

Expedition England With A Pram
460 miles from Moss Side, Manchester To Buckingham Palace, London

By

Explorer Mikael Strandberg

Fellow of the Explorers Club, The Royal Geographical Society, Travellers Club and The Long Riders Guild



The team arriving at Blenheim Palace to interview an expert on Winston Churchill and one of the questions was what he would have made of England of today. Apparently he would have been for immigration and the EU. Possibly. Or the other way around. Standard English answer.

Karaganda, Kazakhstan
26th of October 2014

Dear Explorers, Friends and Readers,

Three months have passed since the Bolton lass Georgia Villalobos, my 2 year old daughter Sardana (Dana) and myself reached Buckingham Palace after walking and pushing a heavy loaded pram 460 miles (750 km:s) from Moss Side in Manchester. In all honesty I have needed this time to process what I consider one of the happiest journey's I have ever done. But, I would also consider it as one of the biggest "discoveries" I have ever come across. Even though the Explorers Club in New York denied me a Flag, an honour which I have become accustomed to on almost all my Expeditions, mainly due to that my primary application didn't offer any new scientific discoveries about England or the English to further the clubs scientific knowledge, nevertheless they concluded it could well still be an important journey. I have to say what I have seen and discovered on this journey I personally rate my most important of all journeys. It has changed the way I personally see life and how I am going to live after the journey. Who knew!

One of the major differences with this journey compared to my other Expeditions has been the fact that this is the first time in my last 20 years, that I have actually done an Expedition in a country, who's reputation globally is predominantly very positive. The other Expeditions I have done have been to areas and countries who in one way or the other, have terrified people. And for this reason, during those Expeditions, I have put most of my energy into changing those perceptions into something overwhelmingly positive. This time, however, it went slightly the other way. Mainly due to the far too positive image I had beforehand, dominated by my time in London and that most of my best friends are English. And, of course as I understand England today, the great marketing abilities of the British. Well, I just had no idea the real England would differ that much from my perceived image of this great island!



Let me first say that there's an incredible amount of positive things to say about England. Mainly about its people! There's a reason most of my very best friends are English. They

make very good friends; loyal, funny, and intelligent, no limits or obstacles in life and they have a great knowledge of the outside world. They have this aura around them of greatness and positivity. My mistake was to believe this was true for most English. It could be, but it isn't.



Secondly, I am (still) an anglophile due to having spent many summers in Essex, and I, like I imagine most human beings on earth do, had this image of England as a rich, powerful, just, equal, free and opinionated country. After spending 10 months living in Moss Side, one of the most densely populated areas in Europe, and walking from there to London, I beg to differ. Please let me clearly point out that I am basing my opinions and discoveries on almost 30 years of exploring the world, having visited over 100 countries and being Scandinavian where class is not an issue, yet, feminism is very strong and there are still not too many hungry and destitute people. I am still slightly in shock about what I have experienced in England.

I just had no idea that the differences between rich and poor were this huge. I didn't even know that there was such a large number of poor, freezing and suffering people in England. Like many others I have bought the self-confident propaganda pouring mainly out of London, but that was before I realized English society is split between those who have been to public schools (private) and those who have not. The class society is certainly still alive, even though it has taken new shape and seems to be made up of quite a few more levels than the traditional upper class, middle class and working class. (*According to a survey published by the BBC there's 8 levels of class nowadays, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/21970879>). And, importantly, your accent still matters a lot.

Another major reason for my astonishment is that all the friends I have in England (and I have quite a few) are boisterous, outgoing, loud, extremely self-confident, doers, great fun and with a mentality that nothing is impossible. Not until this year in England did I know that with very few exceptions, they're all public schools trained, where they teach you too become a doer. And as I have found out through the survey's I have read, most explorers, people within media, government and the legal system have this back ground.

For this reason, I was genuinely surprised throughout my journey to come across a large section of society who just seemed to accept most things in silence, with the sole idea of just getting on with life. It was hard filming because most people were terrified either ending up in one of these shameless tabloids or in a documentary which turned out to be something completely different to what they were promised. And generally, the hardest was getting women to have opinions on camera.



Also, as regards to the issue of private land accessible to just a very few, and how scared most English people are of trespassing and questioning this status quo, I can just not fathom this point as little as the reality that on paper one of the richest countries on earth, display these big gaps between people. I cannot understand this.

However, having pointed this reality out, there are other sides of England which impress me a lot. The resilience and survival instinct among those less fortunate is impressive. A trait I have fallen in love with. I also think the English generally are among the most tolerant of people on earth. Even though immigration is a major issue right now, as it always is in the EU, the English are still generally welcoming to newcomers. At least compared to what I have seen in other countries. Areas like Moss Side and East London I rate world class on the subject of mixing of cultures and people. I loved both places.

