

Under Their Skins

Skinheads created one of the most striking youth movements in Britain, and it was primarily defined by terror and racism. But beneath the shaved heads and steel-capped boots lay a more complex reality.

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For a while in the late Sixties and early Eighties, Britain fostered a youth cult so iconic in its imagery, and so threatening in its pose, that we remain ashamed of it decades later. Steel-capped boots and jeans with back pockets shaped by sharpened metal combs: that was the look, all aggravation and bristle, the terror at station platforms and football terraces and corner shops. Fashion is about many things - money, humiliation, fitting in and sticking out - but until skinheads showed up it was rarely about menace.

And now the menace is back, as unfashionable as ever and ripe for rehabilitation. There aren't so many skinheads on British streets any more, and, like punk, the cult has been exported, occasionally with comic results, to Europe, the United States and the Far East. But new interest is emerging - an exhibition, the reissue of classic books, and a striking film called *This Is England*, the latest work from director Shane Meadows. The movie, a classic rites-of-passage saga, is most memorable for its performances and its look, and for the near-perfect recreation of the oddest of cults. It is the first truly empathetic skinhead film that neither glorifies nor condemns the tribe, and places its conflicts of comradeship, masculinity, music, hormones and extreme-right politics in a fully realised setting, the summer of 1983, with Britain searching for identity in the shadow of the Falklands and Margaret Thatcher's tireless dismantling of community. If you lived through it, you will recognise it.

You may not, however, recognise the humanity of its subjects. These days, the word skinhead can conjure images only of hatred and racism, but that is our problem. How it came to be a problem is instructive, and tells us something about the power of imagery, and the nature of our prejudices.

'Skinhead's a way of life, a culture I live by,' says a present-day skinhead called Pan on the website skinheadnation.com ('A true family of brothers and sisters that spans the globe'). 'It's about having pride in the way I look, it's about working for my living, earning everything I get. It's about the second family I have with my mates on the street, about being true to the values that I learnt, the honour code. It's the truest culture because you're talking about the real people, the working people, the poor people. To outsiders, we represent the scum of the earth, but we know better. We know that we are the part of the greatest youth cult of all time, and nobody can ever take that away from us. It

really is us against the world, and as we know all too well the world doesn't stand a chance.'

From where does his honour code spring? The marines were called skinheads in the Second World War, but the term was first applied to British youth towards the end of the Sixties. The 'h' was silent - skin'ead, the description that stuck after its rivals - 'peanuts', 'cropheads', 'boiled eggs', 'skulls' fell away. The style - particularly the hair, the clean lines of Ben Sherman shirts and braced Levi's, the Doc Martens Air Wear shoes and boots, the rat-tail hair and miniskirt for girls - derived directly from the gang end of the mod movement; younger brothers taking the fashion further and harder, eventually on to the football terraces with improvised household weapons. Amphetamines, the staple of the mod all-nighter, were popular, augmented by cannabis and solvents. Like the clothes, the music couldn't have been more removed from hippiedom: skinheads plundered the Jamaican dancefloor and adopted rude-boy tastes of bluebeat and ska. The tribal gatherings at Brighton and Southend presented a dilemma: who were the skins actually up against, beyond broad authority? By the height of glam in 1972, skinheads had run out of stomping ground.

When they returned in the late Seventies, they had their own style manual. This was not something one might have anticipated from an anti-fashion movement that made things up as it went along, but Jim Ferguson's Fashion Notebook confirmed just how seriously the toughs took their stitching. At times it reads like the shipping forecast: 'Suit jackets single breasted, button three, very high buttoning - sometimes button four, or even button five. Ever increasing pocket flaps (up to 4 inches or beyond).' Their trousers, worn short to display boots, lengthened from 18 inches in 1969 to 19ins or 20ins by 1971. Levis were dominant in London, but Wrangler, slightly wider and pre-shrunk, were big in the Midlands. The use of spattered bleach came in in 1969.

Ferguson's guide also had an instructive list of 'habits'. 'Girls practising dance steps in twos at bus stops, with thumbs in the air... wearing hankies in the ends of your boots because you'd bought them two sizes too big... keeping your hands deep in your jeans pockets because your braces are too tight and your balls are separating... running in a clump through a crowded station, like the Bash Street Kids, keeping perfect time with chant and clap... having a fat youth in your crew...'

