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Opening Extract from...

102 English Things to Do

Written by Alex Quick

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102 ENGLISH THINGS TO DO

ALEX QUICK



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INTRODUCTION

England is a confusing place. For a start, the name. Some say Britain when they mean England. Some say England when they mean Britain. Some, wishing to be flattering or patriotic, say Great Britain; others say the United Kingdom (despite the fact that it is ruled by a queen); others say the British Isles, though they may risk offending the Republic of Ireland.

Politically, the situation is no better. The parliament at Westminster in London is not the English parliament, it's the United Kingdom parliament. The other countries of the United Kingdom – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – have their own devolved parliaments, but only England, the dominant partner, doesn't actually have its own seat of government.

The English are sometimes curiously self-effacing, as if they wish they weren't really there.

And yet this diffident country managed some remarkable things. It exported its language all over the world, penned a globally-renowned literature, kick-started the Enlightenment, and invented most of the

world's sports. This would surely have been impossible without some sense of collective identity.

And it's true that English people, whether from Yorkshire or Norfolk, Bradford or Virginia Water, do still have a lot in common. Most of them buy their round at the pub, talk about the weather, understand the same ironic humour, say 'please' and 'thank you', treat tea like a religion, form an orderly queue, read the same newspapers, watch the same TV programmes (trashy ones), and feel something quivering in their chests when they hear the opening bars of 'Jerusalem'. England and the English have a discrete identity at least as real as Spain and the Spanish or Tibet and the Tibetans.

Perhaps the difficult thing to do is get the required distance. Englishness is only perceptible if considered from above, as if from a visiting spaceship. Then it all comes into focus and makes sense. From the right distance, there are English things to do, English things to eat, English things to think and feel… even English crimes to commit.

So that's the approach taken in this book. I want you to imagine yourself hovering somewhere above Fenny Drayton, Leicestershire, the geographical centre-point of England.

Now descend, slowly…

ENGLISH ATTITUDES

1.

IGNORE ENGLAND'S ACHIEVEMENTS

In the period from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, England managed to assemble the largest empire the world has ever seen. Starting with Scotland, Wales and Ireland, she went on to grab India, America, various bits of Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and sundry other places, adding up to 13,010,000 square miles, or around a quarter of the globe.

Most English people now regard this spasm of acquisitiveness with a mixture of rueful pride and embarrassment, like a sporting injury.

The truth is that the English don't like to be reminded of England's achievements. The industrial revolution started in England and the World Wide Web was invented by an Englishman: the two greatest revolutions of the last three centuries, and they were

essentially English. But English people will never be found crowing about them (except perhaps at Olympic opening ceremonies, and leavened with a hefty dose of irony: see No. 6 'Be Ironic'). They suspect, rightly, that they will be branded by other English people as being rather nationalistic – even racist – if they do.

Try mentioning to an English person that the Nobel Prize for Literature has been won twice in the last decade by an English writer, and they will almost certainly not be able to produce the required names (Harold Pinter and Doris Lessing).

Imagine if these prizes had been won by the Scots!



2.

DWELL ON ENGLAND'S FAILURES

There is a perfect antidote to English shame at England's achievements: England's failures. Fortunately there are a lot of these, and they make excellent conversational subjects.

For example, the English consider English food to be inedible. Even the French are not as disparaging about English cuisine as the English themselves. This is despite the fact that in the last couple of decades English food has undergone something of a renaissance. Mentioning this, however, is taboo. English culinary incompetence is too much of a treasure to give up.

English trains are always late, crowded and overpriced. Of course, they are worse in 95% of the rest of the world, but the rest of the world does not complain about them anywhere near as much as the

English do. The English hate their railways with a venom they otherwise reserve for horse-torturers.

England's finest moment in the Second World War was a defeat: Dunkirk, in which the British Expeditionary Force was kicked out of an ungrateful France by the Germans. This gave rise to the 'Dunkirk Spirit', which is a celebration of the way English people all pull together to achieve a disaster.

Winston Churchill summed it up for the English: 'Success consists of going from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.'

3.

