

A Home on the Rock



Julian Baggini



A HOME ON THE ROCK

by Julian Baggini

Isn't it obvious what the White Cliffs of Dover stand for? When I spent a week there in August 2012 as their writer-in-residence, it didn't take long to establish the consensus view. For Britons, especially, but not only those who live in East Kent, its meaning can be summed up in one word: Home. When a Briton goes overseas, whether from the deck of a ship, or, as one former ambassador recalls, from the window of an aeroplane, the sight of the white line of the horizon has often been the first sign they have returned.

For the rest of the world, as one Italian immigrant put it: 'The White Cliffs are England'. Most would say Britain, actually, but we can hardly blame foreigners for referring to the whole of the United Kingdom by its largest part when many English people still make the same mistake.

They are without doubt one of Britain's most famous landmarks, as internationally recognised as Big Ben and Buckingham Palace. When in 1961 my father told friends and acquaintances in his native northern Italy that he was planning to come to Dover, even the most uneducated farm worker who had not travelled further than the next village would say: 'Ah! *Le bianche scogliere!*' (the white cliffs!). The reaction is typical. When I took a day trip from Dover to Calais, the woman at the information desk on the ferry told me that the first thing foreign passengers often ask is: 'How soon can we see the White Cliffs?' A German couple on the boat said that they knew about them from school.

‘Britain’ and ‘home’. It sounds so simple. But for better or for worse, by temperament, education and practice, the philosophical impulse permeates my thinking and I cannot just leave it at that. First of all, it’s fine to say the White Cliffs mean Britain and home, but what do ‘Britain’ and ‘home’ mean? The very simplicity of this equation masks the complexity that lies beneath. Philosophy is about drawing out what is not obvious from what is often apparently all too obvious. It is also a form of attending, a way of making us look more closely at what passes us every day, in order to see what we usually miss.

Second, symbols are not static. They are malleable and their meanings can change, subtly but importantly. The most simple and malign example of this is how the Nazis appropriated the swastika and transformed a benign symbol of Hinduism into an evoker of fascism. More positively, pandas have not always stood for conservation, nor poppies for the remembrance of fallen soldiers.

So as we flesh out what ‘home’ and ‘Britain’ mean, there is scope to shift the way we see the White Cliffs and what they stand for, building on what they already symbolise but questioning what those symbols represent. The project is worth undertaking because the White Cliffs are among the symbols which are formative of Britain’s national identity. If they stand for us, then what we see in them we will also see in ourselves. And so we should make sure that we are happy with what we see in the chalk.



One starting point for reflection on the Cliffs is what you see when you stand on top of them at Langdon Cliff, just to the east of Dover's town and castle, and look out. On most days, in the far distance you see the coast of France. In the water between you see the nautical equivalent of the M25: the Dover Strait, the busiest shipping lane in the world. And closest of all, you see Dover docks, by some measures the busiest passenger port in the world, with a constant procession of boats coming in and out. Growing up in the area, I always found this sight somewhat hypnotic. The ships move slowly, yet before long, ones whose passengers you could pick out on deck had disappeared over the horizon, while others that had not yet appeared were unloading cars and lorries, and soon enough heading back.

It is a sedate form of busyness which reflects that, in historical time, Britain is a country which has seen a constant flow of peoples coming and going. The result is that we are a mongrel nation of Picts, Britons, Angles, Saxons, Vikings and Normans, mixed with a generous pinch of other peoples from all over the world.

In the popular imagination, visions of the Cliffs are often shorn of this activity. They become the solid symbol of the edge of the country, a clear border that marks the divide between us and the rest of Europe. Rather than becoming a port of entry they become a barrier to it. Their strong association with the Second World War tends to reinforce this. They come to represent defiance, the secure shield behind which soldiers retreated after the debacle of Dunkirk.

The Cliffs thus represent both the arm outstretched, palm facing outwards saying 'come no further', and also the embrace, comforting those who stay or return land-side with the reassurance of home. These apparently contradictory signals are in fact intrinsically linked. In order to be welcoming of incomers, a nation has to be secure and confident in itself. You don't lower your drawbridge if you don't feel strong enough to cope with those who walk over it.

