

# Great Britons

In his new book, **Peter Dench** talks to 12 key British photographers. He reveals his insights into figures at the frontline of contemporary British photography to **Oliver Atwell**

The scene is London and we're sitting in the basement studio of Southwark Street's Blue Fin Building. Ahead of me sits photojournalist Peter Dench, lit by two small lights and watched by the beady black eyes of two video cameras. The first thing that hits you about Dench is his unwavering confidence in front of the camera, even in the face of questions that other photographers would find uncomfortable (at one point he refers to me as a silent sniper). He's a seasoned pro at this game. His eyes stay fixed on mine and he often gesticulates with his hands like a politician striving to reassure you that your local library is definitely not under threat and children are our future.

Dench is here to talk about his new book, *Great Britons of Photography Vol. 1: The Dench Dozen*, a thoroughly unconventional

collection of interviews that finds Dench rubbing shoulders and, more often than not, getting more than a little inebriated, with figures such as Chris Floyd, Anastasia Taylor-Lind, Harry Borden and Martin Parr. Dench comfortably sits within this selective pantheon. In fact, he even finds space to include himself in the book.

For the past 20 years, Dench has made a name for himself as a photographer who uses his images to explore Englishness. His projects have taken him into the booze-drenched streets to create a visual archive of England's sometimes troubling relationship with drinking. He's followed his countrymen abroad to see just what happens when the British mentality lands on foreign shores. His work is sometimes funny. His work is sometimes serious. His work, as with much photojournalism and reportage, is necessarily political.

Recently, Brexit has been very much on the man's mind, and he has produced items for *Channel 4 News*. Dench has worked in more than 60 countries, but Britain is very much his home, his muse and his canvas.

However, he's not alone.

Britain is home to a plethora of distinctive and successful photographers, and it was with this in mind that Dench wanted to do something to start cataloguing these individuals. These encounters with Dench's fellow photographers were more an attempt by him to learn about the people behind the images. It was only later, as the interviews began to build up, that the idea of a book revealed itself.

'The idea came about because photography is very competitive,' says Dench. 'It's a very selfish medium, and necessarily so. But when I reached my forties, I started looking around and thinking, "Well, they're not going away." Photographers such as Martin Parr and Brian Griffin are still producing great work. Rather than dismissing these

people and seeing them as competition, I thought that perhaps I should put myself in their company and find out what makes them tick. How are they working? How are they surviving? Every photographer is unique. I wanted to explore this notion.'

Dench's approach to his subjects differs from the standard dry Q&A or academic discourses we so often find in writings about photography. Dench's instinct to uncover a story is an organic process that applies as much to his interviewees as it does to his photographic work: he arrives at a location; he looks at the details; he hunts around and covers as much as he can. 'As a photographer, I understand both the highs and lows,' Dench says. 'But we only ever tend to hear about the highs – the exhibitions, the awards. I wanted to show that's not always the case.'

**Above: Mitch Pyle in a limo with friends on his birthday. Image by Jocelyn Bain Hogg**

**Far left: Image by Chris Floyd**

**Left: Girls prepare to be seen by international scouts during a Noah Models International casting that was held in a cultural centre in the Sovetsky Rayon suburb of Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia. Image by Anastasia Taylor-Lind**

Often photographers are living day-to-day and trying to survive.' What's particularly interesting to see in the interviews is that each of the photographers has come via wildly different paths. Some are from affluent backgrounds. Others are from more modest backgrounds. But that doesn't matter. What's consistent in each of his subjects is the undying drive to succeed. 'What I found consistently is that there is no definable route to success. There were no words of wisdom,' he says. 'But what was there was a unifying drive to keep making work and to ensure their success. Marcus Bleasdale is a good example. He has an absolute commitment to documenting human rights issues that is absolutely unflappable. As a photographer, I was able to draw inspiration from that and feed it into my own view.'



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Keen readers will note that the book has been labelled as Volume 1. According to Dench, there are various reasons for this. 'First of all, if any photographers got upset that they weren't included, I can always say this is only the first volume,' he says. 'Also, if I call it Volume 1, then a publisher has an incentive to publish a second book. This first book took five years from pen to press. That's because it was a labour of love and I had to find funding. That's how these things work. But if someone gives me funding, I can get the next one done in six months. I'm the kind of person who likes to get things done, get it out there, see if it succeeds and then try something else. That said, I still don't know if there will be a second volume. I've actually approached three photographers. One said no, the second didn't reply and the other is up for it. So, who knows?'

**The photographic eye**

Dench has been working in photojournalism for around two decades. It's been a process of learning, not just about his craft but also about the people he encounters daily. So often we hear the term photojournalism banded around, but what exactly do we mean by that term? In Dench's experience, what makes a successful photojournalism project?

'For me, the aim is to have something to say,' he says. 'If I can make someone smile, make them think and ultimately affect change,

A young gymnast practising her leaps at Wuhan School of Sport where dozens of children with sporting potential are trained. China, July, 1993. Image by Tom Stoddart



**'Have something to say, decide how to say it and then say it better than anyone else'**

twists his mouth slightly. 'I don't know if I find the English appealing,' he says, smiling wryly. 'I've worked in over 60 countries, but England is my home. The country is my passion and its people are the ones I want to understand the most. We are a curious nation, one that is developing geographically and socially. It's extreme but accessible. It would be an error for me to not have an interest in it.'