Compared to Sweden, the English allow much more of a variety of lifestyles outside the norm. Also they are generally much friendlier, interested and helpful. You can still be eccentric, belong to some underground movement or behave differently. Not everywhere, but the closer you are to London, absolutely. This is quite unique as I see it. The closer we got to London, we got more invited in by people and they more accepted our odd way of travelling became. And there is a freedom of religion which I think is by far the best on earth, even if the English government have joined the American Government in their quest to make Islam a threat to whatever values we in the West think we have.

The best of the English; like some of its media, organisations like the RGS, self-confidence, attitude, cultural mix and knowledge about other parts of the world, it is also probably the best in the world. And I loved the immigrant parts of Birmingham, Leicester, Luton and London.

For me that is the best of the English!



The objectives of the expedition before leaving Moss Side where as follows:



Let me first state, that the main goal for every Expedition I do, is to build bridges of understanding between cultures and people. My main interest is human beings, how they live, think, develop, survive and how we human beings globally can work better together to avoid poverty, racism and plain ignorance. Contemporary England is the perfect hotspot for a study of this global issue. It seems they're all here, the cultures and the people!

The second main goal for this Expedition is to do a documentary about contemporary England. It has dramatically changed from what I remember living here on and off as a kid in the late 60's and early 70's. Right now I have lived with my family and filmed for 10 months in one of the most densely populated suburbs (mainly by African, Caribbean and Asian immigrants) in Europe, Moss Side (south of Manchester), this neighbourhood is unfairly called the Bronx of Manchester. Through the tabloids it is negatively known for riots, gang violence, drugs, hooligans of the past and less for its great integration of many different

religions, cultures and personalities. And a survival mentality which everyone could learn a lot from is prevalent.

I also want try to figure out how to define Englishness and who the contemporary English in reality are today. And for this reason, I will walk 650 km:s from Moss Side to where I once grew up on and off, Buckhurst Hill, north of London, through the heartland of this peculiar island. Together with Georgia Villalobos, a local lass from Bolton and my toddler daughter Sardana (in a stroller) and we will neither bring stove or tent, but expect to live with the people we come across throughout the journey to do a fieldwork as good as possible to fully understand.



Why this is important:

Humanity is still severely plagued by wars, famine, disasters, racism, ignorance, hate, gaps between rich and poor and injustice and I have realized that England, better than most countries in the world is a true melting pot for most cultures, races, religions and considering the small size of the island and the big population (63 million in all of UK), they're doing a good a job integrating all these different people. I am not saying it couldn't be better, but compared to other countries I have visited and lived in, they have come further. And the rest of the world can learn from this. Because England has been an empire and still wields lots of power globally.

By 1922 the British Empire had control over about 458 million people, one-fifth of the world's population at the time and they held sway over almost a quarter of the Earth's total land area. As a result, its political, legal, linguistic and cultural legacy is considerable. 92 years later the Empire is all but gone, but Great Britain (especially its engine England) is still one of the global powers. For this reason, what happens in England, have major implications for the rest of the world.

But what I have realized during my 10 months of research and living in the north of England is that very few people understand the great changes which are taking place in

England and Great Britain. For example, more than 1 million need help from Food banks today (*Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/apr/16/open-letter-leaders-three-main-parties-hunger>), and unemployment is rife and growing. Most English I come across today have immigrant background from either Asia, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe or Africa. Some women are dressed in *niqab* and *abbaya* (full covered Islamic dress for women) and men and women go as much to the mosque, *gurdwara* (Sikh temple), Hindu temple as to the Anglican church. 70% of the kids in my daughter's school are Afro-Brits. Quite a few of the white neighbours I have lack good teeth due to no help from the government. And most of them are in their early twenties.



When we moved to Moss Side we decided as much as we could after talking to our neighbours from all over the world, to try to live on what they do monthly for a family of four. It is almost impossible. (About 250 dollars a month per person, say for a family 500 US to cover food, gas, electricity and rent) I don't know how they do it, but what I do know -and bear in mind I have lived in the coldest and darkest inhabited places on earth for a long time- I have never ever been as cold, dirty and negative in mind as this winter, Manchester is a rainy, damp and cold place. We have only had heating on for 3-4 hours a day average. Most of our neighbours had much less. This means you basically have the same clothes on inside as on the outside. The house we live in, an old Victorian one, lacks light, insulation and is depressingly cold. I had no idea the England of today was like this and I believe very few do. (Having said all that we had the best landlord on earth. A great friend of ours today. Imagine if it had been a bad one...)

