

MADE IN
ENGLAND

how ART makes england & england makes ART

Made in England – Maggie Gee

I was made in Poole, Dorset, England, a town on the South Coast whose natural harbour takes a great bite out of Bournemouth Bay, itself a glorious shallow-curving sweep of sand that stretches from Hengistbury Head to Old Harry Rocks and Swanage, with the Isle of White loosely tethered offshore to the east. Born prematurely between tea and supper, after my mother had walked, in the morning, with my father into town, carrying back, between them, a roll of orange stair-carpet. And both my parents were born in England too: in Bucks, where my father's family and everyone else in Wolverton worked for 'The Works', the railway works which had built the town for its employees, who all lived in virtually identical red-brick, blue-slate-roofed Victorian terraces, linked by a warren of 'back ways' like a northern industrial town. One generation back again, they look gravely at me from photographs, working-class families dressed in their respectable best, big hats for weddings (but the men still wearing labourer's boots), curling black plumes on my grandmother's hat for the photograph taken during the First World War where she and her sisters are mourning their two brothers, Joe and 'Laddie', who were killed in France and Salonika, fighting for the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry. When I was born, in 1948, my parents, after the end of the Second World War, had just made the momentous move south from the railway town in Bucks to the space and brightness of Poole. So I am English through and through – am I?

I was made in England, born in England, but in what sense do I feel English? The Gees from whom I spring were probably Magees, many centuries ago, feuding Scots-Irish ruffians. My face has been called Irish: high cheekbones, long nose, small determined chin. One genealogical researcher noted that the family of Zillah Meakins, my illiterate, dark-haired maternal great-grandmother, baptised their children in batches and seemed to travel around the country. My own raven-haired, olive-skinned mother told me her half-belief, or wish, that she had gipsy blood, and one of the first poems she taught me was the anonymous ballad, 'The Raggle Taggle Gypsies'. Re-reading it, I find it is actually about the longing of a settled householder to run away with the gypsies heard singing at the door:

'What care I for a goose-feather bed...? Tonight I will sleep on the cold hard ground, Along with the Raggle Taggle Gypsies-O.'

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And yet, she did have AB blood, which is found in only 3% of today's British population, rising to 10% and above among Eastern European Romany people.

You see how, like my mother, I yearn to be interesting, but really, with at least three generations of settled habitation in England before me, I must be English, as English as anyone can be, fair-haired and pale-skinned like my blond father Victor. I love the English language, and Middle English and Anglo-Saxon, too, and spend my days following the hedgerows of English grammar into the ancient woods and thickets of English words...

But then I look out to sea. It's there that Anglo-Saxon runes had their origins, in faraway German-Dutch Frisia. The sea is where I must have come from, too, like all island-dwellers.

This spring I went back to Poole and its sister seaside resorts, Bournemouth and Boscombe, linked by a single aerating morning's walk along the front, to see what had happened to the England of my childhood. It was the week of the vernal equinox and of Easter, and the weather was predicted to be dire, snow, torrential rain and gales. I was, in fact, on my second big trip back to my birthplace. In 1984 I spent months in Dorset researching my 1985 novel *Light Years*, which describes the return of Harold Segall (who shared my birthday and my consciousness) to the coast where he grew up. There he falls in love with the half-remembered ecology of his childhood, with sandy beaches and golden heathland, and also with a young woman called April, an assistant in Bournemouth's best-known department store, Dingles, which I renamed 'Bingles'.

Napoleon said 'The English are a nation of shopkeepers', so the shops seemed a good place to start. In 2008, Bingles, sorry Dingles, is still there, with art deco sunbursts on its tower and a '40% Off' sale in progress, but just around the corner, a jeweller's window displays the super-large 'Fascist Chic' dials of Italia Futura watches, the most prominent model oddly named 'U-Boat' – this not so many hundreds of metres away from Poole harbour, out of which, on a stormy night sixty-four years ago in June 1944, a D-Day flotilla of assorted ships set off for Omaha beach, Normandy, carrying 22,000 troops determined to drive the Nazi Germans out of Europe.

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"They forget their own history," remarked Wesley Harry, a trim, white-bearded, vigorous man in his eighties who was a hospital orderly in Poole as a schoolboy during the Second World War, where his job was to run to the hospital when the air-raid sirens went and move child patients out of the wards where windows might shatter; once he had to poke a smouldering German incendiary bomb off the hospital roof. Wesley belongs to the Society of Poole Men, a brotherhood of history-loving men who dress up as sailors to 'beat the bounds' of the parish in spring (a ceremony dating back to pre-Roman days). They also look critically at what the town planners are doing – though they did not manage to stop the town centre being dominated by the blank rounded bulge of a huge Barclays building, its white vertical ribs of concrete making it resemble an immense and pointless crown roast.