REFER TO 'EUROPEANS' AS IF YOU WERE FROM A DIFFERENT CONTINENT

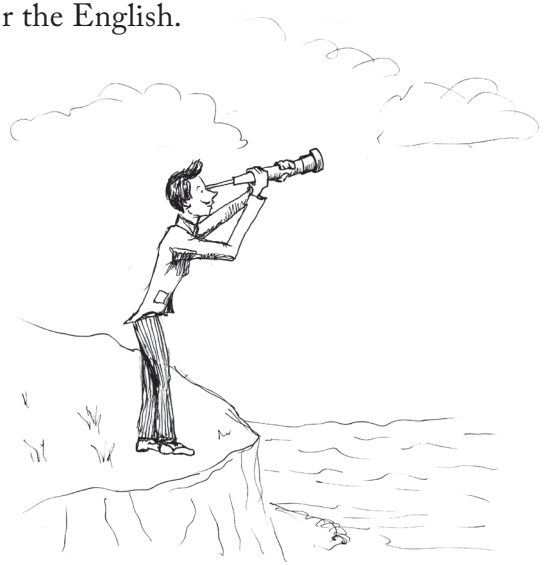
'We generally take our holidays in Europe.' 'Have you ever been to Europe?' 'Europe is getting more expensive.' These are very English things to say. Foreign visitors are often puzzled. What continent do these people think they're from? Antarctica?

The Scots, Welsh and Irish know they are part of Europe. The Scots in particular have often allied themselves with the French against the English. But the English feel themselves to be very distinct from the other peoples of Europe. They live, in their own minds at least, in a continent unto themselves. England, as John of Gaunt puts it in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, is a 'fortress built by Nature for herself / Against infection and the hand of war.' The rest of

Europe is an *infection*, you see. Food-poisoning and rabies are only the half of it.

The greatest separation is not the Channel, but English psychology. English people believe they are essentially alone in the world, and would be downright foolish to rely on anyone else. Foreigners are inherently untrustworthy. The Germans are either at your throat or at your knees. The French and the Italians can't be relied on in a fight. The Spaniards and the Portuguese are always popping off for a siesta. The Dutch, Danes and Scandinavians will steal your wife/husband, and if television is to be believed, there are an appalling number of murders committed in their countries.

Single currency, human rights, Brussels, standardized banana lengths: these have stopped Europeans killing each other, which is all well and good. But they are not for the English.



4.

CHAMPION YOUR OWN WEATHER

When two English people meet, they first talk about the weather. Of course, this behaviour is not restricted to the English. People do this in other countries too. Where the English are different is that they believe they have the *best* weather. For the English, the weather to be found in other countries is frankly uninteresting. In southern latitudes it is monotonously hot; in Scandinavian countries it is monotonously cold; and in China or the USA they have hurricanes and earthquakes, which don't really count as weather, being more akin to the things you find in insurance policies under 'Force majeure'.

The English think they have the best weather because it is so unpredictable. 'You never know what it will do next!' Rain in June? 'Typical English summer!'

Windy April day? 'That's the beauty of English weather,' the English person will explain patiently. 'It's the variety.'

Yes, up to a point. In fact English weather is monotonous in its own way: it is monotonously clement. Bathed in the Gulf Stream, floating in its mid-latitude mediocrity, English weather, compared to the rest of the world, is mild all year round. Neither is it unpredictable. English people have been observing and measuring their weather in fine detail for the best part of 200 years, and so there is almost no weather event that hasn't a precedent: any conceivable morsel of weather is the hottest, coldest, or wettest since the 14th of August 1867.

English weather is actually quite boring, but you should never tell any English person that.



5.

BE SELF-DEPRECATING

The English are very sensitive to pomposity, solemnity or self-aggrandizement, distrusting anyone who 'puts on airs' or 'gets above themselves'. Persons caught acting in an overly self-important way are ridiculed mercilessly. When Jonathan Aitken, the former Conservative cabinet minister, was convicted in 1999 of perjury and sentenced to 18 months in prison, what made him uniquely ridiculous was that in his defence he had claimed to be wielding the 'simple sword of truth' and 'the trusty shield of fair play' against his detractors. This was very un-English. The English might believe in truth and fair play, but they never make a song and dance about it. The English are highly suspicious of high-flown rhetoric, solemn phrases, public Bible-bashing and appeals to abstract ideals, regarding them as just so much obscurantism and soft soap: and in this, their instincts are usually right.

The English can forgive hypocrisy, but rarely pretension. They are constantly at watch for it in themselves and will defend against it by putting themselves down at any opportunity. If you praise an English person's valuable antiques collection, for example, they will tell you that dusting it is the bane of their lives.

Self-deprecation is possibly a side-effect of the English class system, which is designed, through a subtle system of linguistic and behavioural shibboleths, to keep everyone in their place. As soon as the English see someone pretending to be something they're not, warning lights start flashing crimson.

6.

