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Welcome to The Glades

There are three primary arguments to this book. The first is that the study of social media[1] suffers from a fundamental and mistaken preconception. Largely it has developed as a study of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and so tries to explain why and how people use these platforms on the basis of the properties or affordances (propensities) of such platforms. In Chapter 2 evidence will be presented to show that neither platforms nor affordances lie at the heart of what social media truly is. Platforms are merely the vehicles by which social media travels. To understand social media we need to focus instead upon *content,* which often migrates and switches easily between entirely different platforms almost regardless of their properties. Inevitably platforms remain as the units for discussion of social media, requiring frequent references to Instagram or Twitter, for example. Yet over the course of this volume it will become clear how the differences in platforms are exploited to express distinctions – a more private audience as opposed to a more public one, for instance, or a humorous style of communication as opposed to a serious one. The temptation to presume any causative relation between the nature of that platform and its content, however, will be shown to be often misleading and mistaken.

The second argument is that precisely because social media exists largely in the content of what people post, it is always *local*. Just as there will be Chinese or Trinidadian social media, the most important element in understanding social media in an English village is to appreciate how English it is. Indeed the study of social media will turn out to be just as revealing about the nature of Englishness as it will be about the nature of social media. The people who use social media may not share this conclusion. Generally they see their usage as 'natural' – in effect something given by the nature of the medium or the company that owns it – but a project that compares usage across many different regions makes the local and specific character of that usage clear. In this case the spine of this volume that unites much of the content is the suggestion that there is a very particular alignment between what social media is and the traditional character of English sociality.

The third argument is that social media should never be considered as a place or world separated from ordinary life. Such a mistake perpetuated the early misconception of the internet as a virtual place. The best precedent is to consider social media as an elaboration of the traditional telephone. It is unimaginable that today we would consider a landline telephone call as taking place in another world, outside of all other conversations. Social media takes us beyond this analogy, however, since as the book proceeds we will come to appreciate that it has become more than a form of media and communication: in some ways it is now also a place where we live and where everyday life happens, but it is simply another place that could be compared with the way our lives are distributed between spending time at work, within the home or in a restaurant. It is in no sense virtual.

Perhaps the worst way to approach an issue of social science, although also one of the most common, is through semantics – to start, for example, with the dictionary definition of the terms. We really struggle if we take the words 'social media' too seriously or too literally. All media is to some degree social, even as all sociality involves some medium of communication, so it is hard to think of a more banal or tautologous expression than 'social media'. The situation was a little easier when this project began, because at that time the very same phenomena were called 'social networking sites'. Unfortunately we have no control over this terminology because in anthropology we mostly try to remain consistent with the everyday language of the peoples we study.

What is social media?[2] Prior to social media we mainly had two forms of media. On the one hand we had the telephone or letters that were mainly used for one-to-one (dyadic) private communication. We also had public broadcast media such as radio, newspapers or television to which anyone could listen. The earlier social networking sites such as CyWorld, Friendster and QQ, followed later by Facebook and Twitter, were a kind of scaled-down public broadcast. An individual posted to a group rather than to everyone, and had some means of refusing people membership of that group. Often people in the group could also interact with each other. Social media begins largely as group media: more public than private, but no longer an entirely open public.

By contrast the recent rise of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and WeChat are more a scaling up from dyadic private conversation such as messaging services to create groups in which anyone can equally post to anyone else in that group – for example, a family sharing news about a baby. This is more private than public, but not as private as the traditional two-person conversation. We call the combination of these two trends ‘scalable sociality’. What this means is that social media has created a range from private to public and from small to larger groups, replacing the traditional opposition between the private dyad and the public broadcast. It is the scalable group quality that is new and special about these platforms.[3]

The boundaries are permeable. Most of these sites also allow for more traditional dyadic communication, such as private messaging on Facebook. At the other end of the spectrum Twitter has some qualities of public broadcasting capacity, as long as you have not made your account private. It would be clumsy to suggest that WhatsApp is a social media site when messages are sent to groups, but not when messages are sent to an individual. Rather we should consider that social media includes both ends of this spectrum, the private conversation of two people and the posting to an open public. As long as there is also this group function, however, then that platform will be included here as a social media site, which will therefore now include gaming consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation. Not surprisingly, people in The Glades do not use the term ‘social media’ with complete consistency. While almost everyone seems to use this term for sites such as Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Tinder and Facebook, they would probably not generally include gaming consoles, and would vary in their inclusion of webcam or YouTube.