To maintain both openness and security, a balance has to be struck between isolation from and absorption into whatever surrounds us. Because we are an island, bounded by an imposing cliff face, it is

easy to overstate the importance of separation and neglect the role of movement of people which the busyness of the Strait of Dover bears testimony to.

This movement of people is something that resonates particularly with me, the son of an Italian immigrant. For me it seems obvious that the various influxes of foreigners over the years have been overwhelmingly positive. Yet in Dover today there is clearly a great deal of suspicion of incomers, a feeling that too many outsiders have come in. One local talked about how Dovorians felt intimidated by groups of eastern Europeans on the streets, and anecdotes abound about muggings and stabbings. What seems odd to outsiders is that there also appears to be plenty of intimidating looking locals, and crime statistics do not show that Dover suffers worse than the UK average.

The darker side of the coastal edge is represented by the Western Heights, literally the other side of the Cliffs. To the east of Dover lies the main stretch of the Cliffs on which sits Dover Castle and along which most visitors and locals take their strolls. To the west is the less visited section, passed mainly by walkers heading towards the end of the North Downs Way. Here stands an imposing Napoleonic era fortress, one which was also called into service during the Second World War, when it housed a barracks, now demolished. It is surrounded by a very long and very deep ditch and for many years was a borstal, what would now be called a young offenders' institution. As a child I remember it being pointed out from my grandmother's house in Elms Vale, as a warning of where you'd end up if you went off the rails.

In recent years it has been Dover Immigration Removal Centre, a holding centre for asylum seekers. But that name hardly captures the reality. I was shown around it (literally, since we could not of course go inside) by Rod Edmond, a professor of English retired to Deal, who has started doing some advocacy work for asylum seekers. He had read an article I had written ahead of my residency and had come to find me at the South Foreland Lighthouse because he thought I had missed out the sense of 'the White Cliffs as a barrier'. The Western Heights uncompromisingly projects that

image. Looked at from the outside, with its barbed wire and slowly-pivoting surveillance cameras, it resembles a prisoner of war camp, and being run by Her Majesty's Prison Service, it is a prison in all but name. While I was there, the front door was unlocked and a guard emerged accompanying a just-released inmate to a taxi, in a scene played out regularly at prisons up and down the land.

Sympathy has not completely dried up for the detainees within. In a café in Dover town centre, I overheard a woman say that although she wasn't exactly delighted to see them coming in, and even if some were 'economic migrants', the fact that these foreigners are prepared to risk dangerous sea crossings in small boats or take their chances hanging onto the undercarriages of channel tunnel trains shows they must be pretty desperate. Her point is underlined by a plaque near Dover Eastern Docks that I failed to find, and which the tourist office couldn't point me to, in remembrance of the 58 Chinese who died trying to enter the on UK 18 June 2000, suffocating in the back of a container lorry.

But whereas they used to be assumed to be refugees to be pitied and taken in, now they are just asylum seekers, often economic opportunists and sometimes criminals, problems to be kept out. Why do they even come here, people complain, rather than stay in the first European country they enter, such as France or Germany? Gill Casebourne, a veteran local campaigner for the rights of refugees who lives in Deal, told me the answer. It's not that they have any cause to believe that they will be showered with money and given prime housing, as many of the worst kind of anti-immigration campaigners have claimed. It's simply that Britain still has a reputation for fairness, decency and human rights.

So for asylum seekers in France looking over the sea, the sight of the White Cliffs represents sanctuary, freedom, civility and liberty. That is a wonderful thing for a nation to be proud of. But that symbol is turned on its head when, on arrival, those same hopeful refugees find themselves locked up, awaiting removal on the very cliff top they once dreamed of reaching. It would be an immense loss to our national reputation if instead of thinking of liberty, hospitality and freedom, people saw the Dover chalk as a citadel wall.

The Western Heights are also a reminder that even the strongest positive associations, even those found in rock, are not set in stone. Dover itself has suffered from this in its recent history, as a local newspaper's extensive report of an undergraduate student's dissertation on the history of town had shown. Now, when we think of the Cliffs and Vera Lynn it stirs warm feelings. But for the immediate post-war generation, the last thing they wanted to be reminded of was the terror of the Second World War and in particular the Blitz. At the start of the twentieth century, Dover was one of the top tourist resorts in the country. During the war it was bang in the middle of 'Hellfire Corner', which bore the brunt of the bombing, and most of its fine Edwardian and Victorian buildings were destroyed. Unexploded bombs are still a regular find in the area: in the month I was there there had been three finds alone. So post-1945, it was both a literal bomb site and an unwelcome reminder of still raw pains. No wonder that as a resort, Dover pretty much died.