BE IRONIC

The English are famous for their sense of irony; that is, their propensity to say one thing and mean another. English irony is most commonly manifested in the form of understatement. For example, a foul-tasting sandwich might be described as 'somewhat lacking in the edibility department' or 'not the finest that Anglian Trains have to offer'. Occasionally (and confusingly) irony might manifest itself as hyperbole: the same horrible sandwich might be extolled as 'the very finest that Anglian Trains have to offer', which might, in fact, be both hyperbolic and true. Such utterances will often baffle foreigners, especially when delivered (as they characteristically are) in a deadpan manner. Visitors to English shores often wonder why the inhabitants seem congenitally incapable of saying what they mean.

The English are aware of their reputation for irony,

and to some extent have swallowed the myth that only they understand it. Naturally Americans too can be ironic; so can Germans, French and Romanians (where would Eugene Ionesco have been without it?). Nevertheless the English are the only nation to have made irony a way of life. It comes out at any and every occasion, and leavens every sort of conversation, from the lightest to the most solemn. English literature is full of it, as in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, where he recommends that his readers eat babies.

Hold on, though, Swift was Irish, wasn't he. That's rather ironic…

7.

PLAY UP! PLAY UP! AND PLAY THE GAME!

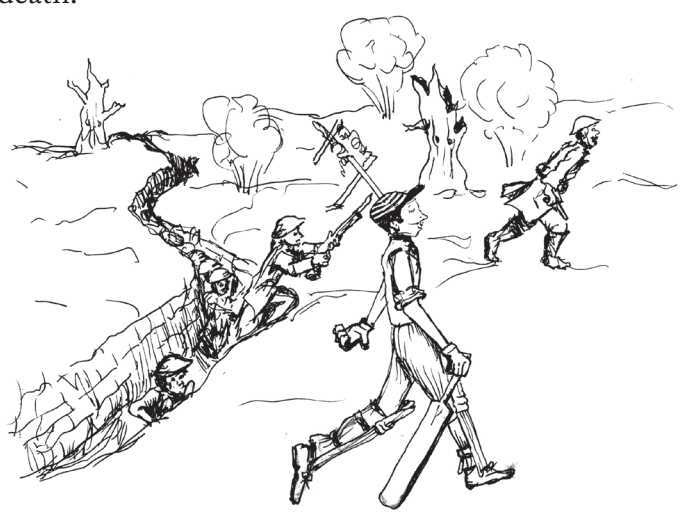
English society is not free from corruption. There are quite regular scandals: ball-tampering in cricket, match-fixing in football, phone-hacking at newspapers and expenses-fiddling in Parliament. But the English do not accept corruption as part of life. They are still shocked and outraged each time a new scandal occurs, and demand that the malefactors be brought to justice, preferably with a long Enquiry at the taxpayers' expense. Things settle down and a new scandal comes along, followed by a new Enquiry. But the default position for the English is still that fair play – though perhaps more honoured in the breach than the observance – should be held up as the standard. Everyone deserves a 'fair chance', a 'fair crack of the whip' and a 'level playing-field'.

In English sport this sense of fair play – in which

it's not the winning, but the taking part that counts – was perhaps best expressed by Sir Henry Newbolt in his poem 'Vitae Lampada' (1892):

> There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night,
> Ten to make and the match to win,
> A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
> An hour to play, and the last man in.
> And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
> Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
> But his captain's hand on his shoulder smote:
> 'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'

The poem goes on to link prowess in cricket and prowess in war. This led the poet Edith Sitwell to comment: 'Cricket brought a great many men to their death.'



8.

CHEER FOR THE UNDERDOG

The English don't like winners. England's greatest sporting hero is still Eddie 'the Eagle' Edwards, a ski-jumper who competed in the 1988 Winter Olympics. Mr Edwards' thick glasses constantly fogged up as he attempted the jumps, rendering the piste invisible. He came last in all his events, gaining the love and respect of his countrymen.

In more recent years the nation fell for the journalist John Sergeant, who competed on the television show *Strictly Come Dancing*. He proved so inept at the Terpsichorean art (dragging his dancing-partner supine across the floor) that he was consistently placed last by the judges; yet week after week the public voted to keep him on the show. Mr Sergeant finally resigned, saying: 'The trouble is that there is now a real danger that I might win the competition. Even for me that would be a joke too far.'

