

Is our multicultural society a myth? Across swaths of the country, it barely exists. Yet many migrant workers and people from ethnic-minority backgrounds are moving into rural areas. Will this intensify latent racism or disarm it? *Janet Bush* reports from Devon

# The white country



**On the sunny side of the fence: Wilfred Emmanuel-Jones (facing page), who runs a successful farming business based in Devon, urges people from smaller ethnic groups to "claim Britain as our own"**

A particularly unpleasant woman had moved into the farmhouse along the lane from us in East Devon. I well remember the dinner party – attended by our weekend guest, a gay Labour councillor in Hackney – when she spent the evening trying to get our spaniel to bark to the word "Paki". When she left our house (and subsequently the county, to general relief) a shocked silence descended. Was it a wind-up or was it real?

Racism isn't, to be honest, a subject that comes up a great deal in the countryside where we live – simply because there are very few non-white faces around. Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, argued in 2004 that a form of "passive apartheid" exists in the British countryside, with people from ethnic minorities choosing not to live in rural areas because they perceive them to be racist.

It is incontrovertible that the countryside is overwhelmingly white. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that, across the UK, 92.1 per cent of the population is white and 7.9 per cent from smaller ethnic groups, while statistics from the 2001 census indicated that, in the

south-west of England, white people accounted for 97.71 per cent of the population and ethnic minorities for 2.3 per cent.

Ignorance about people of other races therefore comes as no surprise. It may be hurtful – which is inexcusable – but it is not necessarily malicious. One friend, who was married to a Zanzibari and has a daughter, described an occasion when she was having coffee in the West Dorset seaside town of Lyme Regis with a friend who also has mixed-race children. The waiter, seeing two white women with their colourful brood, asked: "So, are you social workers?"

Such attitudes are not confined to those who can easily be identified as "foreign" because of their race; they also apply to the increasing numbers of white migrant workers coming to work here. One farmer's wife in our valley told me she had two Polish men, workers at the local sawmill, lodging at the farm, and that she initially "had concerns about the children". She was genuinely mystified why Poles should be living in East Devon until I told her that Poland had joined the EU and they had the right to work here. This summer, she and her

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husband are holidaying in Poland with the men's families.

Such anecdotes are commonplace; but do they amount to racism, or simply show that many people in the countryside are insulated from multicultural Britain, naive about it and unable to shake off their suspicion of "outsiders"? As more migrant workers and people from ethnic-minority backgrounds come to the south-west – the 2001 census showed that the region's ethnic-minority population had doubled in ten years – will this intensify a latent racism or neutralise it?

Let's take an optimistic view first and argue that suspicion can be overcome with familiarity. Christina Oyo's mother is (white) British and her father Ugandan; she has lived in an East Devon seaside town since 1975. Reactions to the family have clearly evolved. "I personally haven't experienced much racism here but I know that my elder sisters and brothers did when we first arrived. My sister was the first black face at her secondary school." Christina, a gym instructor and personal fitness trainer, is trying to win support to develop a prime site to build a hotel and fitness centre locally. At a public meeting,

the audience, entirely white, was united in one thought: hope that "one of our own people" wins the contract, rather than some national conglomerate.

Sonia Francis-Mills, director of the Devon Racial Equality Council, lives in a small village near Honiton. She was born in Suffolk; her parents came from the Virgin Islands. Her introduction to the village couldn't have been more intimidating: a dead cat was thrown into her garden, festooned with a swastika and a note saying, "Who's next?" The first breakthrough came when an elderly village couple asked her and her husband for coffee; when Sonia returned the favour, they arrived dressed in a kaftan and a loud tropical shirt. Both couples later learned about this awkward but well-meaning attempt to make new neighbours feel comfortable. Ten years on, Sonia and her family feel as accepted as anyone else in the village.

The fact remains that life is made very uncomfortable for many people like Sonia, perhaps for years. One recent survey found that two-thirds of people from ethnic minorities living in Devon's rural areas had been victims of race attacks