Both Poole and Bournemouth have wrapped themselves in the heavy snakes of motorways slithering, in Bournemouth's case, right down to the sea-front. But Poole has had the sense to preserve the beautiful green strip around the harbour and the glittering spit of sand and money that is Sand Banks, summer home of multimillionaires. In the last few years, Bernard Myrna has revitalised the nearby public gardens at Compton Acres, laid down in an attempt to make something beautiful after the destruction of the First World War. He has lovingly replanted the Heather Garden and built an Italianate villa for weddings in the formal Italian Gardens, though he was too late to preserve the 'English Mansion' and the green lawns of the English Garden, which once had the best position of all, but were demolished to build flats in the mid-1980s.

Poole also has a small farmer's market every Thursday in Falkland Square, selling 'Dorset Hog Roast' and hand-made sausages, where all the stall-holders are Dorset or Hampshire men. Bob, who has ruddy cheeks and an attractive country burr, sells curds and chutneys and the most deliciously moist and sweet home-made apple-cake. When I told him that my life began at 22 Tatnam Road, he admitted, somewhat shyly, that he was actually born in Portland. I asked him how much Poole had changed, and he quickly said that it was "all foreigners".

"Really?"

"Yes. You wouldn't guess, they're not coloured foreigners. But listen to the accents and you'll hear it. South African, Polish, Bulgarian, Albanian, all sorts. My daughter did a survey at her school, ten years ago, of all the families

in our road, see where they came from. There were 253 people , and only 17 of them born in Dorset."

I asked him if my parents were foreigners when they arrived from Bucks. And wasn't he a foreigner, since he was born in Portland? "Matter of fact I was a foreigner for 23 years when I worked in Saudi Arabia," he said with a smile. "My wife and daughter came out as well. My wife went out in a long dress and an old man hit her ankles with a stick." I confessed I too had just come back from working in the Lebanon. "I suppose we go over there and they come over here." "Fair dos," we agreed.

No wonder people want to work here, for there is money in Dorset now. Boscombe, the east flank of Bournemouth as Poole is the west, has undergone the most changes of the three places, with an artificial surf reef under construction, 'one of only four in the world', and a big development of Barratt balconied flats where you will be able to pay over £1 million for a view across Bournemouth's dazzling bay. I was shocked to find the deep pine-wooded chine where I used to hear the whir-clap of wood-pigeons has been given a drastic Heritage Lottery face-lift involving the removal of 70% of the trees in favour of 'wildlife areas' that still look bare.

And yet, and yet... pines do get old and rotten, and there is crazy golf and a new basket-ball pitch, lots of bright municipal tulips, and a new Clock Café run by Nicki and Tony Unsworth, who serve delicious locally sourced food including bread and cakes from the tiny all-organic Long Crichel bakery at nearby Wimborne. "Crazy golf is the future", enthused Tony, who also has a crazy golf course at Sandbanks. Crazy golf? Though it started in Scotland, spread via the USA and is adored by 11 million Germans, there is something about its miniature detail and dogged daftness that makes it seem very English, too, the right size for a country that has to come to terms with smallness.

In the mid-19th century Sir Percy Shelley, son of the radical poet and his wife Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein, lived in a mansion in the pine woods of Boscombe, and later Aubrey Beardsley stayed here. But by a quarter of a century ago, when I was researching Light Years, Boscombe had become decidedly sleazy, its surplus of small hotels abandoned by the old respectable working-class holiday-makers, who were suddenly able to go on cheap package tours to Europe. 2008 is all change once again, and regeneration

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has come partly from abroad with an influx of keen young workers for the hotel trade and the industrial estates.

In the vivid flurries of icy wind, on the long straight Christchurch Road which is Boscombe's main artery, I came upon a totally Polish shop which bid customers 'Wielkanoc!' to 'Fajny Sklep', meaning 'cool shop' or 'nice shop'. Inside, it had an ersatz Polish mountain village look, with a miniature thatched 'rustic' roof dangling artificial fruit over the head of the friendly assistant, who told me there were 10,000 Poles in Bournemouth and Poole. A few doors down, a green and yellow internet café was entirely peopled by Brazilians Skype-ing their far-away families under the colours of their flag. Was the new Boscombe no longer English?

Actually none of this is new. E G Bennett's *In Search of Freedom* tells how waves of refugees have come to Bournemouth, from French Huguenots in the 17th century to Vietnamese 'Boat People' in the 1980s. Jews fled to safety here in the 1930s – as did Poles, when Germany and then Russia invaded them. Post-war Poole already had a 500-strong Polish community.

Further down Christchurch Road, a charity shop bore the immortal English moniker 'Flogit and Leggit'. Inside, an amazing variety of clothes, gadgets, shoes – and china, much of it 'Made in England'. I started enjoying the English names of the potters recorded in soft-edged reds and blues on the bottom of the plates: Thomas Furnival, Alfred Meakin (no relation), most of them only slightly cracked or chipped and going for a song at 20p each. Delicately painted flowers, faded gilding, raised borders; how rich in skill the Staffordshire potters were. The 'Made in England' stamp actually tells you a piece was manufactured after 1891, when an American government eager to protect American potters insisted that all imported china acknowledged its origins. So 'Made in England' was never a boast, more of a defensive confession. How very English!

