Real England? Reflections on Broadway Market – Patrick Wright

When I lived in East London in the early 1990s, there was one street above all that seemed beyond hope of improvement or recovery. It was spurned even by its own graffiti, which declared 'Broadway Market is not a sinking ship. It's a submarine.'

Recently, however, the submarine has surfaced. Broadway Market now boasts a new independent book shop, an art gallery, various cafés, craft and bric-a-brac shops, including one that appears to find its niche in 1960s furnishings imported from France and Germany. The stalls in the relaunched Saturday street market offer artisanal bread, Kentish apples, olives and other such provisions to a mixed and multilingual throng, whose members are by no means all clad in inner city hiking boots or Converse trainers. Neither are they all forking out £10, as I found myself doing, for a single piece of Italian cheese.

To the shopkeepers in Broadway Market, the busy Saturday market may no longer seem like a miraculous relief operation. I, however, was astonished by the transformation the first time I saw it. 'Is this real?' I wondered as I wandered among the milling crowds: 'Do these people have any idea where they are?'

Yet the sense of dislocation was my own. The market, as one of its organisers assured me, is certainly not just another 'Farmers Market' of the picturesque variety often used to decorate gentrification schemes. Rooted in local initiative and managed by the Broadway Market Traders and Residents Association, it is run to complement rather than rivalling the local shops and also the much larger street market in nearby Ridley Road.

What takes place here on Saturdays is as much a weekly resistance movement as it is a street market with an alternative, organic air about it. The revival has been achieved by local people against powerful opposition. The first enemy, as so often in these parts, is easily identified as Hackney Council, which, as the organisers claim, first tried to stop the street market happening and then, when it emerged as successful, turned round and attempted to take it over. The second is the developers favoured by the council's officers as they prepared to sell off the street's shops and buildings.

Hackney's officials appear to have recoiled in dismay when local traders defied expectation by scraping together the resources and offering to buy their long-rented buildings. Their preferred buyers are developers of an absentee and sometimes also offshore variety: people whose manoeuvres as they assemble sites for demolition are even less encumbered by respect for local life. The campaign for Broadway Market has been accompanied by a vigorous defence of local traders faced with eviction. This time the graffiti has declared 'We want our café not yuppie flats'.

Though only a local affair, the battle has gone into wide circulation as an encouraging story proving that the spirit of England is not entirely dead. It is celebrated as such in Paul Kingsnorth's newly published manifesto, Real England: the Battle Against the Bland. An anti-globalization campaigner, Kingsnorth hails Broadway Market for resisting the commercial and political powers that have already unleashed 'a virtual holocaust of small, independent and local retailers'. He commends the initiative as one in the eye for the World Trade Organization and a blow against the homogenization that so often passes for urban regeneration in a world dominated by brands.

As a place where apples aren't necessarily all the same shape and the beans aren't flown in from Kenya, Broadway Market confirms the vision of Common Ground, the environmental campaigners who raised the banner of 'local distinctinctiveness' over a decade ago and who continue to recommend 'reinventing the market-place' as the 'convivial heart' of our communities. Strongly anti-racist in outlook, it might also be taken as an expression of the 'progressive patriotism' advocated by Billy Bragg, a kind of patriotism that rejects chauvinism for an altruistic commitment to the interest of the wider community.

Broadway Market fits the present-day activist's idea of a resurgent England. In my mind, it also prompts questions about the ways in which we are accustomed to imagining our nationality. Given that England has no separate constitutional existence within the British state, it may make sense that many attempts to define this elusive identity over the years have proceeded by listing characteristic traits, images and sensations.

The Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin came up with the most famous Tory version in 1924, converting the rural Worcestershire in which he was at home into an idyll offered up as the timeless inheritance of all English people: 'The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the

country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe on the whetstone, the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill…'

Writing in 1940, the year of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, George Orwell famously came up with a different list in which the sound of clattering clogs featured alongside cricket on the village green and a subsequently much cited maiden aunt bicycling to communion. Orwell's list was thrown wide to include the north as well as the south, and the industrial working class rather than just the traditional countryside.

Yet, the characteristic images listed are only half the story of these attempts to define and rally the English. Just as the 'real England' of Broadway Market has been achieved in defiance of the local authority and its developers, the England invoked in earlier times has often been thrown into relief by a burning sense of imminent danger. This is easily understood at times of war, when the threat is palpable. Yet it is by no means only at such moments of righteous emergency that Englishness has been a defensive stance. Even in peace time, being English can feel like a perpetual Dunkirk, in which everything that is valued is polarised against 'encroaching' developments that promise only nullification and destruction.

This pattern was established in the first years of the twentieth century by the writer G.K. Chesterton and his friend Hilaire Belloc. Chesterton and Belloc espoused the cause of 'Little England', which they tried to separate out from the larger identity and purposes of the British Empire. While Rudyard Kipling might wander the globe as the poet of British imperialism, the true Englishman, so Chesterton suggested, stayed at home, content in his local place, even if it only amounted to a few cottages, an unmodernised pub and a couple of fields. He was slow-thinking, rooted in his liberties as well as his place, and instinctively wise. He might look out over nothing more than a cabbage patch but he still grasped more about life than the footloose British traveller, who saw nothing but scenery and for whom no place was more than a 'destination'.

