in this case those oppressors are imagined to be Europe, immigrants from or through Europe and the European Union. As discussed, more people that live in the

southern English countryside voted Leave than voted Remain. Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to presume that many people living in the southern English countryside value some kind of political, economic, social, cultural and/or moral separation between England and Europe along with the physical territorial one. Furthermore, based particularly on Darian-Smith's work, it is reasonable to imagine that those trends she noted of Kent in the 1990s would also bear out today, in that people who participated in beating the bounds might value such separations most strongly, and in keeping, were even more likely to have voted to Leave the EU. As such, I believed approaching a relatively privileged rural community in southern England that beat the bounds was going to provide a wealth of information as to why people voted to Leave overall. It was with this assumption that I first approached Saxonbury.

Saxonbury has been beating the bounds for over 50 years, with the custom particularly growing in popularity during the last three decades. I took part in Saxonbury's beating the bounds event in 2019, and interviewed 25 individuals, 21 of whom had either taken part in the custom with me that year or had done so in previous years, and all of whom bar two lived themselves in Saxonbury. The vast majority of interviewees were in their 40s, 50s and 60s; a few were in their 70s, one was in their 80s, and one was in their 20s. In 2019, Saxonbury's constituency enjoyed average household incomes that were higher than the national median; unemployment rates were also far lower. Though there are a number of farmers and other agricultural workplaces still in Saxonbury, most people I met who were not stay-at-home parents, retired and/or in local voluntary roles worked in service, financial or cultural industries. Some were self-employed and worked from home offices, but many others commuted, taking advantage of Saxonbury's proximity to its large county town, or the relative ease of getting to London from Saxonbury by train. Due to their relative wealth and employment history, most of my participants were people who neither identified themselves personally nor were likely to be immediately identified by others as stereotypically 'working class'. The vast majority of people I spoke to were not born in Saxonbury but had moved there (or simply visited for the purposes of beating the bounds) from urban areas. According to the 2011 census, 98% of the population of Saxonbury is white and 92% of the population were born in the UK. In keeping, although participants were never asked to state their ethnic identity, all were born in Britain and all were indeed read by me as white. Like most rural areas in England,

Saxonbury voted to Leave; though exact numbers for Saxonbury are not possible to attain, the county constituency's results are listed as 57% of local voters in the EU referendum having voted for Leave, which is almost 5% higher than the national average. This is particularly noteworthy in Saxonbury's case because the county town is known for hosting head offices of several huge European brands, offices that provide employment for a great number of Saxonbury residents and in all likelihood would close and relocate to the continent after Brexit.

Of the 21 people I interviewed that had done beating the bounds, 16 voted Remain, and 4 voted Leave, with a single person refusing to comment on how they voted at all. In stark contrast to what my literature review had led me to expect, amongst the pool of those I spoke to who beat the bounds, Remainers outnumbered Leavers 4:1. Although I used the snowballing method for recruiting participants, which meant that existing participants often recommended friends—according to Troy A. Zimmer, within rural areas, social communities are likely to run alongside similar voting patterns (1983)—the current leaders and chief organisers of the custom all voted Remain, which in itself ensured Saxonbury's beating the bounds could not resemble Darian-Smith's or Fraser's anti-Europe/anti-EU iterations too strongly. So a new question quickly arose: if the most prevalent theory about beating the bounds revivals that currently exists—that modern iterations communicate anti-Europe/anti-EU or even anti-immigrant sentiment amongst those who participate—does not appear to be true in Saxonbury's case, then what else does Saxonbury's beating the bounds custom communicate about life in the post-Brexit southern English countryside?

As stated, Fintan O'Toole believes that in today's sociopolitical landscape, whereby through global movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too, privilege and oppression are being more openly discussed, '[v]ictimhood has been seen to be the currency of power' (2018a: 85) amongst more privileged communities across the world. The Leave campaigns, through consistently framing Europe/immigrants/the EU as an oppressive neo-imperial force to be resisted, encouraged Britons to indeed see themselves as victims, offering them an identity which according to O'Toole exchanged '[a]ll the complications... of being a former colonial power... for the exuberant victimhood of anti-colonial resistance' (2018a: 86). In the introduction, I presented my theory of the connections between Brexit and beating the bounds, stating that both function to offer white, British-born, relatively privileged individuals who ordinarily are not considered victims a chance to imagine themselves as such. I

call this theory 'doing the boundary', since both phenomena centre around fortifying and defending borders against imagined enemies and oppressors. The most concise depiction of doing the boundary can be found within the example of Brasenose College, and Ireson-Paine's framing of their custom as unnecessarily policed by EU regulation. Not only is Brasenose's protest against supposed land theft ironic in itself, since Oxford University is amongst the largest institutional landowners in all of England (Shrubsole, 2019b: no pg), the repackaging of the rhetoric of anti-colonial resistance movements to apply to white English people's ability to wave sticks in Marks and Spencer's is particularly galling given Oxford's ongoing veneration of slaver Cecil Rhodes. But it is in turning my attention away from Britain's perception of the EU and more towards that of its own empire that I have been able to adapt my Leave-focussed theory to accommodate the Remain-voting participants I was confronted with in reality. The key is within what English folk custom can offer to those who take part in it more generally, regardless of their vote in the EU referendum.

Here I turn again to Brigid Delaney's article, 'Standing outside the circle on May Day, I felt a sense of loss' (2018). Visiting Wessex, Delaney describes it as 'an ancient and unbroken place' (no pg), from the still-standing architecture that inspired Thomas Hardy's novels, to the old stone tools of the Neolithic era that remain casually scattered about. Witnessing local May Day festivities in a pub, Delaney notes the manner in which participants had extracted the long shadow of the British Empire from their domestic history, inheriting a custom from centuries past that they would also no doubt have the privilege of passing onto their children. This is in contrast to the indigenous communities actually colonised by the British Empire over the centuries, who have had their links to their ancestral customs severed, and even in some cases completely erased. Delaney, educated about what the British Empire did—and also acutely aware that Wessex is 'Leave country' and almost homogenously white—cannot help but recall this, and finds the complete absence of references to empire in a landscape so otherwise saturated with history quite stark. As such, despite the joyous atmosphere, Delaney feels only sadness, discomfort and, it is implied, guilt.

Folk culture's specific setting of themes of victimhood against the backdrop of an 'olde English' utopia combine to provide a kind of fairytale alternate history for England—a moral geography of English innocence, rather than English dominance. This is recognisable within Pauline Greenhill's Morris-dancing participants' naivety regards Canada's status as a white settler colony (1995, 2002) and made particularly

clear by the almost total absence of empire from English folkloristics as a whole (Naithani, 2010: 4). White people can use English folk culture to come up with a distinct identity for themselves divorced from that history of racial and imperial power, and thus avoid encountering the very worst of their guilt around racism and colonialism. Remain-voters are overall less likely to support nationalist politics, are more likely to have critical views about the British Empire, and more likely to support anti-racist causes such as Black Lives Matter (Duffy et. al., 2021). But not everyone informed on racism and empire will have the same reaction to seeing English folk custom 'in the wild' as Delaney. Whilst it is true that, for those ignorant of their privilege, reasons for doing the boundary through Brexit, beating the bounds or any folk custom in general may seem obvious—they may well truly believe themselves to be marginalised by the people they in fact have power over, after all—arguably this practice could be just as attractive to people who are well-informed about their privilege, if not *more* so. For informed white people, doing the boundary could provide temporary relief from the guilt about empire and privilege they may otherwise knowingly carry throughout their lives.

So could an informed person such as Delaney actually have chosen to participate in that May Day custom as a form of escapism, rather than simply standing outside of it and feeling guilty? Certainly, this is the choice Tim Robinson appeared to have made when he beat the bounds of Ireland. Whilst he claimed to be too politically progressive to have a nationality, Catherine Nash argued this non-disclosure was probably related to the problematic nature of his status as an Englishman, since it was the British Empire that attempted to erase Ireland's maps and customs in the first place (1995: 208). In this way, doing the boundary from a supposedly politically progressive perspective is not that different from Brasenose's iteration: both are about denying or otherwise distancing oneself from the reality of one's privilege. But this is not all that doing the boundary could describe. It could also describe the mechanism by which someone informed deliberately chooses, to borrow Katharine Tyler's term, to 'screen out' the history of empire during their everyday lives (2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3, 2012b). An example can be found in revisiting Reni Eddo-Lodge's anecdote about her white friend at university who, after taking a couple of lessons on the slave trade, deliberately chose not to learn anything further and dropped the module (2018: 3). The discomfort of knowledge about power and privilege—evoking Paul Gilroy's (2004) postcolonial melancholia—leads on to its purposeful erasure. In the introduction, I stated this thesis

was not just about boundaries in ancient folklore and modern politics, but psychological ones which separate the reality of what England really 'is' from England as some people might prefer to imagine it. It is with this more nuanced interpretation of doing the boundary in mind that this thesis proceeds.

My research could be described as taking both a interpretivist and social constructionist approach, two highly interrelated philosophies both premised on the concept that social knowledge around difference, such as that about racial difference or national identity, is a series of artefacts created by the interactions of individuals within society—and thereafter interpreted by those individuals based on their own *internal* structures of knowledge—rather than a series of naturally occurring truths or biological facts to be found within the world at large (Andrews, 2012; Australian National University, no date; Schwandt, 2003; Berger & Luckmann, 1991). I received advance ethical approval for the following methodology in 2018, application number ER/MC489/1. I decided to use both participant observation—taking part in Saxonbury's beating the bounds—and semi-structured interviews, loosely based on prompts on the topics of beating the bounds itself, life in an English village, Brexit, the British Empire, national identity and community, and racism and xenophobia. The interviews occurred between March and November in 2019, and took place primarily at participants' houses, occasionally backrooms of cafes and other semi-public places in the village, or over the phone or on Skype. These interviews typically took between one and two hours, and the majority of them were recorded digitally, although three participants requested not to be recorded in this way, so I only took handwritten notes. My participation in beating the bounds took place on the May Day Bank Holiday of 2019. During this experience I participated in several 'walking interviews', which were not recorded digitally, but have been recreated here from memory and the field notes I was able to make whilst keeping up the pace. For all participants that were interviewed, I obtained consent via written consent forms. For those I talked with at length during beating the bounds, I either obtained consent again through the forms, over email, or verbally at the time. All research materials, including interview recordings, consent forms and handwritten notes were transferred to my laptop, deleted from the original device and/or destroyed if applicable, and then kept in a password-protected digital folder. No one saw or listened to any of these materials apart from me and my research supervisors.

Initially, I transcribed all digitally recorded interviews verbatim. Some scholars

believe that this accuracy should be maintained throughout all data analysis and eventual writing up, such as Johnson and Rowlands (2012: 106). However, this is not a universal view. Nicholas Loubere (2017) for instance has argued that verbatim transcription artificially separates the researcher from the 'field' in which research was conducted, and that in his own experience 'the method pushe[d] critical engagement with the field to a later time when memories and feelings associated with the fieldwork event have faded' (no pg). It shortly became obvious to Loubere that verbatim transcription and/or quote selection 'flatten[ed]' and 'decontextualise[d]' the data, to the point that he considered such a method to be

an inherently positivistic endeavour, and thus unsuitable for much research adopting an interpretivist approach. It suggests that meaning is the result of combinations of words in a certain order and is, therefore, implicitly objective in an almost mathematical way—i.e., word + word = meaning; meaning + analysis = knowledge. Interpretivist research approaches, however, see meaning and knowledge as being emergent from dynamic and socially constructed discursive processes that must be understood within their own contexts (2017: no pg).

In keeping with my own interpretivist framework, I found a verbatim standard of quote inclusion quite unworkable. Instead, when including quotes from transcription, I preserved the original content as accurately as possible, whilst also removing most pauses, stuttering, repetition, and other ordinary aspects of verbal speech that I felt interrupted the narrative experience I have tried to maintain through much of my data chapters. In selecting quotes themselves, I align with the participants in Ann Corden and Roy Sainsbury's qualitative study on quotation selecting within social research itself, most of whom claimed to 'not have systematic criteria for deciding which spoken words to extract,' instead selecting quotes ad hoc 'when what was said seemed important or interesting' (9). One researcher who was interviewed rejected the verb 'selecting' altogether, considering it to indicate 'power or control' over the results that they did not in fact believe they had (17). This feels disingenuous—I of course selected quotes that seemed significant to me and likewise declined those that I felt had nothing much to say. To claim I had no power over this process would be to simultaneously claim that anybody else selecting quotes from my data would choose the exact same

ones, as though they had a life of their own. All quotes were selected by me based on what I perceived to be relevant to my topics of interest, and then lightly edited to neaten grammar and punctuation in order to fit within the overall immersive storytelling style I chose to write in (as is explored further below).

My methodology was framed around the concept of ‘practice-near research’, a term coined by Professor of Social Work Andrew Cooper in 2009. I came across Cooper’s work in a seminar I attended on the topic of the importance of not seeing academic and creative writing as mutually exclusive; in fact, both forms of writing can have positive influences on one other. Cooper’s work was lyrical, metaphorical and affecting, even in describing such difficult topics as working amongst child abusers and their victims. As such the style of his work, particularly the piece ‘Hearing the Grass Grow’, has been a huge influence on the development of my own writing style. This will be explored further below; however, as stated above, I also borrow his use of the ‘practice-near’ method, which he describes as the ‘emotional and epistemological challenges that arise from the researcher coming “near” enough to other people for psychological processes to ensue’ (2009: 429). The invention of this research framework is not tangential to Cooper’s use of a more creative, personal style, but part and parcel of it: Cooper’s writing illuminates both the folly in maintaining formal writerly conventions and inflexible researcher/participant relationships at the same time. Practice-near research, developed from the basic truth that academics are not objective overseers of research (Andrews, 2012; Rofe & Winchester, 2016) but shape and are shaped by what again might be called here the ‘forces of encounter’ (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010: 2) that the research process requires, is governed by the principle that ‘we can only hope to generate new knowledge in so far as we are emotionally and ideologically open to the possibility of discovering something new, including things we *really did not want to know*’ (emphasis mine, 2009: 429). This approach struck me not only as particularly apt, since one strand of my analysis as stated above is the idea of guilt and denial of uncomfortable truths, but very practical, since it prepared me for the potential discomforts of my own that might emerge during the research process, emphasising that these feelings would be normal on my part too, not just on the part of the participants. Practice-near research overall is summarised by Cooper in four general guidelines:

1. The smell of the real—practice-near research will bring us close to people in a

visceral, bodily, and therefore live emotional way... [and] the boundaries of the researcher's self are likely to become fluid and uncertain.

2. Losing our minds—the closer we come to other people the greater the likelihood that we will become psychically mixed up with them...We lose parts of ourselves in others, and find ourselves inhabited by the lost parts of others [and thus be prepared to] extricate [ourselves] from potential confusion.
3. The inevitability of personal change—the psychological intensity of these kinds of encounters changes us, whether we wish for this or not... [Thus] the test of whether something really is 'practice-near'... might be whether or not the researcher felt themselves to be changed as a person in the course of the work.
4. The discovery of 'complex particulars'—if you are close enough to your research subject for all the above to be happening then you won't be engaged with large populations of research subjects... The closer one comes to a single case, the more its uniqueness and particularity demands to be understood (2009: 432)

Although she does not use the term, some of Katie Walsh's research could be described as led by a practice-near ethos. Her 2007 article, "It got very debauched, very Dubai!": Heterosexual intimacy amongst single British expatriates', is perhaps the best example of this, and was a huge influence on my initial thoughts on developing reflexivity when I began my PhD in 2017. Detailing what she referred to as a 'whole-hearted' research methodology (512) on the performance of heterosexuality amongst British migrants in Dubai, Walsh engaged in participant observation, leading her to conduct research in increasingly 'less formalised' places such as bars, clubs and beside swimming pools. Her understanding of the British 'expatriate community' was driven through personal connections with many participants, and Walsh found that such intimacy had a dramatic effect on her own behaviour:

My own everyday performances and experiences of sexuality and gender changed in the field. I began to embody a much more exaggerated white heterosexual feminine identity (both consciously and unconsciously) than I ever have in other spaces, which began to materialise in the manipulation of my

appearance and also in my corporeal gesture. The sense of belonging I experienced as a result, through both transient sexual relationships with men and still-existing friendships with other straight women, was seductive, even if only in partial and temporally specific ways. This embodied change was not a calculated decision but, without doubt, enabled me to be an ‘insider’ in the field (512-513).

Whilst I did not develop any intimate relationships with my participants, I did notice that I was drawn to older participants—those in their 60s, 70s and 80s—and that I often behaved differently around them than I did participants who were in their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s. My beloved Taid passed away only a few months before I began fieldwork in 2019, and looking back on the experience, I believe my grief subtly altered my behaviour in a way that I doubt any participants would have noticed, but to me in hindsight appears quite profound. I enjoyed being with older interviewees in particular, often choosing, when asked, to spend additional time in their homes after the formal interview concluded to engage in further small-talk or other activities—one participant in their 80s and I watched an episode of *Countdown* together—whereas when younger participants extended similar invitations, I was more likely to decline. Arguably I put on somewhat of a performance of a ‘granddaughter’ (or what constitutes a granddaughter in my experience), finding that I often showed more interest in the décor of and photographs propped up around older participants’ houses, and accepted more biscuits or requested more cups of tea (!) from them than I did of younger ones. Occasionally I would say no to refreshments offered by older participants, which tended to either result in their disappointment or a joke about whether they were ‘good enough’ for me as a spread (after which I would probably accept the refreshments anyway out of embarrassment). Although I was usually not interviewing participants from across a ‘class divide’, such moments were still evocative of certain jokes made by participants in ‘cross-class encounters’ during social research conducted in England in the 1960s, as recounted by Jon Lawrence: ‘[in this house we] don’t go in for refinement of manners, or 6-course meals where you have to decide which fork to use’ (2014: 225). Strangely, I also sometimes avoided bringing up either Brexit or the British Empire for a longer period with older participants than I did with younger participants, as though I did not want to ‘spoil’ the cosy atmosphere with serious topics and run the risk of disagreeing with them—showing a presumption on my part that

there *would* be disagreement, of course. Indeed, whilst one participant who I disagreed fervently with on matters of immigration was in his 70s, several other participants I disagreed with on other topics were much younger, to the point that I cannot claim to have noticed any pattern in sociopolitical opinions amongst my participants as pertains to differences in age.

Critical whiteness studies has been demonstrating for decades that white people tend to only consider race and ethnicity in relation to people of colour, forming the ‘invisibilisation of whiteness’ as a racial and ethnic category (Frankenberg, 1993; Klinenberg, Nexica, Rasmussen & Wray, 2001). This issue is likely to be only more acute in the English countryside, which is historically ‘a white domain’ (Agyeman & Spooner, 1997: 1999). In keeping, I barely knew anything about institutional racism or the British Empire before my early 20s. I also voted Remain in the 2016 EU referendum, and after the vote indulged in a lot of stereotyping about ‘racist idiots’ (such as those I believed I had left behind in my home village) voting Leave as opposed to ‘rational and accepting people’ voting Remain (such as I supposedly now found myself amongst in the city). Practice-near research encouraged me to carefully manage the difference between my own presumptions about what people would believe in Saxonbury versus what they actually believed—as demonstrated throughout this Methodology, assumptions have tripped me up on many occasions! Attending to Cooper’s ‘complex particulars’ (2009: 432) not only convinced me to tread lightly when using my own experiences and expectations to guide my analysis. It also suggested I carefully balance the understanding that Saxonbury is, like any community, unique, against the requirement of all social research to offer some framework for extrapolation.

This thesis has been written in a style that fuses formal academic writing with a more creative, storyteller-type voice. This storytelling style is most visible throughout Chapters 3 and 4, and is partly inspired by Michael Mayerfeld Bell and his ethnography of the English village of Childerley. He begins this 1995 work with a paragraph about the way Childerleyans see themselves that is written so enchantingly that it resembles the first page of a fairytale (3). It is fitting to talk about English villages this way, being as they are themselves often depicted as ancient and mystical, as was discussed in the literature review. Chapters 5 and 6, whilst more traditionally analytical, still include some narrative elements, with the writing style here more resembling the various anecdotes and analyses around Brexit weaved seamlessly together in the recent work

of Ben Rogaly (2020). Perhaps most importantly, the use of a narratorial style in this thesis works to emphasise the fact that this thesis *has a narrator*, someone ‘shaping’ Saxonbury within the mere act of writing about it.

This emphasis also fits in well with my ethical requirements. Anonymisation is an expectation within most social research; naturally, all names have been changed, and when possible, other identifying details such as job titles have also been altered. Any reference to someone’s nationality has also been uniformly changed; a participant who is described as being dual-national ‘Icelandic and British’ for instance will not be in reality Icelandic, but will have a different nationality alongside their British one. However, some scholars have argued that such a blanket, unvarying approach to anonymisation is not sufficient. Andrew Clark claims: ‘[A]nonymisation strategies cannot be separated from other methodological... or indeed substantive issues’ (2006: 2). Through the process of selecting pseudonyms, for instance, researchers could potentially be ‘inferring all sorts of connotative baggage onto research participants that may or may not be appropriate’ (6), such as picking names/job titles they like the sound of for participants they favour, and vice versa ⁹. In this thesis the village name has also been changed, and arguably my choice to include the word ‘Saxon’ in the pseudonym, with its connection to ‘Anglo-Saxon’, a term for inhabitants of England during the Middle Ages, sparks imagery of heritage and ‘nativeness’, further complicated by the co-option of the term by white supremacists in the modern day (Williams & Haselby, 2019: no pg). I maintain however that this pseudonym remains an appropriate choice to describe a village that is as invested in preserving links to its ancient history as much as Saxonbury (who have a dedicated museum, and several groups that promote local heritage, as will be explored).

Naming choices aside, Clark adds that anonymising places is even more complex since they remain identifiable through the way they may have been ‘constructed through stories and myths’ (2006: 8). Therefore, not only is it important to change some geographical descriptions of Saxonbury, but also to subtly alter some details of the historical and folkloric narratives that had been weaved around the village over time, and by which many Saxonburians still somewhat seem to come to understand their community in the present. This is a particularly fraught position to be in, as the desire for research ‘authenticity’ feels on the face of it methodologically

⁹ Naturally I have tried not to do this, but whether it happened subconsciously or not is another matter!

incompatible with alterations of Saxonbury's 'stories and myths' in any way. Nevertheless, the Saxonbury I present in these next few chapters is as 'anonymous' as I can make it—notwithstanding the contention that no data can ever be truly anonymised (Rocher, Hendrickx & de Montjoye, 2019)—whilst being always 'authentic' in representing the spirit of Saxonbury as I experienced it.

Chapter 3. ““Well thank god I don’t live there!””: Doing the boundary in the everyday Saxonbury ‘community’

‘I think we’ve done beating the bounds—Jack, we’ve done it, haven’t we?’ calls Robin, my Airbnb host, through the kitchen doorway. She receives no answer. ‘We have, I think, but we’re not the people to ask about it. Not really our thing.’

Robin and Jack, a couple in their forties with two young girls, moved to Saxonbury five years ago, in search of a more settled life after spending much of their careers overseas. The two purchased an almost 500-year-old thatched cottage just off of Saxonbury square, raising Harriet and the later-arriving Holly within its chilly but homely walls. Still flushed from the school run and having dropped Holly off at ballet, Robin is now trying to balance Airbnb host duties against Harriet’s immediate post-school creative energies. Jack arrives from the living room, having apparently heard every word.

‘Have you met them yet, then?’ he asks. He then lists two risqué nicknames.

‘Who?’ I ask uncertainly.

‘Men!’ sighs Robin, darting around a baking tray in an attempt to dislodge some flapjacks that have seared themselves to its base. ‘The ones who lead the walk now. One holds this stick and the other one blows a trumpet and that’s what people call them, I guess. A little village joke.’

‘Not yet,’ I reply.

‘Nice guys. Especially Keith. Can’t do enough for you. And there’s Alan, too, he’s very involved in village heritage and things. Darling, how about you finish that lovely drawing off for me?’ Harriet has ambushed Robin over the bin—the flapjacks were only partly salvageable—with a request for the iPad. ‘No, no, drawing time now. Finish the one of Fairydust?’ Appropriately enough for a house dominated by two girls under 10, all the pets, even the cockerel, have names taken straight from the little princess playbook.

How do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large articulate ‘community’? How central do they view living in an English village ‘community’ to be to their sociopolitical identities? I feel like the first step to understanding this is to imagine what it would be like to live in this community myself, so I excuse myself from the Baker house by taking the first opportunity to explore Saxonbury on foot. The Bakers’ house nestles within a row of thatched cottages that peters out with a small key maker’s office, only differentiated from the other houses through an A4 piece of paper stuck in the window bearing the handwritten business name. I turn in the other direction, follow the snaking road of cottages up to a series of rust-red farmhouses and long stretches of open fields, and the scent of manure lilts towards me right on cue. My French boyfriend often comments on similar smells when we drive to his dad’s childhood home in Normandy. I shake my head at his urban fragility; he calls me *le ch’ti*, a colloquial term akin in English to country bumpkin.

But it is clear we are not in bumpkin country now. Aside from the scrappy sign on the key makers, from my vantage point everything looks very carefully curated. Saxonbury’s square, featuring a hairdresser, a newly refurbished pub called *The Queen’s Arms* and a small car park in which Land Rovers abound, is fairly underwhelming, and not really in the shape of a square at all, more of a ragged octagon. Nestled underneath a cluster of trees however lies a large and pretty pond, a feature so central to Saxonbury’s identity that it, rather than perhaps the more easily spotted square itself, is a named stop for the single bus that (very occasionally) turns

up here. The centre is otherwise jaggedly kept in check in by a mixture of new builds and thatched cottages with walls of patchwork stone, an operational forge, a tearoom, a small supermarket, a post office and a tiny library whose sign indicating it is currently open is belied by the fact that its blinds are drawn. Beside one road further along is a stream, a miniature moat segregating the long driveways of fancy houses from the rest. From a distance everyone is overlooked by the luxurious Saxonbury Mansion and its occupant, Lord Spreadingham. Despite its lopsided square, Saxonbury seems to otherwise tick all the boxes of what P. H. Ditchfield looked to include in his 1908 compendium of English villages as a 'typical example' (1908: 17).

3. 1. 'This beating heart in the middle'

'It's a typical English village,' confirmed Jean and Derek Wintercroft simultaneously, looking at me from either side of their striking table, the materials of which I was later told came from a local demolished church. 'That's what we asked the estate agent for,' continued Jean proudly. 'A good old-fashioned English village.'

Derek and Jean's house was nestled on a side street in which all the properties, whilst not being as 'traditional' as the ancient cottages nearer to the centre, still have a cosy old-fashioned feel. 'A nice old house. A nice lane. A nice square,' said Jean. 'If we were going to move back, there was no way we were going to consider anything else. And we were immediately told, if that's what you want, you need to go to Saxonbury.'

'We were so sure about it that when I bought it, Jean hadn't actually even seen it,' added Derek mischievously. 'She hadn't been able to get the kids over in time. But I said to her, over the phone: "It's everything we've been looking for. It's perfect. Every aspect is traditional. The layout, the roof." And you walk around—not so much these days, but back then—and every other house is the same too. And she said, "go for it."'

'I did,' said Jean. 'There are things you know, just on instinct. And we'd just had enough of Canada—they have lovely rural landscapes, but everybody's house is just so perfect, you know? Inside and outside, not a tile, not a cushion out of place. Rustic but not truly rustic, like arranged. Like something out of a catalogue. Canadian friends would visit and we'd have the kids' toys out, maybe a few dirty cups on the side, and they'd ask us, "Are you alright?"' Both of them laughed. 'To us, a bit of disorder, well that's English living isn't it? Cosy is what it's all about. And that's the same with a

traditional English village. We may look back on it as picturesque, but they built everything for practical purposes. A house needs to keep you warm, not be nominated for a design award!

‘They were built to be close, as well,’ Derek advised. ‘You needed people around you back then. So it was also about community spirit and values. Everybody looks out for everybody else here. You have to, because of the closeness of everyone.’

‘Well yes, exactly!’ said Jean. ‘That’s also why we wanted a traditional village. We wanted a local school, a local pub. And the whole idea that nothing happens in a village anymore—’

‘That village life is dead,’ I offered.

‘Exactly, that village life is dead, oh that’s not true here, not at all, I think there’s what, over 40 different clubs here? Sewing and boules and cricket and debate and chess and Italian cooking, oh my god, it goes on and on. You can barely go to the pub without there being something on.’

‘But you couldn’t have known all that when you moved, did you?’ I asked.

