

The people's coastline

There's the beach, and then there's the English seaside. In our photo essay, **Sheila Rock** views it through American eyes, as "a forgotten England"

THE SEASIDE THE English do like to be beside looks different depending on who's doing the looking. "King Lear" conjures up the coast of Albion as a place of epic scale and dizzying perspectives. Vera Lynn made the white cliffs of Dover a wartime symbol of home. There's another coast that is altogether more domesticated and slipshod: bawdy in Donald McGill's postcards, seedy in Graham Greene's "Brighton Rock", gaudy in the Technicolor snaps of Martin Parr.

But these are all English views of England. The English coast comes with a fresh lick of paint in an affectionate new portfolio of photographs by Sheila Rock. An American who settled in Britain 40 years ago, Rock seems still to view her adoptive countrymen through anthropological eyes. And for her, the sea is a kind of magic carpet which transports them back to a magical monochrome yesteryear, a space where the English can get on with the business of being English without the trammelling distractions of digitised modernity. Here is innocence. Here is an absence of affectation and grandiloquence. Here above all is memory – of an era before bucket-shop package holidays, of Victorian leisure, in one striking instance of our early medieval visitors. Rock calls it "a forgotten England".

For her, the collection is a leap into the unknown, culturally but also creatively. She is known for her portraiture, once upon a time in the halcyon days of *The Face* magazine, most recently in her images of Tibetan monks. There are faces aplenty in her snaps of the seaside, mostly of young people discovering this old England for themselves. It's as if she has somehow sculpted them into the landscape, as if her unsmiling juvenile subjects are themselves organic outcrops of the native soil.

The project, before it had any such name or shape, began in East Anglia when she was staying with friends. "I just decided to photo the sea in a very abstract way." Then one >



"I was photographing something else", Sheila Rock says, "and I just chanced upon these children. I happened to be far enough away and on the right lens to get the right dynamic. They were like fairies on the beach." Rock shot only three frames

Sheila Rock found these twins in bright blue caps in a play pond on Canvey Island. "They were so extraordinary-looking. I actually tracked them like a hunter, I have to say. I didn't ask them to do anything or pull faces. The father was quite trendy, the hats are pulled on in an almost trendy way..."



> thing led to another. She kept getting jobs which took her to the coast – North Yorkshire, Cornwall – and started booking her assistant for an extra day or two. The beaches she was used to from childhood were in Hawaii, so she was not prepared for the faded Victorian splendours and the rainbow ranks of beach huts, for windswept pleasure zones offering crazy golf and donkey rides. "Everyone was very friendly and very fat," she recalls, "and they would sit as far away from the edge of the water as possible."

At first she concentrated on the south-eastern seaboard. Friends invited her to prettified Deal and Hastings, and she was lured by the whiff of chip fat and hardcore working-class-ness to Clacton-on-Sea and Canvey Island in Essex. Later she made special pilgrimages to Newquay, Blackpool and Weston-super-Mare, which gave baffling insights into the English relationship with the elements. "I could never understand why they are famous seaside places because they get the worst of the British weather from the Atlantic. I had this idea of photographing the English on the sea in great blistering hot weather in the middle of July and August, and it either poured with rain or was freezing cold."

On her trips Rock lugged three cameras: a lightweight Mamiya 7 for rapid reportage, a tripod-mounted Wista 45 wooden field camera for landscapes, and, less often, the more studio-friendly Hasselblad. But if a chance image presented itself she would use whichever camera was in her hand. Sometimes, particularly when the light was propitious in early morning, she would think only about landscape. The pursuit >



These early-medieval stone graves near Heysham, Lancashire, may be familiar from a Black Sabbath LP cover. For Sheila Rock they evoke many subsequent deaths, including those of the Chinese cockle-pickers in nearby Morecambe Bay in 2004. "When the water comes in, anyone caught gets enveloped by the sea." Viking remains are also found near where St Patrick is said to have landed. "It's hugely atmospheric"



Filey, North Yorkshire, very early one morning: as usual on Rock's summer visits, the sky was putting on a performance. "It added to the bittersweet melancholic feeling. It was a meditative moment. One of the things that draws you to the sea is the tranquillity, and the quality of the light. Whatever sort of person you are, you stand in it and it captures you"

> of the unexpected became an obsession. "I may have walked a mile and a half to come to some place that someone had told me about, and it was so disappointing or the elements weren't right and I'd have to walk a mile and a half back and get nothing."