There is another reason for regretting the decline of the term ‘social networking sites’. Even if this too was a less than ideal description, it pointed to something essential to the anthropological study of these sites. One way of describing the difference between, for example, economics or psychology and anthropology is that the former disciplines generally study people as *individuals* while anthropologists study people as social networking sites. Starting from the study of kinship, anthropology has always defined people in terms of their relationships, not simply as individuals – an approach first developed because anthropologists mainly studied tribal and small-scale communities in which kinship was the main form of social organisation. Might this still be relevant to something like social media, used globally in huge metropolitan cities?

One of the joys of social media is it reminds us that human beings today remain rather more as conceived by anthropology than by psychology or economics. Even if we live within a metropolitan city, each of us is still in some ways a social networking site, not only an individual. There has also been a tendency to assume that every new innovation necessarily represents a shift from a supposedly more traditional situation, in which we were more socially defined, towards an increasing individualism and autonomy.

This book will argue against such an assumption. Using the case study of an English village, it will suggest that social media tends to have the reverse effect. It makes us less individualistic and less autonomous. In some ways social media returns us to older ways, in which our property as personal social networking sites shifts from the background back to the foreground of our lives. No doubt this is influenced by an anthropological bias here. It is rather a pleasure to be able to argue that just for once the world is becoming a little closer to, rather than further from, the purview of anthropology itself. One of the consequences of social media is to reinforce the individual's facility to network socially.

All of the above is argued to represent a general definition and approach to social media. However, in writing this volume it became increasingly apparent that it is particularly significant when we study social media in England: this study followed a path that led towards a definition of Englishness that was remarkably similar. Unfortunately not many studies try to examine what is particularly English about how people in England behave in social situations. The most popular recent account was probably Kate Fox's *Watching the English*,[4] a book whose focus is on what she puns as the English 'social dis-ease'. Interestingly there is strong support for her characterisation of the English to be found on social media itself. Facebook contains many jokes about the publicly embarrassed English. Three typical examples would be: when one person bumps into another and both say sorry; when one belatedly realises a person was not waving at them; initiating a hug at the moment when another person initiates a handshake. All these seem to equate with the phrase 'social dis-ease'. Of course every English individual is in some ways unique, but the presence of these jokes on Facebook shows that making generalisations about the English is something that English people themselves do, including on social media.

In addition, historical accounts of the English as described by visiting foreigners suggest the longevity of these generalisations, stereotypes and characterisations.[5] The argument will unfold gradually during the course of this book, but in essence much of the embarrassment that Fox calls social dis-ease concerns the boundaries between private and public realms. We will see that English people are friendly and charitable in the public domain, yet remain highly protective of their private domains. At the same time they create values and orders such as suburbia that try to preserve a middle ground, avoiding direct confrontation between these two domains. A good deal that the English see as characteristic of being English has to do with the complex relationship between public and private.

In this field site we have a population deeply concerned with the separation of the private and easily embarrassed within the public sphere confronted by a new set of communicative media that is defined precisely by the degree to which it creates a new space – neither private dyadic conversation nor public broadcast. The relationship between these two observations will be the 'story', and indeed the conclusion, of this book. We will find that at first social media is perceived as a problem, with the adult population becoming very concerned about this threat to their privacy. Over time, however, English users turn social media from being a problem into a solution. In Chapter 4 we discover how the English increasingly use social media as a means for keeping people at a distance rather than making them into closer relations. This is characterised as the 'Goldilocks Strategy', a mode in which English people exploit social media to calibrate the precise distance they desire for a given social relationship – neither too cold nor too hot but 'just right'.