‘No,’ continued Jean. ‘It’s actually become more lively over the years. More groups. But even back then, we knew. We wanted to know the names of our neighbours, as well as the fact we wanted a beautiful view, like the paintings, you know. God, you don’t know how much those kinds of paintings mean to you, just a plain old hill and a little cottage and maybe a church, until you see Canadian art! Just mountains in all of them! Huge lakes! Everything’s so vast and spread out. Nice trees, big pines, just not the right type of trees!’

‘Not to mention the bears,’ replied Derek.

‘Didn’t have any run-ins, did you?’ I asked.

‘No, not us luckily,’ said Jean. ‘But a local man did get taken once when he was camping. Very frightening. And for me you can’t settle in a place like that. But that’s a typical English village for you. It’s about safety and smallness. You can’t compare. And as soon as we were here, we all were acting differently. We weren’t thinking competitively. I even started sewing! I never even replaced a button in my life!’

‘I got out of my suits,’ admitted Derek. ‘Couldn’t be wandering around hunting in suits. I wouldn’t be doing it right, would I!’

Derek and Jean’s descriptions perfectly position Saxonbury as a ‘rural idyll’. Indeed, their oldest son Aaron, Jean said, ‘literally calls Saxonbury “the Shire”. You know, like in Lord of the Rings?’ However, at the same time as the Wintercrofts

considered Canadian life to have been inauthentic and overly ordered, and English village life natural and comfortable, they both admitted to a certain degree of performance required once they moved to Saxonbury, in keeping with Matless (1994a) and Goodwin-Hawkins' (2016) theories, in order to 'do [the village] right'. Unsurprisingly, the performances necessitated had a gendered element, with Jean taking up sewing, and Derek going on hunting trips, chiming with the work of Hughes (1997), Little (1997), and Tuitjer (2016) that demonstrate stricter adherence to gender norms is usually expected in rural communities.

In my preliminary emails with participants I had been primed with the promise that Saxonbury's green that was 'truly something'. Fringed by even lovelier cottages and the village's other pub, *The Thirsty Parson*, what strikes most however is the ominous way it is loomed over by a huge Gothic church, the long shadow of a tall war memorial, and otherwise hemmed in by tight houses with carefully manicured kitchen gardens on all sides. This panoptical positioning would certainly ensure that it cannot easily be used for the same sort of underage drinking people were always subjecting the green to in the village I grew up in. For Eleanor, a friendly but no-nonsense parish councillor in her 60s, the preciousness of the green was ironically outlined best in a story decrying village preciousness in general. As she explained to me over her kitchen table, both of us ourselves hemmed in with large stacks of folders on either side:

'The trouble is with the old ways of running the village, the traditional fetes and things, they're all well and good but it's no use if you don't have the young people interested. A village dies without its young people. We've recently gotten our youngest ever councillor too, she's 19. And she's wonderful.' Eleanor bent down to stroke the silky brown ears of her spaniel, Bertie, who I was told recently won a rosette in a local dog show. 'A village dies without new ideas, and that's what lots of people here don't understand. It's also about trying to open the village up a bit. So when we had [big corporation] asking to come and do their Christmas advert here, I got them to agree to a donation, and we all agreed. And it was like a big village party for the filming. People complained, said they didn't like the idea of it. One woman said, "you know my cousin's an MP, I could shut this down?" But in the end we all had a great time. That's what I mean about fresh ideas. We wouldn't have gotten that donation if we hadn't been open to it in the first place.'

When I asked about the technical arrangements, a surprising word came out of

Eleanor's usually straight-talking mouth.

'But I said, "you have to protect the green, do you understand?" Because the green is *sacrosanct*. Absolutely sacred. Not a single bit of damage. So if you're going to put generator equipment down, you have to put down big tracking mats too. That's very important.'

'Sacrosanct?' I asked. 'Is that something you personally believe, or you think other people here in the village believe?'

'Both,' she said firmly. 'And that's why there was a bit of backlash, I think, initially, the complaints. If we'd said out on the mounds people wouldn't care. It's the green that's the heart. But you know the way they did it, we got it done so that even the people that complained I think had a good time on the night. A big party. And of course we got the donation. All's well.'

The concept of the green—a practical place of activity, a social hub, and moreover a colour, as in Blake's notorious 'green and pleasant land'—being perhaps the most crucial component of the English village overall echoes not only the elegiac words of Ditchfield, but the primary objections of Goodwin-Hawkins' participants in Snay Top to being called a village in the first place: they do not have a village green, thus they cannot actually constitute a village (2013). The Kinks' sixth album (1968) contains two tracks dedicated to the village green, one simply titled *Village Green*, and the other, *We Are The Village Green Preservation Society*, both of which express nostalgia for the 'virginal innocence' it represents, such which has no parallel in modern city life and thus must be protected from 'abuse' at all costs. Peter, a gregarious radio announcer in his 50s living in one of the oldest and most sought-after cottages in Saxonbury, had a similarly dismissive attitude to 'old village stick-in-the-muds' as Eleanor did. Yet, just as with Eleanor, the green seemed to be an exception:

'Plushville [a neighbouring village], I don't know if you drove through it from the station, you'll see it's actually one long strip. One long winding thing with all these sprawling roads, not really a village at all in the way you traditionally think of one. But Saxonbury isn't like that, because although it goes in all different directions, it coils around the green, like a spiderweb, so it has this beating heart in the middle.' Peter gestured to an old map of the village from the late 1800s on the chimney breast that demonstrated exactly that. 'And it means that you can walk through Plushville and you don't necessarily see anybody else but everybody who wants to get to the shop or the post office or whatever in Saxonbury, unless you live right next to it you probably have

to go past the green. That reminds you, that's like a moment of—oh yes, I live in a village, don't I, and this is what it's all about. The scenery, and also being connected. And even though we've got young people here, teenage drinkers and what-have-you, I think they preserve it pretty much as well. Nobody messes with the green. I never see any litter on it, certainly, and I see it plenty elsewhere. It's a symbol. A harmless symbol. And people need their symbols.'

The belief that 'nobody messes with the green' was somewhat undermined by a story I was later told about how, not long after I first arrived in Saxonbury, the police had been called by a resident who noticed two men behind the memorial who appeared to be cooking methamphetamine.

'Did you hear about somebody apparently cooking meth on the green?' I asked Jack Baker as we were doing the washing up.

'Surely not,' said Jack, holding a tea towel and accepting a frying pan it had taken several minutes for me to remove the residue of chipolatas from. 'I don't think someone would do that here. I mean, yeah they would, in their houses maybe. But not out on the green like that. That sounds like somebody's pulling your leg there. Yeah, no, not like that. They wouldn't dare I think. That's dumb.'

'Because the green's so sacred, right?' I said smugly.

'No,' replied Jack, blotting the pan with the tea towel. 'I don't give a shit about that, who cares. I mean it's dumb *because everybody can see you*. Plenty of dilapidated barns round here you could use. It's the bloody countryside, you can get away with anything here. And they choose the green? What berks.'

3. 2. 'Just one of the many invasions over the years'

I am heading for what I believe is the village hall. I am lost, however, and end up doubling back through the square until I find an open door in what appears to be the only nearby civic building.

'Hello?' I say, stepping inside. A man with a bright white beard and matching eyebrows frowns out at me.

'Didn't you see the sign?'

'Oh. No. Sorry.' I cast about on the pavement behind me, but there's nothing there.

'Not there. Here.' The man points to a placard on the carpet beside my feet. 'As

in, the sign's not out *there*, because we're not *open* yet!

'Oh. Sorry.' I repeat, stepping awkwardly out again. Then: 'Are you Alan Millet?'

'No,' he replies. 'I'm Harold. What do you need Alan for?'

'I'm a PhD researcher. He's taking me for a tour of the village tomorrow, I just thought I'd say hi if he was in.'

Harold's eyes suddenly light up. 'A PhD? On Saxonbury?'

I nod cautiously. I suppose, in a manner of speaking.

The large hand that waved me enthusiastically back over the threshold now shakes mine with equal vigour. 'I'm just joking about the sign, we open up officially next week, that's why I was surprised! Was just keeping the door open to air out the old map.'

In this one-roomed museum, I can barely see more than an inch of uncovered wall in any one direction. To say space has been maximised here is an understatement, and the exhibits on offer far outstrip the ordinary array of items you might expect to find in a small village heritage centre. One of the most attention-grabbing cabinets features memorabilia from a flagship BBC sitcom that once filmed an episode in Saxonbury in the 70s. Another displays an imitation Victoria Cross, and a photograph of the Saxonburian military hero the real one was awarded to. Another still displays a huge ancient-looking clay pot, and almost 50 other items from a vast hoard of 3rd century Romano-British treasures discovered in the outskirts of the village in the 1980s. The plaque indicates that the valuables were likely to have been 'buried in haste' following a threat of imminent invasion.

'Just one of many we've experienced over the years!' says Harold, following my gaze. 'Invasions, I mean!'

'How so?' I say, accepting a pink wafer from a newly outstretched plate of biscuits.

'Well, there was the yanks, of course, in the Second World War, although I'm half-joking about that really. And then you've got when we had all the yuppies coming in. And turns out it's just the latest in a long of invasions, when you look at the records. Saxonbury's been fending it off since before BC became AD.'

'Yuppies?' I query.

'Oh yes! Well you know the story. All these fashionable urban people suddenly think it seems frightfully nice to get a lungful of somewhere green. So they swan over here. *Just think they own the place.*'

I swallow the sticky remnants of the custard cream. All the village ethnographies I had read in preparation for visiting Saxonbury featured at least a handful of individuals who spoke this way about outsiders. I did not expect to meet one within my first hour of arriving.

‘Well, I’m sorry I walked in *just like I own the place*,’ I say, smiling nervously. He gestures his forgiveness and trots back over to the yellowing map. He traces a line across it with a finger.

‘Here. All a new development. You know what was underneath here?’

‘Er —more Roman things?’

‘A *bathhouse!*’ Harold reveals triumphantly. ‘Now, some say you wouldn’t find a bathhouse this far out of the main cities, but we had a surveyor, an experienced archaeologist as well, come over here in the 1990s and they said, well yes it seemed improbable, but all signs pointed to it nevertheless. We did that to try to stop the development. This is part of the natural fabric of the village. But the building company was too rich for our blood. And now we’ll never get to know. What a waste. No longer a village. Not now we’ve been invaded by the *suburbs*.’

The idea that the building of the new estate represented an ‘invasion of the suburbs’, whilst Romano-British artefacts—themselves derived from the invasion of Romans into Britain in the 1st century—represented the ‘natural fabric of the village’ is reminiscent of William’s escalator (1975: 9-11); the constant deferral of ‘the golden age’ of rural living to a different era regardless of the reality that no era was without social upheavals. But the subject of invasion as opposed to ‘natural’ history would come up in later interviews again and again. Victoria, a formal woman in her 60s who had come from a long line of Christian missionaries and spent several decades herself proselytising in Africa and Australasia, moved to Saxonbury in retirement, inspired by her father’s own vivid memories of growing up in Saxonbury as a boy.

‘It really was like a fairytale. I mean, obviously there’s the nostalgia element there, possibly enhancing things, but still the way he talked about this place, I just loved listening to the stories about it.’ Victoria’s interview was taking place over the phone as she would shortly be jetting off to Australia again to visit old friends; the echo within her 17th century cottage, in keeping with her ancestry, made it sound as though she was speaking from a church pulpit. ‘But one thing I was terrified of when I moved here, in the late 1980s by this point, was that it might have changed. Been spoiled or something, loads of houses built by urban invaders and tourists and commuters and

such. I think even when my father was growing up it seemed a rarefied experience. He was telling us those stories because even in the 30s, these kinds of villages weren't surviving anymore. But when I arrived here, and later I spoke to my sister, and she asked, "Well is it exactly how Dad said?", I replied that it was. But she replied, "Well thank god I don't live there!"

Alexander, a marketing executive in his 40s, had moved to the village a few years prior. Having bought a plot of land on which to build a new house for his family, he initially faced pushback from Saxonbury locals, who assumed he was going to develop the property into something wholly out of keeping with the other nearby houses. In fact, Alexander dedicated several months to researching local architecture and drew up the plans for his own house accordingly.

'And I was amazed at how many people actually came up to us and said, "Oh you know, those tiles, you've chosen, they're beautiful". Because I did spend a hell of a lot of time choosing them. I was just so keen to blend in with what was already going on in the area, not wanting to wade in with this completely incongruous style, you know.'

We were in Alexander's office; despite being sunny outside I had needed to pull on my fleece. He issued an instruction to his young assistant, who swiftly turned on the radiator. Despite Alexander's desires not to be incongruous, the archaic barn out of which his office had been converted did look a little jarring populated with silver MacBooks and ergonomic chairs.

'But I really did put so much effort in. I drove to churches here there and everywhere where they'd used a particular tile or a particular brick. And the dividends have paid off because people have actually commented on it and said "Oh god it's so nice seeing a house like this here. It's new but it's *old*, too."

I sipped my water. Alexander had informed me very apologetically that the complicated-looking Smart kettle in the kitchen had packed up just a few hours before I arrived. It had been an expensive purchase and, rather than replacing it, Alexander confirmed he was just going to bring in a cheap old one from home; one of the neighbours had originally lent it to him in order to hydrate his workforce whilst the house was still being built.

'She said she got it as a wedding present in the 70s and it has worked ever since. I thought surely she would want it back but when I tried to deliver it, she said: "No, consider it housewarming".'

‘You’ve been accepted then?’ I asked. ‘In Saxonbury?’

‘I think so,’ said Alexander pensively. ‘Then again, I was born only a couple of villages over. I think you tell people that and they already relax.’

3. 3. ‘And she’s absolutely a villager’

About to make my way back to the Bakers’ place, my eye is drawn to a very cluttered-looking noticeboard. That there were, as Jean would later tell me, at least 40 different clubs and societies in Saxonbury would seem, just at a glance at this web of flyers and post-it notes, very plausible. For all the talk of ‘typical’, it was this that the Wintercrofts believed that also made Saxonbury very special. One notice that sticks out, despite being almost completely papered over since it was now six months out of date, is a poster with a drawing of a fairy on it so saturated with glitter it could almost have been Harriet’s handiwork. It advertises last year’s local pantomime.

‘Shall I tell the Cinderella story?’ Derek suddenly said to Jean, interjecting Jean’s point about the apparently welcoming nature of Saxonbury.

‘Oh go on then, tell the Cinderella story,’ replied Jean.

Derek turned to me. ‘Right. White demographic. Never a black person who lived in the village. A young couple come to live in a farm cottage, three miles from here. And there’s a local pantomime. Amateur dramatics pantomime. Cinderella, yes? And the scene with Cinderella sitting in front of the fire crying because she can’t go to the ball. And suddenly there’s— a big flash of, flash powder—’

‘Puff of smoke,’ Jean assisted.

‘Puff of smoke,’ Derek agreed. ‘And then onto the screen, the stage I mean, pops this—somewhat pregnant—fairly largeish black lady in a pink tutu. And this was Florence’s introduction to the village. This was the first time that most people in the village had ever *seen* her!’ Derek had tears in his eyes, and Jean was chuckling too.

‘Wow!’ I exclaimed.

‘And she appears in this pink tutu!’

‘And pregnant!’ I marvelled.

‘And pregnant!’ Derek said. ‘And she’s been one of the stalwarts of the amateur dramatics ever since.’

‘And she’s absolutely a villager,’ cautioned Jean. ‘As much as any of us.’

Despite the joviality of Derek’s tone, and the confirmation by Jean that Florence

is 'absolutely a villager', the story is indicative of the idea that non-white individuals need to 'integrate' properly into the white moral geography of where they live to be accepted (Agyeman & Spooner, 1997; Tyler, 2003, 2012a, 2012b). 'Doing the village' over the Christmas period indeed often means attending or performing in local pantomime, and that Florence's first mass public appearance in Saxonbury was through so explicitly doing the village probably immediately ingratiated her in the minds of many watching. Nevertheless, the onus is placed on people of colour to 'prove' they are not a threat to traditional village life—rather than on white villagers to make the effort in welcoming them—and as the story makes clear, the humour inherent in a large pregnant black woman playing a fairy godmother in a local panto confirms that Florence is going to somewhat 'stick out' regardless of how she behaves. Although I never personally got to speak to Florence, as per Tyler's work examining how much effort villagers of colour must put in to be accepted in Greenville (2003, 2012a, 2012b) it is possible the Wintercrofts misrecognised Florence's actions as a charming joke rather than a potentially fraught attempt to be accepted. As Tyler describes in her work on Greenville, white villagers emphasised 'supposed cultural differences' between themselves and non-white villagers even when there was little evidence for them, which paralleled old colonial beliefs that 'mark off and separate the coloniser from those colonised' (2012b: 84). This idea was underscored by an anecdote I was later told by a tearoom worker about a Pakistani couple who moved to the village in the early 00s, whom the teller had been absolutely shocked to learn were not only Conservative voters but keen horse racers. 'They fit in well actually on that basis, surprisingly well, but my god they do stick out like sore thumbs!' she laughed.

Megan, a teaching assistant in her 40s, was far more reflective. Our interview took place in her new build on an estate on the outskirts of Saxonbury—the very one Harold had been complaining about as an 'invasion'. The geographical distance she had from the Saxonbury centre also seemed to align with a critical one she had developed between herself and village life.

'I feel, in many ways, blessed to live in such a beautiful part of the world,' she said thoughtfully, looking out to the garden into which she had just released her elderly cat. 'It's quite powerful, in as much as, you can associate it with beautiful music like Vaughan Williams' pastoral 'Lark Ascending'. So on that spiritual note I suppose it feels good to live in a place like this. It's picture postcard pretty, isn't it? And there is a tightness to the community here. There is in all villages I think. I mean here I can go

out for a run, and I can say “good morning” to people I see, you know. That never happened when I lived in the city.’

I picked up on a kind of guilt in Megan’s voice, and pressed her on it.

‘Well, we do live in a really friendly village and I think that’s lovely but... but but but,’ she replied, frowning. ‘But—I’m very aware that I live in Blue-kip [portmanteau for both Conservative and UKIP voters] central. And that my political views are perhaps on the other end of the curve to perhaps some of the people who live around here. And I do think that has something to do with being attracted to living in a village, it does. Maybe that’s what you hear when you hear guilt. That I blend in here. But not everybody does.’

Megan indeed had complicated feelings about living in Saxonbury. The idea that it was a ‘typical English village’ was inextricable in her mind from a moral geography that privileged and prized whiteness and white ways of being and dressing, with which she was uncomfortable. Her knowledge of her own privilege status even affected the way she behaved at the school gates, greeting a woman who turned up to her son’s school wearing

a niqab? No hijab, hijab is just over the head, isn’t it. And her two children go to the village school. And I felt a responsibility to smile at this person, to say “hello”, at school pick-up and drop-off. So I did usually. Because I felt a responsibility because I thought about how many other people actually are going to think she looks different. I mean, I hate that I even think that about her, that she’s different, but she is, she knows she’s different, there’s no point pretending otherwise. You pretending she’s not isn’t useful to her, is it?’

Peter, already clear on his belief that white residents of Saxonbury tended to close ranks over the idea of change, turned his gaze to the way the village coped with ethnic and cultural difference.

There was a new Indian restaurant, and oh my god, how the people complained! Kept saying, “oh now the whole village is going to stink of curries, great”. And you really can get a business broken with that attitude! To change people’s environment dramatically, of course they’re going to feel threatened by it. But how threatened do you think those Indian chefs feel, you know?

The comment about ‘stinking of curries’ again mirrors Tyler’s work; one of her participants, Sheila, said ‘if we had a lot [of Indian people] in this village, one thing that would get up my nose literally would be the smell of all their cooking’ (2012b: 42). This already problematic framing of Indian people with an unpleasant smell is complicated further by Peter’s later admission that Saxonburians actually ended up enjoying the curry house instead, another insidious echo of old colonial relationships since, as John Hutnyk put it, it is solely the ‘violence of imperialist history that allows for the British love of curry in the first place’ (1999: 101). However, despite Peter’s sympathy for non-white incomers to Saxonbury, he defended white villagers for being

terrified of rapid change. And I get that, and integration and change should happen far more slowly. But Saxonbury is different, it’s evolved in an organic sort of way, not in the accelerated way of today. Because if you suddenly put a prison, or you put something that was going to dramatically change the way this village was, boy would you see some racism, you’d see some really not necessarily very pleasant reactions to it.

The fact that Peter immediately chose the example of the building of a prison to describe a plausible situation in which there could be increased levels of people of different ethnicities and cultures in Saxonbury—rather than, for instance, the opening of a gurdwara or mosque—reveals a telling, probably unconscious association in his mind between criminality and ethnicity. The perception of people of colour as inherently dangerous is exactly the kind of bias that, as Chakraborti and Garland contend (2004a, 2004b), would continue to keep people of colour wary of moving to Saxonbury in the first place. For Brian and Deborah Zimmer though, a couple in their 70s, ethnic and cultural difference was something to be excited about. As Deborah showed me a photograph of their son David, she explained to me that his upcoming marriage to a Caribbean woman would soon ‘see the first black addition to the Zimmer family’.

I asked that how they felt about this. Brian and Deborah were in their 70s and unlike many of the older couples in Saxonbury, did not appear to ever have lived together anywhere else. I had discovered Brian felt a lot of pride over being in born in the village, and this led me to form assumptions about what a couple such as this

might believe about who 'belongs' in Saxonbury and who does not.

Brian answered my leading question immediately from behind us: 'Her colour doesn't matter. Just what she is. Lovely girl.'

'Very nice to have some new blood, some new culture in the Zimmers,' added Deborah.

'Lovely girl,' repeated Brian. 'Lovelier than the rest of us lot, that's for sure!'

3. 4. "No, we want to be in the centre"

A few months later, I happened to bring up the meth-cooking story with a woman in her 40s I found myself queuing behind at the Saxonbury mini-supermarket.

'Well actually I heard it was a shisha pipe,' said the woman. 'They were just hanging out, smoking shisha. I think the guy who called the police didn't really know what actual drugs looks like.'

'Oh!' I said. 'Well that's a relief!'

The woman looked at me in surprise. 'Is it?'

'Well, yeah,' I said, equally baffled. 'Surely it's better than drugs?'

The woman was called up by the cashier but continued to talk to me as her items were scanned. 'I just think it could've been anywhere. It shouldn't have been by the memorial. I think that's disrespectful and it's quite obvious they did it to provoke.'

'Maybe it's disrespectful,' I replied cautiously, although not convinced. I had seen several people lean against the memorial and drink pints from *The Thirsty Parson* in broad daylight, without those passing by issuing so much as a tut. 'But it must be less disrespectful than doing something illegal.'

'It's not just the legality though, is it,' said the woman. 'It would be legal to put a poster up on it of the prophet Mohammed, but that doesn't make it right.'

'Oh dear,' I said softly. I did not reply, and a few moments later she had taken her receipt and headed out the door.

That it seemed to this woman to have been preferable to have people committing a crime by the war memorial, rather than doing something legal but representative of Arabic and Asian cultures, placed doubt in my mind regarding Peter's description of the sacred green as a 'harmless symbol'. That the war memorial was erected in the middle of the village green in the first place, rather than in other equally or perhaps even more suitable locations such as the churchyard or the village square,

felt like a statement in itself. The woman in the shop's apparent belief that a hookah pipe was more defiling to the memory of fallen soldiers than a meth-cooking kit only further demonstrates the divorce in English rural minds, aided by 'imperial amnesia', from the realities of what is truly 'native' English history and what is 'foreign'. In reality, whilst the World Wars are often quantified purely in terms of the loss of white servicemen, the huge contribution of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh soldiers through their relationship to the British Empire is typically forgotten (Sanghera, 2020; Tharoor, 2019). Funnily enough, shisha smoking in Britain is arguably just as much a product of imperial occupation as it is of Arabic or Asian cultures, since the emergence of the term 'hookah' in the English language initially occurred after British officers adopted the habit in colonial India (Prateek, 2016: 4).

Lola, a white woman in her 30s, also happened to live close to the green. In the local cafe, she explained how living in this central location had not cemented her reputation in the Saxonbury community quite as she imagined it would.

'Outsider, yes, [I'm] definitely an outsider. Now that's very funny though because in terms of, I don't know if you've heard people talk about the green. The importance the green has to some of these people here.'

'Heart of the village, right?' I said.

'Well, it's the centre of everything yes both physically-speaking and in terms of other, more kind of emotional things. And I live, well I don't live literally on the green, but I live one house over from a house that's directly on the green. And when I first moved here, me and my partner, years ago now, I was right by the green so I could always see when things were going on. One day, I didn't know people yet, but there was some kind of cake market being set up. And really, really strangely just the evening before I had baked a load of brownies because we were expecting my nephews to come visit to see us into the new house, but one of them had gone with a temperature and suddenly I had all this cake with no clue what to deal with it. And I don't actually like it, not much of a sweet tooth, hence...' Lola gestured down at her own empty place; I had offered to buy her a slice of apple cake along with her espresso and she had declined. 'And we didn't have kids yet, back then.'

'So you offered to sell the brownies?'

'Actually I offered to *give* them the brownies,' said Lola. 'I thought, I've got no use for them, and there's no harm in greasing the wheels, is there? It usually goes to some nice cause anyway.'

‘But they said no.’

‘They did, but it wasn’t just the no, it was the whole reasoning they gave. It was really quite, quite bizarre. I said, “Would you like these brownies, they’re fresh and going spare and oh by the way I’m Lola nice to meet you,” and this woman turned to me and said, and I swear this is true. She said—and I can’t remember the name, let’s just pretend it’s, I don’t know, Theresa—“It’s only Theresa who makes brownies.”’

I frowned. ‘Who was “Theresa”?’

‘Well, it was just some woman,’ answered Lola. ‘And I was confused, so I just sort of interpreted that as a really weird way of saying “We’ve already got brownies today.” But I went around that market later on and I didn’t meet anyone called Theresa or see any brownies being sold. I still don’t actually know who that woman was. And so, right from the off, you can see. I lived on the green but we were put behind this big wall. Almost immediately. I don’t even know if they knew about us not being married yet, or if they just picked up on that later as just an extra reason. Extra ammunition. And it was so stupid of us because there were two options for houses on the market in Saxonbury that were in our price range, and the one on the outskirts was actually a little nicer, but I remember saying to my partner—cannot believe this now—I said, “No, we want to be in the centre so we’ll get to know people better.”’

‘Oh dear,’ I said, with a sad smile.

Lola nodded. ‘Oh dear is right.’

Although Florence was spoken about positively by Derek and Jean, another participant—who did not know Florence’s name, but seemed to have been referring to her also—complained about

this black couple, very nice and I have no problem with them coming in. But they’ve taken this old cottage and they’ve absolutely destroyed it. There was works that needed doing and you can tell they tried very hard to do them right, respecting the old ways that things were done. The place looks right enough just at a glimpse. But my architect friend came to stay and he said, “That’s going to be gone in 8 years max.” Subsidence I think he said. So it’s over for that house, completely over. Just a matter of time sadly. And I don’t blame them entirely because maybe that is how it is where they come from, you don’t need to think about the quality of the building materials because perhaps people are often being displaced there. But it’s like when somebody tries too hard its

always obvious. Do you know what I mean?

The more people of colour in Saxonbury tried to ‘do the village’—in getting involved with local events, in doing repairs to buildings in a traditional style, even in voting for the same political parties that the white villagers might vote for—the more they were perceived by white Saxonburians as not making a proper effort, as ‘sticking out like sore thumbs’. The resident who had told me about the Conservative-voting Pakistani couple mentioned ‘how funny’ the man looked dressed in tweed on the day of a local horse race, despite the fact that many other of the white attendees were presumably also dressed in the fabric. And yet, it seems likely that if this man had turned up in traditional Middle Eastern clothing instead, he would have been criticised for not making the effort to integrate. All these comments, along with the hookah pipe story, show the endurance of Carolyn Pedwell’s ‘colonial affective afterlives’ (2005: 20) in everyday Saxonbury life. Even when villagers of colour were apparently well-immersed in Saxonbury and well-liked by other Saxonburians, white villagers still could not help in some way doing the boundary—‘screening out’ (Tyler, 2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3 2012b) the empire, of course, along the way—and somehow hardening boundaries between them and villagers of colour *within* the very act of trying to persuade me there were none. Megan best summed this up in her description of seeing the woman in the niqab, recognising that in many ways pretending ethnic differences do not exist, as those who claim ‘I don’t see colour’ are often accused of, actually impedes societal cohesion rather than progresses it.