So for this reason, I decided that I needed to walk through the heart of England to document what life really is like and figure out why. Kind of rediscovering England. Another thing which has surprised me is that the class system is still alive and strong as ever, though slightly changed in form.

Yet, these are just a few surprising discoveries of contemporary England. On the positive side, however, I have made one big discovery, though there are some obstacles still to be dealt

with, but the integration between cultures here is better than any other place on earth I have visited. Moss Side, with all its problems, is the prime example.



I firmly believe that understanding contemporary England is vital for the rest of the world in figuring out how we can tackle today's main issues of overcrowding, intolerance, the gap between rich and poor and the topics of immigration and integration. And, change people's perception of the English today!



My (and Georgia Villalobos) discoveries and observations:



First of all, let me first note there's major chunks of England that we didn't visit or got to know, so these observations are based on the places we did visited. If only for a relatively short time.

I am very happy I did this journey together with Georgia Villalobos. She was actually perfect in every way. Not only as an Expedition partner, doing all needed work like the physical part, helping me with my daughter to being my film assistant. Just as important was her input on the journey.

In hind sight you can say that we represented the two most decisive parts of English society, the ones who have been to a private school, Georgia, with an accent to show just this, and me, who in British terms would be classified as working class. Still today. And there's no doubt, if I had been born English, it would have been much harder for me to make my way as an explorer, with my background. Of course, in the Swedish 1960's, 70's and 80's, no class existed. Thank God.

I can see absolutely nothing good with this division of the English society. The same applies with this out of date class system, where you put people unfairly in a box due to their accent. Luckily, being Swedish, made me unboxable, which made things so much easier for me. Whereas for Georgia, at times –well quite often- she was judged just by her accent judged by

the people we met to be a posh rich t**t (their words). Which she is not to any degree. On the contrary. Her opinions were astute, interesting and sharp.

Georgia wrote this great summary with sums a lot:

One of the most interesting elements to walking across my homeland for me was walking with a foreigner. I wouldn't have learnt or realized nearly as much had I walked with another English person. For instance I would not have recognized what a strange relationship we English have with the land, and when I say the land I mean the earth that is under our feet. Mikael and Dana felt like they had a right to be out in nature; the notion of asking if we could camp on farm land was quite amusing to Mikael who took the attitude- who has the right to tell another human being they cannot camp on a piece of land? Everywhere we went asking people where we could camp the answer was inevitably the same; that wild camping is illegal in England. In England every single last piece of land is owned, even the land that encompasses the national parks is privately owned with public footpaths running through it. All the hedges that caused us so many problems with oncoming cars represent field boundaries and hundreds of years of land ownership and land management. Even as we walked in to the Hope Valley at the beginning of the trip and looked across the valley all we could see was fields and field boundaries. When walking we came across sign after sign saying 'Private' or 'Trespassers will be prosecuted', Mikael found this funny- at first- and took photos of the signs. My overwhelming impression from the trip is of how detached we English are on the whole, from the land underneath our feet. The green spaces that are available are so often empty; one hour in to our walk out of Moss side and we were walking along an empty riverside. No one was using it. We saw this all along the trip; under used green spaces, canals and riversides. I say that Northumberland has the last English wilderness but to be honest I think the concept of Wilderness is beyond our realm of understanding. We don't miss it because we don't even know that it's missing. This was really driven home to me walking with someone from another country where the God given right to access nature is part of the national psyche. They even have a word for it, Allemansrätten. I've been thinking about the reasons for this difference in approach and I've been wondering if it's down to the fact that we are simply busting at the seams? We have a huge population for the amount of land available. Is wilderness possible when you have over 55 million people living in just over 50 thousand square miles? Those numbers are actually breath taking when you consider them. And from what we saw whilst walking, England is actually managing quite well under this enormous strain. How on earth do we keep it together?



British tolerance is a wonderful thing. England is an incredibly multicultural place. This was not a new idea to me or too many English people but walking across the country meeting so many different people I realized how much of a winning lottery ticket we're sitting on as a nation. I really enjoyed visiting Leicester and Birmingham, particularly Leicester, as these places are brimming with energy, enthusiasm and ideas. And you can feel it on the streets. These places have a real energy to them. We saw an array of cultures thriving as we crossed England but also we saw alternative cultures thriving. We met people living on canals boats- or the 'nomads of the water' as one person living on the canal near Hemel Hempstead said. We did a long interview with a lady living on the canal at Oxford who was actually Scandinavian. She explicitly mentioned how she had been surprised how alternative cultures were much more accepted in England than in other countries, and I was proud to hear this. This is a good thing. We also stayed a night with an alternative community, living in a mansion near Leighton Buzzard -I would find this lifestyle challenging but I'm pleased that there is the space in English society and national psyche for this to exist.



