Understand England

England Today

Events in recent times have been seismic for the English. For decades as Scottish and Welsh nationalism gained ground, the English seemed to become less certain about their own identity. But in 2016 the country had the chance to define itself – facing a referendum vote on either remaining an integral part of Europe or breaking away. The country, technically, made a clear call to leave. But the detail revealed a divided England, and the long-term consequences remain opaque.

Best on Film

Brief Encounter (1945) Classic tale of buttoned-up English love affair.
My Beautiful Laundrette (1985) Touching and comic study of racism and homophobia in Thatcher-era London.
War Horse (2011) Rite-of-passage story of a young man surviving WWI.
Pride (2014) Comic, compassionate depiction of lesbian and gay activists raising money for families hit by the UK Miners' Strike (1984-5).
Suffragette (2015) Compelling account of the pre-WWI fight to secure votes for women.

Best in Print

Notes from a Small Island (Bill Bryson; 1995) It's dated, but this American's fond take on British behaviour is a classic, and still spot on today.
The English (Jeremy Paxman; 1998) A perceptive take on the national character.
The Rotters Club (Jonathan Coe; 2001) Growing up in the 1970s, amid strikes, IRA bombings and punk rock.
Watching the English (Kate Fox; 2004) A fascinating field guide to the nation's peculiar habits.
A Week in December (Sebastian Faulks; 2009) A state-of-the-nation satire on 2007 London life.

English or European?

On 24 June 2016, England awoke to monumental news. By a slim referendum vote the UK had opted to leave the EU, cutting ties stretching back 43 years. Within hours of the 'Brexit' result the prime minister, David Cameron, who'd campaigned to remain within the EU, announced his resignation. The pound fell to its worst level for 31 years; the FTSE 100 share index fell to an eight-year low.

The result mattered so much because since 1973 English and EU laws and procedures had become intertwined, from migration to trade, from fishing to human rights, from weights and measures to the environment. The closeness of that relationship was a comfort to some but an anathema to others. Remain supporters felt protected by Europe-wide civil rights; Leave campaigners felt Britain's right to shape its own destiny was under threat. For some it was about whether they saw themselves as English or European. These divisions were brought sharply into focus by a fierce, often acrimonious, referendum campaign.

The economy and health service were central issues, but – against the backdrop of a Europe-wide refugee crisis – the real flashpoint was immigration, an issue that's bubbled uncomfortably under the surface of English politics for decades. This time the debate revolved around whether Britain should regain the right to fix levels of immigration from within the EU. One camp argued England didn't have enough resources to cope with more migrants, the other pointed to the ranks of EU workers fulfilling crucial roles. There were bitter arguments over whether levels of migration meant 'Englishness' itself was 'under threat'. For some it was a debate about latent racism, for others it was about sovereignty.

The referendum result was close: 52% to 48%, revealing a country polarised by different views. Some argued the country was freed from the shackles of an ailing EU while others saw a country cast dangerously adrift. The result