Saxonburians initially misrecognised Alexander as another invader, a concept revolving it seemed not so much around the idea of incoming in the first place but how well those incomers ‘fit in’. In Alexander’s opinion, he was able to fix an initially unfavourable impression of himself by making an overwhelming effort in that regard through his housebuilding, but perhaps his having been born close by (and being a white man) was the real clincher. Lola and her partner and Florence and her husband have been unable to similarly close that gap. Although the participant bemoaning Florence’s repair project claimed to have ‘no problem with them coming in’, the use of this term and others such as ‘where they come from’ brings nationality and ethnicity unequivocally right to the fore of their complaint. White Saxonbury is ‘us already here’, whereas black Saxonbury is ‘them coming in’. Although Lola is white, according to her, the fact that she was a woman—in her words an *unconventional* one—was the culprit

that kept her definitively outside of the moral geography of Saxonbury, regardless of her skin colour or where she lived.

‘Being unmarried is cardinal sin in this place,’ said Lola.

I frowned. ‘Really? Even in 2019?’

‘Oh yes, very much so. It doesn’t have the—what-you-call-it—religious aspect that it maybe once had. But I don’t fit in still. Been with Felix for 18 years, raised three children. We don’t care to get married because we don’t see how it’ll change our life together in any way. Our relationship is real and doesn’t need that crap piece of paper. But apparently, it’s not a proper relationship, I’m not a proper woman, not a proper village woman at least, not a proper mother in their eyes.’

‘That’s unbelievable,’ I said, genuinely shocked.

Lola took another sip of her no-fuss black Americano and gazed out of the window into the surroundings below. Two mothers with buggies on opposite sides of the square suddenly recognised one another, and were drawn together into the centre like magnets.

‘It’s actually funny in a not-so-funny way,’ continued Lola. ‘So it just shows. It’s just very backward. You couldn’t be more technically inside than I am but they put the wall up. Like we’re invaders. Like we’re always mean to them but we’ve never actually said a word. And I noticed actually that the harder I tried to be a part the more it seemed to annoy them. So I just accept it now. I either move or I accept it, don’t I.’

Chapter 4. 'Playful... to a point': Doing the boundary in ancient custom

'...and here she is!' announces Patrick, in the tone of someone who has coincidentally just spent the last minute speculating on where I could have got to. 112 pairs of eyes swivel in my direction. It's 7:59 and beating the bounds begins at 8am, 'on the dot'.

'Yes, hello!' I stammer. It is a beautifully clear and cool morning, but I woke up late and have just had to sprint to the green, my walking boots still unlaced. A small woman with a large smile removes my plastic bag containing my lunch from my clammy grip, throwing it atop the rest in the back of her car. I have arrived with only about 10 seconds to spare. Patrick momentarily announces the official commencement of this year's beating the bounds by blowing on a small brass trumpet, and then, like one organism, we all begin to move. Keith hangs back, his ceremonial walking stick in hand, jovial as always but faintly concerned.

How do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large articulate their participation in beating the bounds? Well Keith, inspired by my own visible struggle to start the walk, seems best able to articulate his reasons by first admitting he understands why others would find it unappealing.

'It's not for everyone,' he would later laugh in his conservatory; through the window, I could see Cecilia, his girlfriend, tending to their rose garden in what looked

to be an oversized King Crimson shirt.¹⁰ Keith is an individual for whom ‘keen walker’ seems a major understatement: having undertaken fortnight-long hikes in places as far-flung as Kazakhstan and the Rocky Mountains, 19 miles is child’s play. ‘But I didn’t just say yes to leading beating the bounds because of the walking,’ he clarified. ‘It’s also the country isn’t it. Village life. Community life. I grew up in a small village, and moving here 15 years ago confirmed all my positive prejudices. When we turn up for doing the walk, you think in a small village you’d see everyone all the time. But you might not see one of them from one year to the next.’

‘But that’s why you *take part* in the walk,’ I clarified. ‘I wanted to know why you decided to *lead* it.’

Keith’s eyes twinkled, and he put his mud-encrusted boots up on the ring-stained coffee table between us. ‘Well, I say you could call it an ego massage. That’s men, isn’t it? We wanted to do it as well as our predecessors, improve the legacy of it. And—maybe a bit of subversiveness too? You’ve heard of the whole *bronzotter* thing [a term for people born in Saxonbury]? There was a bit of hoo-ha with some people: “He can’t lead it, he’s not bronzotter”. So I thought well I’ll go ahead anyway, and I had the support I needed officially-speaking. We want everyone who wants to be involved to get involved—why wouldn’t you? It’s just like—you’ve heard about our rivalry with Plushville I suppose?’

I nodded.

‘And you know that Plushville used to have their walk on the same day as ours?’ he added.

I admitted I did not have a clue that the neighbouring village did beating the bounds at all.

‘Well they do, and it’s quite a thing. In the olden days, I believe they would meet in the middle, the two villages. But since the last 20 years or whatever it’s been on different days, or usually it is, but once, before I was leading it, it was on the same day again as a one-off. And me being the cheerful idiot that I am, we met in the middle, and instinctively I waved at them. Why on earth not? But everyone said, “No, you don’t do that. Don’t wave at Plushville thank you”. I thought they were joking, but I found out

¹⁰ Keith and Cecilia’s popularity in Saxonbury, as an unmarried cohabiting couple, appears to somewhat conflict with Lola’s insistence that she and her partner are ostracised for the same reason. However, Keith and Cecilia do not have children and spend their time primarily with others also without children. Lola appears to be discussing her ostracization from the Saxonbury community of other mothers.

otherwise.'

Patrick, the horn-blower, had a similar anecdote to tell, although the origins of him leading beating the bounds did not mirror Keith's more philosophical motivations.

'Oh, it wasn't something I properly put myself forward for, not at all,' said Patrick as we sat on a bench outside *The Thirsty Parson*. Patrick was a freelance journalist in the county town, often called up at a moment's notice, but based on the strong cider he had ordered for himself, I trusted he felt sure nothing else would be coming in today.

'Keith hadn't long moved to the village, and I hadn't been here much longer either, and it just seemed to happen. Keith's a very keen walker, so when he heard that the old guys were looking to hang up their duties, he wanted the job straight away. And we knew each other vaguely, I'm keen on some of the village heritage events. He approached me and there we are. And I know I might not seem a young man to you right now, but trust me, amongst much of the other candidates, we're spring chickens!'

Patrick removed a cheesy chip from his plate and held it under the table; his Bernese Mountain dog gobbled it up with frothing gusto.

'And you know, a few years ago, before I ever led the walk, I came close to making a pretty fatal *faux pas*,' continued Patrick. 'Not long after we moved to Saxonbury I thought I fancied doing the Plushville walk. I'd done the Saxonbury one the year before, 19 miles, but the Plushville one is longer—24 miles—and I do like walking, so I thought I'd take on the challenge. *Well*,' said Patrick, exhaling.

'Did they mock you a bit, knowing you were from Saxonbury?' I asked.

Patrick smiled. 'I certainly did come face to face with a local friend of mine. And he gave me this glare—we're chums really, so it's not really that serious—but he did shout over at me, looking a bit cross, "*Oi! What on earth do you think you're doing on the wrong walk?*"

4. 1. 'Someone pointed a shotgun, once, right in my face!'

That to Saxonburians there is a 'right walk' and a 'wrong walk' to be doing on May Day Bank Holiday typifies a general attitude that there is also a 'right' and 'wrong village'. Plushville, one of three neighbouring villages to Saxonbury but the sole one to evoke its antagonism, plays a significant role in Saxonbury mythology. Peter, who showed a professional curiosity in almost all aspects of life, suggested I actually do a dual study between Saxonbury and Plushville.

‘To find out actually and definitively what they think of us, could you imagine? I’d be fascinated. *Fascinated*.’ His eyes shone.

‘I don’t know if that would be... sensible,’ I said, pausing to think of the most diplomatic word.

‘Well I tell you what, I tell you why that would be interesting, is because it seems to be Saxonbury that’s got the problem, that’s got the chip on its shoulder. I don’t think Plushville gives two hoots. It’s all us, our problem, all in our heads.’ He tapped on his temple demonstratively.

I relaxed a little. ‘I do sometimes get that impression, yes. So if I went over to Plushville and said, “What about this rivalry with Saxonbury,” they’d be like...’ I rearranged my face into a perfect deadpan. “What.”

Peter chuckled. ‘Exactly. I think they would be like that, yes. Because I do think they have a different mentality to us. There’s no question, when I go there, when I go to their pub, I think yeah they take themselves quite seriously here. They’re a little bit up themselves frankly compared to Saxonbury. However, do they have a problem with us? No. I don’t have a problem with Plushville but it’s not actually an environment I would enjoy as much as here. I love the fact that you know don’t see pink corduroy trousers as much in Saxonbury as you do over there for example. That’s almost the symbol of, “I’m the country gent and the country squire!”’

Both the participants in Stacey’s *Tradition and Change* (1960) and Strathern’s *Kinship at the Core* (1981) show an awareness of a distinctiveness between the identities of people found within their own village and those who reside in neighbouring areas. For Strathern’s village, Elmdon, vague references are made to differences in ‘character’, but Strathern does not believe her participants’ descriptions fully ‘explain why hostilities should have arisen, nor why Chrishall and Duddenhoe appear to be singled out as Elmdon’s particular rivals’, rather than other neighbouring communities to Elmdon (70-1). For Saxonbury, the animosity apparently began in the 14th century, when Plushville refused to lend its doctor to Saxonbury even though several Saxonburians were suffering with what was later revealed as the early stages of Black Death. Most of the criticisms aimed at Plushville centred around the belief that Saxonbury was a ‘working village’ but Saxonbury was ‘full of toffs’, as alluded to by Peter above. This came out of the mouths of participants even when they had recently admitted either that they did not in fact know any Plushvillians personally, or that they did know some Plushvillians but they were in fact nothing like that stereotype at all.

Saxonburians who moved to Plushville of their own accord however seemed to earn the worst of the scorn. Since not only was Brian a bronzotter, but he had also dedicated over 30 years of his life to a custom designed to keep the boundary between Saxonbury and Plushville as rigid as possible, it was perhaps unsurprising that he expressed the most serious verdict.

‘I don’t know what it is, but I’ve always been brought up to know that those over there, “ooh they’re terrible”—I mean they’re not in actual fact, probably, but that’s what you say,’ said Brian. I got the feeling that the second part to that sentence had been rushed out primarily for my benefit.

Deborah added, ‘It was in your dad’s day, and the lads from Saxonbury and the lads from Plushville used to walk up the common, meet up on the common, the place between the two villages and they used to meet up and—well, fight!’ She looked grave, but Brian laughed.

‘Cheapo sport that!’ he said brightly.

‘And what happened if you’d meet them on the way round beating the bounds?’ I asked.

‘Oh, just banter,’ continued Brian. ‘No fights. Maybe they’d have a stick from Plushville, and we’d challenge sticks with each other, and then we’d both just pass by. Although there was a lot of verbal.’

‘A bit of blue?’ I offered.

‘Maybe,’ replied Brian mischievously. Then, ‘Oh, no!’

Deborah cut in. ‘We can’t say much, Brian, Tom [their second son] lives in Plushville!’

I nudged Brian gently. ‘Ooh, Brian, how do you feel about that?’

But Deborah continued. ‘He had a choice too! He bought one of the new houses for first-time buyers, could’ve picked Saxonbury but picked Plushville instead.’

Brian remained silent for a few moments. Then he agreed: ‘He had a choice of plots over here and plots over there and he thought the plot in Plushville was better.’ He grinned. ‘And I was *ashamed of him!*’

Deborah gave a dismissive gesture. ‘No you weren’t!’

I hauled myself up by my elbows, trying to keep my eyes on Brian’s expression. The sofa was one of those ridiculously huge, low and squishy kinds only ever found in the houses of grandparents in my experience; the ones that trap you in a cage of comfort and custard creams for hours on end. As I struggled, I desperately interjected:

‘Did you mean that seriously, Brian, about being ashamed of him moving to Plushville, or are you being playful when you say that?’

Immediately Deborah answered, ‘Playful.’

Brian paused again, this time not looking at either of us. ‘Playful.’ Then he added, vaguely ominously: ‘*To a point.*’

Out of 112 people that currently surround me, at this point I only know Patrick, Keith, and Keith’s partner Cecilia. Cecilia, like Keith, is a very keen walker. Accordingly, the gear the two of them are wearing today looks like serious mountaineering-type fare, unlike my flimsy Sports Direct get-up. Indeed, it was beating the bounds that originally brought the couple together, the two of them having met during the walk the year before Keith began co-leading it with Patrick five years ago. Cecilia floats somewhere in the back section of the pack in order to remain within earshot of Keith, but I sense she could easily outpace us all.

‘Alright?’ she says breezily as I attempt to get into step with her—not easy, despite the fact she’s obviously slowing down. I had been told to expect a leisurely stroll; hopefully the brisk pace is just the communal eagerness to get started. ‘Would you like me to introduce you to some people, get you talking?’

I nod gratefully.

‘Just wait until we get past the stretch coming up, everybody’ll spread out again and then we can circulate.’

The route of the parish boundary begins in unromantic territory, crossing a large road that leads out of Saxonbury, through to the dreaded Plushville and the local market town that hosts the nearest train station. Soon enough however we are all thinned out to pass single file through a kissing gate, and then there is suddenly nothing to see in all directions but shades of green. I have been spending a lot of time in the northern French countryside over the last few years and have come to think fondly of it: the vast chartreuse and golden-yellow fields; the charming patchwork of *bocage*; even the massive ubiquitous water towers, all spacey antennas like a 1960s TV set. Nevertheless, it becomes clear, as I walk along a series of untidy hedgerows knotted with dog roses, elderflowers, and of course the odd rash of stinging nettles to take out unsuspecting knees, that as pleasant as I find rural Normandy, it does not give me the same feeling I am experiencing right at this moment in England. Because although I have been in England for some time already, only now does the thought cross my mind, *Oh yes, I am in England*, resembling Peter’s epiphany from the

previous chapter on reaching the Saxonbury green: ‘oh yes, I live in a village, don’t I’. I am suddenly troubled by this thought—do I not think I am in England when I wander around the city I live in, and if so, why not?—and I get so absorbed in unpacking it that I am the last to notice that we have suddenly stopped. Someone behind me yells, ‘Calm down, mate!’ I follow the group’s gaze to see a man stood at the bottom of a hill to our left, behind a metal gate, wearing a fluorescent tabard and an expression of such fury that it is clear he is not in fact anyone’s mate.

‘Someone pointed a shotgun, once, right in my face!’ said 80-year-old Gregory, Brian Zimmer’s long-time co-leader of beating the bounds between the mid-80s to the early 2000s. Gregory lived alone in a little cottage two doors along from *The Queen’s Arms*. Although this seems like a noisy existence, Gregory claimed he was glad of the company: ‘The Queenie’ was his favoured of the five watering holes that existed in Saxonbury when he was a young man, and as such a few chosen patrons were permitted to look in on and enjoy a nightcap with Gregory on their way home.

‘Farmers are armed to the back teeth, you know,’ he added gravely. I nodded, not only remembering my own childhood glimpses of rifles, but also one of the best exchanges from the Edgar Wright’s 2007 comedy *Hot Fuzz*, when rural Detectives Wainwright and Cartwright challenge the newly reassigned Met officer Sergeant Angel on firearm protocols:

DS Wainwright: You do know there are more guns in the country than there are in the city?

DS Cartwright: Everyone and their mums is packin’ round here!

DS Angel: Like who?

DS Wainwright: Farmers.

DS Angel: Who else?

DS Cartwright: Farmers’ mums.

‘Were you frightened?’ I asked Gregory. He threw back his head and laughed, revealing a long gully of naked gum. It reminded me suddenly of my beloved Taid, who lived all of his 84 years fit as a fiddle except for being seemingly unable to keep a tooth in his head.

‘No, not frightened, me and Brian were big lads, we were both there, could have wrestled it out of his hands if we wanted to. Was just for show. But every single year

the old council would write round and prepare everyone, but even so, you got these blokes getting all hot and bothered, thinking they've got a right. And they do have a right. Their land. But they were all told about this months before. And it happens every year, and in some ways they still forget each time? Doesn't wash. He just wanted to show off, didn't he.'

The man in the tabard with the furious expression does not appear to be interested in showing off. He looks like he genuinely wants to brain someone, although, crucially, he does not have a shotgun.

'Someone else didn't get the memo,' mutters Cecilia as Patrick and Keith, for the sole time during the day except during the bumping and lunchbreak, leave their positions as bookends and come together to reason with the belligerent stranger. This reminds me again of the story of Mike Carter's (2019) own beating the bounds just before the referendum; how little he critiqued the infrequency with which his pilgrimage—a white man walking through all the private land he wished—was interrogated by similar authorities or landowners. Of course, there are more than 100 of us today, but back when Brian and Gregory had the shotgun in their faces, there were barely more than a handful. Had either Brian or Gregory themselves not been so evidently white English themselves, would that objecting farmer have wielded his shotgun not purely for show? 'Scary,' I say, momentarily trapped between the present tense and the themes of my thesis.

Cecilia shrugs. 'And to think, these are the guys that will scream from the rooftops if the council puts in a new rule or other, and look what they're putting us through! What harm are we doing, what are we possibly doing, just having a walk.'

4. 2. 'It's always: "This bowl was probably used to catch the blood of a child sacrifice", isn't it?'

Patrick and Keith, prepared to negotiate, have removed a printout from one of their rucksacks and are currently familiarising the stranger with its contents. After a few more minutes of protest, the man waves his arm in resignation and storms off, and we are back on the move. We follow a narrow-fenced ridge atop a steep hill for about a half-hour before the landscape begins to open up again. The track triples in size, and the train has fattened out accordingly, so that Cecilia has been able to introduce me to Frances, a forthright woman in her 60s, and Magda, a subdued woman in her 50s.

We are now surrounded by alternating dips and humps of seemingly infinite field, leading in the middle to one particularly deep basin.

‘There were some tools found there, Neolithic,’ Frances says. Fittingly, Magda, who is merely nodding along, has one of those troglodyte-faced, neon-haired troll dolls—the ones used as pencil toppers that came as prizes in cereal boxes in the 1990s—attached to the zip of her rucksack. ‘I think they were found in the 70s, the tools,’ Frances continues, ‘and there was this one amateur archaeologist who said he thought that they could’ve been used in some ritual ceremony of some kind—I mean, they say that about everything, don’t they? These people did *ordinary things too*—ate their breakfast and washed their clothes, but *no*, it’s always: “This bowl was probably used to catch the blood of a child sacrifice”, isn’t it. I mean, what nonsense. And that kind of guff also attracts these weird hippie Druid types as well. They sometimes come here with their drugs and their instruments and things. Dreadful.’

We continue on through open field for a while, and I come in-step at some point with an elderly man named Jeremiah, who seems to be struggling to keep up the pace. We exchange some small talk, and I carefully admit my concerns about his breathlessness.

‘Oh yes, it hurts,’ replies Jeremiah, nodding vigorously. ‘But I think the pain is a good thing.’

‘Is it?’ I say. ‘Not sure I agree with that, I must say.’

‘Well, that’s your generation!’ he retorts. ‘Why should we be afraid of feeling like we’ve worked ourselves a little bit?’

I murmur in reply, sensing, with a little despondency, that I know the exact kind of conversation I am now in for.

‘Back when my children were still growing up, I tried to get them to do it as well,’ continues Jeremiah. ‘I said to them in the evening, when they’re all walking about all stiff: “That pain says you’ve done something useful today”. I actually had my son call me the other day, and we were talking about *his* son, how they’re having problems getting him away from his video games. He spends all day, on the internet, playing games with strangers in Japan or god-knows-where. And my son says, “Dad I’m really starting to appreciate how much you made us go outside. How you didn’t just hand everything we wanted to us, you made us go out and get our legs working and our lungs working”. But then he won’t follow his own advice. If it were me I’d just take that computer away.’

‘Yes, well,’ I say. ‘I don’t think being online all day is very healthy at all, certainly not for children.’

Jeremiah nods triumphantly. ‘What would be wrong with saying to your children here: “Right, the rule is you do this walk once a year, strengthen your legs and your character, teach you some discipline of the mind, teach you about the names of the natural things around you, the difference between a grey tit and a blue tit”, I mean what on earth would be wrong with that? You get to run around with other children, don’t you, this would’ve been the time of my life when I was a boy! But new parents, they won’t put their children out for anything, not for anything and as far as I’m concerned it’s the same impulse—I know it’s not fashionable to say it!—but it’s the same thing that allows that boy to sit in that chair, that expensive chair they’ve got for him, on the internet all day and shout at his parents when they say: “How about you go look at something else for one minute”. They say proper discipline gives them all kinds of mental diseases, but I say a 14-year-old who is glued to that £800 seat and disrespects his mother and doesn’t recognise a birch from a beech is pretty diseased already.’

A sudden fit of wheezing stops Jeremiah in his tracks. The sound attracts the attention of the girl in front of us, who stops trailing a stick along the hedgerows and turns, her free hand already working at a small satchel around her hip. She removes an inhaler, shakes it, takes off its cap and passes it to Jeremiah; he places the nozzle between his lips, presses and inhales deeply. He takes a second puff, then returns the inhaler.

‘No, you see though? I’ve got conditions that make it a bit difficult for me to do this, but do I stop? No. Because there’s nothing wrong with a bit of discomfort, bit of pain. Children now are too intolerant of any inconvenience and in the old days, something like this would’ve set them right, that would be the point of it.’

‘Has the bumping got something to do with that too, then?’ I ask. I might not have remembered if Cecilia had not nipped in a few moments earlier to advise me that this would be happening momentarily.

‘Oh! Well, there you go, yes of course!’ he says brightly. ‘I was speaking very metaphorically, but there, we’ve got something that proves my point right there. You hurt the child so he can protect his own village. You hurt him to do him good, that’s the very thing, to teach him what’s important in life, where he comes from.’ Jeremiah lifts his gaze at a flutter of nearby wings; a small bird has just alighted on a branch of a tree in front of us, but I say nothing, not keen to let on that, in light of Jeremiah’s

speech, I can identify neither the species of the bird nor the tree it is sitting on.

‘They don’t do these things for nothing, you know,’ concludes Jeremiah softly, seemingly addressing the roots of the custom we are currently performing, and summarising the actions of all the animal world, in one single phrase. From here I initiate what he evidently considers to be a quite jarring segue, but to me is the natural follow-up to all this.

‘Did you vote Leave, if you don’t mind me asking?’

His brow furrows again. ‘That’s not what your work is about now, is it?’ It is both a genuine question, and in some ways a scolding.

‘Amongst other things,’ I say cheerily.

Jeremiah considers me for a further moment, before divulging: ‘Well, yes, I did, but it wasn’t because I don’t like immigrants or anything like that, I know that’s what everyone thinks. I think we just need a shake-up as a country: we need to stride out on our own again, because that’s what Britain is for, that’s what it’s founded on. All that exploration, that boldness. And I’m not saying it’s going to be easy; I’ve studied the economics of it, I know. It’ll be a hard road to get to it, very uncomfortable, very hard—I’ve got grandchildren, grandnephews and nieces and such younger than yourself as you can see that’ll bear the brunt, and my son and daughter have well told me how they’re all so disappointed in me, the kids—but in 20 years, you’ll see how much ground we’ve gained, and you’ll be glad of my decision. I promise you that. You’ll be proud of wandering around your country again and seeing what’s been changed for you, and you’ll be grateful.’

I discreetly write the number 4 on my notepad. That signifies how many allusions to walking Jeremiah has made in the last few sentences. It is not until later that I realise he seemed to have been addressing me as if I was one of those very children he knew were so disappointed in him. I did not know if the nearby girl was one of them, but having completed the prompt delivery of Jeremiah’s inhaler to him, she has since returned to whacking the bushes with her stick, decapitating dog roses with—to my eyes at least—a refreshed violence.

Keith calls me suddenly. I am taken aback to realise we are suddenly no longer in an open field, but what looks like a little copse, the strong sun blotted by a few branches threading into each other overhead. The air is dappled, dancing, almost like a disco ball: the Japanese call this effect *komorebi*, or ‘the magic of speckled light through leaves’. It does appear mystical, like a fairy grotto. I notice that everyone has

stopped and gathered, the sudden hushed tones reflecting that we seem to have left one world and entered another.

Keith makes his way into the middle of the semi-circle, where Patrick is already waiting. Between Patrick and Keith is a granite rock with the name of the village on it, a bit like a tombstone. Coiled around its base is a ribbon of white wildflowers, which, based on the lack of other similar flowers anywhere else in view, look to have been deliberately introduced to this spot by someone keen to further enhance the arcane atmosphere. I had expected an air of levity, but it feels strangely as though we are gathered to pay respects. Patrick and Keith are waving up two children from amidst the crowd in front of them. One boy, about 10 or so, strides forth proudly; the girl is younger, and difficult to coax out from behind her mother's legs. Eventually she comes forward and there is a smattering of applause. Patrick and Keith, their faces turned demonstratively to the anxious girl, each take either the arms and legs of the boy and from this position he is swung in the air, his body tapped against the boundary stone three times as the surrounding community counts each strike out loud in unison. The boy is then let go of and welcomed back into the fold like a returning war hero, grinning and waving. But if the aim was to show the girl how fun it is, this has failed. The crowd parts to allow her mother to step forward in encouragement. A gust of wind cleaves the canopy, and she is caught in a shaft of light that makes her look like a medieval painting of a patron saint.

The fact that everyone, within the village borders and without, are supposed to watch the bumping shows that it is intended—at least according to Daniel J. Sharfstein's theory (2012: 666)—to strike fear, 'mak[ing] an unmistakable statement to the outside world' along the lines of, "if this is what I will do to my child, what on earth do you think I would be willing to do to you?". But Michael Houseman (1998) also argued that such rituals provided communal catharsis. When I asked another ex-organiser, Kit, whether there had ever been complaints on the basis of the bumping's allusions to child abuse, he seemed slightly offended at the question, answering with a firm and dismissive no. When I further queried, he claimed: 'It's not some nasty thing, it's a nice thing, and I think people *need* it, actually, and they would be, yes, people would be in an upset if it was removed. I think some folk might even ask *what the point of coming would be* if we removed that' (emphases mine). Frances commented on the subject that it was apparently 'common practice' to kill May Queens at the end of May Day in centuries past (it was not). Evoking the sacrifices of King's *The Long Walk*

(1979), Frances speculated that the inclusion of the bumping today merely showed respect to those 'that felt comfort in that sort of thing still being remembered. It's quite a gift when you think about it, in those societies. Giving your child away to be whacked like that. What more can you give?'

Children's pain being used to make adults feel better about themselves is a concept not unfamiliar to me, but I am still confused as to why this obvious pantomime has so turned my stomach. I hear the girl being bumped ceremonially against the stones, but I do not see it; my own head feels as though it is the one that is being walloped.

'Are you alright?' asks Keith, suddenly next to me. The bumping is over, and everyone is filing onward.

'Sorry,' I say. 'Bit warm.' I stand up, gesture with my big water bottle that I am going to take better care of myself from now on. Keith stays with me for a second.

'Sure?'

'Yes,' I confirm.

His eyes fix on my bottle. 'Well, you're going to need that. Drop-Dead Downs is not far up ahead.'

We emerge out into open field again. Despite the fact that I can see no remnants of any pathway or fence, and it just seems as though we are bisecting the field at a random point, we have apparently already reached a boundary line between Saxonbury and Plushville. I head up to the front to speak to Patrick; he tells me there is a very subtle difference between the two grasses underneath my feet, but I am sceptical, doubting plants would pay attention to the Ordinance Survey. Nevertheless, seeing Patrick stride out and lead the 100 or so of us into a sudden hairpin with such certainty allows the true importance of memory to these proceedings to hit home. A few hundred years ago, what else was there to enshrine these geographies into law except repetition?

Looking back for someone to share this very banal observation with, I see Magda slowing down, peering downwards as though searching for something. Everybody else passes her without a second glance. I start walking back, intending to offer my assistance in the recovery of her lost phone or whatever it is, when suddenly she disappears from view entirely. When she straightens up again, something is in her palm, and it is neon green. Only when she pulls her rucksack to the front of her body to unclip the pink-haired troll doll from her zip and replace it with the newly recovered

green one do I realise what she has done. I reach her when she is already bending down again to set the pink one in the grass in the green one's place; she stamps and smooths out a cradle of sorts for it, and does not seem fazed that I am approaching her.

'Wow, do you do that to find your way? I'm amazed you manage to find it each year, that's incredible!'

Magda straightens up and considers the troll for a last moment. 'They're my son's,' she says flatly, and then begins to re-join the train, leaving me gazing down into that plastic face, frozen in an oblivious smile.

4. 3. "Nobody goes home until she's finished"

I had seen an aerial view of the route beforehand as my tour with Alan had included a trip to the top of Saxonbury church tower, a place that only people as important as Alan, a chief bellringer, have access to. He pointed out various geographical eccentricities, as well as a few dull modern health-and-safety style concessions, that would pepper my 19-mile walk a few months later.