Any generalisation such as 'Englishness' breaks down immediately when we start to differentiate men from women, working class from middle class, old from young. A reason this argument requires an entire book to develop is because we need to include the nuances of the particular as well as the overarching generalisation. To take the issue of age, the argument applies differently at each stage of life. For children it must mesh with the much more general problem of which each child becomes acutely aware: how he or she becomes an individual, with personal freedoms and choices, in response to the authority of parents and the incursion of peers. That is often an overwhelming concern for young people during their teenage years. One of the core studies within this research, discussed throughout this volume, was research among 16–18-year-olds, for whom these contradictions are particularly clear and often troubling. For adults the relationship between social media and Englishness blends into a more general contradiction of the modern world.[6] On the one hand we may feel overwhelmed by information and communication, something now extended to our private lives through the bombardment of emails, texts and more conventional media. How do we negotiate this intensity of public and private lives? Yet this same contemporary world seems to facilitate new possibilities of loneliness, isolation and separation, a particular problem for the elderly. If this research was bracketed at one end by a study of school pupils, the other bracket was a study conducted in collaboration with a hospice, looking at the impact of social media on people diagnosed with a terminal illness. This resulted in a paper entitled 'The Tragic Dénouement of English Sociality'.[7]

Similarly the definition of social media as 'scalable sociality' takes on specific implications as we match it to particular stages of life, for instance becoming a new mother. Partly because England has seen a rapid spread of social media to older age groups there is already a sense of its ubiquity, and it is possible to examine its impact across the age spectrum. Yet issues of Englishness and of scalable sociality also arise when we investigate the way in which social media has impacted on our relationship to almost every institution, from health and commerce to education and politics.

In the conclusion it will be suggested that social media has already been a vast social experiment. For example, the rise and success of Facebook in part came about because people felt they had lost something represented by a romantic vision of 'community'; they used Facebook and Friends Reunited to recreate this ideal of bringing people back together. When that happened, however, users also gained a growing realisation that this ideal of 'community' was actually a myth: in trying to recapture it they had brought people far too close and mixed them up far too much. This is another reason why the English have subsequently re-purposed social media into more of a tool for keeping people apart or at a distance.

This approach to social media as an anthropology of the English contrasts with conventional studies of social media that situate it within a trajectory. Such studies emerge largely from disciplines such as internet and computer studies, or from work on media and communication. There is a vast literature that perceives social media as the current station on this journey through new digital technologies.[8] By contrast, in this book social media is regarded as a mode of social life and an aspect of relationships as studied within anthropology rather than as media. Nor is there any assumed continuity with prior uses of the internet. For example, when the internet first developed the overwhelming concern was with the consequences of anonymity, while with social media anxiety arises from the opposite problem of a lack of privacy. The internet fostered the bringing together of specialist groups such as fans of *Star Wars*; by contrast, Facebook has created the opposite effect of juxtaposing previously separated groups, for instance family, work and friends, in the same space. The approach here has thus been to examine social media in its own right rather than seeing it as the latest version of anything that preceded it.

Given the emphasis upon Englishness, much of this chapter is an extended description of the particular place in which the study was done and the variant of Englishness that it represents. It also includes a short discussion of the ways in which we carried out the research. In order to appreciate the arguments that develop through the course of this book we need not only to meet the people and the place, but also to be clear about the current range and usage made of social media. Chapter 2 introduces the concept of polymedia, intended to help us understand each social media platform, and indeed all other more traditional forms of media, as always in relation to each other. Evidence is presented that, rather than dealing with a fixed thing we can call, for example, Twitter, we seem to encounter platforms that have one set of properties at one stage and yet a few years later can be something with quite opposite effects. Rather than a single coherent Twitter we find a whole series of quite distinct genres of communication, which may today happily coincide in their use of this platform, but have nothing else in common. The evidence will be used to repudiate the current study of social media as the study of platforms and their affordances.