Reading Chesterton's defence of the traditional English pub with its real ale we may rightly sense a distant anticipation of the 'slow' movement of our own time. Yet there are, I think, also reasons to be cautious about this way of thinking. It defines England not as a present political society with its own varied and also disputatious population, but as an inherited way of life that is

under constant threat of being closed down and thrown irretrievably into the past by hostile modern forces pressing in from outside.
Anyone wanting to review the encroaching threats arrayed against Chesterton's browbeaten English folk and their traditional liberties might start with The Flying Inn, a comic novel written shortly before the First World War. The enemies here include the British State, with its arbitrary rules and systems of administration. Academic learning is on the list, with its abstracted expertise, and its rejection of grounded commonsense. So too is Islam, presented as the alien creed of a 'prophet' who, through the influence of overeducated upper class disciples, manages to get an alcohol ban imposed over England. Then comes the rest of the metropolitan elite, with its secularism and its crazy taste for avant-garde pictures. Other threats included big business and department stores, which Chesterton finds guilty not just of displacing the small shop-keeper but of corrosive cosmopolitanism and luxury. Like Belloc's, his defence of England was tinged with anti-Semitism too.

This way of valuing England as a deeply settled way of life that is critically at odds with modern developments, would go on to find many variants during the course of the twentieth century. It was harnessed by rural preservationists, as they tried to defend the traditional countryside against mechanisation, ribbon development, BBC English and other alienating forces: 'England and the Octopus' as one of the campaigning tracts of the interwar period put it. It found benign expression in the Ealing comedy film Passport to Pimlico (1949), in which the inhabitants of a bombed out area of London discover an ancient charter licensing them to secede from drab old post-war Britain with its snoops and its rationing bureaucrats, and to set up their own independent country (complete with vibrant street market). It's surely also informs Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, where the opposition between rural England and the industrial state is recast as the war between the Shire and Mordor.

The spirit of England would be invoked against numerous mistrusted acts of modernisation after the 1950s too. There was Beeching's closure of so many railway lines, decimalization, the relentless advance of the road system and industrial development, the reckless destruction of town centres, and the high rise corruption of public housing. The thought of endangered England has been rallied repeatedly against the perceived threat of colonial immigration, against the European Community, with its federally defined rules and regulations, against asylum seekers and migrant workers. It has also been stirred by BSE and foot and mouth disease: the latter being genuine

emergencies that were, nevertheless, accompanied by an excessive, panic-ridden symbolism.

In case anyone is inclined to think this is primarily a problem of the Conservative imagination, it is worth noting that there are left wing versions of this beleaguered Englishness. In the 1980s, for example, Margaret Thatcher prompted some socialists to develop a strong compensatory interest in the England of Robin Hood and the seventeenth century Diggers and Levellers.

This is indeed a confusing and contradictory list. Many of the perceived threats provoking these defensive reactions were real enough, and the alarm and argument they provoked perfectly legitimate. Others, however, were surely not, and should prompt us to think twice about conceiving England as a heritage in danger.

I realized this when researching a curious network named 'The English Array', which set about trying to revive the English countryside in the late 1930s. Members espoused organic farming, compost heaps, the Alexander Technique and Morris Dancing, but the leaders, who included a cousin of G. K. Chesterton's, were also fiercely anti-semitic in their hatred of chain stores, loathed the urban population as degenerate, and thought Adolf Hitler had some pretty interesting ideas.

I would gladly write that off as a remote and inconsequential eccentricity. Yet the same sense of confusion has appeared in more recent examples.

In the mid-nineties, I talked with a founder of a distinctly Chestertonian Movement for Middle England, a devolutionary campaign which urged the English to consider 'taking root in your region and helping to run it'. Since relaunched as 'England Devolve!,' this campaign was founded partly a response to the perceived vibrancy of immigrant life. Britain's Afro-Caribbean, Irish and Asian communities had their own culture and a sustaining sense of where they came from, and the English should surely emulate them in recovering their regional roots and traditions.

The founders seem to have been of a co-operative and strongly democratic persuasion. And yet, when they started to attend meetings and rallies with their flag showing a carefully fragmented cross of St George, they found people backing off as if they were motivated, as the England Devolve! website now recalls, by 'chauvinism, nationalism or worse'.

More recently, while driving through Oakham, the county town of Rutland, one evening in 2006, I turned on the radio to hear a rousing song called ‘Roots’, by the West Country folk band ‘Show of Hands’. The song lamented the fact that, unlike the Celtic nations and Britain’s immigrant communities, the English have lost their culture or traded it for a few mind-sapping American songs played on a jukebox in a forlorn, and probably also lager-filled public bar.

The song went on to become something of a popular anthem, and yet here too the reception was mixed. The next time I heard Show of Hands on the radio, they were at some pains to distance their song from the British National Party, members of which had turned up to reveal their enthusiasm for it at a recent concert at the Albert Hall.

I am not seeking to condemn either that song or the Movement for Middle England, both of which have usefully demonstrated the importance of sorting out our ideas. The imagery of endangered England has undoubtedly served good causes over the years. Yet it has also justified the apprehension of those members of British immigrant communities who have expressed their reluctance to identify themselves as English, suspecting that this is really a hostile ethnicity in disguise. It is on the same account that some Labour ministers have in recent years felt licensed to dismiss all thought of post-devolutionary political reform in England, using the racist and Europhobic expressions of English nationalism as their justification.

Meanwhile, recent events on Broadway Market are encouraging. They suggest that while defensive battles may remain necessary, they can be conducted in the name of a mixed and present-day local community rather than a mummified set of ancestral roots. It’s possible to be vigorously English without resorting to mournful elegies, or without having to prove your descent from the ancient Iberian or Celtic stock that Hilaire Belloc, writing a century ago, described as ‘the permanent root of all England’.

As for the organic metaphor, which so many embattled English folk have ended up applying to their own endangered way of life, Broadway Market has a message there too. While it should certainly not be applied to mixed human populations, it remains just fine on the fruit and vegetable stall.

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