'And there,' said Alan, pointing to a very tall, very steep mound, such that did not appear scalable by any living creature, except maybe those goats with slanted hooves that scamper across the sheer faces of dams. 'That's the Drop-Dead Downs! Well, it's called Priory Hill formally, but we call it the Drop-Dead Downs, for obvious reasons. I certainly wouldn't want to be in your shoes come May Day. Good luck.'

'Jesus,' I muttered. Suddenly remembering the holy ground on which I was stood—right next to the chief bellringer, no less—I stammered, 'Oh, I'm sorry!'

Alan held up his palms reassuringly, and replied, 'It's alright, it's alright. I'm an atheist, dear.'

Our progress up the infamous 'downs'—really, a single hill—is conducted, unsurprisingly, in relative silence. Within only a minute I am already out of breath. Only the most dedicated walkers (e.g., Keith and Cecilia) seem unfazed, and everybody else looks almost as nauseated as I do. The trek reminds me of a 'death slide': a phenomenon of insanely high, almost sheerly-vertical slides endemic to children's soft play areas in the Westcountry in the 1990s, and the cause of many a friction burn and bumped head on a school trip. During this interlude, it is evident that many individuals, including myself, are in mild to considerable amounts of pain, but like the bumping, it

only serves to underline how pain and discomfort in fact runs through the entire event. In previous years, unexpected heatwaves led to mass faintings along the walk due to heatstroke; a storm a few years prior had led to one individual's hospitalisation for pneumonia. Johnny, a schoolteacher and poet in his 60s, claimed 'sometimes it's as though you're not even aware of your legs and your lungs, are you, until you force yourself to be through something like this, and then after I've done it, for a few days I'm hyperaware of every aching muscle and what it's gone through and how they don't work very well, it's like, "oh yes, there's my legs, that's what they're for"'. This process of only becoming aware of one's physical limits through their 'malfunction' is reminiscent of what psychotherapist Fuchs has noted within those with chronic illnesses as 'the corporealisation of the lived body' (2005: 96); a sudden awareness of one's biological borders and, therefore, their vulnerability (Ahmed, 2014: 24; Prosser, 1994: 48). Jeremiah, a proud Leaver, considered discomfort part and parcel of the very motivation for doing the walk itself, but several Remain-voting participants I interviewed later claimed that somehow valued or even 'relished' the pain participating brought. Two different participants, echoing Johnny's hints of gratitude, even used the word 'humbling' about treating their aching muscles the following day: 'bodying forth' to the world indeed (Boss, in Craig, 1993). Certainly, *I* am humbled to note, despite some people being several decades older than me, that I am also one of the last to make it over the top. I make the mistake of looking behind me one last time to see Keith predictably bringing up the rear, looking about as flustered as if he has just returned from putting the bins out.

'Highlight of any walker's day,' says Keith cheerily, clapping my sweaty shoulder. 'Lunch!'

Deborah appears—the small woman with the lunches, having gotten here with her car I do not know how—and is reuniting each walker with their sandwich bag. We all take our places on either of the sunny banks and, for the sole time in the day until we finish our journey at about 4pm, relax. Amazingly, Deborah seems to be matching up walker with lunch based purely on memory, until I get closer, and realise that unlike everyone else, I have forgotten to put a label on mine as was previously requested.

'First time, the worst time!' says Deborah, handing me my bag after I point it out from the few that remain in her car, although whether she is referring to my experience of the hill, or my adherence to the lunch-labelling etiquette of the walk, I am unsure. I go to a large camping table that has been set up for the purposes of offering orange

squash and, finding Cecilia there, attempt to discreetly ask her where the best place is for going to the toilet. But in a village, nothing is private, and the woman distributing the squash announces: 'No toilets round here, love. *Plushville* hires Portaloos, you know. And they could just leave them out one more day, for us, couldn't they? But they don't. They clear them away. And that's typical Plushville, absolutely typical.'

When the walk starts up again—seemingly mere minutes after I first sit down to unwrap my colourless chicken sandwich—I can no longer locate anyone I know. Eventually I see a woman walking alone in a kind of six-foot diameter bubble, almost as though she has been given a wide berth (or is giving that to others). The multi-coloured fleece she has on belies her serious demeanour, and when she spots me, she gives me a mildly disdainful look.

'Miss Researcher,' she says dryly. 'Go on then, get it over with, ask your questions.'

A to-the-point introduction, but it is only when you do walking interviews that you realise how unnatural it feels to begin a conversation by asking for somebody's name. Much later, when I would locate her again for a follow-up interview, I would discover it is Lola.

'Do you like walking?' I ask insipidly.

'I like the scenery. I like the trees, wildlife, fresh air, yes.' I can almost hear the bullet points in her speech, and I am left nodding long after she appears to consider her obligation fulfilled, and looks at me as if to ask, '*Will that do?*'

'Have you done beating the bounds before?'

'Yes,' states Lola, 'despite how some might wish that I *don't*.'

Later in the tearoom, after the discussion about her ostracization due to her apparently *unconventional lifestyle*, a slightly more relaxed Lola gave me further insight. When I asked her if she felt like she was knocking down 'that wall' set up between her and the Saxonbury community by taking part in beating the bounds, she replied:

'Oh definitely not. I'm just doing it for my own self-satisfaction. I know I was very uppity when I was walking, when you came and spoke to me, and I think I said I was doing it to show people what they can't make me do, and don't-push-me-around, there's an element of that. But also. I think it's also just to prove to *myself* I'm still here. It does make you feel invisible at times, being kept out of everything. I mean I've got my own life now so it doesn't bother me as much as once, but still. So I prove to myself

I can do it. I'm still here, still have two legs. Either that or I'm a complete sadist. That's what my sister says, by staying here I just seem to want to punish myself sadistically or... what's the one where you do it to yourself.'

'Masochist,' I said, taking a sip of my tea.

Exclusions, in keeping with the work of Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 13), are indeed part of the fabric of everyday village interaction. As discussed, there are particular penalties for rural women who do not fit strict conventions of femininity (Hughes, 1997; Little, 1997; Tuitjer, 2016), and Lola's treatment appears to be a reflection of this. One would imagine that all other forms of gender nonconformity would also be similarly penalised in Saxonbury. However, through conversations with Alan and others involved in running the village museum, I discover one of their cohort, their forty-year-old web designer, has recently transitioned, is now taking estrogen and going by the name of Elizabeth. I was pleasantly surprised to hear Alan, a man in his 70s, who admits the concept is very new to him, do his level best to use Elizabeth's correct name and pronouns during our discussions.

'She told me she was leaving the group, and possibly moving away,' said Alan, looking downcast. 'I couldn't believe it. And she didn't want to talk to me about it, but I came around one day, and I said: "Look, what is this all about now, why do you want to leave us," and then she admitted it, said it was because she felt she couldn't do it in front of us. That we'd chuck her out, or something. Her wife accepted her and they just wanted to begin afresh, you know. But she's been living that way for a while now, and now she says she's glad they stayed. She looks lovely, does her hair very nice, very attractive really.'

'Do you think everyone feels the same way, are they also being accepting?' I probed.

Alan thought for a moment. 'Yes. Oh yes, at least from the perspective of the people I know who work at the centre. Honestly, she's too important! No one can do all the digital stuff like her, so what do we do, get rid of one of our best people just because she wants to dress differently now? Punishing ourselves more than anyone. And she's done beating the bounds too, you know. She gets to do it too, be part of our land and make her mark on it just as anyone does, that's what I believe.'

Even though I have talked with many women during the walk so far, from what I can tell the majority of kids in attendance seem to be escorted solely by men. Funnily enough, just as I notice this, a hand is extended towards me; a man in his 50s, wearing

what looks like bright blue cycle gear, assisting me paternally over a particularly tall stile. His name is Rupert, and what he most wants to talk to me about is his own late father's enthusiasm for beating the bounds.

'Did it every year,' beams Rupert. 'Almost 40 years in all. He even did it the year he wasn't supposed to do it because of foot and mouth; he just did a miniature one. He did it right up until he was 88. I think that's the oldest person who's ever done it. And he was outpacing some of the young ones too by quite a way.'

'God, I'm 60 years younger than that, and I'm a straggler,' I marvel.

Rupert holds up a cautionary finger. 'No, no, it's not about speed, Dad never would've stood for that. There was another old lady once, usually we finish about 4 o'clock as you probably know but I think it took her until about 8pm. It was completely dark by then. But my father—they never would've abandoned her anyway, but my Dad—he wouldn't stand for anyone going home, wouldn't stand for anyone going off to the pub without her. Just getting it done by hook or crook was what it was all about and he was always encouraging people, no matter what their pace.'

I glance up at Lola. She strode on far ahead from me, and perhaps someone equally helped her over the stile, or perhaps not.

'So, you do this to remember your dad?' I ask Rupert.

'Absolutely, we did this together for the first time, I must have been—10? I couldn't always do it with him, I moved away, went to university, had my own kids, blah blah. But I'm a single man now and Dad's old council house was still in my possession, I'd never felt right selling it. So I moved back in and started doing the walk again about six years ago.'

'Sounds like he was a nice man,' I say. However Rupert frowns, inhaling sharply.

'No,' he admits. 'No, I wouldn't say nice. A difficult man. That kind of thing, where he'd wait for that old lady, say "Nobody goes home until she's finished", he'd struggle to extend that to his nearest and dearest. But he was a Corporal in British Malaya, you know. And we weren't allowed to ask any questions but I'm pretty sure he was damaged. Mentally, I mean. Physically he was in good shape. But in the soul, you know. Troubled.'

I had taught a few modules concerning the British Empire, but the events unfolding in British Malaya were somewhat of a mystery to me. Later, I would strongly regret Googling the term, since I was presented immediately with images of

anonymous British colonial officers grinning whilst holding decapitated indigenous people's heads. 'Troubled in the soul', indeed.

'But you still like to do this, to remember him,' I offer gently, and Rupert nods, but then frowns again.

'Well, actually, I do this to remember—to remember I forgive him, I think. Yes, that's the best way of expressing it.'

Unlike Rupert's father, who it seemed stayed fighting fit until the very end, Mike Carter's trade union campaigner father Pete, who Mike did his own pre-referendum beating the bounds in memory of, deteriorated nightmarishly. Carter describes how in their final meeting on Pete's houseboat, this once 'bull of a man' then appeared 'rasping and skeletal, wearing a large oxygen mask' and looking like something from a horror movie (2019: 230). Carter's lifelong tendency to stay silent on his father's betrayals suddenly shattered, and in that moment he decided to tell Pete exactly what he thought of him, seeming to take a perverse pleasure in his father's 'shrunk and hollowed out' reaction (2019: 232). A few days later, Carter heard that Pete died on that boat, alone, having fallen and hit his head on a metal bin: a tragic, unceremonial end for such an impactful life. At one point during his one-man 180-mile replication of the 1981 'March for Jobs'—his father's greatest legacy—death seems to beckon for Mike himself:

I was fifty-two, with receding grey hair, jowls, and bags under my eyes. At Pete's funeral, many of his friends told me how much I was now looking just like him... When I first got together with my ex-wife, I took her to meet Pete for the first time. I was in my early thirties, and Pete his late fifties... By then, Pete was living in his flat in the run-down council block in South London, sleeping on the mattress laid out on top of two old doors... I remember standing there, surrounded by filth, with my arm around my goddess of a girlfriend, looking at Pete. I felt safe from his mess, that somehow I had escaped from 'our' story (2019: 162).

One particularly startling revelation in Stephen King's *The Long Walk* (1979) is that one of the boys competing is the 'illegitimate' son of the mysterious commander of the ritual, known only as the Major. If the boy secures the prize—'everything he wants for the rest of his life' (232)—he simply intends to use this prerogative to demand the

Major accepts him as his son and brings him into his home (282). Rupert, whilst his own father similarly looms over our 'long walk', is beyond such influence, however. His positive self-image radiates, only underlined by his choice to wear much tighter and brighter clothing than the rest of us. Despite his father's cold, even violent life, Rupert seems neither to wish to further connect with his father's memory, nor escape it. Intriguingly, Rupert's father's last walk at the age of 88 occurred in 2013. His uninterrupted 40-year observance of the custom must have therefore begun in 1973, the year that Britain first joined the European Communities, the precursor to what would become the European Union in 1993. Rupert did not reveal how his father voted in the referendum, or even if his father was still alive in 2016, but his later assertions of himself as being a 'staunch Remainer' did have a similar air of parental defiance.

'And strangely,' Rupert continues, 'I know I'm doing the same thing he always did [beating the bounds], but I feel very much "my own man". I don't have to walk and that's the control I have. And I don't know if you believe in this sort of thing, but he's doing it with me still, right now, as far as I'm concerned. Because I'm inviting him along. I don't think life's that big cliff edge like that. I mean, you know there's only a finite amount of energy in the universe, right? You can't create any more and you can't destroy it, it just gets repurposed. So if he's still here, walking with me, it's because I've said he's allowed to.'

4. 4. 'It's just there because you do it'

We are on the home stretch now, and currently being funnelled into another copse. This one, I see once inside it, is studded with what looks like multi-coloured jewels; primroses, blue and purple and yellow, sprouting out through the cracks in fallen moss-webbed logs and winking up from the crisp living floor. Unlike the bumping grotto, it feels welcoming here, hopeful. Or maybe that is just as much down to the fact that I know, from Alan's briefing, that this means there is only a mile left to go. I notice the girl who was the recipient of the bumping earlier has strayed off the track in front of me, attracted by a particularly bright cluster of flowers. In standard supernatural lore, girls are lured astray in forests deliberately: do not leave the path 'for one instant', urges the narrator in Angela Carter's Gothic retelling of Red Riding Hood, *The Company of Wolves* (1995: 130). Indeed, once the girl is successfully clutching a few severed petals, her mother appears, pulling her gently back into the fold. A charming

picture, only somewhat marred by a comment I overhear Frances make about the need to teach children that picking flowers—echoing the concern noted by Matless that those would come to the Norfolk Broads ‘*for the wrong reasons*’ (2016: 10)—is ‘so indecent. Might as well drop beer cans about’.

Once we clear the wood, we reach the other end of the main road again, right back where started. This time there is a fringe of even grander-looking houses than in the centre of the village, done out in a more rustic fashion, and with vast sprawling gardens, cats lazing in the briefly revived afternoon sun, and paddocks, one with a pig and two others containing goats. I *adore* goats; we had several when I was growing up. I stop for a few moments to get a good look at a particularly cute one before I hear a complaint.

‘... and my wife tried to drop a copy of *The Bronzotter* around to him, the maid answered the door, would you believe it, or someone, and Nancy says, “I’ve got something for Mr____, please can I hand-deliver it to him as I have a request?” All she wants to ask is whether he’ll consider a subscription, but the maid says, “I’m sorry but Mr____doesn’t take any personal callers, please leave the premises...”!? I mean the *gall* on the man to think he can just screen people like that, like we are the little people and we don’t deserve even a moment of his sainted time...’

‘We’re quite precious about our land, you might have heard from Harold,’ said Alan earlier, back in the village museum. ‘And that’s what it’s about, isn’t it? Preciousness? Beating the bounds? I mean, I don’t think it’s an exact thing, but there’s a relationship, isn’t there? We do beating the bounds and we like our land, that’s related. Don’t like any snatching.’

‘Snatching?’ I enquired.

Alan curled his fingers around the handle of his mug of tea and gave a hearty swig, despite the fact that the contents must still have been very hot. ‘Ah, well, you’ve heard that [famous and beloved British TV presenter] lives here, don’t you?’

‘Really?’ I responded. ‘Wow. That’s fun.’

Alan drew his arms across his chest and shook his head. ‘It’s no fun to actually live here with him, I can tell you that for free.’

‘Oh? Why’s that?’

Alan leaned forward, lowered his voice as though about to divulge a very deep, dark secret. ‘He’s a land-snatcher. And we all know there’s bigger problems in the world, we do, but it still upsets people. Because when he moved here, we thought he’d

get involved. Open fêtes and things, give a little back. Not a peep. Just stays up there in his big house. Nothing.'

'How's he snatched land then, exactly?' I ask.

'Through his garden. He bought a specific house with a specific amount of land for a garden on it, where there was a wall. And he's knocked down that wall to put a hedge in. That hedge is over on public land. The hedge he planted is 100% in Saxonbury, and he's essentially made the Saxonbury brook part of his garden. People are really upset. And of course, it costs too much to employ a solicitor. He can afford solicitors, but we can't. And I'll tell you why it's especially relevant to you.'

I nibbled a chocolate-coated biscuit, pleasantly surprised to see it still in one piece; the day was unseasonably hot, but the temperature in the village museum was carefully regulated to protect its artefacts, a by-product being that the wealth of biscuits on offer were always intact. 'Why's that?' I asked.

'Because that hedge is what stops the beating the bounds from being able to follow the actual parish boundary. We can't, because his hedge sticks out three yards. So he's not just nicking land, he's nicking history, if you like.' Startled at his own sudden profundity, Alan laughed. 'There, put that in your dissertation!'

I peer through the hedge again towards the property. I recognise it now from Alan's description, and think: *oh my god, this is [famous and beloved British TV presenter]'s house*. This must mean that this very hedge I am peering through is *the* hedge, the infamous trespassing hedge that gives the man his land-snatching reputation. I wonder how many village points I might win if I was to perhaps go the whole hog and shout 'Damn you!', shaking my fist like a trounced villain in a comic book. But I am surprised by the mockery inherent to this thought; if this is important to participants, it should be important to me. For a moment, I look around in vain for someone to make peace with, although I have not exactly unsettled the peace to begin with, when I am suddenly projectiled from behind by Harriet, the eldest Baker girl. Holly shortly appears alongside, along with Jack, who is struggling to keep tabs on all of his excitable little girls, Fairydust included. Harriet is still stuck to me like glue, but Holly, of a more independent spirit, is skipping along ahead.

'Don't be fooled,' said Jack under his breath. 'Holly's the one who shouted out the minute we saw you go by that she wanted to run and catch up with Mimi, and only Mimi.'

We can see the green up ahead, and after a few more minutes, as though some

starting pistol has gone off that only Saxonburians can hear, suddenly a small portion of the very front of the train breaks away and sprints past Patrick. They are making an inelegant break for the memorial, evocative of a photograph Brian would later show me that was taken at the climax of the 50th anniversary of beating the bounds five years ago. In it, Brian is arm in arm with four other men, all of them bronzotters (AKA born in Saxonbury) like himself—some of the last of the old generation remaining—as they make a particularly symbolic bid for the finish line.

‘And I do happen to be the oldest one there!’ Brian admitted. ‘Last 25 yards that is. So we were the first men there, and I broke free and ran and touched the memorial first!’ He laughed heartily.

‘You cheated!’ I said, miming horror.

‘I did!’ he beamed. ‘And they said that, they shouted at me, “Cheat!”’

‘But they didn’t mind really,’ cautioned Deborah. ‘Since he *was* the oldest.’

My research instincts kicked in again at that point, and I said—remembering an earlier conversation in which Brian claimed beating the bounds had essentially no meaning to it beyond a bit of fun—‘But that seems quite symbolic, Brian.’

Brian reflected for a moment, but was not to be fooled. ‘Yes, I suppose, but only because it was an anniversary. Beating the bounds itself is *just what you do*. It’s just there because you do it.’

Most participants described only taking part in beating the bounds, as Darian-Smith’s participant did, ‘for fun’ (1999: 180). Some claimed more specifically that it appeared to strengthen Saxonbury’s sense of community and community values. Peter said, echoing positive impressions of pain from Johnny earlier: ‘We’re all going through that and it together bonds people together, it does. Your legs might be stiff but then you feel better when you know that other people’s legs are stiff too, so it’s: “Come on everybody, not much further now”. People who you wouldn’t even talk to before, people you might even despise, you’re rooting for everybody suddenly. Very powerful, all feeling the same thing like that’. Deborah confirmed that ‘You wouldn’t put yourself through walking 19 miles on your own, or I wouldn’t. It’s all the village no matter who you are or what you think and that’s what’s lovely’. Notably, four Remain-voting participants started doing beating the bounds in the year after the referendum, May 2017; all of these participants were already living in Saxonbury prior to the referendum but for various reasons had never before taken part. Two of them connected this in some fashion to Brexit specifically. Daphne, a recruitment consultant in her 30s said

'Brexit did get me thinking in more depth and understanding and trying to parse out what is the daily stuff going on in my local community, so I think joining in with it was part of it. I felt so disconnected from everyone when I realised what my country had done. At first I wanted to feel like I still had people to be around, trying to kid myself they might still be like-minded. I felt like, "Well that's me not being English anymore, that doesn't represent me, maybe I can find something different to identify with.'" Henry, an art gallery tour guide in his 50s, said simply: 'I do beating the bounds because I'm English, I suppose.' However, quickly recalling our earlier conversation in which he divulged his relief at still having an EU passport through his Danish father, added with a laugh: 'But thank fuck for my Danish dad!'

By the time I make it to the memorial, there are already at least 70 people who have finished ahead of me, as well as a cluster of other villagers who did not participate and have turned up ostensibly to congratulate the walkers, but in reality, to grab a pint. *The Thirsty Parson* does a roaring trade on the day of beating the bounds and is already far beyond capacity both inside and outside on the picnic benches. As the two Baker girls settle down into a circle populated with their friends, Jack kindly offers to get me a drink. He shortly returns to place a glass of strong local scrumpy in my hand, before striking up a conversation with a friend whilst Fairydust makes a doomed attempt to coax Patrick's huge nearby Bernese out of her lovely lounging spot in the sun and into a high-spirited chase. All I can see is smiling people, amber pints, and emerald grass. Eventually through the milieu I perceive petite Deborah, holding a recycled ice cream tub in which she stores the badges handed out to everyone who finishes. By this time my pint is already two-thirds drained.

'Well done you!' Deborah says, pressing a badge into my hand with a firm warmth.

'Am I a Saxonbury girl now?' I ask cheerfully.

Before she can answer, Keith appears out of nowhere to clap me on the back for the final time of the day. 'Come back for another 49 of these,' he laughs. 'Then perhaps they'll consider it!'

Despite him putting me to rights about whether I was a Saxonbury girl or not, Keith did not really believe in fencing anybody off from anyone else. His philosophical understanding of beating the bounds was not limited to the 'subversiveness' of his own choice to lead it, but what it signified to take part in it at all.

'It's the boundaries in people's minds you've got to break down,' he said back

in his conservatory, the hiking boots even muddier than on the first time we met, since now they had been given a fresh coat through beating the bounds. 'Now I know how that sounds, very cheesy, and whatsoever, but it's true. And the fact is that this [beating the bounds] does bring people together, I know all about that seeming like a contradiction-in-terms because it's about marking territory, but I'm somebody who's had friends, partners, romantic and platonic relationships with people from different countries. Of course, I travel different countries, as you know, with the walking. And I like my community here but I'm just as pleased that they have a strong community in, say, France. I treasure that relationship with the world, but I still wanted to move somewhere like Saxonbury because I *didn't* see that as a contradiction in fact.'

'It's interesting, isn't it, because that's the standard plot of a film, someone from a small town, plucking up the courage to leave so they can finally grow up, see the world.' I mused. 'And often the people back home are painted as holding you back from that. Very insular. Territorial.'

'The point is that anybody can mark territory, carve out their bit of turf here actually and I think that's very important,' Keith responded. 'As I've said, when I took up the role in the walk, I was very crucial, very clear, that I wouldn't be involved unless it was something open to anybody and we let anybody walk, whether they were a Bronzotter or not, actually from Saxonbury or not. So you could absolutely see it as an exclusionary thing, or you could see it as a "Welcome to Saxonbury, you've got just as much right to be involved here as anyone else" thing, and I see it as the latter. I mean, we have people coming from France sometimes to do the walk the last few years; even had one chap in from America apparently once who was coming to visit with a friend and who'd been told, "Why don't you join in". There's people who get very sore in the legs that've only usually gone as far as their front door, and then we'll have someone who's come from much further afield saying, "I'm struggling too but let's keep going", and in that meeting they're close for just a day even though they might not see each other again for a year, in fact might not ever. We make boundaries so we can break 'em, that's how I see it.'

Chapter 5. ‘I probably would’ve just put Churchill in a drawer’:

Doing the boundary with Britain’s imperial legacy

I was still sat in Jean and Derek Wintercroft’s living room, on my third cup of tea (and fourth finger of shortbread) since I had arrived. The time had passed quickly with them, and it was easy to forget that I was technically doing research rather than just having a nice long chat with a friendly older couple. The Wintercrofts had shown an openness to any and every discussion point so far: they had disclosed their thoughts on Brexit—‘Derek, I *know* you voted Leave for constitutional reasons, but what I’m saying is the xenophobia was a big, big factor for *other people*’ (Jean)—and racism in the countryside—‘he said there were too many “brown people” in the county town, that’s why he moved here. I thought, well I hope a lot more move to Saxonbury then you horrid man!’ (Jean again). But the Wintercrofts, like Harold and Alan, were key players in local history events. I had seen Jean give a presentation at last month’s committee meeting, taking the audience through a history of Saxonbury that appeared to me to be a tad romanticised. One section discussed the building of Saxonbury Mansion but did not mention—such as I discovered through my own research—that the current Lord Spreadingham’s ancestors had indeed been prolific slavers and the Mansion was built partially with the proceeds of a Caribbean plantation. I had it in my head for some reason that the British Empire would thus be an unacceptable topic for the Wintercrofts, and we went painfully round the houses on the vague theme of ‘British history’ for a while before Jean mercifully cut to the chase:

‘When you want to talk about history, colonialism really is a dirty word these days, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah?’ I asked, relieved. ‘How so?’

‘Well,’ she said. ‘You know I’m a teaching assistant, and that stuff about British values—’

What is the relationship between the sociopolitical identities of the residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large, and their beliefs about the British Empire and systemic/institutionalised racism in the UK? For Jean, her values and beliefs about society and politics seemed strongly influenced by her experience and enjoyment of teaching, visible today in the history presentations she made for the heritage centre but previously through her multiple roles in state education over the

years. Earlier Jean and Derek and I had discussed Jean's involvement in various government education initiatives, one of which had been the push during David Cameron's premiership to 'actively promote fundamental British values' (Marriage, 2014: no pg), a policy which had been widely ridiculed not only for its nationalistic overtones but its lack of specificity. None of the three of us could think of a single thing unique to 'Britishness' except—and we were probably conflating this with 'Englishness' again—an apparent love of scones, sarcasm, and queuing. Jean's irritation at the idea of teaching 'British values' was revived again here, albeit here with different specific objections.

'I hate it, and I don't just hate it because "British values" is just a load of nonsense as I said. It's also because it papers over things, especially with the youngsters. And actually the trouble is, sometimes, I used to find if I was teaching teenagers, equal opportunities, if you want to explain why the West Indies people are in these countries with a British passport, the girls I was teaching couldn't understand why! Because it had never been explained to them that these people were part of the Empire, that they were British subjects. We're all united, we're of one British culture in that way. So I found it quite tricky, because they would say, "Why are they here? Why have they got a British passport? And why are they the same as us when they obviously aren't?" So I would have to go back and start explaining to them. But it is so, so irritating. Because they're [the British government] going on about "British values" but they don't give the students the first clue about actual *British history*. They pick and choose.'

I nodded. 'Presumably, the students don't have a clue about slavery either, then. About how the British were involved in that.'

'No,' said Jean. 'Or—very bare bones. Horrendous. Absolutely horrendous what we did and they've barely heard of it. Unforgivable, even.'

'Unforgivable what we did, or unforgivable that they've never heard of it?' I asked.

'Oh, well, both,' clarified Jean.

Derek had been an active participant in the interview so far, but at this point had fallen quiet. With his arms folded, and a mildly tense expression on his face, his silence by now had become a kind of presence in itself.

'Anything to add, Derek?' I asked.

He moved his head from side-to-side, indicating a kind of *comme ci, comme ça*

response, but I sensed he was also somewhat playing with me, introducing a false atmosphere of suspense. Eventually he said:

Well, you see, I come from an old family on the south coast, and back in the old days, the very old days, my village had several slaves taken. Several Englishmen taken into slavery. By the Barbary pirates. From time to time, from the 16th century, right through to the end of the 18th century, Britain was raided along the South coast by Barbary pirates. That's North African pirates. So it's gone both ways, you know. I would say you can teach it, but only if you teach that it went both ways.¹¹

5. 1. 'I'd like to hear people defend that, wouldn't you?'