One of the other problems in the existing literature on social media is that we have been tardy actually in *showing* what we are talking about. Postings on social media have become increasingly visual. Young people in England today tend to start their social media lives on platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, which are almost entirely visual. Yet often publications on the subject contain no visual material at all. If we fail to engage directly with this visual content we could properly be accused of 'missing the point' – or at least of missing most of the content. Chapter 3 of this volume consists of a direct comparison between young people's photographs and memes posted on Instagram with those posted on Twitter.[9]

Chapter 4 is concerned with the use of social media within relationships, whether of friendship, family or intimacy. The central argument will be about how the 'Goldilocks Strategy' is used to keep people at the appropriate distance. This may apply equally to friends and family, and perhaps even extend to the English version of intimacy. The chapter strives to give equal space to the instances where this proves not to be possible, and to explore what we can learn from these failures.

At first it might seem that Chapter 5 is off on an entirely different tangent since it is used to argue that our research is not solely academic, but can be used for applied purposes such as policy and welfare. Two examples are presented. The first argues for replacing the term ‘cyber-bullying’ with a more general understanding of the context of school interactions that could be called ‘cyber-taunting’. The second reports on the two-year study of the potential of social media and other new media for improving the ways in which a hospice communicates with its patients. It also examines the wider social universe of people with terminal illness. In the event, the advice about how this social media might be used for policy and welfare purposes rests largely upon these same arguments about how social media can bridge private and public domains, and the specific issues raised by the context of English sociality.

This theme becomes still more entrenched through the final substantive Chapter 6, which explores three institutional settings for the use of social media: religion, politics and commerce. By comparing the sociality of the church with that of Facebook we are able to explore further the consequences of the English myth of community. By the end of the chapter the English dislike of intrusion into the private sphere becomes the foundation for a sceptical look at the currently dominant mode by which most internet activity is funded, that of targeted advertising. All of these themes are brought together in the conclusions of Chapter 7. First, however, the study must be understood in context and that is the task of the remainder of this chapter.

The Glades

The field site that I call The Glades[10] is a dual village made up of the sites I call Leeglade, with a population of around 11,000, and Highglade, with around 6,500. Curiously The Glades is English in a way that is now quite atypical of England. The medical practice that covers Leeglade has 12,000 registered patients. They reveal that the entire Afro-Caribbean, African, Mixed and Asian population amounts to only two per cent of the total. On the High Street in the first few days I did not see a single person who seemed to be black or Asian, other than shopkeepers. In stark contrast to London, The Glades is largely homogeneous in population, White and middle class. It is also a relatively affluent area, chosen partly to repudiate the tradition of anthropology as one of ‘us’ studying ‘them’. Many anthropology students at UCL, where I work, come from places very like The Glades. Despite the size and the fact that central London can be reached in less than an hour by train, everyone refers to them as villages.

The Glades may more accurately be regarded as a suburb of a suburb of a suburb. The original London suburbs, such as Finchley or Wimbledon, have since been integrated within Greater London. Commuter belts, such as one here called Treedon, with a population of 100,000, developed just beyond London, but today this too is almost joined to London and has a similar metropolitan and cosmopolitan feel. By contrast, The Glades could be considered the first ever true 'suburb': they are genuine villages surrounded by countryside, possessing all the accoutrements of a village, yet brought close to London by the facility of modern transport. As such they fully realise that suburban dream of enjoying 'the best of both worlds'.[11]

Historically these were farmlands, but the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the growth of considerable industrial and service areas – to the extent that by the 1960s just four local companies/institutions would have employed around 13,000 people. Partly in response to this came various private housing developments, joining up some of the earlier housing into larger units. Wealthier people tended to live close to the central Anglican churches. A novel by Marghanita Laski, *The Village*,[12] written about a place similar to The Glades and published in 1952, principally concentrates on the scandal caused when two people want to marry across class lines.