When I ask Peter to identify the unifying theme throughout his work, the answer should be obvious to anyone familiar with his work. It is, he says, an important tool in his photography. 'Humour can be used to lead a viewer on a very particular path,' Dench says. 'However, it's very difficult to get right. If I showed you 10 pictures of disease and decimation, you'd know what the next set of pictures are going to be. It's much more affecting to disarm someone with humour and then throw in some more serious images. So, for example, I take that attitude with me when I'm travelling in America as well as a general enthusiasm for wherever I happen to find myself. I suppose I have a certain naiveté. For the *Dench Does Dallas* book, I was going out at 7 or 8am and shooting for 12 or

**DENCH'S KIT**



'I like to work quickly and without fuss. The kit that I use at the moment is an Olympus outfit. Generally, I just use fixed lenses – the 35mm, the 50mm or equivalent of. What I want from a camera is to capture what I see as quickly, flawlessly and fuss-free as possible. For me, the Olympus OM-D range does that exceptionally well. I want something aesthetically pleasing that people feel happy to have pointed at them. Something that's a bit more conversational. I started with a Mamiya 6 and 7 and these weren't commonly seen cameras. That was an icebreaker in various situations. I think I should point out I'm an Olympus Visionary, by the way.'

then I've succeeded. On another level, I have to think about what I want from an exhibition, a magazine spread or a book. I want to take the viewer on a journey through the emotions, ranging from laughter to despair. And ultimately what I want to do is create an anthropological legacy. That sounds very grand, but that's what, in my mind, a photojournalist has to do. The reportage I did on [the book] *Alcohol & England*, I don't think will ever be repeated. That was a 10-year reportage of a time when I believe the English were drinking quicker, longer, younger and more cheaply than ever before. I have seen a change away from that since I finished that work. Again, with *The British Abroad*, maybe cheap travel will end, and that will be the definitive visual archive of that time. As a photographer and a photojournalist, you need to have grand ambitions.'

The medium of photography has become a saturated art form, particularly in reportage. Recent years have found smartphones and citizen journalism bleeding into the pages of newspapers, websites and news reports. Standing out has become harder and harder. 'Standing out is certainly as hard as it was five or ten years ago,' says Dench. 'There is one key element, though, and if I heard myself say what I'm about to say 10 years ago, I'd probably have punched myself in the stomach – *you have to be a brand*. You have to be a little more adventurous and savvy about who you are and how you represent yourself because that's how you stand out among the saturation. Have something to say, decide how to say it and then say it better than anyone else.'

**A little inspiration**

One of the most common questions – perhaps *the* most common

question – often asked of artists, novelists and photographers is where their ideas come from. Typically, Dench is unconventional in his answer. Ideas can often come from overheard conversations in pubs. At other times, ideas have come from reading the columns of writers such as Tim Dowling, Jon Ronson and Danny Wallace. At other times, it's simply a case of Dench deciding where he hasn't been, where he wants to go and then thinking about the kind of story he might find there. Currently, his research is focused on the Black Sea and the stories that could potentially reveal themselves there. However, it's for his work in England that he has become so well known. His colourful, humorous and memorable images are the kind that, once seen, can never be forgotten. I ask him why he finds the English such an appealing subject. He arches an eyebrow and



A Man has his Head Shaved, South Beach, Miami. Image by Peter Dench



The Spice Girls.  
Image by Harry Borden

© HARRY BORDEN

## 'In 20 years of photographing boozy Brits, I've only ever been punched in the face once'

➤ 13 hours. I would walk 20km, just taking an interest in the mundane, rather than the more fanciful events.'

### Standing firm

While we as the viewer may see the humour in what Dench does, not everyone is going to see it that way. Time and again we've received letters from readers asking how to deal with confrontation when faced with a subject who objects to the presence of a camera in their personal space. Dench has some advice. 'I'm not ashamed to be a photographer,' he says, confidently. 'I'll never shoot from the hip. I'll never sneak photos. I'm very deliberate in my methods. My camera is always up to the eye and I work very close to the subjects. I think it's very disrespectful to use a zoom lens.'

'I'd rather respond to my subjects if they turn to confront me and I always have a very clear and honest sentence prepared. For example, if they ask me what I'm doing, I'll say, "Hello, I'm Peter

Dench. I'm here to photograph England's relationship with alcohol." Then I'll stop and they'll either say that's fine or they'll say they'd rather they were not included. In that case, I walk away. Fear is generally in the head of the photographer.'

It's with some disappointment that Dench anticipates my next question before I've had a chance to ask it – how many times has he been punched in the face?

'In 20 years of photographing boozy Brits, I've only ever been punched in the face once,' he says, almost proudly. 'That was in Leeds. Ninety-five per cent of people really don't mind being photographed. They have their own lives to lead, their own concerns and enjoyments. They're not that bothered by the presence of a photographer. But if they are, you have to understand that and walk away. At the end of the day, photography is collaboration. And you must always take people's wishes about personal privacy and space into consideration.'



Peter Dench is a photojournalist with more than 20 years of experience in the advertising, editorial, corporate and reportage fields. He has published several books and has won multiple awards. To see more of his work, visit [www.peterdench.com](http://www.peterdench.com). *Great Britons of Photography Vol. 1: The Dench Dozen* is published by Hungry Eye, priced £55.



### Moving forward

With such a strong body of work behind him, it could be easy to imagine Dench is happy to sit on his rump and let life deliver the opportunities. However, as should become clear from the discussion of his book, that's just not how it works. The need, the drive, which was so prevalent in Dench's youth, is as strong now as it ever was. 'Now I'm in my forties, the clammy hand of mortality has started to squeeze,' Dench says, rubbing his shoulder. 'Photographers can sometimes become a little dependent on letting things drag on. You'll sometimes meet them and they'll show you a set of images where they'll say, "I've been working on this for 10 years!" For me now, it's about getting things done, getting it out there, finding a way to close it off and then moving on. I've done my books on Britishness, so now I am trying to explore America and see what I can add to the discussion of that nation. I've done chapters one to three and I'm hoping to complete another two each year going forward for the next five years. On top of that, it will be whatever else comes along. That's the joy of being a photographer!'