Very few people I interviewed claimed to have been given a thorough education on the history of the British Empire at school. Megan, Henry, Peter, Keith and Elizabeth, all in their 40s and 50s, were pretty much in agreement:

I remember we did the English Civil war, that was very big. We spent eight or so lessons on that, I would say. We did basic history about the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and Stonehenge and all those kind of things. And of course, it was about Shakespeare, and in English literature I did Dickens. That we went off to India, that wasn't taught. It was never mentioned that we decimated them, annihilated them.

It was primarily English history we were taught. From memory. There was a certain amount of Johnny Foreigners had to get involved, because we fought wars. But a very Anglocentric view of history. Henry VIII. The Americans too. There wasn't much about our chequered history as a colonial power except

¹¹ This is true. Slaves were captured in south-west England, primarily off the coast of Cornwall, by North African Berber and Muslim (as well as some Christian European) pirates, predominantly between the 16th and 18th centuries, and transported back to North Africa to be sold, see Styer, 2011. The number of how many Britons were actually captured, enslaved and sold remains in dispute, with one historian's figure of almost 1.5 million considered highly unlikely, see Carroll, 2004. Figures are not of interest here. However, Derek mentions this during the discussion of transatlantic West African slavery perpetrated by the British. This reaction could be perceived, along with his suddenly aloof behaviour, as a kind of deflection of uncomfortable feelings, in line with the 'sold their own' defence as discussed in Chapter 1.

something about William Wilberforce of course.

Well I can remember the Tudors or the Stuarts. Running through it all was O-Level I think. And I can remember the bits of A-Levels, which was mainly Tudor. Then we went up to the First World War. And then my son did bits of the Common Market. I obviously know bits of history of the British Empire from having travelled. Not sure it was mentioned at school. It was all about Stonehenge and the Ancient Egyptians and King Henry VIII's six wives, and things.

I really like history I must say, good and bad, but I say most of what I know I taught myself from opening myself up. To books and my own personal research. School didn't prepare me properly on that score at all, and that was deliberate I think. They can only get away with something like Windrush if we're all ignorant.

I immediately thought of invasions. Danish, Roman, and then Norman. Pushing the Welsh, or the original English, back into Wales. And incidentally, at one point the beating of the bounds goes into in fact an old Roman road, and one year I had a friend with me from Italy, and we had a little joke that she was here just inspecting the roads, making sure we were keeping them up. But my memory was it was very domestic. I happen to remember while I was a teenager or thereabouts the BBC did a TV series about the British Empire complete with magazines and things like that. Watching that, I think it was a shock to the system.

All five of them claimed that information on the British Empire at school was lacking to the point of non-existent. Most of them made some connection between this lack of education and racism in the UK today, as exemplified by the Windrush comment; all of them subsequently affirmed that they believed the history curriculum in British schools needed a huge overhaul. Megan herself in fact proved things had still yet to be ameliorated, showing me her son's history textbooks over the past few years and demonstrating that the focus on English history had barely expanded since her own childhood. Johnny claimed that he *had* received an imperial education, but that, in

keeping with his slightly older age group perhaps, it was overtly positive:

I do remember the map. Maybe you've seen it. The big pink map. They said something like, "this is how far Britain stretches". But they didn't teach us that we killed anyone, no! That we slaughtered and pilfered. The way they described it made it seem very benign. Almost like we were invited over. Like we did them a big favour. As if. I read something about, who was it. I can't remember his name but one slaver who used to defecate – sorry to say it but yes – defecate in slaves' mouths¹². I mean imagine if that was your great great grandpa?! And that is beyond "oh that was just the times". Actually evil. I'd like to hear people defend that, wouldn't you?

Eleanor's no-nonsense, transparent attitude to parish policy meant that I was surprised to hear her object to the idea of teaching more about the British Empire. When I pressed her, she explained that she didn't think it should be 'taught under that title. I think that's negative. I mean, every country has behaved badly in other people's countries.'

'But that was the name of the institution, though,' I said. 'That's not a value judgement, is it?'

Eleanor seemed to bristle. 'Well, I was an aid worker in the 60s and 70s, and I was employed by Kenya for a bit. Actually some of my family members had to leave at the time of the Mau Mau, they had a suitcase and a baby, and they had to leave at two in the morning. They got a call that the Mau Mau were down the road and they had to leave. Late 70s I was personally there, but I couldn't go back now. I did support a Kenyan school, but I can't go back, because I'm a woman on my own. You don't feel comfortable now. And the thing is, I've no problem with a country gaining independence, being allowed to be independent, it's just that people, their way of reacting was violence. And so if you're teaching them, the children, about what we've done, you need to make it fair and balanced, include stories like that too.'

Strangely enough, despite being a similar age to me and even growing up in a similar part of the country, Bella claimed she'd been taught in quite frank detail about the British Empire.

¹² Johnny is probably referring to Thomas Thistlewood here. See Gladwell, 2008: 282

I don't remember any coyness about the British Empire, no,' she stated. 'In fact I remember thinking in one lesson, we watched this documentary about slavery, about the Middle Passage is it called? And the teacher was like, "Yes, we did that, Britain did that". However, a very funny thing happened, I went back to stay with my grandfather, and naive thing I said, "granddad you'll never believe this". Well apparently he tried to have it out with the teacher, phoned her up! No idea how he did it but he did. Said I was being brainwashed or something! I think he was worried about me being told what the British did in Calcutta, because you know he was there. Because I loved my granddad, whilst he was here, but he was probably thinking I wouldn't want to talk to him after that.

5. 2. 'What he would give to have one more chance to apologise'

Derek, Elizabeth and Victoria all mentioned the idea that African peoples also historically traded slaves, and all brought this up almost immediately after agreeing that Britain's involvement in the slave trade was otherwise hard to defend. Elizabeth added her understanding that 'The British Empire was terrible of course, but I think when you look point by point the Belgian Empire was absolutely disgusting. That took cruelty to an entirely new level'. Henry however claimed: 'Saying "ooh at least we weren't as bad as them" is ridiculous. Pitting one history against one another as though we can run a tally isn't how it works'. However, my participants tended to be united on the issue of statues (it is important to note that these interviews occurred prior to the toppling of Edward Colston into Bristol Harbour in 2020). Very few participants claimed removing statues was always wrong, but sometimes they did make reference to the fear that this might open the floodgates to 'too many' other kinds of sociopolitical shifts. Victoria gave her views on the proposed removal in particular of a statue of James Marion Sims in the US, who performed experimental reproductive surgeries in the 19th century on enslaved Black women without anaesthesia. Victoria claimed his conduct

was completely disgusting. But I'm not greatly into correctness and not-correctness. I'm talking generally here. I think there should be a lot of breadth. I think we should listen to people's experience but—sorry, I'm just thinking of

the Canadian Prime Minister blacking up his face.¹³ I remember watching the black and white minstrels with my grandparents, who absolutely loved it. And that was not derogatory about Black people in their view at all. It was a compliment about their marvellous musicality and dance. So yes, should we still do it? No. But I do think there's a problem with misunderstanding, and I think there's a problem with some people feeling as though they're still thought to be inferior, and therefore they're wanting things like apologies. I don't think it costs anybody anything to apologise so I think apologies should be given if that is what is going to help things. Of course, the apology has to be accepted, otherwise it's no use. If they're demanding an apology they've also got to be prepared to accept it. Otherwise it's having your cake and eating it.

Victoria's discussion of blackface is evocative of conversations in 2020 around the depiction of black people in British comedy. In the wake of George Floyd's killing and the ensuing protests in June of that year, several sketch shows in which white performers wore blackface, such as *Bo Selecta!* (2002-9), *Little Britain* (2003-6), and *The Mighty Boosh* (2004-7) were removed from streaming platforms Netflix and BBC iPlayer. This hit a ludicrous peak when Hulu removed an episode of *Golden Girls* in which the characters wear brown mud masks, *not* engage in blackface. Across social media forums, black commentators despaired about the performativity of these 'empty and poorly researched gestures', claiming they made BLM activists look like 'childish fools', with one joking: "END POLICE BRUTALITY! STOP KILLING US" Response: "K... So... Remove insensitive TV episodes? Done! Look at us! Aren't we so progressive & great!!!" (Oh no they didn't!, 2020). Victoria's further comment that oppressed individuals might only want an apology if they mistakenly 'feel as though they're still thought to be inferior' obscures the reality that black people are evidently still genuinely considered to be inferior by a huge swathe of the white population. Finally, her implication that oppressed peoples may request apologies only to feel superior, and/or that a person who is being apologised to is duty-bound to accept said apology, implies that apologies in this context are given in the expectation that they will alleviate white guilt first and foremost, rather than with the sincere wish to soothe

¹³ In the previous weeks, photos had emerged of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wearing blackface at fancy dress events during his college days. See Khambhampaty, Carlisle, & Chan, 2019.

the hurt of victims. The Archbishop of Canterbury's dramatic prostration at Amritsar in 2019, the 100-year anniversary of the massacre committed there by British troops of nearly 400 Indian civilians, was derided by an Indian MP, Swapan Dasgupta, as 'a form of self-flagellation... contribut[ing] to a self-indulgent debate' (Gomes, 2019: no pg). This allegation reminded me of an episode of the adult animated Netflix series *BoJack Horseman* (2014), in which the titular character visits a terminally ill old friend, Herb, who he seriously wronged 20 years prior. After Herb indicates an apology might be appropriate, BoJack is shocked to find that this apology, once delivered, is not accepted:

BoJack: Herb, I said I'm sorry.

Herb: Yeah, and I do not forgive you.

BoJack: Er, not sure you get what's happening here. This could be the last time...

Herb: No, I'm not going to give you closure. You don't get that. You have to live with the shitty thing you did, for the rest of your life. You have to know that it's never ever going to be okay.

BoJack: I really think that we'd both feel better if we...

Herb: I'm dying. I'm not gonna feel better. And I'm not gonna be your prop so *you* can feel better.

Although Johnny unequivocally believed that we should 'just get rid [of slaver statues]. Why on earth do we want to keep these creatures up in a modern day and age?', for the most part even those critical of imperial history agreed the statues should not be destroyed entirely. A popular idea was that of 'statue parks', a concept prevalent in Eastern European countries in which old Soviet-era statues are displayed to the public in one place and usually with expanded context. Another prevalent thought regards memorialising the British Empire in general was to echo the efforts of Germany in memorialising the Holocaust. Converse to the British mode of 'screening out' (2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3, 2012b) imperial atrocities, Germans were considered amongst several of my participants to face their past complicity head on, an idea that Britain would apparently do well to emulate. There are several memorials to the Holocaust and other World War II atrocities across Germany, one of which, *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*, is a large, abstract structure of almost 3000 concrete

slabs arranged in a maze-like pattern for visitors to pass through. The work is ambiguous and lacks directions or labels, suggesting no strict formula for visitor responses and therefore presenting, according to Angharad Closs Stephens, 'a disruption to homogenizing accounts of time and history' usually enforced by traditional museums and historical exhibitions (2013: 105). Certainly this multiplicitous, ambiguous approach to memorialising might have soothed some participants' irritation, such as Eleanor's, about a lack of nuance to modern-day interpretations of the British Empire.

Henry, who through his work in art galleries had in fact been to a conference in Berlin in which German public memorials were discussed, said: 'The openness there was incomparable, you know. The woman who was presenting the one I saw, I think there was a proposal for another piece of artwork along the veins of the 'Missing House', making a statement out of empty spaces, you know, although this one didn't end up coming to fruition, I think. But there was just an absolute clarity about what had happened. There wasn't this—this—there's a word on the tip of my tongue—the way the Brits do here...'

'Obfuscation?' I offered.

'That wasn't the actual one but yes that works just as well,' replied Henry. 'What I mean is that there's all this kind of embarrassment, and then that circles round into pretending to be proud, doesn't it, which doesn't do anybody any favours, even us. But the atmosphere in that presentation. Not just from the speaker, you know. From everybody who was watching who had been coming there to listen, even though they weren't just Germans, they were from all over the world. But the Germans I spoke to. There was no—what did you say? Obfuscation. None of that. And actually it reminded me, I remember asking them, "How do you do it? Own up like this?" This was afterwards in a bar and I had got on with this particular chap, can't remember his name now. But apparently his great grandfather had had a small role. He hadn't been a Kommandant, not working in the camps or anything, but he had doxed in some Jewish people on his street, I think. Never knew what happened to them.'

'But we can probably guess,' I added.

'Sadly, yes, we can. Well anyway, he said that this was known in and amongst family but it was never talked about but he told me this different story. Apparently he had a blind elderly relative, great-aunt or something, who he went round to read to and sometimes bring lunch for when he was a child. And one day he was fiddling with

some of her things, and he accidentally broke something. I think it was something like a little doll. And he was only 12 or something but very embarrassed and guilty and so he hid the broken thing somewhere knowing that a blind person wouldn't be able to find it.' Henry sucked air through clenched teeth. 'Bad thing to do obviously.'

There was silence for a few moments. 'What did that have to do with the Nazis, sorry?' I prompted.

'Oh well this was the thing. This chap got a phone call sort of half-way through and had to leave and so I never actually heard the end of it. But I found I kept thinking about why he might have brought it up, I was very confused, as you are. I actually thought about it a lot on the U-Bahn back to my apartment. And I think the thing I realised over time is he was trying to say that the pain of the guilt is far harder to bear than actually just owning up and getting the short sharp condemnation there and then. Because I could tell he was still very embarrassed about this story, very guilty about having done this and I'm not sure it was ever discovered. Maybe his blind aunt never could find it and never knew and there we are. This is a very simplistic thing to be saying, of course and there's many more layers and complex ways of looking at it. But maybe we think we can't bear admitting what we've done because of the shame but actually maybe it's far worse the suffering we undergo by keeping it quiet. I mean, I was just some stranger in a bar and this guy was 40 at that point. But about 30 years had gone past and he still hadn't forgotten about breaking and hiding that little doll. What he would give, I think. Because obviously this great-aunt was long dead. What I think he would give to have one more moment to own up and chance to apologise.'

5. 3. "“Would you mind if we offered your son a sweet?””

Megan was well-versed in talking about shame. She described herself self-deprecatingly, handing me a tea when I first arrived for the interview in a mug emblazoned with Nelson Mandela's face on it, describing it as her 'standard white liberal mug'. However, her understanding of shame—as with many Remain voters, it seemed—crystallised particularly around a comparison between Brexit and the London 2012 Olympics.

'During the Olympics. I was very proud of being English, or British, because of how inclusive we felt as a nation, at that time. And, I don't know, I think I felt—we all felt, as a family, we felt very much that we were an outward looking country, a country

that was welcoming, that has something really positive to offer the world. It was a celebration, a massive one, not just of Britain, and Englishness, but the whole world. You knew we were celebrating the whole world equally too, the whole world of athletic excellence. The buzz. Just beautiful. We adored the whole thing, everything. To think. Just to think we went from that, to this. I never would've believed it. Just so, so shaming.'

Lola, despite the absence of community feeling towards her in her own backyard, called the 2012 Olympics 'a shot in the arm for getting along with each other. Just so excited, so thrilling, all the effort and drama. That's been ruined now with Brexit, obviously.' Peter, characteristically, called it 'a fantastic piece of PR, flawlessly pulled off. Really something to be proud of, I thought. I feel proud now, even, just discussing it. Also it makes me all the more ashamed of what's unfolded since then—we certainly chose a radically different path in 2016, did we not.' Elizabeth claimed that she was moved to tears whilst watching the opening ceremony, as did her wife. Joanna watched it at the same time as her friends did in New Zealand, even though for them it was the early morning: 'They felt as British as we did that day I think!' Johnny even read me a short poem he'd written in honour of the occasion, containing the particularly resonant line: 'For once in my life, old Blight', I've got nothing to whine for—a cracking old night'. Nobody however had quite such a powerful response as Megan, though, who admitted it was in no small part due to the way the Olympics had raised her hopes that she found Brexit so devastating.

'We even bought the DVD recently. Just to revisit it, that feeling. And whole tone of—so cinematic and whatnot—was set by Danny Boyle, you know. So peaceful and yet so full of energy at the same time, that's hard to do. And I suppose, against the backdrop of everything going wrong in the UK at the time as well, this kind of austerity thing was looming, and, and this massive celebration of the NHS. And in its own way there was something really subversive about this amazing display of what was going on, having Stephen Lawrence's mum, as a really huge part of that opening ceremony. It was like, goodness, look how far we've come! And now look. Just look at us now. Can't believe it. Just can't believe it. Shaming.'

Several other participants, like Megan, mentioned the feature of Doreen Lawrence as a Union Jack flag-bearer in the ceremony as particularly significant to their reading of it as inclusive overall. Some had pointed out Doreen Lawrence's involvement in the ceremony as a crucial symbol, particularly Johnny, claiming

That was absolutely fucking mind-blowing, pardon my language. I am all about subverting powerful national ideologies and symbols, hence why I have my rose [tattoo] as I just said, and I don't think you can get more subversive than that. This is a tragedy that demonstrated that basically everything said about ourselves, everything to do with Blair and "Oh come on over here we're all swinging again" was absolute bollocks, because it wasn't just that a black man had died, a *child*, excuse me. But basically all the forces that are meant to be positive about Britain, our law and order and justice and whatever, they had, now what is the term. *Colluded* in denying that poor family their right to be heard. So in the Games, yes, it all came full circle, and I actually thought at the time, this is a demonstration of healing. I was happy to be British for a good few years after that. I think everybody was. I didn't hear anything about my black friends being harassed on the street, threatening their heads kicked in, during the early 2010s. People didn't think it was acceptable back then and I think the Olympics broadcast the message that it was not acceptable. And now it's all just imploded again.

The involvement of Doreen Lawrence in the flag-bearing ceremony drew significant praise from critics too, as is recounted in a roundtable featured in the journal *Soundings* (Graham ed., 2013: 88-9):

Anna Minton: But, for example, I was gobsmacked by seeing Doreen Lawrence... carrying the flag. I felt I had no criticisms there. That is how the coming together of the UK was symbolised for me.

However, Minton's colleague quickly recontextualised Doreen's appearance—given the manner in which the London Metropolitan police colluded in denying justice for her son—stating 'we cannot forget who the flag was then passed to [by Doreen Lawrence] – members of the armed forces' (Ibid). Fascinatingly, as though recalling this exact chain of events herself, it was the subject of the military presence at the Games to which Megan then immediately turned.

And even—there was a lot of hoo-ha about the private security firm that they'd

hired to do security who were absolutely rubbish so instead they got the forces to do it. And, they were amazing, you kind of think, “Oh my goodness are they going to check our bags”, whatever. And they were just amazing, the navy guys, and I can remember one of them, he said, “Oh would you mind if we offered your son a sweet?”! You know, just because my son was only about four at the time, I don’t think he’d even started school, and it was just so sweet, that they were a) doing it and b) had the common sense or decency to ask me. The whole thing just seeped into everyone’s pores like that, you could say.

The contrast of Megan’s comments about scanning bags to her praise of the event’s peaceful and inclusive atmosphere caught me a little off-guard. The idea of military personnel giving her son a sweet when they are supposed to be on alert for terrorist threats at the highest-profile public event the nation’s capital had seen in decades—not to forget that the 7/7 London bombings occurred the very day after the 2012 Olympics host duties were first awarded to London in 2005—seemed an implausible image. No wonder Megan felt the atmosphere had ‘seeped into everyone’s pores’ if soldiers were handing out treats to toddlers; a demonstration that Closs Stephen’s ‘national affective atmosphere’ had been highly successful then (2016: 182). At the same time, the fact that these soldiers acted so pleasantly towards Megan, her husband and their son might have had everything to do with who Megan’s family are: white and ‘middle class’ going by their clothing and mannerisms. Johnny’s shock at the apparently sudden re-emergence of racism in 2016—‘people didn’t think it was acceptable back then [in 2012]’—elided various realities about being a person of colour in Britain before 2016, as already discussed in the literature review. Despite the attempt by Boyle and associates to create a ceremony that ‘conceived of the nation as a multiplicity of stories rather than as one single collective experience’, as Catherine Baker claimed, ‘it is debatable whether [the joyous atmosphere] could overcome this silence as erasure’, particularly silence on the systemic and institutionalised racism resulting from the British imperial legacy (2014: 9). Megan, Johnny, and to a lesser extent Elizabeth, Joanna, Lola and Peter, all demonstrated critical views of the British Empire and racism within British society; nevertheless, they seemed to temporarily ‘screen out’ (Tyler, 2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3 2012b) these matters in a manner that prevented them from being too critical of the Olympics.

‘I’ve even still got a t-shirt, somewhere,’ said Bella. ‘Like a commemorative t-

shirt. I've even got one from the Millennium Dome still, I think! I got that when I was 12. Doesn't fit, obviously.'

'You still wear it?' I asked. 'I mean the one from the Olympics.'

Bella hummed pensively. 'I mean—I enjoyed watching and everything but it's not something I'd frame and like a precious possession. I think I put it on once recently to paint my outdoor shed and got a few marks on it, but then, the shed was going red and the t-shirt was blue actually. So maybe if we can look at it that way, I only made it look more patriotic than before!' Bella stopped for a moment, opened her mouth as though to say something, and then closed it again. She gave me a mischievous look.

'What is it?' I asked.

'I—oh dear—let's just say I'm remembering I had another use for it once too which I'm not going to actually say. Very... there was a Union Jack on it so I think my grandfather would be very disgusted to hear. I mean he'd be disgusted to hear it anyway. I can tell you but you absolutely can't put what I'm about to say in your dissertation.'

She told me, and she was right.

'Well, I'd say it's very punk though, isn't it,' I said wryly. 'Didn't Britain use to be known just as much for transforming the flag, patriotic things? Like Vivienne Westwood and the Sex Pistols and all that.'

'What was it, what was the song?' Bella clicked her fingers, as though trying to summon the lyrics to her. '*God save the Queen—*'

'And the fascist regime,' we said simultaneously.

5. 4. 'I think we can have both, can't we?'

Despite her earlier protestations against 'hippie types' doing illegal activities in the fields around Saxonbury, sitting in Frances's living room meant being overseen by her framed signed photograph of herself and the Westcountry folk singer Seth Lakeman, a performer who tends to be quite popular with exactly that sort of demographic. Keegan-Phipps and Winter, in their account of the resurgence of English folk music in the early 21st century, claimed that when Lord Coe, chair of the organising committee, quipped that the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics would match that of Beijing in 2008 'by featuring "five thousand Morris dancers", his remark was meant as a joke' (2013: 1). Frances would likely have bristled to hear this; it turned out folklore

was something she took very seriously.

'I think quite a lot of people heard about the English elements [of the opening ceremony], the maypole dancing and whatever else it was, and thought what a bloody laughingstock we're going to be. I have friends who do the dancing as a hobby and yes, it's not actually for me, but I do share their irritations that England's traditions aren't taken very seriously. You wouldn't talk that way about the Irish ceilidh, for example, and why should it be that way with England? So I was glad to see that properly represented, not joking with our history. But then again, I think they failed with that in other ways.'

'Who failed?' I asked. 'And on what?'

'Well,' said Frances, reaching behind herself to rearrange her cushions, one of which bore a cross-stitched design of the face of what I was told was Sir Chris Hoy; a design from her daughter's Etsy shop which also included cushions bearing the faces of David Attenborough, Stephen Fry and Andy Murray. 'I just think it was a bit unnecessary having all those people doing the frolicking about with the maypole, the times meant to be representing our authentic historical times, to have it be a mixture of coloured (sic) *and* white individuals,' continued Frances. 'I thought it was very silly. I know we've been branded with a multi-ethnic place label these days but back in the 14th century, we *were* all white.' She shrugged. 'It's not *racist* to say that but I'd say these days it seems like it is.'

My hands gripped the sides of my mug instinctually. 'You think if they just had white people in that part of the opening ceremony,' I said carefully. 'Boyle would be accused of racism?'

Frances looked over into her garden. Her tortoise was sat in a chicken-wire pen, glacially munching on some iceberg lettuce.

'I just think that we are allowed to have some things,' she answered eventually. 'It's not racist to keep some things, you know, our traditions, our historical figures, and say we're not going to rewrite history just to make them more palatable to the new mixed society we have now. I wouldn't dream of asking a Muslim person living here to give up Eid, but by the same token we can also preserve some of our own traditions without needing to adapt them. So it was just a shame that they had to do that [in the opening ceremony]. I really don't think a single Muslim person would've cared if all the people in the historical segment in the countryside setting were white, all our most important figures were white. I think they probably think *we're* odd for going the other

way fully unnecessarily when they don't give the first objection.'

'It sounds like you were quite upset by that,' I said.

'Well I suppose I was,' replied Frances. 'I wouldn't have said I was but I'm going into it now and clearly I am! It's just a bit wounding of the pride maybe. I just thought it was unfair. Feels a bit taken over of things, like someone recounting your life story to you and pretending it was theirs. Yes, I was hurt I suppose.'

As Sara Ahmed contended, the conversion of 'the nation' into 'the national body' also allows the transformation of 'invasion' (or a phenomenon imagined like an invasion, such as Frances's apparent view of immigration) into 'wound'. The subsequent 'transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of getting hurt or injured' (2014: 32), and thus, in keeping with O'Toole's theory about the 'exuberant victimhood' of Brexit (2018a: 86), allows even those in positions of relative privilege to experience this hurt. Ahmed illustrated this through analysis of the 1996 *Bringing Them Home* reports, which detailed the modern political repercussions of the 'Stolen Generation', a mid-20th century phenomenon in Australia in which thousands of Aboriginal children were stolen from their families and forced into white schools. Though the cultural and physical violence was inflicted on the Aboriginal children and their communities, the white voice of the reports appropriates some of this violence by claiming the result is a 'scar' on the Australian state's conscience. 'In such forms of responding to pain,' Ahmed argued, 'the national body takes the place of the indigenous bodies; it claims their pain as its own' (2014: 35). Whilst Frances claimed to support Britain's modern multi-ethnic makeup, through her use of the terms 'been *branded* with' and '*wounding* of the pride' (emphases mine), she appeared to envisage Britain's border to be as sensitive as skin, evoking the use of branding irons, a tool often used against indigenous people by British colonial forces and slavers. Frances spoke in quite openly critical terms about the British Empire's legacy and racism in the UK in general, and yet reappropriated the pain of colonial victims by claiming that the inclusion of non-white people in the first set piece of the opening ceremony was 'a shame', indicating, unlike other participants, that the shame of Britain's racism belonged to someone other than herself.

In an otherwise very trendy office interior, the portrait of Winston Churchill hanging on the brickwork above Alexander's desk made for an unusual focal point. When I finally pointed it out, Alexander appeared to have been expecting it.

'Yes, well, obviously there's that there. And the significance to me is that was

my grandfather's portrait. That portrait of Churchill was always on my grandfather's desk. And actually, you can't see it, but it says underneath, 'Our Skipper'. My grandfather was a World War I fighter pilot, a very successful farmer, you know, a self-made man. Very British. So I suppose so for me it's a bit of a sentimental value.'

Alexander's fingers drummed on the desk, and he stared down at them.

'Actually, I wanted the desk too. It was a lovely desk. And I'll tell you—this is how fucked up families are, excuse my language! But the desk was given to my uncle who remarried, and he died a year ago, and his new wife rung me up, and said: "I've spoken to all your family and no one wants your grandfather's desk, would you like it?" And I said, "Actually that's very kind of you, I would like it if you don't need it." She replied, "Ok you can have it for three thousand pounds"! I was like: "No, you can keep it if that's the case!" So I managed to salvage the photograph, at least.'

'Right, so was that a tenner?' I joked.

Alexander laughed. 'No, I got that before she got her hands on it, thankfully! As I said, it's nostalgia for my grandfather, sentimental, but yes, I'm not a Brexiter, I'm not for that interpretation of things. So it's ironic to have that up there, yes, I don't mind admitting it. But I don't think we need to look at history that way. We don't need to say for everything, "Right this is totally bad, unsalvageable, and we should chuck it and never speak of it again", or, on the reverse, that anything is totally good.'

I had been reading up on British India a lot lately, and found I was driven to give my own view of the subject a little more forcefully than I usually did in interviews. 'Definitely,' I agreed. 'Human beings don't need to finish deciding, you don't need to tally everything up like that. And Churchill's a good example. Obviously your grandfather had very strong feelings towards Churchill, you might have more ambivalent ones, but I'm actually reading a book at the moment about the British Empire's effect on India, and some Indian scholars would count Churchill amongst Hitler and Stalin, in that he did a lot of atrocious things over there.'¹⁴

Alexander leaned back in his chair a little. 'Presumably as an officer rather than when he was Prime Minister?'