The skinhead revival came in with a darker shadow. 'Paki bashing', though not confined to skinheads, was prevalent, a gang mentality fuelled by unemployment and deprivation. And there was a fatal link with the Oi! movement, a fiercely working-class, predominantly East End collection of bands including the Cockney Rejects, Angelic Upstarts, Skrewdriver, the Last Resort and the 4-Skins. These were not media-friendly groups, and their confused disaffection swiftly transformed them - in the public eye at least - into a musical version of Alf Garnett: nationalistic, defensive, bunkered in with a victim mentality. Racist clashes marred several shows, a skinhead with a swastika appeared on the cover of a compilation album, and it became difficult to think of Oi! as anything beyond the soundtrack to the National Front. Many of the bands swung completely the other way - anti-racist, pro-

Communist - but skinheads have always struggled with public relations. So Top Shop never embraced their wardrobe the way it did punk and the new romantics; the bigger bands skinheads followed, including Madness and Sham 69, were swift to disown them as soon as they became successful. In many ways, this was ideal; no one liked them and they didn't care, or at least they didn't care until they couldn't move without police searches and accusations that they were all Nazis.

Shane Meadows' film shares its title with an astute essay by the cultural critic Dick Hebdige. Its full title, *This Is England And They Don't Live Here*, comes from a comment made by an East London skin called Mickey, a quote that began with the classic line, 'Don't get me wrong - I've got a lot of coloured friends. And they're decent people. But they've got their own culture. The Pakistanis have a culture, it's thousands of years old. But where's our culture? Where's the British culture?'

Hebdige confirms that the stripped-down skinhead style was as self-conscious and studied as anything that had preceded it. 'Just watch the way a skinhead moves. There is a lot of lapel twitching. The head twists out as if the skin is wearing an old-fashioned collar that's too tight for comfort.' He observed the cigarette tip turned inwards in the palm, brought down from the mouth in an exaggerated arc. He saw them always 'jumping out of the frame', alert to provocation and eager to defend what little they had (and what they perceived was being taken from them by Asians and other immigrants.)

These days Hebdige is a professor in the art and film studies departments at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and now he equates the stance adopted by skinheads in the late Seventies with a more recent phenomenon. 'In the end,' he tells me by email, 'I think it's about humiliation, to be frank: the matrix of humiliation is an obvious but all too often neglected condition that's driving many of the more violent/extreme contemporary cultural and political phenomena in our era. I don't think you can understand what motivates a Palestinian suicide bomber any more than you can a blood and honour Asian-stomping skin without taking humiliation into account as a major motivating factor.'

Hebdige supports a theory put forward by the East End youth worker Phil Cohen: the original skinheads from the Sixties hankered for a traditionalist prewar Britain and the working-class lifestyle of their fathers, distantly wary of the new European alliances that threatened a magnificent isolation. In the second wave, nostalgia for a golden age was replaced by a desire to shock and bully, and to drink and laugh.

Hebdige says that these days 'the style tends to look more like part of an international white power movement, though I may be wrong. It may well be a lot more complicated than that, but it's certainly more difficult in 2007 than it was a few decades ago to adopt the skinhead style "innocently", that is, without invoking the equation most everybody nowadays - white and non-white people alike - makes between skins and right-wing racist activism. Spectacular youth subcultures are all about bending signs this way or that, but my sense is you'd have to be really determined, really smart and really

perverse nowadays to set out to appropriate skin style for something other than a xeno-homo-non-white-phobic ideology.'

'I was so intense about being a skinhead, to me it was final,' says Gavin Watson, a former skinhead from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. 'Anybody who grew their hair for work or their girlfriend was severely mentally impaired. I would be downtown and see an older skin growing his hair for some reason or another, I would feel very disappointed. I could not understand how one could ever not be a skinhead once the step had been taken.'

Watson, who is 41, is a more reliable witness than most. On the floor of his Brighton flat is a large black case containing a few hundred photographs. 'There are many, many more,' he says. 'I've got 5,000 printed and 10,000 in all.' The living room windows are open with a view of the sea, and Watson is wearing an Adidas woollen cap and loose-fitting black work-out clothes. He is muscular, tattooed, and illustrates his speech with such animated, large hands that you think he may be wrestling an invisible animal. He calls his black case The Box of Death, and he goes through his photos with a mixture of delight and dread. 'That's John... that's Lee... he went mad... he went off the rails on heroin. That's Duncan. He died when a PA [an amplifier] fell on him.'