There is also nothing about cliffs in themselves that guarantees a positive image. Think of Beachy Head in Sussex, for example, and you'll probably think of people leaping to their deaths. Spike Hughes from the coastguard in Dover told me that it had been an unusually bad year for one-way-jumps, with about five lives lost by August. For them and their families, as well as for refused asylum seekers, the Cliffs are more a symbol of despair than reassurance.

If Dover's cliffs are to be a positive symbol of a link with the rest of the world, we need to reinforce and protect its positive associations. One small way to do this is to link the cliffs and the port more firmly in the imagination. Forget bluebirds, which only ever flew over the cliffs in the imagination of the American songwriter who had never even been to Europe (another indicator of their international symbolic importance). No image should be complete without the boats that sail under them.

The link between port and cliff is particularly salient at the time of writing. Dover Harbour Board has run the port as a trust since 1606, and its land includes a section of cliffs that provide the harbour's backdrop. The board, however, wants to privatise the docks and for a wholly owned subsidiary of itself to become the buyer.

To say that many people believe this is wrong is an understatement. A local referendum found 98% of people against the plan. For some it is about a visceral fear of the docks ending up in foreign hands. But there is much more than jingoistic nationalism at work here. I think that within this saga we can find many of the elements that show just why the Cliffs, and places like them, really do matter.

It starts with trade. One of the main reasons why so many people have travelled to and from the Cliffs is for some kind of exchange of goods, albeit sometimes on the non-voluntary terms imposed by conquerors. Tourism is a late arrival on the scene: for centuries it was business that drew people across long distances. Some historians and anthropologists have even argued that it is because we are *homoambiens* – exchanging man – that civilisation has made as much progress as it has. Trade meant people could specialise in what they were good at, which meant that instead of being a species where we could all do the basics just well enough, we could collectively do lots more things excellently. Trade also meant it became worth travelling to places where they had what you didn't and vice-versa. Once there, it encouraged the building of trust, reputation and friendships. You can rip someone off only once, but if you offer a good deal, you can carry on exchanging indefinitely.

As the closest point between France and England, the White Cliffs country has been a centre of trade for centuries. The lorries loading and unloading from the ferries are the latest incarnation of a long tradition. Superficially, it can just look like stuff moving soullessly, a cog in the capitalist machine. And trade can indeed become no more than that, with customers scanning their own goods at self-service checkouts or ordering goods online. But just how positive a human force trade can be was brought home to me when I walked into Le Bar à Vins in Calais and saw some leaflets on the counter for the Black Horse Inn at Monks Horton in Kent. It just so happened that we were due to go to that very pub the next day to catch up with the owners, who had just taken over its management too: an Italian family we had known since childhood.

It turned out that Isobel and Luc, owners of Le Bar à Vins, had got to know the Italian family simply because the French couple had

supplied their various restaurants with wine over the years. After a few years, the wine merchants took up the restaurateurs' invitation to come and eat when they were in England, and repeat visits followed, creating a friendship from a professional relationship. Business had brought Italians to England and to France, and French people to England, and in so doing it had brought people together.

This form of benign trade requires trust in the personal sphere and the security of rule of law in the political. When specific forms of trade become illegal, you get smuggling instead, and with it criminality and suspicion. Good trade needs and builds good human relations.

However, in the contemporary world, trade can be stripped almost entirely of its interpersonal dimension, at huge personal and social cost. The 2008 financial meltdown was in no small part down to the fact that economies grew not on the basis of exchanges of real goods between real people, but on the movement of numbers on a screen. The sale of the Port of Dover could be another step in that process, with the harbour simply becoming data in a spreadsheet, squeezed for every last drop of profit, with no thought to their social or historic importance. *Homoambiens* degenerates into *homo economicus*: a single-minded maximiser of financial gain.

Nations produce goods, but they also have assets and landmarks that are deeply connected to their histories and identities. These are things that no generation truly owns. Rather it holds them in trust for future generations, just as the generations before did. So we must be careful not to turn national assets into commodities, to take them out of the hands of custodians and into the arms of people interested only in exploiting their economic value.