'Well, no, actually when he was Prime Minister, there was a famine that happened in India that killed millions and millions of Indian people,' I continued, watching the colours change in Alexander's eyes. 'And apparently, there are many

¹⁴ Here I am paraphrasing Shashi Tharoor, in Oppenheim, 2017, whose view is naturally contestable.

memos demonstrating that Churchill deliberately diverted food stores away because he wanted them to deplete their population. So he condemned them to death, quite deliberately. Now does that mean that there is no worth in individual British people—and not just in Britain, I think Churchill's got a wider reach than that—getting inspiration from him for different reasons? I don't think they have to contradict each other.'

Alexander nodded slowly. 'I think we can. I think we can have both, can't we?'

Maybe I should have stopped there, seeing as Alexander was showing such willing. This was the other side of the coin to my interview with the Wintercrofts: the strange paradox that I seemed to turn up to interviews either terrified of mentioning the British Empire, or for some reason unwilling to personally shut up about it.

'Sure,' I rambled on. 'For instance, I wouldn't have a picture of Churchill in my office. But at the same time, I didn't have a granddad who liked Churchill!'

'Yeah,' said Alexander. 'Well, for me, it's nothing like having a swastika on the wall. It's nothing to do with a political statement, which is why I use the sort of swastika example. And digressing slightly, because it's a bit of a sort of human thing, I remember talking to someone who was actually a trained shrink. And I remember there was this bloody bloke, a client, he would never ever return my calls, he was a pain in the arse. And I remember chatting to this lady and saying, "He's useless, he's this and that and everything else and oh god he just really winds me up." And she goes: 'Alexander, you just—that guy, he could have run over his cat this morning or his mother could have died. Unless you know what's going on in his brain you really shouldn't be judging how useless he is and all this sort of stuff'. And the point I'm trying to make is— and I've sort of said, "Yeah you know what you're absolutely right"—my point is that you can't read what's going on in someone else's mind. So therefore I think we are quite judgmental in this day, about people's decisions and behaviours. And I think sometimes we just need to sometimes need to rein back a little bit and stop being so judgemental. Sometimes people really have been doing their best.'

Alexander was still drumming his fingers on the wood. The anecdote he had told me about the desk swam through my head once more. In wondering whether he ever regretted not fighting for it a little harder, I suddenly succumbed to an onslaught of precious memories and now lost treasures of my own Taid—who, incidentally, as a soft-spoken Welsh separatist, would have laughed and simply said in his lovely voice,

*'Tonypandy!'*¹⁵ to anyone claiming Churchill as an inspiration. My silence seemed to have made Alexander a little uneasy with his last comments, as though he thought I disapproved. Maybe, deep-down, I did.

'I would like to read the book you're reading, definitely,' said Alexander kindly. 'And yes. I see what you're saying. Especially given the current political climate, all this "Britain rules the world again" crap. If I had lived in India and I had actually read the book that you're reading, well yes. I probably would've just put the portrait in a drawer instead.'

¹⁵ As Home Secretary in 1910, Churchill sent the military to intervene in a miners' strike in the Welsh town of Tonypandy, which reportedly resulted in several injuries and one death. See Barrie, 2017

Chapter 6. ““She just seems to want to trash her own house all the time, that’s all she wants””: Doing the boundary through Brexit

Miles and I were sat in his glitzy music production office within his huge house looking out over Saxonbury stream. Miles was a busy man in his late 30s, and I drank tea and pretended to review my notes whilst he replied to an important email. This was the fourth or fifth such instance where Miles had needed to interrupt our interview to attend to other matters, sometimes for many minutes at a time. This was particularly disappointing, since he was a Leave voter who also did beating the bounds, one of the few I had actually met. My hopes of exploring a link between the impulse to beat the bounds and supporting Brexit had therefore been kept alive mostly by the prospect of talking to a handful of people like Miles, but Miles did not seem to want to talk to me at all. It was getting stuffy, so I took off my jumper; Miles’s gaze was suddenly on my upper arm, where I have a tattoo. It is a large, unusual one and I often get comments on it; Miles promptly asked me what it meant. I explained, always an awkward conversation.

‘That’s a weird thing to want to commemorate,’ Miles said eventually.

‘Yes,’ I replied, mentally searching for an elegant way to wrap up the interview.

‘Then again,’ he said, undoing the cuff buttons and then rolling up the left sleeve of his pristine white dress shirt to reveal a tattoo of his own. ‘My wife likes to say the exact same thing about this.’

How strongly do residents of Saxonbury and rural southern England at large identify with how they voted in the EU referendum? What are their beliefs about the identities of people who voted differently to them? At least as far as the former was concerned, Miles clearly identified with his EU referendum vote in a strong enough manner that he was willing to tattoo himself over it. Although it was not immediately obvious what the tattoo symbolised, which he told me was a conscious choice ‘just to make sure I don’t get in any trouble with clients’, Miles later admitted it was an intentional commemoration of Brexit done just a few weeks after the vote in 2016. The tattooist had apparently told him:

a lot of them were going the whole hog and getting, you know, the St. George, or a bulldog, or whatever. But I'm not interested in getting what everybody else has, it seemed a bit tacky, and they don't need to know anyway. Only I need to know. And that's not just because I don't want people going round saying, "Ooh, look at that". It's private. Not to be mushy but that's why I got [the object tattooed]. To me it symbolises freedom in my own way as a working-class man, a man who has those values. I'm not some person going round looking to start a gang. I've spent a lot of time in Japan for work and I know how tattoos have been stigmatised because of the yakuza, but they've also been used as a kind of reaction to the end of dictatorships. There's a museum in Amsterdam I worked with once that had pictures of Jewish people that had collected other tattoos around the ones they'd been stamped with in the Holocaust. So there's different ways of looking at it.

'But isn't Brexit going to make it a bit more difficult for you to travel to work?' I asked.
'Like with that place in Amsterdam?

Miles smiled knowingly at me. 'Yes. And that's what my wife means. She's a Remainer, and she said: "I can't believe you've gone and stamped yourself with this thing that only spells absolute chaos, that means Alfie can't go and work in Norway, wherever". But it's in our hearts. You've got to understand what it means in people's hearts. It means freedom for people who've been under the boot. When I found out the next morning that we'd won, I cried. I never cried at the result of any political thing in my whole life. And the thing is, whenever people talk about Leave voters, I know they think we're bloody stupid.'

'I apologise if I've come across like that,' I said.

Miles held up his hands. 'No, no, a lot of them are, don't get me wrong. Thinking withdrawing from the EU will get rid of Muslims? What are you on about? And what the bloody hell is wrong with Muslims anyway? It's not about that at all for me, not at all. Economically-speaking the logic doesn't work and I'm not pretending the logic will work. But freedom as I've said and that comes with a bit of graft, part of the territory. But that's because you can't actually make gut feelings fit all nicely like that. That's why I wanted to get it, the tattoo. Did it make sense for that Jewish man to cover his

body in tattoos, when his suffering was symbolised by a tattoo?¹⁶ Probably not. But those were his feelings. You've got to respect the feelings.'

6. 1. 'Like a death, really.'

Through this short conversation—he received a phone call which ended the entire interview seconds later—Miles seemed to tell me far more than in the previous hour and a half. Miles was of course not the first Leave voter to describe Brexit as a kind of uprising, nor the EU as akin to Hitler, as detailed throughout the literature review. It was the first time however I had heard a Leave voter go so far as to utilise analogies of the Holocaust to make their point directly. Miles' emphasis of the imagery of victimhood in his feelings about Brexit were even more explicit in our discussion around his class status. He claimed that 'as a proud working-class man, a jobber' he had been 'fighting against everything' for his entire life. Whilst I do not pretend to know exactly what Miles's class status 'is', his wealth and privilege evoke Friedman et. al.'s 2021 study demonstrating the increasing prevalence in Britain of younger people claiming themselves working class, whilst having little markers of what would traditionally be assumed to signify one. At the time of the referendum, Miles had already been a successful music producer for several years and had recently bought an expensive house, partially paid for by a large inheritance from a relative. His wife was an internationally successful dancer and his son was being privately educated. Whilst starting one's own business and becoming wealthy of course does not invalidate someone's identification as a working-class person, the few stories Miles had told me about his heritage seemed to show quite a lot of money running through his whole family for several generations.

Miles's vote to Leave was inherently entwined with his sense of himself as a working-class man. But the fact that Miles voted Leave because he somehow felt himself oppressed by the EU in ways he could not provide concrete examples of appeared to give me a single glimpse—the only true glimpse I would get throughout my time in Saxonbury, perhaps—of my original definition of doing the boundary in

¹⁶ It is not clear which man or exhibition Miles refers to here. Tattoos are traditionally forbidden by Jewish law, which of course has taken on deeper resonance in the last century due to the Nazi practice of tattooing prisoners in concentration camps during the Holocaust. Some Jews however have and are choosing to get tattoos as an act of subversion regards the Nazis' atrocities. See Truesdell, 2015.

action. Miles was so invested in his identity as a victim of class oppression in some way, despite all the privileges visible during that brief time I spent with him defying that categorisation, he seemed to desire to be allocated a cause for which to rise up and an enemy to resist, which he found in the Leave campaigns' narrative of the EU. In O'Toole's analysis, this was 'the fever-dream of an English resistance, and its weird corollary: a desire to have actually been invaded so that one could—gloriously—resist' (2018a: 44). Unfortunately, Miles did not give me much information about why he participated in beating the bounds, but his use of a tattoo to honour the referendum, which he described as 'marking it I suppose, like a rite of passage', certainly further chimes with much of the work on pain, Brexit and sovereignty as previously discussed in the literature review. Ahmed's metaphor (2014: 2) that British national borders are often discussed in language that evokes 'skin' (soft, penetrable, easily damaged) is important here, although it does not necessarily go far enough. Skin's vulnerability is also what makes it most hardy, and in keeping, Miles' sense of the oppression of himself and his nation is potentially exorcised somewhat once his own tattoo heals.

But the pain—as in the economic losses of Brexit—is not only unnecessary, but so far is probably not proving to have the catharsis some Leave voters were hoping for. Alexander described Leavers as 'having one big tantrum, like one of those kids that says "I'll hold my breath until I get my way"'. The pathetic twist becomes clear when Leavers notice how little other EU nations seem to actually care: 'When they realise they've hurt themselves for no reason,' continued Alexander, 'because you know, about a tree falling in the forest, does it actually fall if nobody hears it'. Daphne commented similarly on watching Eurovision in 2017, thinking "god they'll [the other competing countries] be giving us hell [for Brexit]" and Graham Norton says in the first ten minutes or something: "Literally no one has mentioned it. They don't give a shit." And even me as a Remainer, I felt slightly bruised by that' (the explicit use of the metaphor of a 'bruise' here took even me aback!). Making fools of ourselves for attention is always pitiable, but it becomes truly mortifying if that plea for attention does not even pay off. This idea is redolent of a scene in Alejandro G. Iñárritu's 2014 film *Birdman*, in which the world-famous actor protagonist locks himself out of his dressing room in his underwear. The subsequent video of him being forced to walk through New York's Times Square half-naked goes 'viral', and our expectations of his global humiliation are subverted when his daughter shows him the millions of 'likes' this indignity has amassed on YouTube: 'Believe it or not,' she says, 'this is power.' The

contradiction Daphne brings up in not wanting to be a part of Brexit, yet feeling empathetic about it going badly, smacks of the command that circulated in right-wing media after the referendum that ‘everyone’, regardless of how they voted, now had a duty to ‘get behind Brexit’ (LBC, 2017; Nanan-Sen, 2020). Certain other pro-Remain participants agreed: as Peter put it, ‘It’s going ahead now, with or without us. We may as well try, you know, try and band together to at least to get the look of it right, so we seem united, even if underneath there’s still things that are, you know, bubbling away.’

Patrick told me that he thought the worst thing about being a Remainer in a post-Brexit Britain was probably

being forgotten I think. Being forced to watch things go on without you. You’re stood there, waving them off, “Goodbye great thing, that we’re never going to be a part of again, so long.” Like, we’ll just rot here, slightly. And in that case I also think, I also think and this is a wicked thing. But maybe this is what the majority of this idiotic country needs. As well as the EU itself, because I think seeing the fucked-up nature of Brexit has put a kibosh on Brexit and things. So here we are. So there’s a grief. Seeing what Europe’s going to be able to do without us, climate change things, human rights things. They could really flourish. And we’re left alone. What do we do with our lives now. Stuck here. Left behind. Bereft. Like a death, really.

Posing Remain voters as the ones truly ‘left behind’ would be ironic, given the prevalence of that term in the Leave campaigns. Through this perverse idea of ‘left behind Remainers’—‘like a death, really’—I began reflecting on how many people I had met during beating the bounds whose experience of it also seemed framed by isolation and loss. Lola, a Remain voter, believed most people in the community hated her and considered her an outsider, yet she participated in a custom intended only for insiders anyway. Her actions formed a kind of protest-within-a-protest, revealing the flawed logic behind the village’s moral geography and maintenance of insider/outsider boundaries in the first place. Rupert, through walking in commemoration of his father even though he was a ‘difficult man’, simultaneously brought the custom’s simmering undercurrents of parental authority, the gaps between private and public personas, and wider forms of oppressive social control into the light. Magda, who Frances, a close friend of hers, told me also voted Remain, appeared to have reinvented the

custom as a method of commemorating her late son, who died several years ago from bone cancer. I can think of few actions more subversive than using a custom intended to ‘pass the baton’ onto future generations instead to commemorate a child who has already died.

Although many compared Brexit itself to a kind of mourning, none in the end were as explicit as Johnny. When he chose to get a rose tattooed on himself in 2018, he told me it was at least partly inspired by

how people were using the idea of Englishness [before and during the referendum] to be something that personally I never once thought it was. And I was talking to a friend about it actually and she’s very pretty, and I described her as “an English rose”, and she said to me: “Oh god, Jon, don’t use that terminology now”. But actually we were talking about it more because I was thinking of how to get a poem on it, and it’s very sad, you know, not just a positive connotation. They called [Princess] Diana an English rose as well. Because you lay roses on graves, too.

6. 2. ‘I’ve only lived here since the 70s! What about me?’

During my interview with Alan in the village museum, I saw the map Harold was labouring over the last time I was there, now in a frame and propped against the wall, waiting to be hung up. A few minutes of small talk passed before it triggered a memory in me, and I practically shouted at Alan: ‘Oh, you’re a bronze otter, aren’t you!’

Alan blinked, a little taken aback. ‘Well yes, I am. One of the few of the older generation still left, I think, although of course there’s a whole new generation of little bronzotters.’ Alan pronounced the term like a single word, the ‘e’ of ‘bronze’ and the ‘o’ of otter merging into one—*bronzotter*. According to Alan, the story of how the term emerged in the first place was that at some point in antiquity, a Saxonbury local was fishing in the village pond and spotted a bizarre animal. Confused, the man went to the house of the oldest man in the village to settle the strange creature’s identity. With the help of neighbours, the elderly man was loaded into a wheelbarrow and carted to the pond, whereupon he announced: ‘That be a bronze otter!’ This strange proclamation was apparently on account of the creature having a long slim body resembling that of an otter, but also having a rusty red coat. Since then, the bronze

otter—likely to have been a European polecat—has become a kind of village mascot.

‘Plushville, you know, they used to say it to us whenever we’d cross paths, as a kind of insult. Like bumpkin,’ said Alan.

‘But it’s been reclaimed?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes, with pride!’ replied Alan. ‘I’m proud to be one and I think it’s lovely.’

For the first time since the conversation about the land-snatching TV presenter, however, Alan lost his smile. ‘I do think some people take it too seriously, though. In my opinion anyone who chooses to live here becomes a bronzotter. I’m not that precious. It welcomes people—I get to tell people, you move here and you get to be bronzotter, and they think that’s nice. It was first written about in the 17th century, so it gives them a sense of identity, a long one at that.’

‘Are you in the minority there, would you say?’ I probed. ‘Being one of the older generation of bronzotters, who isn’t precious about it?’

‘Perhaps. Some people will complain and say, “Yes, but they weren’t born here.” Some people are really elitist. But I don’t think it’s important at all. They join our committees, they run our carnival. Our village would go to nothing without people coming in and helping. It’s very unfair that people are so excluding.’

Brian Zimmer was another one of the oldest bronzotters still living in the village. Brian led beating the bounds for over 30 years, and Deborah still created the medals passed out to those who completed the custom each year. Brian’s father was so proud of his son’s status that he weaved it into Brian’s name itself: taking advantage of the surname beginning with Z, Brian’s father called him Brian Ron Zimmer, or BRonZ ¹⁷.

‘It was absolutely deliberate. It was deliberate that was I born here, and it was deliberate that I was named what I was,’ explained Brian.

‘Why do you think it was important to your dad, to call you after how you were born?’ I asked.

Deborah chimed in. ‘He was just so proud, that’s all! And Brian’s proud too. Proud of his name.’

‘And it’s not just that,’ replied Brian, leaning forward to point through the window in the notional direction of the square. ‘I have also fallen in the pond!’

¹⁷ Naturally I have somewhat altered the story regards the animal that lends its name to those born in Saxonbury. Brian’s initials do correspond to the genuine animal named in the story. However, as I changed the animal, I have also changed the initials of Brian’s name so that they correspond with this new animal stand-in. This is therefore not his real name!

'Is that part of it, really?' I asked.

'Oh yes, you've got to be born in the village, and you've got to fall in the village pond too!' The glint in Brian's eye made me unable to tell if he was joking.

'It also applies,' Deborah cautioned, 'if you're a child and your parents are living here but you've got to go and be born in a hospital.'

'Oh really? I've heard from some people that that doesn't count.' I admitted. 'Some are a bit more purist, aren't they? Has to be literally in a house in the village.'

'Oh no that's not right,' said Deborah. 'We can't be having that these days, can we. Can't be telling people not to be born in a hospital or they won't count, could be dangerous, couldn't it?'

'Yes that's too far,' agreed Brian.

'Do you think someone can become an honorary bronzotter?' I asked.

We had found Brian's limit, however. 'Noooooooo!' he yelled melodramatically.

Deborah looked at him with a tinge of hurt in her face. 'I do Brian! What about me? I've only lived here since the 70s, after all! What about me?' She rolled her eyes.

'Practically a newcomer still, Deborah,' I joked.

'Well precisely! The way some people talk here, you'd think it was. I've put my time in by now I think!'

In Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), the protagonist Police Chief Martin Brody has recently moved with his wife and sons to Amity, a small island off the coast of New York state. In a scene where Brody's family is relaxing on the beach, but Brody himself is more concerned with shark-spotting, his wife Ellen asks a local, Mrs Taft, when Ellen herself 'get[s] to become an islander'. Mrs Taft responds with a fervent: 'Never, Ellen, never! You're not born here, you're not an islander, that's it.' This exchange was, according to the screenwriter of the film Carl Gottlieb, directly inspired by real circumstances (2010, originally 1975: 68). The people of Martha's Vineyard, the real name of the island where the movie was filmed, had a similarly strict policy. In fact, in the late 19th century, when a pregnant woman found herself stranded off shore and was forced to give birth on a closely anchored boat, the baby she delivered grew up to be the Vineyard's most beloved minister. Never setting foot off the island for the entire 85 years of his life, his eulogy nonetheless began with the words: "This beloved stranger to our shores..." Such a policy is redolent of Marilyn Strathern's discovery during her ethnography in Elmdon of the concept of 'real Elmdon' (1981: xxiii-xxix, 7-9, 15-16). Although not reliant on being born in Elmdon, in the village under Strathern's

study whether one was considered ‘real Elmdon’ related to how far back one can trace one’s family tree. Those that were ‘real Elmdon’ would be related in some way to a group of ‘core’ families, a handful of surnames that had apparently been present in Elmdon since time immemorial. In Elmdon and Martha’s Vineyard alike, it seems no amount of time lived in and contributing to the village—not even over 50 years, as in Deborah’s case—would allow you to broach the inner circle. Although both Alan and Brian discuss the appellation in jovial terms, Deborah’s objection hinted towards the possibility for tenser disputes. Indeed, in the first few days after arriving at the Bakers’ house, I found a copy of *The Bronze Otter* on the kitchen table.

‘That’s the village magazine,’ Robin said. ‘But you know, that’s also what they call themselves here. They’ve got a special term for people who are born here, and that’s it.’

‘Bronze otter?’ I asked.

‘Don’t ask me what the whole story behind it is. Basically anyone who was born in the village is called one. Doesn’t matter if you’ve lived here however many years—you’re not born here, you’re not bronze otter.’

Harriet stopped her methodical scribbling and looked up at her mother with hopeful eyes.

‘Mummy, am I a bronze otter?’

Robin gave her a sad smile. ‘No sweetheart, we’ve talked about this, remember? Holly is, but you’re not my love. I’m sorry.’

Robin informed me that she once overheard the cross words of what she had previously thought to be a friendly fellow mum at the school gates: ‘There’s too many children who aren’t *bronzotter* in this school!’ Throughout my time in Saxonbury, I heard a story repeated from different participants that one woman, turning up to an open council meeting one day, made a declaration that she did not think anyone who was not bronzotter should be allowed to serve as parish councillor, nor contribute to decision-making about the village in any fashion. Several other non-bronzotter participants, although overall quite supportive of the idea that villagers who are born there have a way of celebrating that fact, nevertheless did describe instances where it seemed to have been taken too far. Few had more of an upsetting experience than Megan, however. Leading on from our discussion about people of colour in the village, Megan suddenly said: ‘But—sorry—colour is one thing, but there is a racism of sorts, parochialism, between the people who’ve been born here and the people like me

who've moved in. But that's another subject.'

'Yes, you mean bronzotters?' I asked. Megan nodded and took a deep breath:

So we've lived here for 17 years. But we live in houses that were built on the land that the farmer down there owned, I think previously this was barns here, old barns. And this farmer, he regularly has bonfires which burn the most noxious, horrible stuff. Anyway, a couple of years ago, I posted on the parish council website. I just wrote, something like "Village Idiot Award goes to the person who decided to have a bonfire on the hottest night of the year when everyone's windows are open." Ok, a bit crass, could've worded it better. But I couldn't even get out of bed without using my asthma inhaler, it was so bad. And I was subjected to the most extreme and disgusting online abuse. Calling me a bitch. They threatened us. They said, "All these kinds of people who were fucking never born here and fucking think they can do whatever they like". They said they were going to chuck shit at our house. That they were going to come round and... I have a son. So I reported it to the police, kept the screenshots of their messages and everything. I said that I don't want to prosecute but I want you to be aware that this is going on, should anything happen to us.

Megan was disturbed to be recalling these events, and I did not really know what to say; fortunately her elderly cat began mewing noisily at the conservatory door again, and Megan was obliged to get up, open the door for her and give her a cuddle. When Megan sat back down, she summarised:

'So, yes. Bronzotter. I think most people don't take it too seriously, but I think that, like with a lot of these things, you don't have to scratch too far to find what's lurking under the surface. I think Brexit has exposed that. Brexit was all about people not being born here, wasn't it, as well as colour. And I'm afraid as much as I know that many people here are lovely, when somebody says bronzotter to me I do sometimes think oh god what is this, if not Brexit on a tinier scale.'

6. 3. "A colonoscopy to zap the inner colony"

Despite admitting that she felt some empathy with Leave voters over how badly Brexit seemed to be going, Daphne was very keen to emphasise to me just 'what a proud

Remainer' she was herself. When the topic of Brexit came up in our interview, she reached down the front of her shirt to pull up a pendant hanging from the gold chain around her neck, and extended it towards me. The pendant appeared to be a tiny acrylic passport. Unlike the black/blue entities that would famously face anyone who had to apply for a new British passport from now on, this miniature was of the old burgundy version, with the circle of stars on it still, from before Britain left the EU. If there was any doubt as to what it signified, it was allayed by the gold lettering reading 'European at Heart', above, indeed, an engraving of a heart.

'Gift from my sister, initially,' said Daphne. 'I was concerned at first. I thought, what if somebody sees it on the Tube. A Leaver sees it and has a go at me. Or someone around the village, because there are definitely many, many around here.'

'Is that true?' I said. 'I've struggled to meet many actually.'

'Oh yeah. Yeah this is a Leave-voting village, this is to its bones a Leave-voting village. So I tuck it under my shirt mostly,' Daphne said, demonstrating. She continued:

Actually when I have had it out, the only thing I've had is people coming up to me and asking me where it's from. They want one themselves. There's an absolute solidarity there. And it really is an identity for people. My friend, she's bisexual, and she sometimes wears a little pin, you know? With the colours of the flag? But she saw this and she bought one—a brooch version—and she pins that alongside it on her jacket. Like, those two are her identity. And of course we are a minority as well, we *are* marginalised by Leave by definition of having lost, and some solidarity that comes from that. Pride and solidarity.

The idea of feeling 'pride' over having voted Remain was something many Remain-voting participants alluded to. In fact, almost every participant who voted Remain (and Leave) spoke about it in terms as somehow representing their sociopolitical identities and values at large, with the two exceptions being Derek, who spoke purely about economic factors, and Cecilia, who did not appear to see the vote as meaningful in any which way. Those who attached the Remain vote to other principles often said something along the lines of: 'I voted Remain because I disagree with racism', or 'I voted Remain because I stand for tolerance and equality'. Echoing Evans and Schaffner's (2019) results from their polls, in my experience Remain voters tended to talk in terms of solidarity, and of an almost automatic kinship with other Remain voters.

Henry, drawing on his experience in Berlin again, said: 'We invented the EU because of refusing to indulge that again [the rise of Nazism across Europe]. It stands for something positive and collaborative and that's why I voted but unfortunately there are people, there are people that do not like level playing fields like that'. Keith said: 'Peace is a radical project, under capitalism it has been always radical. As a political radical there is no question for me [around voting Remain]. Politically, this is who I am.' Rupert said, again possibly alluding to his father's legacy here: 'It feels like taking a stand against things, against traditions of selfishness, of nationalism. When I hear people say they voted Remain, when I meet people, I relax because I know it means that they are probably caring people, people who care about those who are less fortunate, people for whom, you know, this isn't just a game. A game of flag-waving'.

Having voted Remain seemed to figure in most participants' minds as a kind of sociopolitical shorthand that automatically designated someone, including themselves, as a 'good' person who could be trusted. But in some it went further, figuring as a kind of badge of honour, a piece of crucial political activism, even heroism. Intriguingly, two people separately quoted to me (although one was drastically paraphrased) the famous claim—often attributed to George Orwell, but this is apocryphal—that 'speaking the truth in times of universal deceit is a revolutionary act'. Daphne added:

And that's what Remain was, a commitment to hard truth over comforting lies. About what Britain is or isn't any more. We can no longer rule the world and that is hard to stomach isn't it, hard to compute if you care about that sort of thing. I feel for them, I do, they were lied to and not just, I mean, the referendum. Lied to about all of it. And people who speak the truth like that, we are speaking it. I remember, I remember about people complaining "Where were Remain [as a campaign], if they're so smart where were they?" Well I was at [local county town] train station handing out flyers, where the fuck were you?

Unprompted, three different individuals who Lola had particularly singled out as 'hating me, you ask they won't have a good word to say about me' spoke very positively about her, in a way that at least had the appearance to me of being sincere. Whilst I do not doubt Lola's feelings of being an outsider, there were times when she also seemed to revel somewhat in this reputation, even deliberately working to enhance it. She later

told me about a t-shirt that her partner had bought her with the words ‘persona non grata’ on it, which apparently she once wore at a beetle drive at *The Thirsty Parson*, an act she described as: ‘Definitely provocative, if you are in the know, which some people were’. It seems doing the boundary in her own way—hardening her outsider status through actions like wearing the t-shirt—afforded her a kind of control out of the discomfort others seemed intent on inflicting on her. Similarly, the idea that Remainers are a kind of oppressed minority—even to the extreme where Daphne’s friend appeared to consider it almost as important to be ‘out and proud’ about as her LGBT+ identity—was a popular thought as well. What was most intriguing was how well this mirrored conventions used in pro-Brexit media, such as that around invasions and colonisation, and David Goodhart’s assessment of the left-behind Leavers feeling like they suddenly ‘lived in a different country’ (2017: 2). Henry said: ‘It really is like Invasion of the Body-Snatchers. As in, you know, how they’ve [Leavers] taken over. Seeing those flags on the street, and you just know don’t you. Oh here we go. I do try actually to keep an open mind but it is like waking up on Mars one day.’ Johnny, as usual, had a poem for the occasion:

It’s like being violated, like some kind of, well I would say tumour or melanoma or so forth. I have a friend actually, sorry this has just got me onto thinking about this now, she’s another poet, who did this poem, you can probably find it online. She described it [Brexit] to feeling similar as it did when she knew she had cancer of the bowel and she just had to sit there with it as it was, growing. Growing in strength and, and venom I suppose. Like a kind of colonisation. I remember this line now: “a colonoscopy to zap the inner colony”.

