

Home territory

There's an undeniable excitement in heading off for the unknown to explore, whether it's to an exotic location (see *Destination Workshop*, page 30) that you're visiting for the first time or a special one-off event. Many of us get fired up by the possibilities of the new and unfamiliar, and that itself can be an asset. However, one of the most overlooked advantages available to everyone is simply the natural familiarity we have with the places we grew up in, live or work. We take them for granted, and they just don't seem as interesting as places on the far horizon.

Well, exotic places aren't exotic to those who live in them, and by the same token, what goes on around your own territory may be absolutely idiosyncratic and fascinating to others.

Stuart Freedman, whose reportage assignments feature a significant amount of long haul travel (to Africa, India and more), tapped into his own upbringing in Dalston, East London, when he began photographing the traditional eel, pie and mash shops of the city. A collection of his images became the book *The Englishman & the Eel*. One of the symbols of cockney culture in London's East End, these establishments started to spring up in the Victorian era as cheap places to eat, offering, as Freedman writes, 'the staple diet of the London poor. Clean.



Tidy, Respectable. Victorian. White tiled walls. Sawdust on the floor. Wooden benches. Honest food, honest people.'

Times have moved on, so these places often feel like a relic of a culture as alien as anything we might hope for in far-flung locations. But for Stuart, it was about recording his own culture after

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Stuart Freedman

Manze's Pie and Mash shop, Tower Bridge Road, London, 2017

spending so much time away from home. Having grown up in the area, Freedman fitted in naturally; he knows the banter, when to talk and when not to, and he knows how these places function. For instance:

'People don't linger in these places: they are not intellectual salons for languid debate, rather places to eat quickly and leave . . . I had to work very quickly and be very direct. Approaching people whilst they're eating is also complicated. It's usually a very private moment and one has to be decisive in choosing the right person and situation to photograph.'

'I don't have a "secret" to getting close to people; I just do my best to be friendly, explain what I'm doing and smile a lot . . . I've spent most of my long career out of the UK, mostly in places where I can't speak the language and so perhaps I've learned to be patient and polite.'
– *Stuart Freedman*

The picture opposite was taken at Manze's Pie and Mash shop on Tower Bridge Road. Freedman highlights how being familiar with your subject can lead to opportunity:

'I spent a few days there just hanging around drinking lots of tea. I was behind the counter watching the girls serve and wash up and generally getting in the way when a woman came in to order and shared a joke. A shot like this is not an accident, it's a calculation about what might happen and being in the right place. Compositionally it's very simple and shot on a 50mm lens (as was much of the book).'
– *Stuart Freedman*

In any picture story, variety drives the pace and rhythm, and details are important.



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Stuart Freedman
Joe and His Tattoos. Robins Pie and Mash shop,
Southend-On-Sea, Essex, 2016

'I'd noticed the tattoos on the man's hands as he'd arrived and so went over to him and explained what I was doing. I knew how important the phrase on his knuckles might be in terms of the culture of the shops and it was really then just a question of how to best frame the picture. In the book, it's the last image of the main section – a kind of ending.'
– *Stuart Freedman*



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Stuart Freedman
Eastenders Pie and Mash shop,
Poplar, London, 2017

'Taken in Eastenders Pie and Mash shop in Poplar. I'd been working at the shop all day watching the ebb and flow of the work and the customers and, around 4pm, when school finished, this lady's grandchildren came in. They wanted to tell her about their day and I just made sure that I was well placed (again on a 50mm lens) to show that – being careful of the mirror's reflections. The picture is made by the smaller boy's movement and the elder child's expression mirrored in her face. I deliberately waited until the seated man eating his late lunch could be seen to be eating – to have a fork close to his mouth – otherwise, compositionally, he's superfluous.'
– *Stuart Freedman*