There is however a downside that I can see. Along with British tolerance comes British privacy; a 'you get on with your thing and I'll get on with my thing' approach. From what I've observed during Expedition England and the interviews Mikael undertook, I can see a lot of self-imposed segregation existing. People living in the same city or town or even street that live parallel lives and don't mix. This is a generalization of course- we didn't visit a lot of places in England but the places that we did visit I was surprised by this segregation. (I hadn't realized this still existed before the trip but now I see this is not a new idea for many people- one of the think tanks have coined the phrase 'interculturalism' (or a lack of it in our case)- the mixing of cultures in the public domain without the loss of cultural identity.) Mikael interviewed a good friend of mine, Mo, who talked about growing up in a Somali community when London is supposed to lead the way on cultures living together. One man we met in

Birmingham said he really liked living in England compared to Denmark because ‘ the English are not nosey, they just let you get on with your business and your way of life.’ The Expedition England team went for a curry on Leicester’s Golden mile and we were the only white people who had ventured in. English privacy was something we came across the whole journey from people from all ethnicities and social classes and gender; people watching us but not actually speaking to us. Whilst English tolerance and privacy enables a variety of lifestyles and cultures to thrive, it seems to me through having taken part in Expedition England that this generation and the next have another transition to negotiate to change this? How should we do it?



Listening to so many different people being interviewed gave a fascinating insight into the national character and all the quirks that are common to the English. For instance I realised how nuanced English communication is. In conversation with an English person, so much of what is communicated is not actually spoken out loud. It is inferred or suggested. Which makes us really challenging to interview. We also don’t say what we mean. A lot. We have a standard set of phrases that say one thing but mean something completely different- and everyone living in England uses and understands these phrases as if they were a second language. For instance near Hemel Hempstead we camped on church land and asked the vicar there if we could interview her. She replied ‘I’ll see how I feel later, if I’ve got time.’ Which I took as ‘Nope, never – not even in a month of Sundays.’ So I was surprised when a couple of hours later Mikael looked disappointed and said ‘It doesn’t look like the vicar is coming for her interview.’ No, she isn’t, and she never was. This happened all the time and made me realise a few things about the English; they don’t like conflict and they don’t like disappointing people. So this English quirk is absolutely infuriating but it comes from a relatively well-meant place.



Another English quirk we came across all the time was the culture of not ‘blowing your own trumpet’ – meaning that you shouldn’t show off or promote yourself. So many times we started to talk to people and they had strong opinions about what we were discussing, but as soon as they were asked to talk on camera they couldn’t get away fast enough. The English tend to express opinions in private with close friends and family but not in public unless the matter is very important. I actually don’t mind this quietly spoken quality (Global English translation: I love it)- for me it helps to filter out what is very important from what is not important. I did notice, however, that this seems to be applied a lot more to women. Coming from a stereotypical matriarchal northern family, a family full of ferocious women I found it fascinating that actually hardly any women would speak on camera during the first two months, but men would. Does this cultural quirk of not ‘blowing your own trumpet,’ not promoting yourself or not speaking out in public apply more to women than to men in England? Do English women self-sensor in order to not appear ‘un-ladylike’? When at Mansfield college I asked this question to one of the women Mikael interviewed, she replied ‘I think its because its seen as a bit distasteful to promote yourself or your opinions.’

The English are also generous and warm people. Yes, you read that correctly- generous, warm. We interviewed a woman living in Oxford running her own theatre company, who summed it up perfectly for me: ‘The English need a good chance to warm up- but its there. They want to help.’ And we could see this as we asked for help in various places. Initially people were a little cold and distrustful but as they heard our story and got to know us a little they wanted to help. What would start out as a suspicious hello would end up as cups of tea, a hot shower and someone building us a fire in their back garden. (Interestingly if people walked out of their houses before we had knocked asking “May I help you?” with a forced smile on their face this was bad news. This greeting always meant – global English- ‘Please leave now.’ This only happened twice though) The English need time to unfold their layers I found, but once they ‘let you in’ they have a big capacity for generosity. Cold hands, warm heart.



To finish I'd like to point out that the English don't actually know how to answer the question 'Who are the English, what are they like?' And that says a lot in itself. So many people could not answer this question when Mikael asked them and I've realised that I always struggled to answer this question too. I think this is because I was trying to give an answer that would encompass everyone living in England, which as we've discussed would be impossible to come up with. When I ask myself what are the English like answering as a white middle class woman from the north of England, I'm much more to the point: We're tolerant, easy going, resilient and take time to open up. The people who did answer the question confidently seemed to be specifically referring to their version of English. In London we interviewed a soldier who was extremely succinct, he knew the answer because he was describing his England. People who couldn't answer were trying to answer for everyone. Who are the English? Has been such a hot topic recently in the wake of the Trojan horse scandal. English schools are being asked to teach 'British values' and the generally quiet English have actually yelled back for once 'What on Earth are British values?!' Team Expedition England went to a public meeting in Birmingham analysing the way forward for Birmingham schools after the Trojan horse scandal. One of the speakers summed up the matter perfectly for me 'British values? How about human values? Surely a country like England needs to be thinking in those terms.