Some Remain-voting participants had decided to psychologically ‘dispose’ of their British or English national identity post-Brexit. As Bella described:

I mean people joke now, about, being a citizen of nowhere. I consider myself to be an EU citizen. I will always be an EU citizen regardless of whether or not we leave the EU. I think I have a sense of pride in that, my Europeaness. I suppose, ultimately, I may well identify as an EU citizen. I’m a citizen of the world now. Not a British citizen. There’s no other option for me emotionally and personally.

Alexander, who benefitted from a citizenship of New Zealand as well as the UK, added:

To be honest, I'm not sure how I'd feel about having my rights like that stripped away [losing Freedom of Movement]. And if I found it was negatively affecting my life, my ability to do business, to be honest I think they'd have a difficult time trying to get me to respect those new borders. I think they'd have a fight on their hands. I'd just claim: "Fine then, I'm a citizen of the world instead".

Several of the participants I interviewed described the way they were going to think of themselves post-Brexit in terms that could be related to the idea of a global citizenship. A couple of those who said this in fact owned properties on the European continent and described certain avenues they intended to go down legally in order to preserve their access to them, one of which included trying to obtain an Irish passport. Two couples, one including the Wintercrofts, were comprised of one Leaver and one Remainer. Ironically, the other couple were looking to hold onto EU citizenship through obtaining other passports via family connections. The Remainer was the one with access to Finnish citizenship, and described the situation:

Well I think about my kids here, it's them saying: "You know what, in the future it would be really helpful if things go completely pear-shaped we have Finnish citizenship, it could really help us". That's why I'm applying to the embassy, not sure I would do it by myself really. And also, for their children as well, because who knows what's going to happen in the future. So it's kind of a safety thing. I don't say that I have ever felt particularly Finnish which is quite funny. I never thought of myself as Finnish until suddenly it was convenient for me, you could say. Forced my hand. *Turns to their partner.* And now it's kind of unfair, in a way, isn't it? Because through me eventually you'll get Finnish citizenship, you'll get your EU citizenship back. Even though *you* voted to take it away from everybody else. Hmm. Not quite fair is it.

Johnny called himself 'a full-on folkie in the worst possible sense, ale and singalongs, except without all the nationalistic undertones'. Like me, he lived in Brighton, and thus was only the participant who I interviewed in person who lived outside of Saxonbury.

However, I thought it was fitting to include him in this project as his explicit choice to be part of the Saxonbury 'community' seemed to make him a member of said community by definition, if other participants who claimed that whether someone 'gets involved' in Saxonbury serves as the benchmark for who belongs in Saxonbury overall are to be believed. In his extremely colourful kitchen, Johnny showed me a YouTube clip of him participating in a regional Morris dancing side, filmed at sunrise on Midsummer's Day in 2016 on the Sussex Downs. Midsummer's Day is the 24th June; therefore, in 2016, Johnny and his peers were dancing only a few hours after the referendum.

'We're all very anti-Brexit, all of us,' claimed Johnny, grilling his lunch—some Croatian *peka*—in a cast-iron pan he informed me had been in his family for 50 years. 'And I got a call from my mate Stanley at about 3am, saying, "Christ shall we call it off then," very depressed, and I just replied: "Are you fucking joking?! We need to do this today more than ever!" And so we were going up the hill and it was all still very raw, and we were in a bit of shock, I think, but once we got to the top, I was telling them all to completely go for it, and we were dancing and greeting the sun and I think we actually ended up finding it quite healing actually. You won't be able to see from that video but there were quite a few tears in eyes, sad as well as glad.'

Eating lunch, his rose tattoo peeking out from underneath the sleeve of his t-shirt, Johnny told me that he had been involved in Morris dancing and the folk revival scene for several decades. He had actually met his ex-husband whilst attending the Furry Dance, a custom in Cornwall.

'In Cornwall, they have such a strong sense of themselves, as Colin did, and there's this idea that we don't have it in England because we bury a lot of our traditions,' mused Johnny, bringing up a complaint often made by English folklore enthusiasts, including Frances earlier, that English traditions are not taken as seriously as those of the other countries (or particular regions, in Cornwall's case) of the UK. 'And it's very powerful to realise that you do have them, you do have an identity. And that is important to protect, definitely. But then I would say, I suppose the way to protect it is not to like partition it off from people like Muslims, from change, but allow Muslims to get involved.'

Here Johnny implies that Morris dancing can fuel discrimination because of the desire of some dancers is to protect it from change, which requires 'partitioning it off from people like Muslims', contending that instead the answer was to 'allow Muslims

to get involved'. This is evocative of many of the arguments that Greenhill encountered during her own work on the racist implications of Morris; some dancers claimed that the reason there were no people of colour involved was because they might have felt, apparently wrongly, that Morris dancing was not open to them (1994; 2002), just as, in Victoria's mind earlier, black people were wrong to believe they were still seen as inferior. But this refocuses the blame onto people of colour for 'feeling' excluded, obscuring the reality that they are *being* excluded. Greenhill asserted that it was more likely that people of colour did not want to get involved in Morris because of their 'manifest disinterest in it' stemming from the obvious 'whiteness of the practice' (2002: 232), adding that it was this inherent whiteness, rather than non-white reluctance, that needed to be examined. Whilst Johnny seemed naive on this score, I still felt he was onto something in imagining the route out of English folkloric preciousness and Brexit-based tensions alike not to be pretending we were no longer English or British, but somehow committing to England and Britain afresh.

Johnny's love of dancing—which, it appeared, was second only to his love of poetry—led him to believe in a kind of 'politics of movement' (Closs Stephens, 2019: 427) of his own making. Echoing Angharad Closs Stephen's experience of watching *The Poplars* (2019), Johnny considered whether movement might present the answer to dismantling individual instances of racism and xenophobia (as opposed to systemic) going forward. The transformative potential of those 'forces of encounter' (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010: 2) appeared to emphasise, in Johnny's iteration, the definition of *force* as in to *demand*; that swanning off to second homes and second citizenships on the continent was just privileged laziness, and that nothing short of staying here and *forcing* ourselves to interact with one another would 'fix' what was 'broken':

You've *got* to get people clashing together, bouncing off of each other, that's what I mean, what I really mean. I mean there's a reason why they show that those who come into regular contact with people who aren't white get less afraid of difference all the time, reason why places like Saxonbury has a lot of fear, because there isn't the difference there to rub against. You've got to *make* them see—we're stuck here together so they've *got* to see. Difference and normalisation and clash and repair and mix and heal, settle and grow. In the way that Brexit's told us we're not supposed to do that anymore, not supposed to be like that. But I won't have it. Once I'm dancing I'm anyone's man, is what

I'm trying to say. And if a Muslim person had tried to join us on the Downs [the morning after the referendum], genuinely, genuinely, genuinely, I would've hugged them so hard I don't think I'd let them go again. I'd want them to know it wasn't me. Whatever happens it wasn't me.

6. 4. 'She goes very quiet, and I'm thinking yeah well you *should* be quiet about voting to Leave'

Earlier Johnny had shown me a book of charcoal drawings entitled *England's Dark Dreaming* (Watson, 2019), all depicting nude individuals in disturbing post-Brexit reimaginings of English folklore tropes, such as the Green Man and the May Queen. One that made the greatest impression was of a short, tubby, bald man enswathed in the Union Jack, who glares out at the viewer from a frame entitled 'The Glorification of Ignorance' (7). It is a startlingly unflattering portrait, and puts into sharp relief another motivation for participants considering themselves stateless in some fashion: to avoid being accidentally confused with Leave voters by other Europeans. Participants described occasionally attempting to pass as another nationality when abroad, using a second language for instance; Patrick discussed a temptation to 'do something with the [car number plates], if only it was possible'. Whilst many Remain-voting participants criticised the government, especially those instrumental in the Leave campaigns or otherwise involved in the delivery of Brexit, several praised them too. Eleanor considered Jacob Rees-Mogg to be a 'highly moral man', who would apparently never tell a lie; Peter gave praise to Priti Patel in her prominent status within Johnson's cabinet as a woman of colour, something that should apparently be celebrated despite any racist policymaking. It was strange overall how relatively *infrequently* Remain-voting participants explicitly levelled blame at Johnson, Gove, Cummings, Farage or any other figureheads of the official Leave campaigns, compared to how much more likely they were to disparage Leave voters themselves. These people were most often described as racists and xenophobes and in terms critiquing their intelligence, such as 'thick' or 'moronic', words often used by Remainers on social media, as already discussed in the literature review. 'Intelligence' was sometimes a euphemism for class. One participant claimed: 'Most of these people [Leave voters] think just because theirs fathers went down the mines we all have to

go back down there. I am sorry but I am not going to apologise for getting an education, for reading’.

Bella was one of the most fervent about her dislike of Leavers, claiming early in our interview: ‘I can’t bear talking to them, knowing how differently they feel to me. I don’t want to be associated with it’. Her desire to disassociate from them—to the point that she considered moving abroad and somehow rescinding her British nationality—was challenged, long after we had seemingly left that part of the conversation, when I commented on a beautiful vase of primroses sitting on her kitchen windowsill. The vase had been gifted to her by her Auntie, an apparently very chic and intelligent accountant who worked in a high-profile firm in London, and who was engaged to a Ghanaian immigrant who had opened his own successful pottery studio. Bella sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

Although she voted Leave, you know. I was so surprised. And we’ve butted heads over this because I love her, but I just can’t understand it. She’s married to Ebo. The abuse he’s got after the referendum, I mean, doesn’t she feel complicit? And it came to a head because she was talking about Brexit again, not really praising it, just disinterested, and I suddenly announced that I was thinking of moving to Europe, you know, like I told you. Get away from all these ignorant ones. And she goes very quiet, and I’m thinking yeah well you *should* be quiet about this. And then eventually she says: “Bell, did *you* know a single real thing about the EU when you cast your vote to Remain? Did you do hours of your own independent research? Or did you just read your ordinary newspapers? And if you didn’t do that research, then you have no right to call all these people morons. Now *that’s* moronic.”

Bella did not say anything for a while. Suddenly, with a practiced, jerking motion she turned on the hot tap at the sink in front of her. Each of these old cottages had stiff taps, all seeming to require their own individual trick to turn on, like a secret handshake. Realising she had left the scrubbing brush at the bottom of the washing-up bowl, Bella quickly dipped her hand in to retrieve it. She seethed, and the hand emerged not only clutching the brush, but bright red, clearly scalded.

‘Fuck,’ she said, cradling it against her chest. ‘Ouch’.

What turned out to be one of my biggest misconceptions about doing beating the bounds was that everybody participating at least vaguely knew each other. The walking interview process was not always conducive to taking down contact details, but nevertheless I assumed that, by knowing Keith, Patrick and Brian at least, I would be able to track down anyone I talked to again with relative ease. How wrong I was. Several people I shared short conversations with I never found again; running a description of them by the three present or past leaders, or Alan, or the Baker family, or even Peter who seemed gregarious enough to know everybody, only garnered blank looks. But no one seemed to vanish off the face of the earth quite as completely as Jeremiah. For such a memorable person to me at least, it was unbelievable that nobody seemed to have ever heard of him.

I eventually found Jeremiah through talking to one of the local volunteer librarians. Amazed I had managed to turn up in one of the few hours it was open, the small, crowded room was awash with activity and noise, including that of a screaming baby. The understandably harried-looking woman behind the desk apparently did not place much importance on data protection laws, and not only immediately advised me as to where I could locate Jeremiah, but also requested I do her a favour by delivering to him the Bernard Cornwell tome sitting within a big pile on her desk. Apparently she would usually do this on her bike, although I would have to walk it of course. A librarian hand-delivering library books to elderly residents seemed to represent doing the village in that honest, un-self-conscious manner that I had come to appreciate about Saxonbury, far more than its more obvious, transparent attempts, such as the Laura Ashley-smothered tearoom, for instance. There were things about village life that brought excitement and joy, but to do the village in its fine-mesh, daily way—‘Part of the natural fabric of Saxonbury way’, as Harold would probably put it—seemed to also rely on doing a lot of things that are inconvenient, even unpleasant, often for people you do not even like. Surely that was also part of being a community, was it not: if you do not like talking to your neighbours, the cliché goes, then move to the city and you never have to talk to them again.

Jeremiah lived in an ex-council flat at least 20 minutes’ walk from the village green. Despite the fact this seemed an awfully long way for a man who had struggled to beat the bounds as much as he did, in the freezing cold kitchen in which he made us both a cup of tea, Jeremiah stood his ground, our breaths misting in the frigid air.

‘You know what I said to you on the walk, didn’t I? Well I meant it. Little bit of

discomfort is nothing to whine about. If I need to get some milk, then that's my problem, I'm not going to get someone else to go out of their way for something as simple as that, very silly I feel.'

The Bernard Cornwell book sat traitorously on the kitchen table. Milk was not something Jeremiah thought acceptable to get delivered, but reading material certainly seemed to be. Strangely though, there was so little furniture in Jeremiah's flat that that borrowed book in itself made a considerable contribution to the entire *mise-en-scène*. Unlike Gregory's similarly sized ex-council flat, whose every room had been stuffed with antique furniture and every surface caked with mementos, Jeremiah's flat was sparse. Shockingly so. In one corner, a vast bookshelf stood, onto which only three single books had been placed—the King James' Bible, a biography on Margaret Thatcher, and another Bernard Cornwell. The mugs from which we sipped our tea had none of the homely, idiosyncratic quality of the hodgepodge sets I had encountered in other people's homes so far. Jeremiah drank from one with an advert for an estate agent's; mine was white and without any pattern on it at all. We sat on what appeared to be two foldaway camping chairs. It was like being in a particularly cheap room in a hostel. Even a prison cell.

When I brought up Brexit, though, a kind of fire lit up behind Jeremiah's eyes that seemed so ferocious it was as though the referendum had only been yesterday.

Absolutely marvellous for the fishing industry, that's another thing that didn't receive enough press I think. I used to know a bloke who told me that he estimated about half a tonne every year, just his boats, based on the inspections. That he had to tip away. Just waste and tip away. If you've caught too many fish, which remember isn't something you can control, and you get caught in an EU inspection, you've got to dump that surplus out before you've been caught having overfished and you're slapped with a hefty fine. And that's half a tonne of fish just wasted. It's already dead, it's not going to come alive again just because you dump it in the brine again is it? So there's that. There's vital things going, that affect lives. And less vital things too, don't get me wrong. Like the wattage on hoovers. That's regulated from Brussels. Why on earth do they get to control that? Absolutely pointless. So that'll be going too.

Despite his admission that this matter was 'non-vital', he still beamed at me as though Hoover wattage deregulation was tremendously exciting news. Still, at least this

content was benign compared to the stuff he had spouted earlier about Muslim integration; despite Jeremiah's comment on the walk that his Leave vote 'wasn't because I don't like immigrants or anything like that', he certainly did like to talk about them to me.

I made vague notes to keep up appearances, and sipped my tea, which tasted of the inside of the copper kettle in which it had been brewed. A little like blood. Soon after, I asked to use the bathroom. It was upstairs, and it was only on my way down that I properly noticed the Stannah stairlift attached to the wall.

'I wouldn't have thought you'd have gone for a stairlift,' I asked him flippantly. 'You said the discomfort's good for us, isn't it?'

Jeremiah looked up, surprised. He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, as though rifling through different optional responses. 'That was for Marge,' he said eventually. 'My wife.'

'Oh,' I said, suddenly getting the same excruciating knot in my stomach as I did with Magda and her troll dolls. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude. Sorry.'

'She's not dead,' he clarified. 'She's in the care home. Over in Plushville. I asked if the company would take it back, second-hand, but it's worthless apparently now. All the savings emptied. £10,000, newly installed, suddenly worthless. They don't miss a trick.'

When I sat back down, Jeremiah seemed to have lost his enthusiasm for the conversation, even though I probed him to pick up again where we left off about Hoover wattages. He asked me if I would like another cup of tea. I said I would make it. He said I could come into the kitchen whilst he made it instead, and he could show me something. Next to the fridge, there was an indentation, surrounded by a spiderweb of cracked paint, in the otherwise featureless wall.

'She did that,' said Jeremiah over the roar of the kettle. 'A 70-year-old woman. My son didn't believe me, because most of the time when he saw her, she was more kind of limp. But she had these phases. She had these phases and when those happened there was no Marge. Even less Marge than when she was all floppy. She would scream bloody murder. Very free with her expletives, effing and jeffing like I'd never heard. Unless you've seen the kind of thing you won't know it. And then one day she put that hole in the wall. I don't know why. Seemed to me we were having a fine day heretofore.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said softly.

'It's alright. My son wanted the stairlift put in because he said Marge needed to have some special adaptations, to make her feel at home still. But she didn't seem to want to be at home, not to me. She was always running out the door if you didn't watch her. And she used to do these naughty things all the time, she used to widdle on the chairs and the carpet. Couldn't get the stains out she was doing it so often, and couldn't afford to replace them. And when she saw a photograph, a photograph on the side, or a mug, or something that seemed to have a shiny surface, ceramic, silver. I tried to go to the library and see if there was any articles online, I was always being told by the doctors and my son to make myself informed about dementia, so I thought there must have been some things about shiny surfaces. But there wasn't anything. Even though anything that was shiny she would smash it, she would just drop it, open her hand up and drop it and there you go.'

Later, I would find out that a friend of Johnny's had lived next door to Jeremiah and Marge in the period just before Marge entered a care facility, when she was at her worst. I did not reveal any of Jeremiah's interview to Johnny, of course, but Johnny did divulge that part of what had sped up the process of his friend moving out of Saxonbury and into London, which was already needed for a new job, had been 'this absolutely mad woman who lived at [Jeremiah's address]. I went round one time a few days before beating the bounds to visit and have a drink and I could hear screaming and crashing like a banshee, like a poltergeist. It seems the woman was ill and so I understand and don't want to be insensitive or anything, but my friend was so tired of it coming through the walls, she said: "She just seems to want to trash her own house all the time, that's all she wants, I can't live next to her anymore Jon, I can't."

'I was getting to have nothing left to use,' said Jeremiah in the living room, gesturing as best one can do at nothingness. 'So I gave them all to Darren, anything left gave them to him and said: "Put these away please". He didn't think I was very sensible he didn't, he said I was making a big fuss when Marge didn't know what she was doing. That's what everybody said, again and again and again. And that: "Everybody wants to be at home in this condition." That's what she must have wanted even if she didn't know she wanted it. And then sometimes Darren says I was never a good husband and now she's not got the politeness in her to pretend I am anymore. Because that's something about the widdling too, you don't care anymore about acting nicely in front of people and manners. No shame anymore. And yet they talk to me, say that / should be the one who's ashamed. The doctors and my son. Always on at

me about my responsibility as a good husband. Don't know why no one was asking about her responsibility as a good wife.'

Much like the horror Mike Carter (2019) felt watching his father deteriorate before his very eyes from cancer, Jeremiah watched the person he knew—Marge—transform into not-Marge, her entire identity seemingly collapsing in on itself. It is a unique horror particularly well explored in Natalie Erika James's 2020 film *Relic*. As a daughter and granddaughter witness their little family's matriarch descend into dementia, cognitive decline manifests throughout the film in symbols of decay; the walls of the home crumble and rot, and the elderly woman's body is slowly consumed by a festering black wound. Fittingly, since all the objects in our homes help us comprise our own sense of self, once that self-awareness falls away, we may also lose our regard for our once precious possessions, which is what happened to the grandmother in *Relic*, and what appeared to have happened to Marge. It reminded me of something Jeremiah had said earlier about immigration too: 'The England I knew as my home, and actually lots of people would like to admit this too you know, that the England they knew as their home is unrecognisable now, may as well not be England at all anymore for how they see it.'

Jeremiah handed me my tea, the liquid inside almost as white and featureless as the mug it was brewed in. I took it, my frozen fingers wilfully absorbing its burning heat for a moment. Maybe this interview was unusable, I thought.

'I can turn it off,' I urged, referring to the recorder.

'I don't give a monkey's, love,' he said, squeezing out his own teabag and dropping it, with a wet thud of finality, in the sink.

Chapter 7. Conclusion: If ‘the places we are’ don’t come back

7. 1. ‘What *should* be happening in rural communities’

‘The wonderful thing about Saxonbury,’ Victoria would tell me, ‘is that even if my father was still living here, and I wasn’t, he wouldn’t need to go into assisted living. He could live almost independently still, and you know why that is? Because people would look in on him. And if in the post office or the café they noticed he hadn’t been in in a while, they would go round and check. Nobody falls under the radar here. People care.’

So what does ‘community’ mean to residents of Saxonbury? To Victoria at least, it seems to be about caring for others in your immediate environment regardless of who they are. This interpretation of community is supposed to be a defining characteristic of the moral geography of the English village (Hughes, 1997; Kerrigan, 2019; Scutt & Bonnet, 1996; Rose, 1993; Shucksmith, 2016; Murdoch & Marsden, 1994). Indeed, when the Wintercrofts claimed their primary criterion on moving back to England from Canada was that they wanted to settle down in ‘a typical English village’, they cited aspects such as ‘knowing the neighbours’ names’ and ‘safety and smallness’ as key elements of typical English village life. Though Alexander and Peter were a little more sardonic about some of the more ‘backward’ ways of their neighbours, fitting in with the community of Saxonbury and having some kind of connection with many of the people in it was clearly still important to them. For bronzotters, this sense of community became more acute; they were united not merely in where they now lived, but in the matter of where they had been born. And whilst Brian certainly was precious about it, it did not seem to matter greatly enough to damage his relationship with others (although Deborah was clearly a bit miffed). Alan went further, claiming that even as a bonafide bronzotter himself, he believed that the title should be open to anybody who lives in Saxonbury regardless of where they had been born. ‘What really brings us together is getting involved, and if you want to get involved in Saxonbury, if you want to help our community thrive, you’re a bronzotter and I’m glad to have you,’ Alan said on the matter.

But as Gupta and Ferguson put it, far from being a solely inclusive thing, community ‘is premised on various forms of exclusion’, since for there to be people on the inside of a community, there must naturally be people who are outside of it too

(1997: 13). The answer to the question of how central living in an English village is to the sociopolitical identities of those in Saxonbury is, to many bronzotters at least, quite central indeed, and how this compares to people in the rest of rural southern English villages at large seems dependent on whether they have a similar mythology around what it means to be 'native' to Saxonbury (the concept of 'real Elmdon', uncovered by Strathern in her own village study, indicates Saxonbury may not be all that unique in this regard, 1981: xxiii-xxix, 7-9,15-16). Indeed, arguably the mythology has meant 'too much' at times: Patrick and Keith received troubling pushback on their desire to lead beating the bounds, and other anecdotes tell of bronzotters trying to dictate who should be eligible to serve on the parish council, or even enrol in the local school, based purely on their bronzotter status. Even worse were the threats of violence levied by some bronzotters against Megan and her family. It is not hard to imagine all these tensions entering the young Harriet's consciousness, leading her to respond to the revelation that she herself is not a bronzotter with tears and frustration.

Certainly, it appeared that Saxonbury had created its own 'hierarchy of belonging' (Wemyss, 2006; Clarke, 2017) through the bronzotter phenomenon, although the way in which class interacted with this hierarchy was surprising. Many of the older generations of bronzotters might be described as 'working class', coming from a long line of farmers, builders and other land-workers. The supposed rivalry with Plushville was summed up by most Saxonburians in terms that indicated Plushvillians were 'posh' and 'snooty'—as Peter put it, dressed in 'pink corduroy trousers'—whereas Saxonbury was a 'working village', more honest, down to earth, which came from an apparent historic combination of being harder workers with less inherited wealth. Myths about Plushville were prevalent amongst most participants who I met, even though, as stated, most participants did not appear to me to be traditionally working class; indeed, several participants who bought into the idea that Plushville was exclusionarily posh seemed to fit much of the criteria they gave me for poshness themselves. Whilst I would not go so far as to say that most Saxonburians resented Plushville so much as to make this rivalry a core part of their identity, Brian Zimmer, one of the few 'working-class' men it could be argued that I interviewed, had by far the most serious emotions about the division. For everyone else it seemed that, whenever they got to reproduce a story about Plushville, they relished the opportunity to describe Saxonbury as an honest working village because that somehow made them proper honest working people by association. This is redolent, again, not only of Friedman et.

al.'s work on class 'misidentification' (2021), but of the complaint by rural scholars for decades now that real issues of 'working-class rural life' have been subsumed and repackaged into 'middle-class fantasies' (Burchardt, 2004; Howkins, 2003; Kingsnorth, 2008; Scruton, 2000), a form of doing the boundary that has been underexamined here partly because it represents a rather oversaturated field of rural studies overall. Nevertheless, with rural southern England doing so much heavy lifting in the triumph for Leave at the 2016 referendum, doing the boundary as it refers to the murkiness of class identification in the countryside specifically may provide fruitful, somewhat refreshed ground for analysis of 'the rural idyll' in the future.

For participants, poshness and a 'lack of community' went hand in hand, with one of the defining elements of Plushville's aloofness apparently even baked into its geography, the village layout unfurling into more-or-less one strip, as opposed to Saxonbury's spiralling around the 'heart' of the green. The green was both a physical and symbolic place, physically allowing for Saxonburians to gather in one area, and symbolically giving them a sense of shared values and goals. Eleanor and Peter defined the green for instance as something inviolable, something most people from Saxonbury instinctually valued and respected. However, it was also the site of rejection, as seen in the anecdote about the hookah pipe in Chapter 3, and the ironic reality that the very place where Lola was first ostracised in Saxonbury was in trying to join a community event on the green. The latter situation provides some further insight if it is compared to the story about Florence and her husband, also from Chapter 3, and how their attempts to renovate a cottage on the outskirts of the village in a 'traditional' style only seemed to further ostracise them. The key difference seems to be one of expectations: some newcomers to Saxonbury, already well aware of their 'outsider' status, may well put a monumental effort into trying to fit in. Others perhaps expect merely to fit in by dint of moving there.¹⁸ These differences appear to coalesce along racial and ethnic lines. The Pakistani couple who turned up in tweed to the horse race, mentioned in the anecdote on page 92, may have been expecting to be 'bordered' in rural English society on account of their non-whiteness. Potentially knowing the particular importance of not resting on their laurels in somewhere as ethnically homogenous as Saxonbury, they perhaps made deliberate integrative

¹⁸ This is not to say that people 'should' put a monumental effort in in order to be accepted into any community; I make no value judgements on anyone's behaviour upon first moving to Saxonbury.

gestures to endear white Saxonburians to them as quickly as possible¹⁹. For a white person (particularly a cis, heterosexual white person) moving to Saxonbury, finding themselves on the fringe of a community, perhaps for the first time ever, may be quite a shock, formulating the kind of ‘new bordering’ (Benson, 2020: 501) some white Britons seemed to experience after the loss of Freedom of Movement through Brexit, as discussed in the literature review.

But whilst Lola had tried to join the ‘Saxonbury community’ when she first moved there, and apparently found herself ostracised based on being unmarried, she still told me of raucous nights spent with friends at *The Thirsty Parson*—one of her best friends in the world lived only three doors down from her. Did that not constitute a community? And even Florence, who seemed to be held at arms’ length by some villagers because she was black, had Jean and Derek, who clearly thought the world of her. Whilst that did not excuse the actions of anyone else, did that not in itself also constitute a community? People can ‘do’ community just as they can do the village or do the boundary, but often these ‘doings’ seem based in stereotype more than physical realities. As Neal said, rural participants in her research were motivated often ‘not by a notion of community *per se* but more by the notion of what was imagined to be happening—or *should* be happening—within rural communities’ (second emphasis mine, 2009: 134). In Victoria’s ‘village in the mind’ (Pahl, 1966: 7), everybody is always cared for because that is what she believes *should* be happening in Saxonbury. This impression was probably further impacted by her father’s stories depicting the village ‘like a fairytale’, which even Victoria herself admitted in Chapter 3 might have been ‘enhanced by nostalgia’. Notably, Victoria never found out whether her father, as an elderly man, would have gotten the community support from Saxonbury she predicted. If Jeremiah’s story is anything to go by, however, the outcome feels far from certain.

Although there appeared to be nothing but encouragement on the part of Brian that as many people as possible should beat Saxonbury’s bounds, it was telling that, despite claiming the custom to be nothing more than ‘something you do’²⁰, Brian was the only participant for whom custom was not just a hobby (even a fervent one, in Frances’ and Johnny’s case), but dictated some of his ordinary everyday interactions too. ‘Every time I meet [an old friend],’ Brian told me, ‘he throws down his hat, and I

¹⁹ This couple, who I never spoke to, could of course have just liked dressing in tweed! As such I use the anecdote only as an illustrative example, rather than definitive proof, of theories about belonging.