From the 1970s there was a sharp decline in local industry, and over the next two decades all of the major employers in the area closed down. Yet The Glades never seems to have suffered major unemployment, and people living there today affirm that it is relatively easy to find work. With good transport links the area saw a rise in building and connected trades, as well as new service skills, for instance in the IT sector.

Jacob was born in the very room in which I met him. His mother's family had always lived in Leeglade and his father was born in Highglade. All of his schooling took place in the village, after which he worked as an electrician. Most of his work was in the local area, including maintenance of factory equipment in Treedon for 26 years – 'monstrous machines they were'. When that firm shut down Jacob got another job in Treedon repairing classic car engines, but he had to give this up when he was diagnosed with advanced cancer. He lived in a good sized private house in one of the more desirable sites within Leeglade, reflecting the decent salaries earned by families working in local industries prior to his birth.

Jacob recalled Leeglade and this particular area as having been a very friendly place, but most of the people he knew have moved on or died. He himself was a loner, interested in home improvements, and had never joined any of the village societies or sports clubs. Nor was he involved in the local church. People had difficulty in knowing how to respond to his recently diagnosed cancer, most making general offers of help, but nothing specific. Others had backed away, feeling they did not want to intrude into these private matters. One of his sisters had died; the other lived in the United States, but anyway, in his words they 'didn't get on'. His children mainly stayed in touch by phone, so he had few visitors. He used the internet extensively, both for shopping or information, but had increasingly become housebound. A few months after I met Jacob he died of his cancer, in the very same room in which he was born.

Jacob may represent one extreme in terms of identity with this locality. When the work started it seemed likely that this area could be characterised as a commuter belt for London, but this proved to be wrong. Many people in The Glades were born locally, not necessarily in the village itself, but in surrounding towns and villages; they typically work in places such as Treedon and a site to the north called Girming, so there is a genuine regional integrity to this area outside of London.

Although many people call themselves working class, most would be judged, at least by non-English observers, as middle class.[13] The exception, amounting to less than ten per cent of the whole, is those who live in social housing;[14] this used to be owned by the local council, but is now run by housing associations.[15] People worry that any further building might threaten the rural integrity of the villages and bring them closer to Treedon – a big issue in local elections.[16] Class issues are also reflected in education, with a huge amount of parental concern over which primary school their child will be allocated to, and the consequent influence of this in determining entry to one of the four local secondary schools. These secondary schools vary from one to which entry depends entirely upon selection through examination to the school where parents told us they wept on hearing their children had been assigned there, believing it to be the end of their long-term prospects. This may in fact reflect more the problems of the past. We worked in all four schools and found a high standard of educational services throughout.[17]

Property prices are quite high. In 2012 at the start of field work average house prices were nearly £400,000 in Highglade and £300,000 in Leeglade, ranging from £700,000 for a detached property in Highglade to £250,000 for a terraced house in Leeglade. The most common house type is the terrace, which means a continuous row of joined houses (Fig. 1.1).

