

# ENGLAND'S GREEN AND PREJUDICED LAND

**When David James Smith's family moved from London to a quiet Sussex town, the BNP neighbour came as a shock. Yet it was smaller, subtle incidents that dented his faith that his mixed-race children would be treated as equals. His account is a powerful, personal journey into living with racism.**

## Photographs by Steve Schofield

**L**ewes is a genteel town for liberals and libertarians on the edge of the South Downs, so it was quite a surprise to discover that we had been living next door to a neo-Nazi for a year, when we first moved there in the summer of 2005.

Our neighbour on South Way in Lewes where we rented a while after first leaving Fulham, southwest London, never gave us any trouble. He ignored us. He seemed strange, withdrawn, but we were told that was because his wife had died sometime earlier. Nobody mentioned that he was an arch racist. Perhaps they didn't know.

His name – Andy Robertson – came up on the British National Party's membership list when it was published online by a rogue BNP >>>>>





official two years ago. I searched Lewes on the database and there were four members in the town, Robertson among them, but that was not all. He had once been photographed with his schoolgirl daughters and appeared with them on the BNP logo at the head of the party's website. And he was a moderator on a truly horrible racist website in the US, adding poisonous posts — more than 20,000 over the years — under the pseudonym John Joy Tree.

I thought of him on the other side of the wafer-thin walls that separated our semidetached homes, spewing out bile on his computer in the small hours after his daughters were asleep. I wondered if they knew.

I wondered too how he must have felt when the mixed-raced family moved in next door and, more to the point, how we would have felt, had we known who he really was. We will never know now — we eventually moved to a different address in Lewes, and Robertson has recently moved away from the town.

Lewes, if it is famous for anything, is famous for its bonfire societies, loosely based on a tradition of anti-Catholic bigotry. Once a year around November 5, members of the societies dress up in costumes — pirates and all manner of soldiers and warriors — and parade around the streets throwing bangers and chanting “Burn him”. Burn Guy Fawkes, the Pope or any other national or local hate figure who happens to have been produced as an effigy that year. Weirdly, some people still “black up” and march the streets as Zulus.

We decided to move here because multiracial London had not been the perfect place to bring up our family either. We were crowded out by lack of domestic space, a vague unease at the potential for urban crime and a poor selection of local schools. We had three daughters heading for secondary education and a son not far behind them. Mackenzie, my son, now aged eight, was younger and so less well-primed in his own racial origins. It's easy for mixed-race children to get, well, mixed up and unsure of who they are. We wondered how his identity would be shaped in Lewes and worried about his future, in the depressing statistical context that black boys fare worse at secondary school than their white counterparts. As academics have shown, this is less to do with them being not as clever and everything to do with the attitudes of teachers and the system's preconceived idea about them. Racism, in other words.

**T**hese days it is like a cancer for black people, slowly eating away at you — you don't call people racist because they don't like it, they get offended. They don't even like to think about it. They fondly imagine it is no longer a problem and don't mind telling you either.

My wife, Petal, went out for a drink with some local women not long after we moved here. She was the only black woman in the group of course

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(she was born in London to parents of Guyanese origin), she would have to get used to that, but that did not stop one of the gathering telling Petal she had nothing to worry about as “there is no racism in Lewes”.

Petal could see a couple of the other women were embarrassed by this implausible proclamation, but nobody said anything, except they must have discussed it afterwards as yet another woman later said to Petal: “Oh, I heard so and so said there's no racism here...” That's small worlds for you, as we were learning, where not everyone is prepared to put their head above the parapet.

It happened again to Petal that a white woman felt she could reassure her there was no racism in Lewes. She meant well. She might have used the word “coloured”, but of course she meant no harm by that either. She obviously hadn't stopped to think that white is a colour too. Our eldest daughter's dance teacher at the local secondary school also used the word “coloured” to describe black people, a young woman who really ought to know better.

