

## Outside the “London bubble”: listening to views on Brexit and migration in Jaywick



*Jaywick is a Leave-supporting village in Essex, and one of the most deprived areas of the UK. Alexandra Bulat (SSEES, University of London) talked to some of the people living there about migration and Brexit.*

“We voted Leave, right? Then there is nothing else to say about Brexit!”

“What do you mean by Brexit? Can you explain in layman’s language?”

“I don’t think it will happen, it’s too late.”

“It’s poli-tricks, not politics. They just make the money disappear and nothing changes.”

“We’ve all been lied to, they don’t care about us.”



Jaywick. Photo: Alexandra Bulat

The quotes above are some of the views I recorded from passers-by near Jaywick beach when I asked them “What do you think about Brexit?”. Jaywick, a 5,000-strong community in the Clacton constituency in Essex, has been several times ranked as the [most deprived area in England](#). Because of this, it has been the subject of much media attention, notably the TV series [“Benefits by the sea”](#).

Over the decades Jaywick went from a successful holiday destination, especially for east Londoners, to a case study of a poor, pro-Brexit, monocultural and rough place to live in. It’s an area with a higher than average number of welfare claimants and support for UKIP and Brexit, factors which have been argued to be [closely linked](#) with the impact of austerity. This image of pro-Brexit, pro-UKIP Jaywick prompted several of my friends in London and Cambridge to advise me against even setting foot in the area. In many ways, Jaywick represents the antithesis of the places hosting universities and institutions, where research about Brexit is written.

“Jaywick? You must be joking! I would be afraid to go there in your place, especially since you speak with an accent!” said one fellow PhD student.

As a migration researcher, I have always advocated *listening to*, rather than just *speaking about* migrants. Most of my experience in research has been listening to migrants’ life stories and opinions, in trying to make sense of more complex phenomena and theories. Why should I do research any differently when writing about British attitudes towards migration in Clacton? I have always spoken in favour of having a migration debate beyond numbers and simplistic tick boxes. So how could I speak about Jaywick residents through Remain or Leave tick boxes or political party support, without listening first to what they have to say?

So there I was earlier this summer, a Romanian PhD student in Jaywick, knowing no one apart from Danny, a local whom I approached via Twitter in advance of my visit. I met Danny at the Jaywick beach bar, with the intention to interview him and then go back to Clacton-on-Sea. I soon found out that Danny knew everyone in Jaywick. During my two-day visits there, I ended up listening to a wide variety of perspectives. The fieldwork in Jaywick did not only result in insightful interview data and research notes for my ongoing PhD study. The time spent there was crucial to challenge my own assumptions and stereotypes about the people of Jaywick, views mainly influenced by remote conversations with British friends and media portrayals. I spoke to people in the pub, on the beach, in shops, on the streets, in front of houses, and during a community event.



Danny and I in a Jaywick shop. Photo: Alexandra Bulat

At first sight, Jaywick reminded me of my teenage years in Romania. The beach bar where I met Danny was a déjà vu of some of my trips to the Romanian seaside: we had very little money, but a lot of fun. The pub we visited later reminded me of a village bar in rural eastern Romania, where everyone knew everyone and talked all day long in the sun, from subjects as serious as philosophy to those as practical as cooking. I observed the habit of many Jaywick residents of kissing on the cheek when greeting each other, just like we used to do in Romania. Many things were strangely familiar: the potholed narrow roads, the time which seemed to slow down while having beers and cigarettes in the local village pub at noon (as opposed to having the third coffee in a rush in London by that time) and, most of all, a strong community spirit which is perhaps increasingly difficult to find nowadays.

The views in Jaywick were not as strongly pro-Brexit as I expected. I listened to both Leave and Remain voters, but most of the people whom I spoke to were non-voters. This was one of my first observations: the high level of disengagement with politics, both at local and national level, prompted by a feeling that Jaywick residents do not have a voice in the “bigger picture”. They felt “left behind”, yet broadly unable to affect change. Later on, when I showed some leaflets from the EU referendum, almost everyone told me they have never received these campaign materials – not even the official [government Remain-supporting leaflet](#), which was supposed to reach every household in the UK. Jaywick seemed not only left behind economically, but also left behind during the campaign. “No one knocked on my door around that time”, was the typical answer. While a couple wanted a second referendum, because they felt they have been lied to the

first time, most people I spoke to just wanted politicians to “get on with Brexit”. They felt that a delay in the Brexit process means even more badly prioritised spending on negotiators, instead of funding the communities in urgent need of resources in the UK. While a few believed things will become better after Brexit, at least in the long term, the majority thought nothing will change in Jaywick – “it only gets worse around here”, as one man at the pub put it.



Clothes donations at Jaywick Happy Club. Photo: Alexandra Bulat

On immigration, again, the views were more positive than I expected. Of course, there were those who supported “kicking those [migrants] who misbehave out”, not allowing any welfare support for migrants or having zero net migration. Yet those types of views exist across the country. What surprised me in Jaywick was how some justified their positive attitudes towards migrants from poorer countries or refugees. There was a sense of empathy towards migrants from people who used to have nothing and who now have just about enough to survive, such as a woman who used to be homeless in East London with five children before arriving in Jaywick. She said, “Even if people around here tell you they are against immigrants, if you ask them, would you like if you were on a boat fearing for your life, or would you like if you had to choose which of your children to feed today, wouldn’t you look for a better life? Most understand then, because many can relate.”

There were also mixed views about people coming from inside the EU. The negative attitudes were expressed when speaking about people from Eastern Europe. Although most described East Europeans as “hard workers”, understood potential motivations of people to migrate and recognised they have seen little immigration personally in the area, they believed migration has a negative economic impact locally. This is influenced by the fact that, apart from those working in the local pubs and shops, most Jaywick residents I spoke to were retired, unemployed or working in casual, seasonal jobs. People disliked the type of low paid, insecure jobs which have been created during recent years. The opposition towards migrants “taking our jobs” was not about the shortage of available jobs, but the lack of “work that pays off” in Jaywick and the surrounding areas. There was a perception that migration allowed the creation of these low paid jobs, as opposed to an alternative scenario where, with more restricted migration, employers would be forced to create jobs that “pay off” for British people living in Jaywick.

I left Jaywick late in the evening on my second day, after speaking to those attending the Jaywick Happy Club meeting, organised by Danny. The community spirit there was genuine, with each helping others however they could: warm tea, clothes, advice, someone to speak to. “Thank you for the wonderful day,” said Danny when he dropped me off at the station, “we both learnt a lot!” As I was typing my field notes on the train back to Cambridge, I had a lot to think about.



Our “culture of speaking, rather than listening”, as sociologist [Les Back](#) describes it, often means we generalise about “elite remoaners” and “racist Brexiteers”, just because it’s easier to speak about someone, rather than seeking to listen and understand the more complex picture. Personally, as a migration researcher, I find it contradictory to listen to migrants’ stories and avoid unfair generalisations, while generalising about Brexit-supporting areas at the same time. Would we have these Brexit debates now if politicians also chose to listen more to people’s local concerns over the years?

In Jaywick, both the Brexit voter and their Polish neighbour next door have life stories to tell, stories of economic hardship, feeling forgotten and seeking a better life for themselves and their communities. For some, the answer to this “better life” was to leave Poland, for some to leave Jaywick – and for others, it was to leave the EU.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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