Georgia Villalobos, Northumberland September 2014

My personal observations on top of Georgia's great one's are as follows:



- **Who are the English, the topic of class and what is Englishness. And immigration. And north versus south. And so much fear!**

I can't really think of a bigger contrast in life than the gap between Moss Side and Buckingham Palace. Two completely different worlds, but both very English for me today. With all the good and bad that goes along those lines. The mainly good in Moss Side. I just don't get this admiration for the royals that so many English have. They're just people with far too much land, money and damp rooms.

There's a lot of strange realities which is a mystery to me with regards to England. There's no doubt about that. Not only as a Swede, but as a global traveller. One such oddity, at times extremely irritating, subject is the ability to be frank. This was actually another big surprise for me. For two reasons. Firstly due to my boisterous opinionated London friends and me thinking this was normal for all English. Secondly, the level of bitterness, aggression and negativity that one comes across when reading and viewing English media, like comments after articles or discussions on TV, but I have realized most of this is done anonymously. But that made me think, woow, I will get a lot of really vicious comments and some dynamic interviews. In reality, hardly any at all. At times I almost got upset when people just couldn't free themselves of being too levelheaded and so incredibly scared of having opinions. And this way to avoid a question or when asking for help...

I wrote this quite early on the journey:

Being in anyway rude seems to be the worst of things to be for an Englishman. Or woman. This, in my eyes, inability to say what you are actually thinking, and I presume, deep down, want to say, but don't, has caused me the most concern on this journey so far. Once I turn on the camera, people become very controlled and political and once it is off, they tell me what they really are thinking. I have, of course, realized, this is quite English. I met a Danish and a

*Swedish lady in Edale and they confirmed this was their biggest problem after having decided to live in England. (They still preferred to live in Edale compared to Scandinavian though!) They said:
“Don’t be too frank.”*

***But they have** changed to be able to fit in. Fair enough. Moss Side, of course, was different, due to the diversity of cultures, but since we left Moss Side, I have increasingly felt uncomfortable with what kind of material I will end up with at the end. Frankly, I do not want to do a documentary about the English in an English way. At times it is hilarious, this way to avoid causing discomfort. The other day in Edale I was listening to a friend who called some people, relatives of his, to ask if we could have a stop over there for a night. He did not ask for that direct though, but instead said we were passing and hoped the people on the other end would understand, but he realized after just a few minutes it wouldn’t happen, since the one on the other side of the line avoided the topic and instead chatted away, for what felt like hours about nothing, just to avoid the issue of saying no.*

***I get a feeling everybody has to be utterly perfect in England.** Or white England. At least until we made it too Mansfield today and met a few of the legendary miners belonging to NUM. Yes! They were frank, straight talking, honest, passionate and extremely interesting! I am not saying it haven’t been interesting meetings before this interview, on the contrary, I am just talking passion and frankness now.*

It seems like the English are stuck between the US and Europe and don’t really know who to go for, which is also a sign that outlining being English is difficult, so for this reason, I set out asking the question to every one we met, how do you define being English?



I had no idea when we started out that this would be such a tricky question! Most of the time it made people rather uncomfortable in the English way where you get an extremely low key answer avoiding any sort of conflict. Like this:

“We are a decent, tolerant, resilient and hardworking people who live in a country who is doing its best to look after its citizens.”

When challenged people would either say that they couldn't really have an opinion on camera, off yes, but not on camera, for the fear of either losing their job, if they had this opinion during working hours, or the great fear being hung out in the tabloid media. Most of the time, which I understand, they didn't know if I was the good or bad guy. This great fear dominated this relatively simple question. I wrote this piece before leaving Moss Side, I was hoping at that stage, it was purely due to the situation in Moss Side, but it was true throughout the trip:

24th of May 2014 Moss Side

***I am encountering what I believe I haven't come across in a long time**, possibly not ever as a film maker, a genuine distrust in what I am doing. Let me just say, I fully understand it! I would be exactly the same, possibly, if I'd live here in Moss Side AND England, because I feel it is not only here. And there is a reason. We, my family, have come across this item that people tell you one thing (Talk-Talk for example) and you agree and you get lied to and given something completely different. It is quite common it seems, especially when media is involved. The Moss Siders, and others in the same situation, and there's quite a few here in England, have been told that the TV-crew/film makers will do this, but in reality it is all totally different and always negative. This is causing serious problems for me, who wants to do something positive. It takes a lot of time to gain people's trust. But as it is, I can't film in my favorite pub and other places, and people, who could give a positive, realistic image of Moss Side. What I see is a unique place on earth in a very positive light. But this English media hysteria, which I come across all the time as an explorer when I am getting offers to be fooled out of my ideas for others to use, by some media company calling and lying initially about why they have contacted me. Yesterday somebody called from a media company in London and said they loved my films and Expeditions and wondered if I had any ideas I could share. So I asked, which particular film do you like? They had no idea.*

***So I understand this mistrust** of outside media and people. And no, I haven't come across it elsewhere. It is of cause the competitive nature and crappy tabloid press which shines through. It is also well known within exploration, that some English "explorers" do not fully tell the truth and overdo their own importance. To suit their commercial needs. Something I saw today when I got a contract from a potential British sponsor, they were terrified that I would write something bad about their product. Amazing! I have never come across that before either!*

***Having said that**, there's hell of a lot I like about the English! But, there's no doubt about it, being a great ally to the US and a global power, seems to create a society built on extreme security, worries and distrust. Or at least that is my feeling now, before I start walking.*



It was also a case of who you asked. White or immigrant. What political affiliation the person had. Educated or not. Public school or state school. North or South.

I recognize this problem from Sweden as well. People do have opinions about being English (Or Swedish in Sweden) and on the subject of immigration. But they fear the consequences and don't want to come across as racist. Almost all white English people I came across thought that too many immigrants were allowed to enter the island, but didn't wanna say it on camera. No matter what background. I definitely sensed a fear of Islam, Eastern Europeans and Africans. When questioned, very few white English had a clue why they had this fear, since most of them lived apart from these worries, but followed the news and based their opinions on this. And rumours.



Quite a few of the East Europeans I met during my time in England were the one's with strongest opinions about especially non-European immigration. Having traveled extensively in many parts of the former Eastern Europe, these biased opinions are not new to me; on the contrary, I am just stunned how they as immigrants can have these opinions.

As surprising I think, was the fact that those proudest of being English and clearly stated this were often...immigrants! Even Muslims, who had been unfairly attacked in the so called Trojan horse affair in Birmingham, were still very proud to be English (Or British) and loved the island. And immigrants coming especially from former colonies, of which some of them had gone through terrible racist problems after arriving back in the late 50's were incredibly proud being part of English society. I have yet to find more than a few handful of Swedish immigrants saying the same about being Swedish.

So, the question of being English, I did get more clear answers the closer to London we came, mainly from professional opinion makers, but it is still nearly impossible to define it, it seems!

Therefore, I can only offer my own definition and personal opinion...

What I really love about England is the mixture of cultures, religions and colour which is growing and does exist, even if I realize that outside the big cities and their suburbs, England is still white. And for me, let me use an English expression, therefore quite boring. But this mix is still the best the world can offer, if not good enough. But that is another question.

No matter how we see it, England is changing and so is being English. With regards to English privacy, which quite a few interviewees thought was part of being English, sure it does exist, but not more than in Scandinavia for example. And I generally found people less welcoming and understanding in the Midlands and the north up to Manchester. And they were more judgmental of us. So this theme of northerners being much friendlier than southerners, I have no idea where this comes from. In our case and our way to travel, it was as wrong as it could be. And those who judged us in a negative way, they were all people who were experiencing problems in life. People having a rough time. This is of course not a surprise for me. Same everywhere. The less you know, the more you judge things incorrectly.



I wrote this in my blog:

But, just let me add, this is just an observation and I still found the Midlands and the North in many ways more interesting, mainly due to the diversity in Manchester, Leicester and Birmingham. But do see it as a valid observation, I have 30 years of travelling like this with my backpack, through more than a 100 countries and this is the first time, that some people have looked at me like dirt. Or with fear. I blame the worst media in the world for the fear issue. The tabloids...how can anyone wanna read this utterly scaremongering crap? As I wrote before, it says a lot about Britain, when so many tabloids dominate far too many peoples life.

So I guess, being English is how each and every one of the English perceives themselves. One thing is for sure, the old image I had of the English has changed. An England of an equal society dominated by polite and proud people, very polite police, everyone the same in front of the law, quite reserved and always drinking tea, dressed in bowler hats and thick coats, who loves the past, rugby, fox hunting, the royals, their gardens and who with great conviction believe they saved the world from the Nazis.