You generally didn't hear people talk like that in Fulham. Lewes is only an hour away on the train, but when you get to the other end that 60 minutes looks more like 60 years. I said to Petal, some time after the move, it's like going back to the 1950s, isn't it, moving to Lewes? No, she said, it's not like the 1950s because in lots of ways Lewes is very cutting edge, with its new school and its “transition town” policies and its radical traditions and its very own pound notes. She was



**LEWES IS FAMOUS FOR  
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LOOSELY BASED ON ANTI-  
CATHOLIC BIGOTRY**

right. Lewes is a modern town, in certain respects, but not always where race is concerned.

There is an important caveat, about all the decent, ordinary, accepting people who abound in Lewes and about how we have found so very many friends among them. It is probably no coincidence, though, that our friends are almost all ex-Londoners, “DFLs” as the locals sometimes disparagingly refer to them — to us. Down From London: not real Lewesians.

There is a local web forum apparently populated by real Lewesians ([www.lewes.co.uk](http://www.lewes.co.uk) — “probably the best place in Sussex for people to live”) where people under cover of pseudonyms fearlessly speak out with crude, sometimes racist opinions on matters of local importance. A thread about commuter-train fares descends into chaos when one contributor calls another a greedy “c\*\*\*” for wanting to work in London. A third contributor is challenged for complaining about the first. Yet another asks if the third is about to “play the race card” and calls them a “f\*\*\*ing idiot”.

When I wrote a couple of paragraphs in the Sunday Times property section about moving to Lewes and finding it twee and white, I set them off. One hoped I would “f\*\*\* off back to





Lewes on bonfire night and (below) a view from its castle walls. Far left: the BNP supporter Andy Robertson, David's former neighbour



London" taking my "stupid Petal" with me, while another offered to have someone come and piss through my letter box. No doubt they will be on there again this morning, after reading this...

I am white myself and can blend in as much as I like, which is not something so readily on offer to Petal or to our four dual-heritage children. Or to all the other, still small but growing, members of Lewes's black-and-minority-ethnic community. After a while, Petal began to feel very visible indeed: people knew her when she didn't

know them. Sometimes they knew one of the other black women in Lewes, and thought that was Petal, an easy mistake to make when you are unused to having to distinguish one black person from another. As time went on, and events took a turn for the worse over the past 18 months, Petal started to feel not just visible but isolated.

When Mackenzie came home from an invite to a friend's for tea and said he didn't want to go there any more because the friend said he'd got big nostrils, that was not great to hear. In fact,

it was devastating, both the idea of his features being racially caricatured and the thought that he might start to internalise that negative image of his appearance.

That's the thing about racism, you see. People want to say it is just ignorance, or petty, or that the claim of it is "political correctness gone mad" or that it doesn't count unless you've been called a nigger — we'll come to that — but it isn't, it's little things, the accretion of them over time, which, if you're not careful, can lead to the wearing down or cancerous erosion of your sense of self.

In America there is an entire academic discipline devoted to racism and its impact. Critical Race Theory says race is at the centre of everything, and even trumps class as a determinant in people's lives. The theory calls all those little incidents — such as telling a seven-year old boy his nostrils are wrong — microaggressions.

Critical Race Theorists are still scarce in Britain and ironically one of its leading exponents, Professor David Gillborn, is white. He has spoken and published widely on race in the UK, notably in education, together with his colleague from the Institute of Education Dr Nicola Rollock, one of the few black academics in Britain.

Depressingly, Gillborn told me that our son was walking around with a bull's-eye on his chest. Rollock agreed, on the basis of her own research. "There's a sense in which there are these pre-conceived ideas in education about you being a troublemaker if you're black, or up to no good if you're black, not to be trusted if you're black. That's not to say there aren't exceptions, but negative perceptions about black people remain part of our daily lives."

As Gillborn said, just because Lewis Hamilton had been excluded from school — before later being reinstated on appeal — and gone on to become a multimillionaire Formula One racing driver did not mean all excluded boys would do the same. Black boys are more likely to be excluded, less likely to do well in exams, more likely to get arrested, more likely to get imprisoned, imprisoned for longer, to live out their lives in poverty... more likely than all other boys, in fact.