The English traditionally admire 'pluck' over skill. If someone performs with tenacity despite a lack of talent, the English instinctually feel they deserve at least as much credit as someone who performs merely well; this is a phenomenon related to the high value English place on 'playing the game' (see above). The English also prioritize humour in any social situation, and incompetence is simply more valuable, as a source of humour, than competence. And the English have pretension-phobia. They are allergic to pomposity and self-importance, and in these circumstances anyone who seems determined to make a fool of themselves is cheered as a hero.

9.

JUDGE PEOPLE AS SOON AS THEY OPEN THEIR MOUTHS

The English class system is founded, more than anything else, on the way people speak. Clipped vowels and crisply pronounced 't's at the ends of words are upper class ('rightt!', 'whott?', 'nightt nightt!'), while elongated diphthongs and glottal stops are lower class ('raigh", wo", 'nu-naigh"). The middle classes, as the name befits, fit somewhere in the middle, and are thus the object of contempt from both directions. The situation is complicated by the various regional accents and the degree to which these are either a pleasant brogue or an impenetrable bog to outsiders.

For the English, life is phonological warfare. Too 'upper' and people will assume you're looking down your nose at them; too 'lower' and people will assume you're thick or have a chip on your shoulder; too

'middle' and people will assume you're wheat-intolerant and keep llamas. A Fair Treatment at Work Survey by the Department of Trade and Industry in 2007 found that accent was cited as a cause of unfair treatment more often than sex, race or religion. And it's not just pronunciation: vocabulary also matters terribly. The most treacherous words are those that distinguish the middle classes from the upper-middles or uppers: the middles say 'pardon?', 'serviette', 'dinner', 'lounge' and 'dessert', while the uppers say 'what?', 'napkin', 'lunch', 'sitting room' and 'pudding'.

There's no escape. A homeless drunken tramp is still upper class if he speaks like an Air Vice Marshal. A plasterer who has made millions and lives in a stately home is still working class if he can't pronounce his 't's. And wherever they go and whatever they do, each will still immediately be pegged by what they call the final course of a meal.

10.

LOVE AND HATE SCOTLAND

The English love the Scots. They are a proud race, fearless, outspoken, clever and industrious. The height of English Scotomania was probably the early nineteenth century, when the novels of Walter Scott and the poetry of Robert Burns enjoyed immense popularity in England, and when the myth of the tartan-clad, caber-tossing, clan-belonging Scot was created. This cult of Scotland was much tied up with the Romantic movement and the new primacy given to folk tradition, wild landscape and Celtic twilight.

However, the English also hate the Scots. They are a barbarous race, mean, weaselly, pernicious and unclean. Samuel Johnson was one of the wittiest anti-Caledonians. 'The noblest prospect which a Scotsman ever sees,' he asserted, 'is the high road that leads him to England.' In his *Dictionary* he defined 'oats' as 'a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.' Charles Lamb –

a Romantic notwithstanding – was another. He said: 'I have been trying all my life to like Scotsmen, and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair.' Another (there's no shortage) was the English clergyman Sydney Smith, who described Scotland as: 'That garret of the earth, the knuckle-end of England, that land of Calvin, oat-cakes and sulphur.'

These two attitudes, of Scotophilia and Scotophobia, dwell simultaneously in the soul of every English person.

The Scots themselves do not suffer from a similar schizophrenic attitude. They despise the English outright.

11.

RESIST ANY DEFINITION OF ENGLISHNESS

John Julius Norwich, the distinguished English writer and historian, said about English identity that 'what is quintessentially English is not bothering about it.' Anyone, then, who seeks to assert the existence of English characteristics is indulging in an un-English activity (which means that this book is quintessentially un-English). If he is right, we must conclude that Englishness is defined to an extent by its absence, or even more paradoxically, by its undefinability.

Why should this be? Perhaps for two reasons. Firstly, English people are temperamentally self-effacing about their national identity because in the past that identity has so ruthlessly and successfully stamped itself on the globe (the Empire, the industrial revolution, inventing all the sports, etc). Secondly,

Englishness, to the English, is always more intelligible by what is *past* – Englishness is always 'lost'; what we have in the present is always a sad falling-off from a previous state of affairs. This is quite understandable in the context of a nation that once ruled a quarter of the globe, but it runs rather deeper than that, and expresses itself in a sort of temperamental nostalgia which imbues much of English poetry, even poetry of the period when English power was at its zenith. Here the elegiac note is repeatedly struck, as in Rupert Brooke's 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester':

> Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
> And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
> Deep meadows yet, for to forget
> The lies, and truths, and pain?… oh! yet
> Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
> And is there honey still for tea?