She would also have "days when I'd look for people". Permission was always sought from adults to photograph children, and if using the plate camera, she could proffer black-and-white Polaroids to barter for their time. Being petite and female helped too. What she discovered, above all in the magnificent image which opens this essay, is that people behave like the weather: they scurry across a photographer's sight lines like clouds scudding overhead, creating unpredictable shapes in relation to landscape and light, ever changing but also never changing, like the seaside itself. - JASPER REES



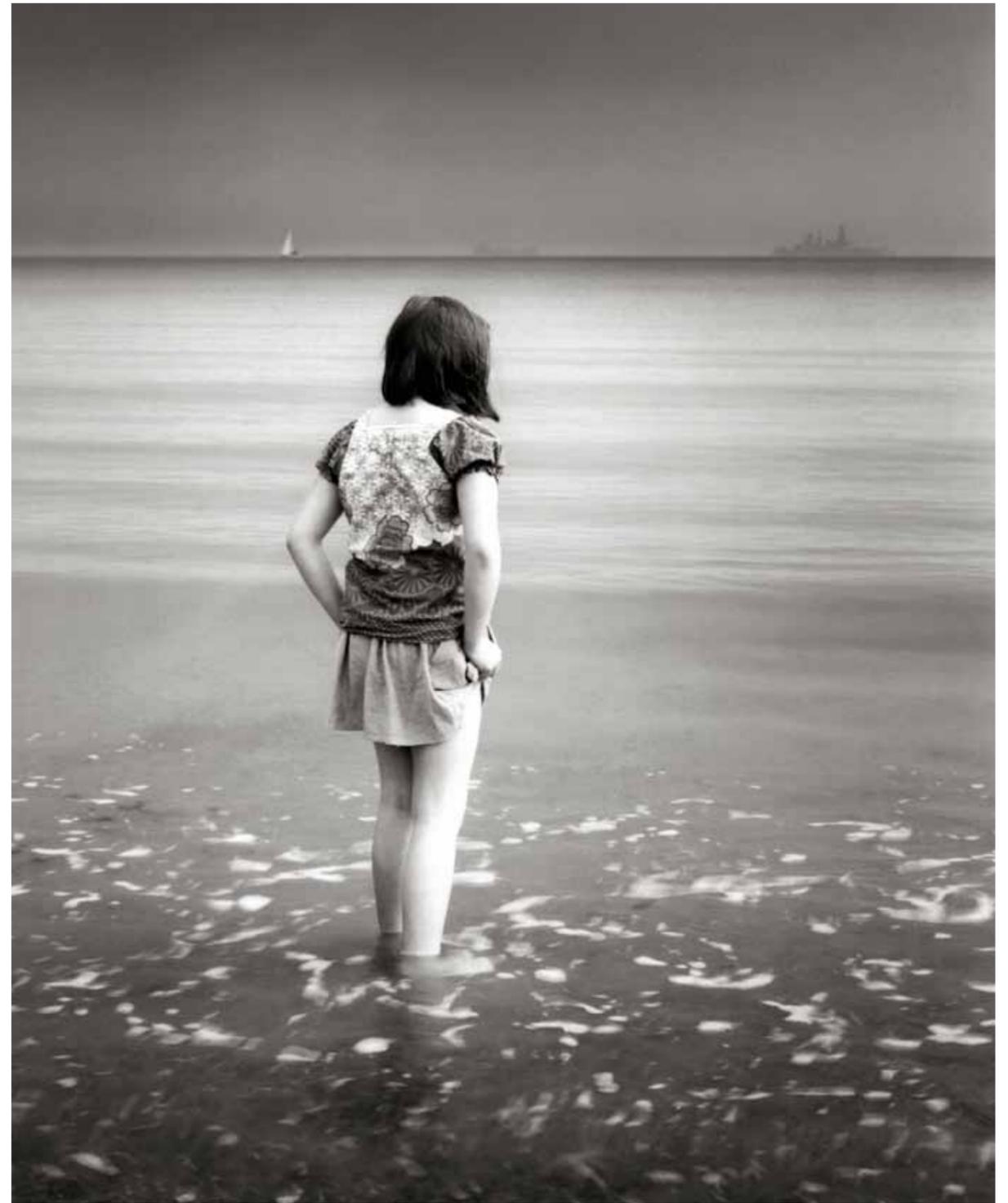
Sheila Rock came across this girl on a jetty north of Clacton-on-Sea, Essex. "What was odd was she was playing, but all kitted out as though she was going to go diving." The girl offered to remove the mask, but Rock asked her to keep it on. The camera was the cumbersome tripod-mounted Wista 45. "She was freezing cold"



Above Rockabilly teenagers in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset. "I just thought they needed to be photographed," Sheila Rock says. "They preened themselves before. I gave the girl a Polaroid – she didn't like it because she thought she was fat, but I think she was beautiful. The boy was trying to be mean and moody, but he was very sweet"

Right These bright beach huts run from Walton-on-the-Naze to Frinton-on-Sea in Essex, and from working-class to chi-chi. "This was done very early in the morning when the tide had gone out," Rock says, "which is why you have the remnants of the sea. I like that little bit of reflection"





Left Filey, in North Yorkshire, was Rock's favourite haunt of all. "I liked the strong light. I got into the graphic nature of the architecture along the coast." With this shot, she captures the contrast between the corrugated sand and the sharp angles of the steps. She likes to think of it as "a classic 1920s picture"

Above Weymouth, Dorset. "This girl stood there for ten minutes getting enough courage to go in further, but the water was so cold. The light on her was soft, but there was this impending storm coming so you had the darkness of the sky. I just thought that juxtaposition was beautiful. It was completely unstaged"