Gillborn does a skilful job of demolishing recent claims that white-working-class boys are now even more disadvantaged than their black peers. The statistics on which the claims are based rely on those pupils receiving free school meals, which ignores the number of children who do not receive them — around 87% in England alone — and represents only a small proportion of the working classes of all races. Further, as Gillborn says, there are other studies that suggest white people are more likely to claim benefits — such as free school meals — than other racial groups. As the broader statistics consistently show, black Caribbean boys are always bottom of the heap, and though the Caribbean girls do better, they still do worse than all other girls. Figures from the Institute for Public Policy ►►► 19



Research show the impact of this. It estimates that almost half of young black people aged 16-24 are unemployed compared with 20% unemployment among young white people.

There is little sign of improvement. The latest figures show the four ethnic groups that achieved the lowest number of five A\*-C grades at GCSE — including Maths and English — last year: black Caribbean, Pakistani, non-Caribbean black and dual-heritage, white-and-black-Caribbean. The latter could be Mackenzie, who already seemed to be suffering from others' low expectations of him.

One time, Mackenzie came home from school with the news that a mother had confronted him in the playground after school with an account that he had hurt her son. You do not normally confront other people's children, but go to the parent. He told her he had not committed the offence he was accused of. Well, she said, her son had said otherwise and she actually told Mackenzie she believed he was lying. It turned out her son had not told the truth. At least she had the grace to apologise to Mackenzie.

We saw this in clear terms: a white woman's perception of the tough little black/mixed-race kid who could do with a reprimand and was not to be believed.

On another occasion, Mackenzie was under a desk while he and a second boy cleared up some paper at the teacher's instruction. Mackenzie had a male teacher, part time, that year and the teacher asked him to come out. Mackenzie didn't hear him, the teacher became exasperated and grabbed Mackenzie's leg and yanked him out. Mackenzie came home upset. I went and saw the teacher the next morning. I am so sorry, he said, I don't know what came over me. I should never have done it.

I left the teacher to ponder an explanation, but once again, for me it seemed certain his perception of who or what Mackenzie was had got in the way of normal teacherly conduct.

Our 11-year-old daughter then attended the same school. She has a marvellous head of Afro hair that she refuses to wear out because people comment on it or touch it. Hair is often a problem. It's a novelty for white people when they are unused to seeing black people's hair. All our girls have experienced that. All black or mixed-race girls and women will recognise it.

It might seem nice to be the object of curiosity — what's their problem? They've got a chip on their shoulder, those black and mixed-race girls! But being treated like you are some creature of exotic plumage is not normal or pleasant.

After swimming one day, our 11-year-old was getting out of the pool when her teacher asked her to tie her hair up. The teacher turned to a colleague, making a big circle with her hands to exaggerate the Afro, laughing and saying it had been "all frizzy" last week.

That, I am afraid, wound me up when I heard it. I went to see the headteacher and said, to



## AT BRIXTON'S EVELYN GRACE ACADEMY, ALL PUPILS ARE EXPECTED TO GO ON TO HIGHER EDUCATION

be honest, that teacher's comment was racist. The head was in a mixed-race relationship himself so I knew he would understand. He said he would speak to the teacher.

Next thing, the head comes to me and tells me the teacher does not understand why her comment was racist and would I mind explaining it to her. Could *you* not explain it? I ask. He shrugs in his apologetic manner. So now I am being asked to do the head's job for him. I go to his office and sit there as if I am the head, speaking to the teacher alone. She is of course defensive, but I persist even though I don't really think she gets it.

Our 11-year-old has a little blonde peer with whom she has had an on-off friendship for some-time. One day at school the white friend tells our daughter that another older girl has posted a racist message on Instant Messenger the night before saying how the older girl hates all black people. We know the older girl and her family and doubt the story, which turns out to be untrue. The little blonde then admits she made it all up. But why? She seems to be deliberately homing in on our daughter's vulnerability.

