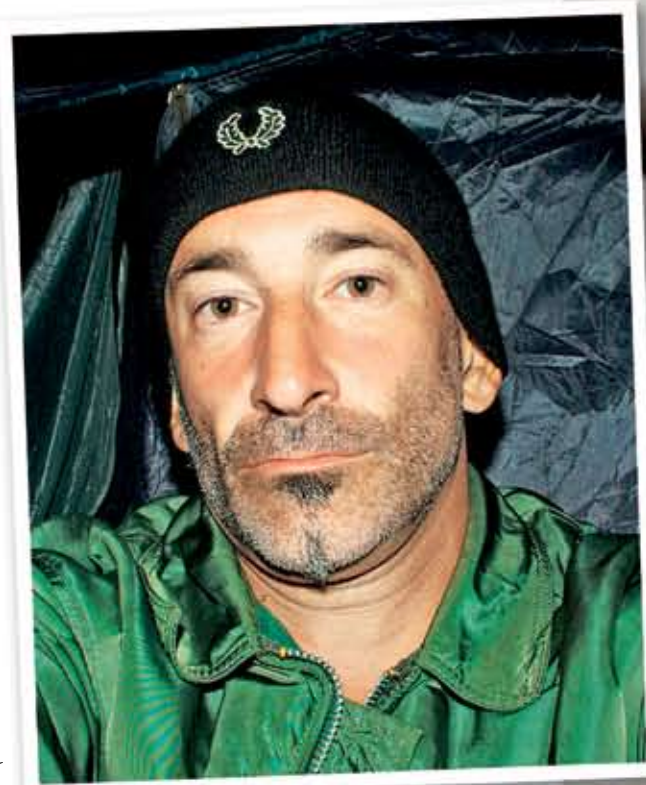


Skinheads revisited: fear and posing in backstreet Britain

It was the era of ska and skins, punk and race riots. Gavin Watson lived it and documented it. But what did the photographer find when he went in search of his old gang? By David James Smith



Gavin Watson

The photographer (left) was born in 1965 and grew up in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. His photographs of his skinhead friends became an inspiration and reference point for Shane Meadows's 2006 film, *This is England*. Watson makes a living today shooting for style magazines such as *Vice*. Right: with his then girlfriend, Kelley, on London Road in High Wycombe in 1983



Even now, 26 years later, Kelley can still remember how she looked, the night she met Gavin. Her hair was orange — a bleach gone wrong, it had got her suspended from school; she would later try to repair the error and send it cabbage-green instead — a black leather miniskirt, a pink-and-black leopardskin top. Kelley — pronounced as Keely — was 14, and her parents, her mum and stepdad, had specifically asked her to tone down her dress for the family party. It would be a boring party full of very ordinary-looking people, she knew. Just the thought of it was hell on earth to her.

Kelley's natural father was Pakistani, but he had left her white mother while she was still a toddler. Her mother's new boyfriend was white too. They lived in a village outside Slough, and Kelley's whole world was white, her mixed-race origins never mentioned, except by outsiders who taunted her with racist abuse: Paki. Paki. Paki. It was, she says, from the relative safety of 26 years, an incredibly difficult time. Nobody ever stood up for her and she never stood up for herself. She felt she was carrying her mother's shame. She would rub her skin with a scrubbing brush, or try to disguise it with talcum powder.

The party, in the nearby town of High Wycombe, was just as she had imagined it, until this tall, imposing skinhead walked in. He stuck out like a sore thumb and Kelley made a beeline for him, her boldness perhaps intensified by her appearance, which served as a kind of mask behind which she could hide her unhappiness and disguise her true self: "You gonna buy me a drink?"

The next day, Gavin Watson borrowed a moped and drove to the village to see her. They went for a walk and he took photos of her, the first of hundreds over the 16 months they were together, as Gavin was an obsessive chronicler of the people around him, in those tribal days of the late 1970s and early '80s. He was just photographing his mates, he insists, and had no idea if the pictures were any good, or would eventually, and deservedly, make him famous.

Kelley, with her punk style and her mohican hair — she loved Siouxsie Sioux — was a beautiful muse. She is 40 now, a grandmother, and more overweight than she'd like, the prints of Gavin's photographs on her kitchen wall a reminder of the girl she once was, and the slim figure she will never regain. But at least she is no longer living a lie. Kelley never actually told Gavin she was half-Pakistani — she never told anyone until she was past 30 and had counselling — but he guessed anyway, and as he drew her into his world she felt accepted for who she was and protected too from the racism she'd been suffering back home.