The increased tendency to see the world too much through the lens of raw economics links this issue with that of asylum. One reason why society seems to be less well disposed towards refugees is that rather than being seen as people with problems seeking a better way of life, they are viewed as just economic migrants only interested in maximising their material wealth, merely examples of *homo economicus*.

The Cliffs can help us to do this, especially if we take time to think about their history. So much of immense importance has happened here. From the cliff tops, people would have been able to see ships on the water since at least the bronze age, as the 1992 discovery of the remains of a 3,000-year-old 50ft wooden boat proved. Later, Roman invaders were spied coming to shore. Fires from the camps of Napoleon's armies were visible, blazing from across the channel. The Spanish Armada sailed by and Blériot flew overhead. Flotillas of small ships brought fleeing soldiers back from Dunkirk. From its construction in the 1840s to the wartime blackout, the night sea would have been illuminated by the sweeping beams of South Foreland lighthouse. Imagine the joy and hope in 1944 when they came back on, heralding the retreating threat from Nazi Germany.

Considering the history of the Cliffs links us with previous generations, seeing that the problems they coped with are not that dissimilar to our own. A few miles away from the South Foreland Lighthouse, for example, there is the remarkably well preserved Roman equivalent from the second century AD. The occupiers used a system of three towers, two on the English coast and one on the French. They burned wet wood by day to produce pillars of smoke and dry wood by night to produce flickering light. Ships could know their position by seeing where they were in relation to this triangle of signs.

Sometimes the small things bring these connections home more than the large. Dover Castle can look like it belongs to an entirely bygone age, but when you see the centuries-old graffiti scratched into some of its walls, you get a real sense of people just like you once inhabiting it.

Like the Cliffs, the Castle can also be seen as both a symbol of resistance and of welcome, as became clear to me when I was shown around it by its former custodian, an old family friend, Phil Wyborn-Brown, who recounted a little known story about its construction.

On 29 December 1170, Thomas Becket was martyred in Canterbury Cathedral and it didn't take long for pious Catholics to undertake pilgrimages to the site of his murder. One such pilgrim was the

French King, who arrived one day on the beach in Dover. As Phil tells it, King Henry II, who was in Faversham or Chilham: 'comes haring down to Dover to meet this very important guest and thinks "I've got nowhere to keep him. I've got nowhere to put a king".' His only option was to put him up in St Martin's Priory. Embarrassed, he changed the plans for the as yet unbuilt castle, intended as a fort, and had it 'converted basically to a state of the art luxury bed and breakfast', an 'overnight stop for important guests going to the tomb of Thomas Becket.' The castle's history is therefore one of defiance and resistance, but also one of hospitality and welcome, another iteration of the double-edged symbolism of the White Cliffs.

There is one more aspect of the Cliffs that makes them a particularly suitable symbol of identity. At first sight they seem eternal, unchanging. Something about their solid earthiness is reassuring. For Michael Sanders, a Folkestone-based artist and photographer, this is something to do with the substantiality of rock: 'It's the foundation of the world, it's the stuff we live on and walk on', he told me at George House in Folkestone, where his exhibition was running. 'It has all sorts of associations, like you feel grounded, you talk about the earth between your feet. So I think it's to do with stability of the mind as well as stability in the environment.' It's that which drew him to the Cliffs as a subject.

Standing on the Cliffs it is easy to be soothed by this sense of rock-solidity, a sense heightened by the remembrance of all the episodes in history that have played themselves out here. But look a bit closer and you'll see that this permanence is an illusion. When I walked along them, for instance, I came across a section that was a much purer white than the rest. Looking down, it soon became clear why: there had been a massive rockfall. At the foot of the Cliffs there was a temporary protrusion of broken chalk, the waves lapping around it creating a milky halo.

A reminder that this is no one-off comes at the South Foreland Lighthouse, a little further up the coast. It's now something of a museum to British innovation, or rather, Britain's fostering of innovation. In 1858 it became the first lighthouse to use an electric

lamp. Marconi also conducted various experiments there, and in 1898 it received the first ship-to-shore radio message and a year later the first international radio message from across the channel at Wimereux, France; yet another reminder of the fertile cosmopolitanism fostered by the sea port.