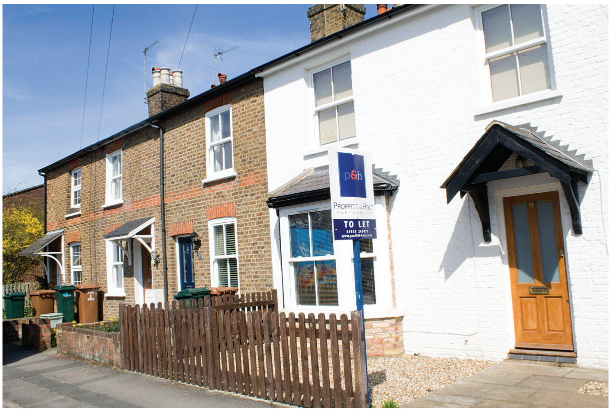

Fig. 1.1 Terraced housing

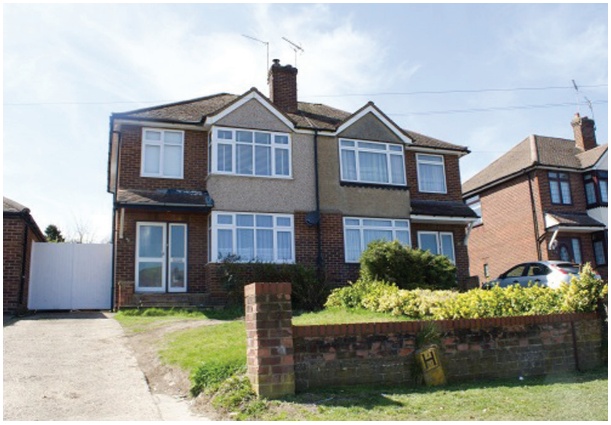

Fig. 1.2 Semi-detached housing

Semi-detached properties consist of two houses joined together, with a shared party wall. This is the housing type most clearly associated with suburbia (Fig. 1.2).

Less common are fully detached houses, though these dominate the roads climbing the hill of Highglade (Fig. 1.3).

There are relatively few flats other than for the elderly, the exception being social housing, or 'estates' as they are typically named. These tend to be smaller terraced properties characterised by small windows (Fig. 1.4).

Most houses are privately owned, but with households paying a mortgage to offset the high costs of purchase. Ironically the social

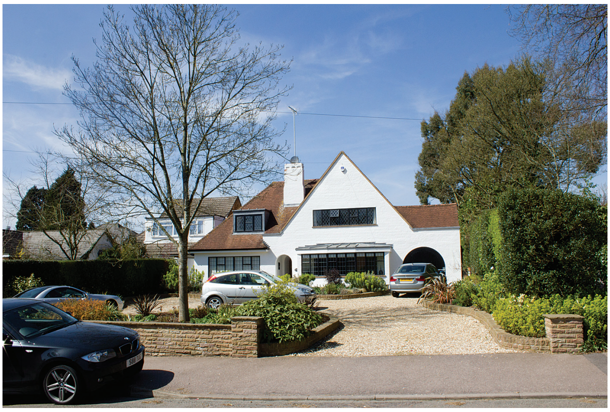

Fig. 1.3 Detached housing

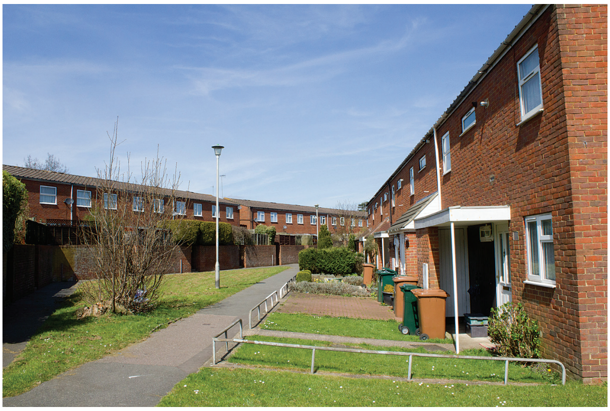

Fig. 1.4 Estate housing

housing units, about half of which have been privately sold, are often the only housing that people born in The Glades can now afford to buy. Otherwise they tend to move still further from London to towns such as Girming.

Tracey lives in one of the main blocks of social housing: her mother and sister also live in The Glades. Tracey has worked since she was 16 and been a mother since she was 17; she now has three children. The difference between the inside of her flat and the homes of The Glades' middle classes is palpable – possibly not helped by her beautiful caged husky dog in the middle of the main room, of which the entire family are inordinately fond – and there is simply not enough space for her family. Everywhere one looks things are piled high, from mattresses to schoolbooks.