We tell the head, who promises to speak to the little girl's mother. I ask him later how it went and he tells me: "She was having none of it." Having none of what, exactly? The girl admitted it. In procedural terms, according to the school's anti-racism policy this is a "racist incident" and must be logged as such.

Instead of addressing the racist behaviour with the girl or discussing it with our daughter by way of support, the school proposes "friendship coun-

selling" for them both. By this stage there has long since ceased to be any friendship.

Months later, early last summer, there was yet more unpleasantness with this girl and her family and the racist incident was raised. The mother plausibly denied knowing anything about it. The head had apparently never spoken to her and had never recorded it either. So he cannot prove his claim that he really did speak to the mother. I suspect, in fact, he avoided speaking to her because he finds her difficult to confront. Instead, it appears, he fobbed me off with a lie.

**I**t is during and because of this sequence of events that Petal starts to feel isolated — let down by the head, avoiding talking about it to others because there are no black people around to share it with and she doesn't want to have to keep explaining it.

The school makes little or no attempt to celebrate diversity or embrace black history and culture. Why bother, seems to be the position, when there are so few black people. Arguably, of course, the more homogenous the racial mix the more important it is to teach diversity.

When our daughter was having the problem with her hair, her friend told her not to worry, she knew just how she felt. That girl is mixed-race too and her father, Mo, now separated from her mother, has lived in Lewes for many years where he works as a potter. There are, even now, what seems like no more than a handful of black and mixed-race families in Lewes — you very quickly get to know all the rest by sight, even if you don't actually talk to them, though Petal, much to our children's shame, will smile and start a conversation with more or less any passing black person she sees down here. In London, that would have been impractical and ridiculous.

One person we got to know that way was Tony Kalume, who was black African from Kenya and came here with his white English wife four years ago. They have two children. Tony recalled ➤➤➤

early on in Lewes seeing a black man walking towards him and the excited look on the other man's face: wow! Another black man! Tony wondered from then on what kind of place Lewes would be.

All the conversations I had with Tony and others about their lives in Lewes would lead to school, to education... to Tony's son, at the local secondary where his English teacher admitted he had been "surprised" to find that Tony's son was a talented writer. Like our eight-year-old, like other black or mixed-race boys, Tony's son could do "cool" to white people's satisfaction, but being black or mixed-race is not just about being "cool", it is about... well, everything that being any other child was about.

Happily, at Mackenzie's school, the old head retired a year ago and a new head arrived and suddenly it was very different. Within a week or two she had called the staff together and told them there was a problem with race in the school that needed to be addressed. Within a month of her start every pupil had drawn a portrait and written a poem about a black icon. Mandela, Beyoncé, footballers, actors... their images were plastered all over the main corridors. A new race-and-diversity policy was drawn up. As far as we were concerned, the school was transformed.

We wished the new head could take her ideas to the town's moribund secondary school, too, where there is also an outgoing head, who seemed to us a remote, aloof figure, and where, again, black history barely features.

**U**nsurprisingly, in such an atmosphere, our two older daughters at the school often overhear or are subjected to casual racism — microaggressions. On a couple of occasions a pupil tells "nigger" jokes in the playground in front of our 13-year-old. At one stage she has a small group of friends who want to give each other cute nicknames. One wants to call our daughter "chocolate-brown bear". No, says our daughter, you can't call me that, it's racist. The girl doesn't get it — which is bad enough for our daughter — and won't change her mind, which is worse. In the end our daughter walks away from the friendship. She is worn down by what she sees as the constant use of racist language in the playground: "Chinks", "Pakis", "Pikeys" and all varieties of racist jokes. She thinks nobody can do anything to stop it as it is so ingrained in the school's playground culture.

There are so few black pupils at the school that the handful are highly visible, none more so than a young boy who is always getting into trouble and ends up being permanently excluded. I pick up a local paper, the Sussex Express, one day and there is the boy in a mug shot on the front page. He is the lead story because he has been given an Asbo — "Lewes crime spree teen hit with Asbo".