A few hundred yards away you can just see the remains of a second smaller lighthouse, built in 1843. Sailors used to line up the two lights and if the higher, main light was to the right of the second one, that meant they had drifted too far north and risked hitting the shallows of the Goodwin Sands, the great ship swallower that has sunk over 2,000 vessels.

However, it didn't work for long because the sands shifted position and the line marked by the lights ceased to mark the line of danger. Cliff erosion also means the second lighthouse is no longer 125ft from the cliff edge as it was when it was built, but only 12–15 ft away, and it almost certainly won't see the end of the century.

Even the solidity of what does stand is not quite what it seems. Especially around the Castle area, the Cliffs are filled with tunnels dug mainly for military purposes over the centuries. 'It's like being defended by a white honeycomb', says Wyborn-Brown.

These are reminders that nations, like persons, are never exactly the same from one moment to another. Their populations are constantly in flux, but so too is their land, by the movement of borders and the literal movement of rock and soil. An honest grasp of identity therefore requires a sense of continuity through change, a recognition of the narrative thread that links the generations, and a rejection of the simple idea that there is an unchanging essence of Britishness that is now, was in the beginning, and ever shall be. A certain security about knowing where that continuity lies and that it will continue is necessary in order to be comfortable with the changes that inevitably come.

So as I see it, the White Cliffs can indeed be a powerful symbol of Britain and home. But this ceases to be positive if we put too much stress on its role as the hard edge, the barrier, the permanent

white wall that separates us from the rest of the world. We need to look more closely at history and what is actually happening now to understand that the Cliffs would mean much less than they do, if it were not for the flow of people and goods across the coast. At the same time, the fact that we are separated from the rest of world by a narrow strip of water is not insignificant. There needs to be a sense of our difference, and that it makes a difference, whether home is what you see from Cap Gris Nez on the Pas de Calais, or whether home is where you see Cap Gris Nez from. We have to be secure in our identity and difference to be able to open up without fear of emptying out.

What is needed is a form of inclusive, generous, fluid patriotism. Patriotism is a powerful, sometimes dangerous force, but at its best it is like appropriate family pride. It is not only right that parents should appreciate and love their own children's attributes more than those of others, those who don't strike us as cold and distant. But if they come to believe that their offspring deserve the same kind of attention, appreciation and praise from other people, and so fail to give due credit to other children, their paternal love becomes a competitive, divisive force.

Patriotism is somewhat similar. At its best, it is taking pride in your own country while equally appreciating that others will take just as much pride in theirs. And for that reciprocity to be genuine, it means making an effort to appreciate what other nations have to offer, not just harping on about how great your own is. We have Dover, but the German couple I spoke to were also keen to tell me about their own white cliffs, on the island of Rugen. Similarly, the Head of Onboard Services on P&O's *Pride of Britain* ferry, Stéphan, prized the cliffs of his home region of Normandy as much as the British do Dover's more famous ones.

There has been so much hand-wringing in Britain over national identity in recent decades and we have not yet found the patriotic symbols to help forge it. Those other familiar icons, like Buckingham Palace and Big Ben, bring all sorts of problems with them. The Palace, like the nation's stately homes, are too associated with a bygone age, and also with extremes of class division. We are too

cynical about politics for the Houses of Parliament to provide a rallying point for the nation. Big sporting events, such as football's Euro '96 and the 2012 Olympics can pull people together for a while, but they are of their nature fleeting and leave a large number cold anyway. People have even tried to use culture, branded by labels such as Brit Art, Brit Pop and Cool Britannia. But again, this says nothing to those who don't see what's so cool about Blur or Damien Hirst.

Far better symbols are right under our noses. The White Cliffs speak to everyone who is British, whether they have just received their passport or can trace their ancestors back to the Norman conquest. For both, they represent home, adopted or otherwise. Particularly for those like my father, who came through the channel ports to live here, the Cliffs remain an indelible memory of their arrival at the threshold of their new homes. Nicola Pomponio, for example, now running the Black Horse Inn, remembers his first sight of land on the gloomy day he came across the channel: 'I had heard about the White Cliffs of Dover, but to see it coming from the sea is a fantastic sight. You never forget those things.'