Gavin remembers someone coming up to him once and saying: "I hear you're going out with a Paki?" Bam. He decked them, as he puts it. "Did ya?" Gavin's fuse was short back then. There was



Kelley Jones

Now a 40-year-old grandmother, Kelley (above) still has pictures that her then boyfriend Gavin Watson took of her in 1983, during the skinhead era (left). Her mixed-race origins — half white, half Pakistani — made Kelley a target of racial abuse. But Watson wasn't racist, or even right wing. 'The most common political bind we had was that we all hated Maggie Thatcher,' he says

a lot of anger in him and in others around him. They were a family of sorts — a family of skinheads — and it seems that for many of them that family was a substitute for the dysfunctional home lives they were trying to escape.

With good reason, skinheads have come to be associated with neo-Nazis and virulent racism, but the world that Gavin Watson occupied and recorded was not so straightforward. While he is well aware of the extremist bigotry expressed by many skinheads, he is a passionate advocate for the view that there were antiracist skinheads too, that it was not about being right-wing, but being working class. His was the second wave of skinheads, the fashion revival heralded by the advent of the two-tone British ska bands such as

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Madness and the Specials in the late 1970s. He remembers having his first crop in 1979. Gavin's micro-landscape was the Micklefield housing estate of east High Wycombe and Hatters Lane School, where he and others mixed freely across racial barriers. Barrymore George, now a DJ and performer living in Brighton, was close to Gavin's younger brother Neville, and remembers how their lives were defined by music from an early age. One minute they were little teddy boys listening to Showaddywaddy, and the next they were being blown away by Madness's



Symond Laws

Now a music promoter, Symond, 43, (above) stages Oi! concerts in Britain and America. Right: Symond (left) and his friend Felix give the Nazi salute on the Micklefield housing estate in 1980. 'They were just mucking about,' insists Watson. 'We were uneducated then'



performance of The Prince on Top of the Pops. The music triggered a distant echo of the sounds of Barrymore's earliest memories, the ska tunes played by his father. The name Madness was taken from a popular song by the Jamaican ska performer Prince Buster. The Prince, their first hit, was their homage to him.

Barrymore mostly grew up in a children's home in Micklefield, separated from his Anguillan mother and Antiguan father. His carers were white and he was, as he puts it, "f***ed up and institutionalised", but he instinctively knew the music was West Indian of origin and belonged to him — an argument he would often have later when black friends accused him of betraying his culture by

becoming a skinhead. It's *our* music, he would say, it came from slavery, and skinheads have kept it alive since the first wave in the late 1960s.

Because he lived in a children's home and didn't really have anyone looking out for him, Barrymore could not initially buy the proper clothes. He remembers having to make do with cutting the flaps out of cheap flares to make them into drainpipes to match the Levi denims and Sta-Prest worn by others, such as his friend Neville who embraced the look quickly and with style, even outdoing his older brother, Gavin.

Barrymore eventually caught up and had his own small wardrobe of Fred Perry tops, Ben Sherman shirts with the button-down collars, a Harrington jacket, a Crombie overcoat, a trilby hat, the right trousers and Doc Marten footwear. The older you got, says Barrymore, the more anal you became about your appearance, especially once impressing "birds" started to matter.

He was never into fighting, unlike some of the others, had no interest in what he calls the soldiering, the heroics and the war stories of being a skinhead. There were nights when it all kicked off, but somehow he just managed to miss it, just as he survived while others around him got messed up by drink and drugs.

He and Felix, another frequent figure in Gavin's photographs, used to sniff glue and drink together from their early teens and would get absolutely slaughtered. Felix had been abused from an early age, so maybe he was escaping something, like so many others, but he kept on drinking and, according to Barrymore, in the end his liver gave out and Felix died at 19. His funeral in High Wycombe was massive, like a skinhead-and-punk convention.

There have been other subsequent deaths, none of them pretty, and none uglier than that of Stuart Horgan, remembered by some as sweet-natured, but, by most accounts, a ferocious, ➤ 59

deeply disturbed young man who became increasingly out of control. He was one of a select group of Gavin's friends who shared the small tattoo in the centre of the palm of their hand as what they called "the mark of our gang". Gavin describes how Stuart might pick a fight with anyone at any moment, how it seemed normal then to "savagely beat people to a pulp". They might be having a drink somewhere and Gavin would suddenly hear Stuart's voice — "You f***ing what, you c***?" — and his heart would sink as he would know there was trouble.

He remembers Stuart steaming into his house on a beautiful summer's afternoon. "Right, got a f***ing scrap on, and you couldn't say no because he'd fight you instead, so they went off to the scene of the impending fight, and standing there was a massive man filling the doorway of the pub, and Stuart said, 'That's him.'"

In the end, nothing happened, but it very often did. Richard Pedley was another of those with the "mark of our gang" on his palm. He remembers the shame of standing watching, doing nothing, as Stuart kicked someone down the street. He remembers too being badly beaten himself by Stuart and his brother, after trying to prevent them from attacking a mutual friend.