Watson says eight of his friends were dead by the time he was 23. By then his camera, an unwieldy Mamiya RB67 in brown and gold, was four years old, and paired with his Nikon had captured a scene in High Wycombe that Watson's admirers claim to be the single most complete depiction of an English youth movement in existence.

Watson photographed from the inside, the only member of a provincial and isolated gang with a camera, only occasionally aware that his friends were part of a larger moment. His work shows a different view from the one we may be used to. Some of his photographs are funny, some are tender, some are domestic. Many of them show skinheads smiling, others display a great vulnerability: young boys struggling for their place in an adult world. If there is aggression it is playful and uncertain. And in the background sits an unbeautified England of the Eighties, a harsh depiction of extreme disunity.

'That's Neville, my brother,' Watson says. 'Three years younger. The girls thought he was the sweetest little thing, and I have to admit we used him as bait when we cruised round town. And I love this one,' he says, holding an image of a young skinhead in a German uniform, Sieg-Heiling. 'The odd thing is, one week before that he was a punk. I think there were only about 30 Nazi skinheads in London. But they tarred everything. Young skinheads were recruited by the BNP, but most weren't because they didn't care about politics. Skinheads just went where other skinheads went. If they voted at all, most voted Labour.'

Watson's own skinhead allegiance began in 1979, when he was 14. He returned to his house after the usual post-school misbehaviour on his estate to find his parents watching Madness on Top of The Pops perform their single, 'The Prince'. 'I had to have that record,' Watson remembers. 'This guy here [he

points to a black friend in a photograph] nicked it for me the next day, and I played it until it was worn. But if Madness had been mods I would have become a mod.'

He has written an unfinished account of his skinhead life, a vigorous record of his experiences with girls and violence and extreme boredom, and it contains several doomed attempts to explain the appeal. 'I truly believed it was a way of life, and that being a skinhead was not just about clothes and style but something that went so deep, a connection. It's like being in love: you just can't explain it.'

Watson's romanticism, unmissable in his photographs, permeates his written account. There are many schoolgirl crushes, and deep feelings of inadequacy. His parents were unhappy with their lives, and there is an unspoken quest for role models among his friends from abusive homes. His writing, available on his MySpace site, offers a raw and unexpected reflectiveness, and it brings an apology: 'Well there I was,' he writes, 'surrounded by 50 Pakis with knives. I had a glue bag in one hand and a tool in the other, the swastika I had freshly tattooed on my head was still hurting a bit but I was ready for a ruck... There, that's better, that should please the readers expecting stories of Nazi nights of passion, ultra violence and hard men who bowed to no one. Well I'm sorry, but I always looked upon myself as a shy, sensitive human being, who if I had the chance would have lived a more stress-free life, not needing to be tough, fight, feel scared most of the time. Damaged goods, that's how I look at it.'

Some of Watson's images have been collected in a book called *Skins*, which is now out of print. Its mood has frequently been appropriated by other photographers and many magazines, to the point where the book has become a cult in itself. The hip youth culture magazine *Vice* recently commissioned Watson to take some new pictures, and introduced them thus: 'We've always loved Watson's photos and would often gaze out the window going, This guy is amazing and he hasn't shot anything for years.' The magazine asked him what he'd been doing since *Skins*. 'The last eight years I've been in the pub,' Watson said. 'Thankfully I'm out of it now.'

His skinhead book was not the first. The celebrated fashion photographer Nick Knight took pictures in the East End, and their publication in the Omnibus Press book *Skinhead*, which also contained Dick Hebdige's 'This is England' essay, was the cause of some resentment in High Wycombe. '[It was] a book I never really liked,' Watson observes, 'because I felt I had taken better photographs even though I was only 15. And also he wasn't a real skin, [but] jumping on the bandwagon. Sour grapes on my part really.'

When skinheads grew their hair, Watson turned his camera towards the Summer of Love, but he knows that rave photographs will not be his legacy. He is now keen to take pictures of the Muslim skinheads of Malaysia. 'I promise you they exist,' he says. 'I often think, how did we get from our little gang to this?' Recently he has photographed some young skins in Southend, but they resemble a catwalk version of their inspiration: they are suedeheads at best. 'What began as a style soon became a myth,' Watson concludes. 'And the myth soon became more convincing than the truth.'