Given current concerns about the integration of immigrants into British life, the Cliffs also have the advantage of plugging newcomers straight into our history and traditions. 'You've got that feeling you are going to land at or near the Cliffs of Dover', recalls Nicola, 'Can you imagine? Historically it's a massive reference point. That really sticks in your mind.'

Another reason why places like the Cliffs can be inclusive symbols of identity is that being natural spaces, they are open to everyone, genuinely democratic in ways that the likes of Blenheim Palace and Windsor Castle can never be. In the hands of bodies like the National Trust, they are also protected from being appropriated by the vested interests of politicians or corporate sponsors. They are truly the people's.

The power for the Cliffs to stand as a unifying symbol is already there: it just needs to be harnessed. But we do need to make that effort to harness them. This was made poignantly clear to me when

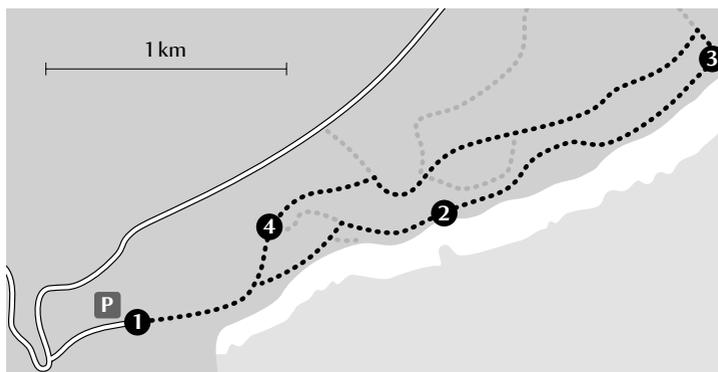
I asked my mother, who grew up in Dover, what the Cliffs meant to her. She answered that for her they were pure wonderment. But despite living just a few miles from them, she was never taken up them and no one ever explained their history or significance, at home or at school. They were amazing, but a mystery.

What a terrible lost opportunity, one that is still being missed. To tell the history of the Cliffs is to tell the history of our country, one that stretches back for centuries and reminds us that we are a nation of immigrants who are brought together by nothing more than shared land and the history that goes with it. We can and should build an open, inclusive, generous and hospitable patriotism, and we can lay the foundation stone for it on the White Cliffs of Dover.





A WALK ON THE ROCK



1. From 'Gateway to the White Cliffs' visitor centre, head east to the coast path with the sea on your right. The cliffs are being eroded by 5–10 cm every year although in winter storms several tonnes can fall. The battering of the sea means the cliffs stay white, otherwise they would be covered in green vegetation. Here you can also see the remains of the Convict and Military Prison above the Port of Dover.

2. Keep on this path, looking out for where the chalk cliffs meet the English Channel, and take in magnificent views of the French coast from the rim of Langdon Hole. On a clear day you can see 21 miles across the Channel. The chalk downland habitat along the cliff tops is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) due to the array of flora and insect life which

thrives here. Above Fan Bay look out for pyramidal and fragrant orchids in June.

3. South Foreland Lighthouse was built in 1843 on a spot where lighthouses have stood for over 350 years. It helped mariners navigate the infamous Goodwin Sands until it was decommissioned in 1988. It is famed for being the first electrically lit lighthouse and the site of the first ever international radio broadcast. Lighthouses replaced simple beacon fires lit along the cliffs. The remains of a Roman lighthouse (Pharos) can be seen within the grounds of Dover Castle, near the church.

4. Return to 'Gateway to the White Cliffs' visitor centre, following a surfaced path just inland, this time keeping the sea on your left.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/walking



A HOME ON THE ROCK

The National Trust commissioned writer and philosopher Julian Baggini to spend a week in August 2012 at the White Cliffs of Dover, as part of an appeal launched to acquire a stretch of this world famous Kent coastline.



Based at the South Foreland Lighthouse, he delves into why the White Cliffs have become so wrapped up with our national identity and the role they play in creating our sense of belonging.

Julian Baggini is an author, philosopher and broadcaster born in Dover. He is the author of several books about philosophy and is co-founder and editor-in-chief of *The Philosopher's Magazine*.

Read Julian's Dover blog at <http://whitecliffsofdoverwriter.wordpress.com>



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