Outside again, that icy sea wind made me desperate for hot lunch. 'Yeah Man', I read over the window. OK. In I went – to find an inexpensive Caribbean restaurant serving tasty, fresh-cooked-to-order sweet chicken with peppers and rice and peas, tilapia, sea-bass, and 'brown stew'. Most of the customers were greying white British of a post-war vintage, tucking into the food served to them by British-Jamaican Sean with total lack of surprise, as if 'Yeah Man' had been there for ever.

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On, on. Halfway down the street, three big male figures in black leather were having a smoke, almost blocking the door to 'Rhythms', a paradise of reasonably-priced 1960s and 1970s records. Yes! I found two early and unscratched albums by Earth, Wind and Fire. Pony-tailed Graham, clearly the leader of the three very English leather-clad lads (none of them will see 30 again, but they had great style, all in black with scads of enamel badges and slogans) cracked a smile when I told him I was born in Poole – he was born a few streets away from me. The hulking lieutenants came in from the cold to flank their chief, once Sergeant-at-Arms of the Black Patch chapter of the Hells' Angels. Lined up, the three of them were a majestic sight, but seeing I was no biker chick, they lowered their sights to talk about the miniature train I once rode upon in Poole Park, which still runs. Graham gave me the number of his uncle Wesley Harry, scion of the Men of Poole. Something not so different from the Hells' Angels: another way of belonging.

It was in the arthritic majesty of the Royal Bath Hotel, the 19th-century doyenne of Bournemouth's seafront, whose large, comfortable, turreted rooms seem to have been built to house those grander, slower people who still held a world-wide empire, that I finally met up with Wesley Harry. He arrived in the bar early, looking splendid in a navy RAF blazer complete with embroidered crest. At first I saw him as the archetypal local man, for he supports not just the Society of Poole Men but the Old Grammarians (old boys of Poole's grammar school) and the Boy Scout Movement, who held their first meeting a hundred years ago on Poole's Brownsea Island. Surely if anyone objected to the new England, he would. But he didn't. "They just have to learn to queue and speak English." What did being English mean to him? "Well my father was Cornish. And I married a Scot. My Grand-daughter's a doctor in Aberdeen. Put it like this. I feel English when I want to be, and Scottish when I need to be. I feel Cornish most of the time. But on St George's Day I'll wear a kilt."

Wesley Harry in his eighties is still full of energy and movement. This sense of get-up-and-go seemed to be everywhere around my old birthplace, as if people had finally recovered from the paralysing aftermath of empire, the miasma of regret and guilt and loss which replaced the sense of hopefulness after we won the Second World War, and were now set on going somewhere else fast. True, it no longer looked or sounded like the England of my childhood. People and memories were being left behind. But perhaps you have to learn to leave things behind when you have lost an empire.

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Some things in Dorset – the most important ones – endure. My first memory is of the wide white sands of Poole's Shell Bay, running for my life ahead of my parents and brother, with the sea to my left, stopping to pick up a creamy-white piddock shell, covered with regular indentations like the rubber on the side of my tennis shoe, and crowing 'Look, I've found a Tennis White'. Although I did not realise it, I had made a metaphor. My life as a writer began that day in Poole.

And that was where I went last before I left: back to the curve of this unspoiled beach with heathland and lake behind it, back to the sea and the unchanging view across to the white rocks of Studland and the green slopes of Purbeck blending into the stormy grey-blue of the sky. That day it was so windy that I was almost crying with cold. Rivers of loose sand blew like thin white hair across the beach and when we went higher up, where the sand was soft and dry, the fine grains made a wailing squeak under our feet like the raw mewling of seagulls. But as I stood there, leaning on the wind and half-closing my eyes to stop the grit getting in, I was transported back to the scene I wrote about in *Light Years*:

'Shell Bay was as soft and softly curved and white as memory made it, still without shops and shelters, a crescent of sand with a cupping crescent of crested dunes behind it... The light was radiant, summer-bright, and each of the thousands of tiny- circular pearl-shells sewn along the edge of the sea had a rainbow sheen... The sand was warm, the sea was warm.'

This, in the end, is what being made in England means to me. This beach and the birch-and-gorse heathland behind it with its bracken in summer and blackberries in autumn, its yellow evening primroses and silver-washed fritillaries, its reed-beds where migrant birds can rest. The people wash over its shores like the sea, or like the fast-blowing rivers of sand, moving faster and faster as the years pass away. But this is the air I first breathed: these landscapes formed my idea of beauty. This chalk and clay helped to build my bones, which will one day return to this bay as ash. All who live or die here become the land. We give it our children, who dance away from us, as they must, as they may – and other people's children wash in, in their place, the children of people who were once foreigners; who will, in turn, become English, and slip into the future, where the lines vanish.



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