

Bed and Breakfast

by David Chandler

Wandering through the countryside of West Sussex, about fifty miles to the south west of London, is to discover a corner of England that appears supremely untroubled and at ease with itself. The rhythms of life here seem finely tuned, the pace is slow and a reverence for the past, and for what is accepted as tradition, dictates the forms and textures of the social present. For in this rolling, green and pleasant land, history is constantly restored, renewed and reinvented. Not only as a model of taste and respectability but also as an emblem of resistance against (what is perceived to be) other less stable realities played out elsewhere in contemporary Britain.

But attempts to mould the inevitable changes that time and progress bring into ever newer versions of what might be called the 'modern past', to absorb them into the mature, well worn fabric of rural life, gives a strange, uncertain surface to this reality; a tension that is often visible in the buildings and objects that we might encounter here. And, in West Sussex, these encounters are likely to be frequent, because for a rural county there is little room for the open, uninterrupted communion with nature we might expect to find. Here, out in the countryside, it is difficult to find a place where the faint murmur of traffic does not break into our experience of the landscape with the suggestion of invisible boundaries and divisions.

This is a place where land and property are particularly highly valued, and personal territories are heavily contested. Its atmosphere of rural calm stems in part from the sense that space and time are under control, part of a natural order impervious to change. But over the next fifteen years or so this order may be increasingly under threat. As thousands of new homes are built in West Sussex to accommodate population growth and migration to the prosperous South East - nearly sixty per cent of which will be on so-called 'greenfield sites' - the tensions between past and present, between preservation and change, are likely to become more and more acute.

Susan Lipper's recent series of photographs of West Sussex, entitled *Bed and Breakfast*, has emerged from this particular time and place and reflects some of its incongruities and contradictions. *Bed and Breakfast* is the fourth of PhotoWorks' Country Life commissions, a project initiated by curator Val Williams in 1995 when she was invited to devise a series of artists' commissions which would take as their starting point the historic collection of photographs made by West Sussex photographer George Garland from the late 1920s to the 1960s. Working from Petworth, Garland made thousands of photographs during this period, some were portraits taken in his small wooden studio, others were made while travelling around the Sussex countryside to weddings, village fêtes, village hall theatricals or political meetings. As Val Williams has said: "Collections of photographs like Garland's represent history in an immediate and poignant way. They show life 'as it was', and in the flurry of the modern world, they can offer a reassuring picture of a more placid society. We invest old photographs with our longings for what we perceive as a more settled and more structured way of life. The challenge of the Country Life series is to accept the presence of the Garland archive without being overwhelmed by it, to accept that the story it tells is a partial one."

Like George Garland, Susan Lipper is attracted by the small, seemingly insignificant details of everyday life that may normally go unnoticed, yet which often accurately suggest common values and habits. But unlike Garland, who saw these details as signs of coherence, accepting the familiar as a measure of stable and enduring traditions, Lipper's more acerbic, restless vision sees West Sussex as an alien and at times disturbing place.

Susan Lipper is an American photographer based in New York and her view of English rural life is that of an outsider, someone unfamiliar with its codes and customs. The photographs in *Bed and Breakfast* make up a diaristic account of her travels in West Sussex during the summer of 1998 and to an extent follow her attempts to understand what she sees, to find some connecting narrative that might be hidden in the hotel rooms, gardens, caravan parks and heritage sites she visits. But these connections are never quite made, instead Lipper's small details and fragments of events and scenes remain disconnected as

though part of some indecipherable language or ritual. So, for example, when she focuses on a black cab parked in a caravan site or empty picnic tables at a garden centre, the mundane become curious and disquieting.

There is a nagging sense of discomfort, too. The compressed space of West Sussex is further chopped up and rearranged by Lipper's photographs. Crossed lines, paths and oblique perspectives contribute to the feeling of being hemmed in. There seems no space to move and no easy way out. Even an English garden, the home of placid order, is framed as a jarring knot of odd angles and sections. Inside, too, creature comforts are often found to be oppressive. Hotel rooms are overladen with fussy decoration, and as Lipper's camera ranges through the rooms and over the fringes, frills and flowered surfaces, the neat and tidy becomes the unsettled and unsettling. Soft toy heaven is transformed into a kind of cloying nightmare of fake domesticity.

This material is uncharted territory in the iconography of post-war photography, that searched - at least in intention - for more durable and gritty subject matter. Here, Lipper's attention is consciously fixed on the veneer, the shallow surface of things so tenuously held together, but in doing this she manages to trace something essential, too, in these murky partitioned corners of our culture. Her incredulity leads her to uneasy and perhaps unanswerable questions. How, for example, can a typical bed and breakfast image of a kettle and a tea cup perched on convenience shelving penetrate into the complex web of the English psyche so effectively as it does here?

As we turn the pages of this book, these surroundings seem an increasing irritant for Lipper, a strain on her sense of perceptual logic. Darker elements of desperation and longing further undermine the fragile decorum: the word 'sex' is painted in nail varnish on a bathroom door, disembodied hands grope towards divine light, and the Jubilee Guest House sign looks like an ominous invitation to a scene of horror. While Lipper is the respectful traveller, the good mannered voyeur who finds most of this amusing, she undercuts the smile with a sense of mild panic and encroaching madness.

However, we would be wrong to assume that Susan Lipper's photographs lead to any definite conclusions, nor can we successfully speculate on a well defined attitude here; are the pictures uniformly critical or just quizzical, are they funny or sad. Perhaps they encompass all these things. In the end Lipper's account of West Sussex is an entirely subjective one, it is her response to a particular formation of English country life. Others will inevitably see things differently. It is also an open-ended account: a series, not a sequence, with no natural beginning and no end. Whereas George Garland's photographs tend to express time as an ordering principle, dictating rhythms of work and life that are cyclical rather than linear, Lipper's work, in its instability and uncertainty, offers a sense of time falling forward, where things appear more contingent, out of order, and collide in irregular patterns. The photographs in *Bed and Breakfast* could be seen as random images taken from another archive, one as equally wide ranging as Garland's but responsive to a new tempo in the countryside and more at ease with its contradictions.

David Chandler is a writer, curator and editor. He was Assistant Curator of Photography at the National Portrait Gallery, London (1982-1989); Head of Exhibitions at The Photographers' Gallery, London (1991-1995); Projects Manager at the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) (1995-1997); and, from 1997 to 2010, Director of Photoworks, Brighton. He has written widely on photography and the visual arts for many books and journals and is currently Professor of Photography at the University of Plymouth.