I look at this in dismay. Here in Lewes in 2010 a boy of 14 is being demonised on the front page of the paper and entirely legally. In fact, the mag-



**A BOY OF 14 IS DEMONISED  
ON THE FRONT PAGE.  
I THINK ABOUT MY OWN  
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istrate issuing the Asbo has gone out of his way to call for publicity. There are stocks in the grounds of Lewes Castle, perhaps we should put the boy in there too. That would teach him.

A week after the black boy's appearance on the front page, another Asbo story featured a white miscreant — a man jailed for 13 months. But this story appeared on page five.

The black boy's father pointed this out to me as an example of racist unfairness — but the editor of the paper insisted to me they had done nothing wrong and threatened to sue for defamation if I say he or any of his staff were racist. The paper did subsequently produce a front-page Asbo story featuring another white man, but I am still haunted by the image of that one black boy.

Of course, I am thinking not just about that one demonised boy but about my own son and whether he too will go on being visible and singled out because of his race. Petal says no way is our son going to the local secondary. Let's wait and see, I say, how things will change with a new head. I wonder what might be possible.

I hear of a new school in Brixton, Evelyn Grace Academy, where they are overturning all the old myths about black pupils. Peter Walker, the principal, welcomes me on a visit. It is an extraordinary place, perhaps the most remarkable state school in the country, modelled on high schools on the south side of Chicago. Three-quarters of its pupils are black or mixed-race.

The day begins at 8.30am and ends 90 minutes after most other schools at 5pm. There is more time for study and less time for mischief outside. Mischief in that area readily extends to drugs and violent crime. So far, it has stayed at the door.

Every pupil is expected to go on to higher education after achieving five A\*-Cs at GCSE. Pupils move from class to class in total silence, they never barge about in the corridors. At breaks they are not allowed to form groups of more than six. They all have a book, a paperback in their blazer pocket. At the end of break the staff raise their hands and the pupils line up in single file, taking out and reading their books.

Each pupil, and their parents, has a close relationship with the school. It is like a primary school ethos in that respect. Parents are contacted directly for any problem and know, before their child ever gets to the school, that they are entering into a very demanding arrangement. Remarkably, something like 40-45% of all the pupils have arrived with some kind of statement or supposed diagnosis of special educational needs (SEN) or learning difficulties. The school is finding that many of those issues just fall away as pupils are drawn into the rigid system and discover that it becomes a platform for learning.

Norris Morrissey, who is the school's lead SEN co-ordinator, told me of pupils who had thrown chairs around in class at primary school and threatened primary teachers with knives, but responded positively to the Evelyn Grace regime.

And, in an unanticipated knock-on effect, the school's ethos was having an impact in the community too. On two occasions pupils had been applauded as they walked smartly through Brixton market on a trip. People liked the way the school was overcoming the stigma that sometimes attached to the area.

Just as I was writing this our 13-year-old came home from school and told us about that day's music lesson on West Side Story during which the teacher had spoken of when the "coloured" people came to America. How terrible, and ironic, that a celebrated musical about the tragedy of racism should be taught in such ignorant terms.

I just knew our son Mackenzie would have loved Evelyn Grace and told Walker I would have been proud to have him be a pupil there but, of course, we live in Lewes not Brixton and that would be one hell of a daily school run. We could move back to London, and sometimes that seems like a good idea, but there have been many positive aspects to our move too, mainly involving making good friends, our children included.

Still, there is constant talk between Petal and I of alternative approaches to our children's education — often agonising conversations about what to do for the best, especially about how to save Mackenzie from his statistical destiny.

We can only hope that a bit of Brixton comes to Lewes, and some of that inspirational approach to teaching and overcoming racism in education eventually rubs off round here ■

*David James Smith's latest book, Young Mandela (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £18.99), is out now. It is available at The Sunday Times Bookshop price of £15.19, including p&p. Tel: 0845 2712 135*