Richard was never keen on the violence himself, more interested in the clothes, the music and the dancing. He had a bad experience with the drug LSD and became a Christian in his late teens. He was still half-skinhead/half-Christian when he took the beating from Stuart, and remembers struggling to forgive himself for not fighting back, for letting it happen.

Stuart Horgan got married, continued to be violent, got separated and ended up killing his estranged wife and her sister with a shotgun in the summer of 2004. Stuart killed himself in prison while on remand, just two weeks later.

They know now that Stuart himself had been abused as a child, and while of course that does not excuse the things he did, Gavin can identify with Stuart's anger. Gavin too was often in trouble with the police for fighting. He was sometimes hit by his parents and was often caned at school. He had been diagnosed as dyslexic and felt intense frustration, and it would often spill over into rages.

Gavin's photographs never recorded the violence. I wondered if that was because he was too busy being involved in it, but he says no, the main reason was that it never crossed his mind. From the age of 14, when he started with his first camera, a Hanimex, later replaced with a Zenith, he was photographing his mates, people he liked and loved, and he had no interest in capturing rare moments of nastiness. There are, however, images among his archive of prints that hint at the emerging right-wing interests of many skinheads, eventually given voice in the racist lyrics of Oi! bands such as Skrewdriver. Oi! was initially a

Neville Watson
Gavin Watson's younger brother, 39 (below), runs independent record labels and is a music producer. Right: Gavin and Neville lean on a sports car during a 1985 shoot for the Bover Boots agency, which supplied extras for films such as *Breaking Glass*



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Tina Roberts
Now 39, Tina (above) recently worked for the ambulance service, but now plans to run her own pub. She is the mother of Gavin's daughter, Kayleigh. In her skinhead days (left), Tina wore offensive T-shirts that were meant to provoke rather than express seriously held beliefs

Stuart Horgan
The public perceived skinheads as violent thugs — and Stuart Horgan (right) conformed to the stereotype, ready to pick a fight with anyone at any time. If his 'friends' would not fight alongside him, he would turn on them instead. A deeply troubled man who was abused as a child, he never outgrew violence, and in 2004 he murdered his wife and sister-in-law. He committed suicide in prison while on remand



Mark Goddard
The leader of the High Wycombe skins, Goddard (right, in 1985) was another of the culture's more disturbing characters. He has spent a total of 16 years in prison, mostly for violent offences fuelled by alcohol, including breaking into his ex-wife's home and being violent and destructive. He has since given up drinking for a quieter life as a refuse worker (bottom right)



punk spin-off for those who considered punk too art school, and was only later hijacked by bigots.

Two young boys give a *Sieg Heil* salute in one picture of Gavin's. In another, his girlfriend Tina — he went out with her after Kelley, and she became the mother of his daughter, Kayleigh — is wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Adolf Hitler European Tour 1939–45", as if Hitler were a gigging rock star. Gavin would say that such imagery was meant to shock, not to be taken as political statements. They were done for offensive fun, at the time, much in the way that the Sex Pistols sang about Belsen.

Gavin cites the tattoo of his old friend Mark Goddard as another example of offensive fun. Goddard himself showed me the tattoo on his chest, of a circle with two triangles attached to the inside of its circumference. "It's the last thing a nigger sees when he's thrown down a well by two members of the Ku Klux Klan

Goddard told me how he had shown this to two Yardies once when he had arrived in prison to begin a sentence, before explaining to them that he had made the tattoo for a bet — the bet made by a black friend, as if that made it all right.

Goddard was an original 1969 skinhead, and had been the generally acknowledged leader of the High Wycombe skins in Gavin's era. He was now 48 and had spent 16 years in prison, mostly for drink-fuelled violence, the longest single term being 3½ years. Since giving up drinking he had been trying to lead a regular life and was now working "on the waste", emptying the bins at a shopping centre in High Wycombe.

This was a far cry from the chaotic life he described, from his troubled childhood home, where he was in constant conflict with a disabled father, to his four marriages and bouts of depression, in the constant presence of alcohol, violence and the processes of justice. He had once hit a black man in the head with a claw hammer because he suspected him of raping one of his wives. He'd broken into the home of an ex-wife and her new boyfriend, a widower, and been violent, even smashing the urn containing the remains of the new boyfriend's dead wife, scattering her ashes everywhere. He later apologised for that and now deeply regrets it.

Goddard still wore a Crombie with a neat red-silk hankie in the top pocket. He had never quite given up being a skinhead. He had seen many others settle down, but no woman yet had changed him, and he wasn't sure anyone ever would. "It's in there and you can't get rid of it. Your feelings are always the same," he says ■ *Skins & Punks — Lost Archives 1978-1985 by Gavin Watson is republished on March 26. It is available from BooksFirst at £22.46, including postage and packing. Tel: 0870 165 8585*