Returning to this issue of class, if the person were wealthy, class didn't exist. No matter what cultural background. there's absolutely no doubt that it does exist and it is definitely a product of the educational system, public school versus state schools. We came across this class issue in almost in every meeting with people we had. In my mind it is archaic, unfair and creates an unjust and unequal society. My Lord we are living in the year of 2014! I can't even understand that anyone wants it!



Another myth is that the people in the north are so much friendlier than the southerners. Maybe we didn't go far north enough, but I would say it is the other way around. Southerners where in general much more curious, excited to meet us, free from judgment, generous, hospitable, opinionated and they were much more open to conversation than people in the north and the Midlands. In these parts I often felt that people avoided contact for no other reason than we were different. Like we were intruding into their known, settled and controlled world. And I generally found them extremely restrained and controlled with emotions and opinions. And they came across as very loyal to whoever ran the country. Not a lot of

rebellious souls around it seemed! By ease the most welcoming people in these rather sad areas were immigrants. Of course.

I wrote this blog piece on the subject:

However, I am not surprised. Obviously if you like people around London, London and the south here are exposed to eccentric behavior; you like it and accept it more. Being a northerner myself and from a simple background, a countryside boy, I understand that the problem is education, no or little exposure to anything than normal daily life in a repetitive surrounding and the lack of an open mind. And that is what I want to get at, I am beginning to see England divided by who has been to public or private schools or not. There's always many exceptions, but just look at the the people who run the country. Public school most of them. Eton, Harrow. Almost all explorers, my great friends, people who do fantastic things, almost all public school. Very few, thought they exist, come from the state schools. No matter how you see it, it seems like public schools create self-confidence, the others schools less so. That is also why I have been so surprised by the England I have seen this last year, because all my friends, almost all private or public schools, they're so outgoing, boisterous, eccentric and opinionated, well, this I have seen very little of on this journey. But very, very much of the low key, silent, I am doing my own business and don't wanna be disturbed too much, please do not disturb my privacy and an obvious great fear for the unknown. But as a whole a very easy going decent people.

What I saw of the North and The Midlands, I would rate them as the most boring places I have ever been to. Except the immigrant parts, but even the Yemenis in Birmingham were restrained here! Such is the control of the colonial legacy. As usual with great exceptions. Like the miners in Mansfield who battled Margaret Thatcher. What a joy to meet them!



Islam and the Muslim community was very much on the English agenda as it is everywhere else outside the Islamic world. In Moss Side I lived in a neighborhood dominated by Somalilanders and Somalis and loved every bit of it and I have to say I was very impressed in every way how well they had adapted into English society in such a short time. Muslims from the former colonies even more. Just like the Afro-Caribbean community. (And, if I just for a moment give a perspective and compare them with English or Scandinavians I have come across in other countries, trying to settle, it is a big difference! These groups mix badly in comparison to their new environment!) I did throughout the journey realize that they are very

segregated communities and I wasn't too surprised when I first came across the Trojan Letter and schools in Birmingham. After meeting the people involved, I am even more stunned about what I still read today about this issue. It is hard to come across more adapted immigrants into the English society and how proud they are to be English, they just want more religious freedom basically. Not any different from Catholic schools or Christian schools. It is just a fact that they're Muslim. I wrote this piece after the visit:

The Trojan Letter was the dominant factor for our four days in Birmingham. Read the articles below here, for three angles of the issue, the conservative Tories (Telegraph), Lib-Dem (Guardian) and 5pillarz (Muslim Britain) to get an idea. But as a whole I learned four important things in Birmingham.

- 1. It is getting harder by the day being Muslim in the UK.***
- 2. British Muslims are very proud to be British and live in England and have only good things to say.***
- 3. Birmingham is really culturally divided. Muslims live predominantly in one place. Afro Caribbean's in another, and whites in their sphere. They don't really mix. We spent a lot of time in Little Heath, a predominantly Asian-Muslim community, and saw 2-3 whites. Sad. This is a vibrant, exciting community and I realized how much I miss being part of the Muslim world with their generosity and kindness. I have a very good new friend there, Waseem Yaqoub, who filled in enormous gaps with regards to my lack of knowledge about England. Not only about Muslim Britain, but about England in itself. Things I hadn't seen or understood.***

And the fourth important thing, well I have been aware of it all along, but it was kind of fully underlined in Birmingham. Fear. There's so much fear here in England. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the other. Fear of the future. Maybe it is the same in Sweden and Scandinavia and I just haven't thought about it, but if I compare England with Yemen, where I have spent a lot of my time the last years, the fear in England is far higher!



And the issue of fear is huge in England. As I see it is due to the class system, the extreme differences between rich and poor, the divided educational issue and these terrible tabloids. It beats me that people like Tony Blair and David Cameron want to ally themselves with the

tabloids. They are a disgrace to humanity. And this tabloid style is seeping in to most walks on life in the English society. Just about anything where competition exists. A competitive spirit of causing as much harm as possible to somebody else for pure personal gain. In any transaction one does, it is there.