²⁰ This is arguably the best definition of a custom anyway!

stamp on it, and he says, Thank you Brian”. It isn’t a joke as such. Just what we’ve always done. No idea where it comes from, that’s just how it is between us.’ If Brian’s motivations for beating the bounds—either as a proud bronzotter, or a dedicated folk custom practitioner—seem to be an outlying case, why do the rest of the residents of Saxonbury beat the bounds?

As the sole Leave-voter I got a straight answer from on this matter, Jeremiah was very clear in his belief that putting himself through the discomfort that beating the bounds caused him was a form of self-discipline (or perhaps more accurately, self-punishment). Aside from the few who cited their connection to ‘Englishness’, such as Daphne and Henry, most Remain-voting participants claimed they beat the bounds only for fun, for exercise or, as mentioned above, simply a way to feel part of the ‘Saxonbury community’. When examining the responses a little more closely, however, Remain-voters have a little more in common with Jeremiah than is obvious at first glance. Whilst Remainers did not claim to take part primarily to give themselves discomfort, Deborah, Peter and Keith still all cited pain during beating the bounds as something that could bring people together, and implied that this could potentially reach across otherwise quite firm political boundaries. Two different Remain-voting participants mentioned checking in with the same elderly Leave voter once the walk was finished due to concern over her visible pain, despite both of those Remain voters otherwise claiming in the interview that they tried to avoid her or Leave voters in general; one of these participants, unconsciously it appeared to me, actually made a face mimicking the Leave voter’s agony. Pain is a ‘sticky’ emotion (Ahmed, 2014: 11), physically passing *between* bodies (Ibid; Bourke, 2014; Closs Stephens, 2019), and expressing the otherwise uncommunicable connections people have across social or political divides. I doubt some participants in my research would be considered part of the ‘Saxonbury community’ in everyone’s eyes, since, although I never shared the details of the interviews between them, I feel confident that some comments certain participants made would be received as very objectionable by certain others. And yet, all of them were able to walk 19 miles together, suffer their blisters together, even climb the torturous Drop-Dead Downs together, engaging in the ‘pain-talk’ through which, according to Bourke, ‘communion and community’ is most strongly affirmed (2014: 47).

Though very few analyses or accounts of revivals of beating the bounds currently exist, those that do typically interpret the custom as a protest against Britain’s

relationship to Europe, and/or and its membership of the EU (Darian-Smith, 1995, 1999; Fraser, 2017; Ireson-Paine, 1999). Because of this, I expected that most of my participants would have voted Leave in the EU referendum, but in fact most of them had voted Remain. Several that *had* voted Leave seemed unsurprised by the Brexit-beating the bounds connection, perhaps even subconsciously subscribing to it themselves, whereas Remain-voting participants were usually shocked when I revealed the existence of this view. Although being anti-EU is not the same as being anti-immigrant, as mentioned some polls have demonstrated the connection (Duffy et al., 2021; Survation, 2016; Travis, 2016a); Fraser's article (2017) on beating the bounds and Brexit certainly conflates the two. Whilst some Remain-voting participants did not seem to know much about what beating the bounds was or how the custom originated, many others were well aware, explaining their understanding of how the custom was rooted in xenophobia almost in the same breath as showing confusion as to why the custom might for that reason be interpreted as problematic today. But as already mentioned in the introduction, historian Jason Todd claimed that beating the bounds 'indicates who was to be included and who should be excluded from an area. Policing the boundaries is often about the operation of power' (2019: 6).

If policing the boundaries is an operation of power, then to not only police such boundaries but deny they have anything to do with power at all is the most privileged act a person can perform. After I beat the bounds with Saxonbury in 2019, ex-organiser Kit told me of his disappointment that his neighbour had declined to show up; a black woman who he seemed sure would make it, even though his anecdote to my mind detailed the behaviour of a woman who had clearly never been interested. Certainly, it is easy to imagine how a custom dedicated to policing boundaries and kicking out outsiders would struggle to appeal to people of colour, who are usually well versed in being on the receiving end of such forces. Whilst for many Saxonburians beating the bounds may only be about affirming togetherness, the symbolism of exclusion runs all the way through most beating the bounds revivals, including Saxonbury's, and it was very surprising to me that so many Remain-voting participants had never considered this, despite being so willing to discuss how English villages like Saxonbury could be intimidating places for people of colour in general.

It is not surprising, however, given its function as the symbolic 'heart' of Saxonbury's community, that the custom both begins and ends on the green. Returning to Lawrence J. Taylor's theory of pilgrimages (2007) from the literature

review, it is possible to think of Saxonbury's beating the bounds as quite a unique form of pilgrimage, since it occurs simultaneously 'to the edge'—not only literally but psychologically, a peering-over-the-precipice as to what and who lies beyond the borders of one's own home—and 'to the centre', since one does not go on this pilgrimage alone but brings one's whole community along with them. There is something essentially exploratory, almost like a colonial expedition, about this kind of pilgrimage, and certainly, even though the custom takes place along known boundaries, on the day there was still much excited chatter about how novel the trip felt, especially by young children, one of whom I overheard being asked about what he expected to find on 'the split between Saxonbury and Plushville', to which he replied with a giggle: 'Lion!' But whilst the trip is exploratory, it is guaranteed to be safe; significance is placed not just on the expedition outward but the journey back. The Saxonbury boy may be going out to track imaginary English lions, but he knows he will be sat contentedly on the green again by the late afternoon.

And this is one of the key aspects of truly 'doing the boundary': the utter absence of any real threat to the people with power. Although I have discussed at length how doing the boundary is premised on a false reappropriation of victimhood by the privileged (O'Toole, 2018a, 2018b), here I do not merely mean to repeat the reality that those with privilege are under limited threats within society overall. Crucially, they also face no repercussions for the act of doing the boundary itself. Whilst Brexit clearly means a lot to both Jeremiah and Miles, for others, Brexit is just a game. As right-wing writer Julie Burchill answered when asked why she supports Brexit: 'I like chaos'. This, according to journalist Mike Scialom, 'translates as "I'm bored, and my wealth will insulate me from whatever happens next"' (2018: no pg). Doing the boundary could be voting for Brexit as a privileged white person, or claiming to be inclusive but refusing to acknowledge the exclusionary symbolism of one's hobbies, like many of my Remainer participants. But critiquing beating the bounds and Brexit in this way does not merely reveal that certain types of privileged people enjoy taking pilgrimages 'to the edge', 'trying on' a framework of oppression and resistance out of curiosity, boredom, or a lack of empathy for those who might be adversely affected by their games. What my experience in Saxonbury revealed to me specifically is that only certain types of people get to go and peer over that edge, and then return to the centre *as if nothing ever happened*. Those could be people who, despite having voted for Brexit, may continue to enjoy their lives shielded from the worst economic

and sociopolitical shocks of it, or those beating the bounds themselves, thrashing their sticks to defend their village from imaginary enemies before returning to relax on the sunny green, those most in need of help within their community pushed furthest from their minds.

7. 2. 'An England shorn of empire; a more generous England'

'It's awful, truly awful,' said Peter of colonialism under the British Empire. 'At what point—this is just a wondering—what point does the past actually become the past? Obviously the invasions of other older dead civilisations, the old classical empires, are not really spoken about with the same kind of relevance. Will there ever be a time in the world, will we get to that point do you think, where memories of Europe[an colonialism] have faded? Will that be in a hundred years? A thousand years? I suppose we might all be finished off by then anyway!'

What were Saxonburians' knowledge or views about the British Empire, and how, in their minds, did this relate to systemic and institutionalised racism within the modern UK? As I suspected, very few participants claimed to have been taught much about the British Empire at school. Most of those with a decent knowledge of imperial history had instead learned much of it through adulthood, either absorbing it gradually over the years or concertedly doing their own research through reading and watching documentaries. Some moved to defend the British by comparing them favourably to the Belgian or French empires, justifying slavery since Africa also 'sold their own as slaves', or deflecting to unrelated matters, such as how the British themselves were also at some point enslaved. Alexander's knowing comment that if he read more widely about the British Empire he might put his grandfather's portrait of Winston Churchill in a drawer is a perfect illustration of how crucial it was, for some participants at least, to maintain a deliberate boundary—Tyler's 'screening out' (2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3 2012b)—between themselves and some of the worst aspects of Britain's history and its icons, since otherwise they might never feel comfortable taking pride in that history and those icons ever again. Whilst some participants seemed able to take a critical distance between themselves and the worst atrocities, others seemed actively weighed down by them, like Johnny and Megan, expressing very palpable feelings of shock and shame. Henry's story about the German man accidentally destroying his blind relative's doll as a child and the manner in which his guilt haunted him hinted

towards the pointlessness of guilt itself, much as Gilroy did with his 'postcolonial melancholia' (2004) concept: 'There's all this kind of embarrassment,' said Henry, 'and then that circles round into pretending to be proud, doesn't it, which doesn't do anybody any favours, even us.'

In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed Brigid Delaney's 2018 article which, fairly uniquely for analysis of English folk culture, reinstated the 'unbroken' nature of English cultural history within its rightful context of the British Empire's systematic destruction of other cultures around the globe. Indeed, there are troubling dynamics around the 'deployment of [racial] power' in English folk culture, as Greenhill (2002: 226, 2014, 2016) and Winter and Keegan-Phipps (both, 2013; Keegan-Phipps, 2017) illuminated, most visible in its everyday practice through the ongoing usage of blackface. Although all participants arguably showed some level of dedication to English folk culture just by turning up to beat the bounds, aside from the leaders, Johnny and Frances were by far the most passionate, showing an interest in the subject beyond Saxonbury's custom and following the English folk culture 'scene' generally. Both were fairly well-informed on the British Empire, and in fact were amongst some of the least defensive people on the matter. But the way each of them seemed to square their knowledge of British imperial history with their hobbies was radically different. Johnny, who seemed particularly traumatised by accounts of what Thomas Thistlewood did to his slaves, wanted the worst parts of empire to be discussed more openly by white people. Although he downplayed the potential difficulties involved, and still placed the burden on people of colour to reach across any cultural boundaries, his encouragement of people of different ethnicities to join in with English folk culture appeared good-natured and genuine. In this manner, Johnny appeared not to wish to disappear or escape from his privilege and power through finding an alternative identity for himself in English folk culture, but to open this culture up to the scrutiny that was needed to make it relevant for the modern multicultural Britain that empire had brought into being.

In contrast, Frances was precious about English folk culture being the sole preserve of white people, despite claiming she otherwise was not as into the scene as many of her friends. Coming to a head with her irritation at the inclusion of people of colour in the heavily English folklore-inspired section of the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, Frances accepted that empire was the reason why there were so many different ethnicities and cultures in Britain, yet did not understand why the ceremony 'wanted to pretend' that there had not been a time before that was the case.

Why, in Frances' mind, could there not be some section of the ceremony where the white English were celebrated purely in relation to themselves? Unlike other participants (and occasionally myself) who sometimes used them interchangeably, Frances defined Britain and England very differently. Britain was a kind of distant, purely pragmatic concept, one that was responsible for empire and all the suffering and racism it engendered and should be allowed no defence for itself. But Frances was not British: she was, as she identified herself to me, English, which was why during the opening ceremony she was cross to see what she saw as 'Englishness' (coded as white) attributed to someone other than 'English people' (coded as people of colour). Although these assumptions were troubling, Frances' desire to see Englishness separated and celebrated distinctly from the other nations of the UK reflected the analysis of Michael Kenny that England was 'the whimsical and cultural side of a national coinage that has imprinted on its other side the more formal, legal and civic associations with Britain' (2014: 234), something from which England must one day escape if it is ever to shed 'the baggage associated with the British past' (2014: 15). Although no participants were asked questions around England developing its own national assembly, many mentioned support for Scotland's independence, with Patrick commenting: 'Maybe that would make us get our act together, too'. As Kenny further speculated, '[a]n England shorn of empire... may flourish anew', becoming 'more generous and culturally capacious' (2014: 234) than ever before.

Whilst no participants were in complete denial of the history of the British Empire, it was notable how little they seemed to know about or interrogate Britain's more recent political history. Participants often framed the 2012 London Olympics as a time of true cultural harmony in Britain, rather than the reality that it occurred in the midst of punishing austerity policies, and only a month after Theresa May's launch of the UK's 'hostile environment' towards immigrants (Foster, 2019).²¹ Much as Raymond Williams criticised rural writers who perceived the enclosure of the countryside as the singular 'fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder' (1975: 137), Dawn Foster levied the same at Remain voters who perceived Brexit as the sole origin of racism in Britain today (2019: no pg). In some Remainers' minds, those most responsible for Britain's current problems are Leave voters

²¹ Megan *did* mention austerity, as well NHS underfunding, in her discussion contrasting the 2012 Olympics with Brexit. However, this was limited to a few words, and did not seem to greatly impact her judgement of pre-2016 Britain: namely that it was a much happier and more inclusive time than today.

themselves rather than the successive Tory governments that brought Brexit to fruition, and continue to ‘stoke the fire’ of already simmering sociopolitical tensions (Mings, in Elgot, 2021: no pg). One participant even described the New Labour era under Blair during the turn of the 21st century as ‘like a moment we were all looking much more outward and moving on with things, getting over ourselves’, even though this era was also one in which Britain became a leading player in the illegal war in Iraq.

It was striking how often Leave voters were seen by Remain voters as representative of a community that would never adapt or change, with three participants in fact claiming that when they found out somebody had voted Leave, they would actively avoid them, even if prior to this they had been getting on well. One participant who particularly fulsomely renounced the ‘racist white morons’ amongst ‘Brexiters’ even admitted to sabotaging the workflow of a Leave-voting colleague, despite the fact that this colleague was themselves not white. Although Remain-voting participants accused Leave voters of being backward-looking and obsessed with an imaginary English past, they also gave precious little scrutiny to their own rose-tinted view of pre-Brexit life. Having voted Remain figured as a kind of get-out clause from examining their own biases, it seemed; a sick note for bunking off the self-examination they claimed Leave voters were in desperate need of. Through doing the boundary between themselves and a stereotype of a ‘Leave moron’ they kept in their heads, some participants seemed able to ‘screen out’ (Tyler, 2003: 14, 2012a: 432-3, 2012b) any trace of systemic racism from their lives and experiences in the UK in 2015 and before. In turn, this Leaver stereotype also absolved them of responsibility for their complicity in systemic racism in the future, allowing some Remainer participants to call themselves ‘non-racist’ whilst praising Jacob Rees-Mog or Priti Patel, figures arguably responsible for some of the most openly racist rhetoric and policymaking seen in the political mainstream for some time (Johnston, 2021; Syal, 2021). No one summarised this better than Johnny in his speech to an imagined Muslim the day after the referendum: ‘I’d want them to know it wasn’t me. *Whatever happens* it wasn’t me’ (emphasis mine). To paraphrase Cambridge Analytica/Vote Leave whistle-blower Shahmir Sanni’s (2021) critique of those merely claiming ‘this is not my England’ in response to the racist uproar after the 2020 UEFA Euro Championship final: only ‘white liberals not serious about racial justice’ say *I did not vote for Brexit, therefore this is not my problem*. It was, I believe, a genuine sense of what is fair and right and sensible that led many of my participants to vote Remain. But it is privilege that

persuades some of them that putting a tick in a box back in 2016 signifies the most important piece of activism in and of itself.

As Daisy Johnson opens *Everything Under*, her 2018 novel about an estranged daughter's relationship with a mother slipping into dementia: 'The places we are come back' (3). That is what it felt like to visit Saxonbury, and in fact, the possibility that I might in some way get the Westcountry village of my childhood to 'come back' was probably one of my main motivations behind doing this research in the first place. But 2016 does not merely represent to me the year of the EU referendum. It was also the year I decided never to go back to the village I was born in ever again. Some reasons were personal, as mentioned in the preface and acknowledgements section, but some of them were political. I found out that my home constituency had voted for Brexit by a huge margin, and I also found out that one of my oldest friends had personally gone canvassing for Leave. I was shocked. I was appalled. But most of all, I was ashamed.

Shame, as already discussed throughout this thesis, is not generally useful. As any victim of childhood abuse will tell you, it can in fact be one of the most toxic feelings imaginable. To claim 'we' as 'white liberals'²² (who in turn are implicitly 'middle class') are 'ashamed' over Brexit, as argued by Zadie Smith, often represents just a smug distancing from 'others' we look down on as backward compared to ourselves, such as the 'narrow-minded, xenophobic North' (2016, no pg). But in reality, it was not this imaginary conception of the North that voted for Brexit. In reality, it was places like Saxonbury. Places like the village I grew up in. When I realised the village of my childhood had voted to Leave so overwhelmingly, 'the place that came back' started to sour. How could my rural idyll have done such a stupid, spiteful thing? Then I remembered the nickname we had for the only Asian student at my primary school. That time our Polish neighbour had eggs thrown at her house. The appalling way we treated the nearby traveller community. Voting for Leave does not guarantee racist and xenophobic views, but in rural southern England, there is often a correlation. In *my* village, there was a correlation.

Brigid Delaney's sadness when 'standing outside the circle on May Day' (2018, no pg) in turn saddens me. Personally, one of the saddest aspects—aside from the

²² This is intended as a rhetorical device. I do not imply that any reader is a 'white liberal', and whilst I am white, I would certainly not ascribe to being a 'liberal' myself.

atrocities of the British Empire, of course—feels related to the fact that Delaney’s sorrow is occurring at springtime. Spring has a particular association with the English countryside, and it is unsurprising that so many English folk customs—dedicated as they often are to marking seasonal changes—cluster around May Day or ‘high spring’ (Hutton, 1996). Spring marks the beginning of the agricultural year and the end of the tyrannies of winter, and as such is often depicted as the season of hope. Animals are born, flowers grow, the sun begins to shine again, and in Christian mythology, God’s son is risen. At the same time, nothing lives that has not already died: lambs replace the lambs of the previous year, some of whom are already slaughtered; seeds grow in the graves of plants that could not survive the winter; sun takes its turn with rain; before being reborn, Christ first needed to die.

Spring may be the season of change, but it also the season of changelessness, traditionally reminding us how little alters in the natural world from year to year. In the coming years, we are not going to be able to rely on this routine so easily, however; spring is already coming sooner in England, and summer leaving later, than they have done in decades (Ravilious, 2021). If the bee population in the UK continues its current rate of decline, it may not be long before our whole understanding of what spring even is transforms completely. Climate change is a direct result of industrialisation, which is in turn a direct result of European imperialism (Laybourn Langton, 2019). Delaney’s statement that English folk customs have been shielded from colonialism, and that the dancers in the circle on May Day ‘would die, and their [children] would learn the dance, and the rites of spring would continue’ (2021, no pg), looks increasingly like an unsafe assumption. ‘The chickens’, as Walter Rodney said when describing the Holocaust as a consequence of the dehumanising practices Europeans first developed during transatlantic slavery, ‘[are] coming home to roost’ (2018: 104).

According to Laurie Laybourn Langton, ‘the exploitative and environmentally destructive model of industrial capitalism... developed on these islands and entrenched around the world’ ensures ‘Britain has a unique historical responsibility to act swiftly’ to decarbonise its society today (2019, no pg). However, the UK government, despite playing host to the 26th UN Climate Change Conference in November 2021, shows about as much appetite for this as it does for educating its citizens on the British Empire itself. Responsibility instead falls on the shoulders of the public to apply the pressure, as well as create grassroots resilience projects to cope with a rapidly destabilising world. The lack of climate-based education for children—

those amongst us who will face the worst consequences of the crisis—is particularly hard to excuse, since not only does it ensure their disengagement from their own future, but from the joys of the natural world around them in the present moment. In what seems like a strange rebuke to Daisy Johnson’s assumption about the inevitability of homecoming, climate naturalists Lucy Jones and Kenneth Greenway (2021, no pg) ask whether, if British children do not recognise the wildlife surrounding them, ‘will they care if it doesn’t come back?’

Whilst I have no idea what Jeremiah thought about the climate crisis, Jones’ and Greenway’s sentiment is still one I think he would approve of; he said something similar about the importance of children knowing the difference between a beech and a birch whilst we were beating the bounds in Chapter 4. It remains strange to me that someone who otherwise appeared to see life on earth as so interconnected was also so adrift from everybody else in his own village home. Whenever I think about Jeremiah, I often think about Gregory too: how, despite having limited mobility and no longer being able to go to the pub, he was still popular enough amongst residents that they often dropped in to see him. Why did Jeremiah not benefit from such camaraderie? An argument could be made for convenience, of course, since Jeremiah lived much further out of the centre than Gregory did, but it was only a 20-minute walk, much less on a bike—hardly a long distance to have to travel to visit a friend. Although, within the moral geography of the Saxonbury, ‘getting involved’ was a key part of gaining acceptance—therefore perhaps nobody could have matched Gregory on that scale—Jeremiah had himself been taking part in beating the bounds for at least four decades. In fact, I managed to find a photograph in an old newspaper archive that showed a much younger Brian, the other ex-leader, raising a pint to the camera next to a smiling man who looks suspiciously like a young Jeremiah (although as the man is not named, I cannot confirm this).

Had the tensions stoked by disagreements around Brexit really caused rifts in Saxonbury ‘community’? If you go purely by the words of some of my Remain-voting participants, who declared they could barely stand to be in the same room as Leave-voters, then possibly. Although Miles claimed he did not like to be ‘too obvious’ about his support for Brexit at work, he did not appear to try to hide it from any other Saxonburians either, and it was clear from comments other villagers made about him, even Remain-voting ones, that he was popular. And whilst Jeremiah certainly seemed a bit of a prickly character, I met several other prickly characters in Saxonbury, both

Leavers and Remainers, and they were not nearly as socially isolated as Jeremiah was. Miles was wealthy, lived in a beautiful house in the centre of Saxonbury with an attractive young wife, privately educated son, and was fit to bursting with glamorous stories about working abroad with celebrities throughout his career in music production. Jeremiah was clearly living close to or even under the poverty line, in a freezing ex-council house on the outskirts of Saxonbury, with his own ageing wife succumbing to dementia, and his own child resenting him for failing to sufficiently adapt his house to accommodate Marge's changing needs (although it appeared this was at least partly due to Jeremiah being barely able to afford the expense). If both men voted Leave, but only one received the arms-length treatment some Remain-voting participants claimed to give all Leavers indiscriminately, maybe the key difference between the treatment of Miles and Jeremiah was not how they voted, but how closely they each resembled that Leaver stereotype preserved in Remainer participants' heads. Throughout this research process, I arguably never found a better example of doing the boundary than the gulf between the allegory of Brexit as a colonial takeover, and the tragic reality of Jeremiah's life. Could this gulf be crossed?

In her theory of 'feeling Brexit', Closs Stephens emphasised a politics of movement, expanded from Gregg & Seigworth's theory of 'forces of encounter' (2010: 2) into a way of understanding Brexit-related emotions that centralised not what people explicitly said to each other, but instead the forces by which bodies were brought 'together and apart' (Closs Stephens, 2019: 405). This developed Closs Stephen's previous theory, as seen in *The Persistence of Nationalism* (2013), that encouraged the disposal of nationalism entirely in favour of a post-national identity, one that takes a form more resembling the kind of fleeting encounters experienced whilst walking around a bustling city. Neither suggestive of 'happy cosmopolitans' nor parochial racial tensions, a citizenship premised on 'urban encounters' instead offers 'another grammar for imagining community which avoids the false opposition between identity, stability and stillness on the one hand and mixture, turmoil and difference on the other' (2013: 119). Following on from this in her article 'Feeling "Brexit"', Closs Stephens claims that what is perhaps most 'fascinating and painful in "Brexit" is watching the sheer determination to arrive at one account of "the people." This figure of "the people" is central to the system of the nation state... But the people are full of contradictions; the people are also *in motion*' (emphasis mine, 2019: 419).

As discussed above, one of the most fascinating aspects of my interviews was

how often my participants—and myself as well on occasion—spoke in terms which fixed anyone who voted Leave in emotional and political place, even though by this point the vote had already been three years ago. Yet no matter how strongly they identified with their own Remain votes, and no matter how little they themselves appeared to have ‘moved on’ from the referendum, Remain-voting participants still considered themselves well-rounded, dynamic and above all people who were *constantly moving*; moving in their ideas, in their plans, in the way they were always open to learning and growing as human beings. Remainers and Leavers judge and reject and disown one another not purely due to warring political and cultural beliefs it seems, but also rather than admit, to borrow Andrew Cooper’s phrase about the wobbly boundaries of research, the true extent to which they are ‘psychically mixed up’ with one another (2009: 432). Admitting that has the potential to illuminate things about ourselves we really would rather were not illuminated.

In some ways, beating the bounds provides the perfect model—if a little literal—for Closs Stephens’ idea of community-as-encounters. Not only does it allow people to come together who might not otherwise ever meet, it also permits people to ‘clash’ together, as Johnny said. A community based in movement allows people to share their views, perhaps sometimes objectionable ones, in a setting within which at all times there remains the option to walk away and start walking with somebody else, or even alone. This might be imagined as a ‘good boundary’, redolent of Tim Robinson’s conception of ‘the good step’ (2008: 19-20); the boundary part denotes that one can share a space with those with opposing beliefs,²³ even learn something from them, yet maintain a psychological border strong enough to not feel diminished in the process—keeping a handle on Cooper’s ‘psychic mix-ups’ (2009: 432). Unlike the good step, where post-nationalism figures primarily as a solution to a white traveller’s inconveniences, within the good boundary, distancing ourselves if and as needed from our own community (or our own nation) would *not* also require us to pretend we had never walked alongside that community (or were from said nation) in the first place.

If I believe that those who participate in beating the bounds should recognise

²³ Within reason. There is little to no space within this idea of community for hate speech, and those who express concerted misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism etc., do not automatically merit the time and energy of others, particularly the time and energy of those belonging to the marginalised group under disparagement. At the same time, there are few methods of ‘reforming’ an extreme bigot that do not include direct engagement with them in some way. How to do this whilst guaranteeing the safety of marginalised people they would otherwise abuse is a question I would love to know the answer to.

the exclusionary symbolism of the custom, that does not mean I think that the custom should be retired, any more than I believe that just because some Morris dancers use blackface that all Morris dancing should be retired. But if Saxonbury is truly ‘not an *actively* racist place’—meaning I believe, when participants told me something along these lines, that people in Saxonbury do in fact desire to be as inclusive as possible, even if underlying biases may ensure that they fail—then the first step towards actualising this is to acknowledge that England is a *systemically* racist place. This is especially important for southern English villages, since the reality of England as an exclusionary place is rarely ever starker than when one is wandering around one: not only because there are often very few of people of colour there at all, but because such places appear to have a predilection for reviving an ancient custom which was *premised on expelling outsiders*. Perhaps, unlike Delaney, not everyone standing outside the circle on May Day has specifically chosen to place themselves there.

I do not know if someone within the Saxonbury community itself will ever raise the question of whether beating the bounds might be exclusionary of their own volition. An intriguing question instead hangs over how other Saxonburians might react if they did. Perhaps a fruitful way to reframe the custom—in light of the way the anti-detainment group Refugee Tales, as cited in the literature review, used it to take a stand against mounting post-referendum divisions—would be through being more explicit about that ‘breaking down the boundaries in people’s minds’ element that Keith was so passionate about explaining in Chapter 3. I am aware that beating the bounds has been sponsored in the past; soliciting donations for an anti-racism charity, or perhaps more urgently, raising money for local people like Jeremiah living below the breadline, might be a useful idea. After all, according to Giles Fraser (2017), is beating the bounds not intended to remind us to prioritise ‘our own’? Ironically, as demonstrated by the twin scandals of the Conservative government first denying British schoolchildren proper meals in January 2021, and then only months later in July also slashing foreign aid by billions, prioritising ‘our own’ may reveal not only how little we care for ‘outsiders’, but how little we care about our fellow ‘insiders’ too.

I choose not to interpret the main thesis of Fraser’s article about Brexit and beating the bounds—that the village serves as the ‘perfect moral community’—as a justification for neglecting immigrants, people of colour or anyone else coded as ‘not fully belonging’ in Britain. Instead, because one can indeed ‘do the village’ (Matless, 1994a; Goodwin-Hawkins, 2016) anywhere and with anybody they wish, I choose to

interpret it as the statement that anywhere in England can take on the moral geography of a 'village community', and thus any place in England at all, no matter how urban, no matter how culturally diverse, can function as a united, supportive community in which Victoria's dreams of her elderly father wanting for nothing can come true. As Jeremiah proves, regardless of how white one is—or how picture-perfect pretty the village one lives in appears—under the ghost of austerity, systematic state privatisation and cronyism, the tragic losses of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the growing perils of the climate crisis, any one of us at any point could find ourselves, for whatever reason, suddenly deemed 'an outsider' and thus abandoned by our political leaders. At such times, we can only hope that our community chooses not to send us over the boundary, but to keep walking alongside us.

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