Nevertheless we came across quite a few people who I believe will make a positive difference in the future. For England, the UK and possibly the rest of the Western world. Many of them belonged to what is called alternative living. People living in communes, collective living, on river boats and so on. To quote a piece from the blog:

I find these people who choose to live an alternative life style much more interesting, inspiring and challenging than the main stream people we come across. I have a feeling they sit with many of the best solutions about our global future and they're much more well-read and insightful than mainstream society here in England. I am thinking a society who has the worst media in the world, these terrible, terrible tabloids, well, I think that says a lot about the English society itself. It beats me than anyone wants to read them and more than anything, who choose to work for such inhuman, lying, war mongering rubbish? That must be as low as it gets with regards to life.

Finally a note on the environment. I saw a sign when entering the Cotswolds calling the surrounding nature world class. The one who wrote that must be working for Talk-Talk or another American inspired company. Like the food, no matter what the English claim themselves, English nature as I saw it is bland. Not once did one get away from either the noise caused by aeroplanes, highway or railway sounds. Or the hordes of people. The wildlife at its best is falcons and half domesticated deer. Most of what could be reasonably good is private land. A lot of it hidden away with the help of the world's highest hedges. They're definitely world class!



And the food? Let me share this note from the blog on the subject:

We stopped for Sunday roast in a small village on route and the English food....I can understand why all visiting travel writers just give up on the food thing...it looked great but tasted of nothing. Just texture. And, once again, that is my only negative critique so far. So much noise about the world class things from internet salespeople such as the Sunday roast. Big promises, always promises of the best in the world, really overrated once delivered. Just like the English football team who has been the best in the world since 1966. I will take Dana to the pub and see their last game tonight against Costa Rica, who promised nothing and has already won so much.



Pushing A Pram Through England.

Pushing a Pram through England isn't logistically easy. Trying to do it off road the English version by using public footpaths turned out impossible due to the styles. A wide shoulder, well any sign of a shoulder, was missing quite often and we were forced into the heavy English traffic. It got better the closer to London we came. As most things. Best were the far too seldom under used windy secondary roads, which instead offered no shoulder and high hedges and on and off walking next to the canal. But doing that also meant we were quite often far away from shops to buy food and necessities.

This was a common blog note on the subject:

Once again, we have been unfortunate not to have a decent shoulder to walk on, so we are kind of pushed into the fast traffic, which makes us all a bit worried. On and off, there's something resembling a shoulder, but it makes going very hard. The English roads just ain't made for strollers! Or prams as they're called here. Some driver's don't like us there on the road, but most say nothing. Something I would consider very English now. People generally nod, smile, talk weather and then get on with life. I think they just want to be left alone, doing their daily routines as they have done for quite some time, most of them.

But, yes, it is possible! I hope our journey can set off a wave off other pram driven Expeditions worldwide! Our choice of model was perfect. Mountain Buggy. It carried my daughter and 25 kgs of weight with no problems at all.

However, pushing a pram like this is a novelty even in the UK and at times we enjoyed the terrible feeling of being looked down on from people who thought we were either homeless or travelers. I did give us a good insight into how society sees outcast.

- **Bringing a two year old toddler.**

Best choice ever. Dana had absolutely no major problems spending so much time each day in a pram and it has turned her into too a tough, positive, happy kid who loves and trusts people and needs the outdoors and who is scared of nothing. And she trusts everyone, which I think is very positive and she can stand firm in a battle at the playground against 6 year old boy bullies.

I wrote this in my blog:

I want to add that I almost need this freedom to sleep and live outdoors. And it seems like my daughter have inherited this need. People have suggested she won't remember this trip due to her age. However Nigel Winsor, the great expedition leader said during a visit to his home last week:

"It gets stuck and sucked up by her genes."

He also said, which made me the proudest dad on earth, that she was the wildest (in a positive way) 22 months old he has ever come across. Even wilder than Wally Herberts daughter, Kari. I hope I can keep it that way, but I doubt it. Once the education system get its hands on it, it will be hard to keep this instinct. Society wants us all to be the same and behave the same way.



Members of the Expedition:

Expeditionsleader: Mikael Strandberg

Team members: Sardana (Dana) Strandberg, Georgia Villalobos

Camera, Sound&Photography: Mikael Strandberg, Georgia Villalobos, Misha Maltsev
(Moss Side)



Georgia Villalobos (in the back), Dana, Mikael Strandberg and his wife and oldest daughter Eva in front of Buckingham Palace the 27th of August 2014.

www.mikaelstrandberg.com
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