Tracey really struggles to get by and ensure her children are educated, clothed and fed. She feels she lives on a fragile edge between two possible futures. Some of her family and those of her husband embrace an alternative culture, involved in constant confrontations with government authorities, but retain a strong sense of their own authenticity as a working-class community. She, however, aspires to move out of both the culture and conditions of her upbringing. She recently took on a leadership role in a village society that surprised the middle-class women who traditionally occupy these positions, but her main strategy is to use her husband's employment in the army to secure a better income and future. Before the end of our field work they had moved out of Leeglade to take up residence in an army barracks, offering not just more space and modern facilities, but better prospects for education, health care and for her family more generally.

Tracey is important in helping to represent the full spectrum of this population. As my forthcoming book *Visualising Facebook*, (UCL Press, 2017) reveals, she also represents a group that posts very different kinds of material on social media than the majority of the population.

Leeglade has the more functional High Street and is not on the road to anywhere else while Highglade, with its art galleries and wine shops, caters to people driving through its High Street from London. English families tend to be nuclear households consisting of parents and children. The most common single-person households are elderly. The most recent census suggests around a quarter of households are single-person, but they are under-represented in our questionnaire. In this we found the following family sizes: one-person (12 per cent), two-person (38 per cent), three-person (26 per cent), four-person (14 per cent) and five-person (10 per cent). None were larger.

There is a small industrial estate between the villages. One company has 800 employees, but the average for local businesses is only 6. The area would be characterised by what is now called the 'white van man', linked to building and associated trades, while many women work in the local schools and services.

Table 1.2 (p. 194) shows employment grades are as high in Leeglade as in London, and for Highglade are even higher.[18] Highglade lies in the ten per cent of wards with the least deprivation in England. Life expectancy is 81.5 years, compared to the national average of 79.8,[19] but Leeglade would be more typical of the region as a whole. Yet there is certainly poverty associated with particular groups, for example single mothers in social housing (around six per cent of households in Leeglade are single mothers) or people with addiction and mental health problems, as evident in the very active local Citizen's Advice Bureau. Local politics, religion and commerce are discussed in Chapter 6. A free local monthly magazine is delivered to every home in The Glades. Crime is strongly featured, but focused on items such as an individual who has been banned from the pubs for rowdy behaviour, revealing a generally low crime rate.

From an ethnographic perspective the village makes most sense in terms of the life cycle of villagers. It matters most to children because this is where they are brought up and educated. In addition to family, most of their friends are likely to be those they go to school with or who live nearby. There is a host of children's sports and other activities, often with long waiting lists. There is also a successful annual carnival (Fig. 1.5). Teenagers, however, are generally bored, drifting to Treedon for Saturday night under-age drinking and parties, and then escaping to college or university.

For much of the middle part of life, post-school and prior to retirement, The Glades is likely to be relatively insignificant, even to the people who live there. People are largely absorbed by work and family. A major exception is new mothers, who join local antenatal and postnatal classes and toddler groups; many may well find this is the main time when they form core friendships, a few lasting for as long as they remain in The Glades or even for life. At this period of parenting they are intensely involved in their own locality. Otherwise the time

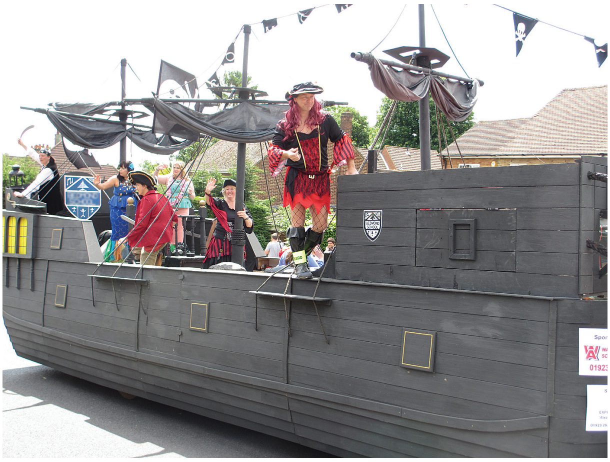

Fig. 1.5 Carnival in Leeglade

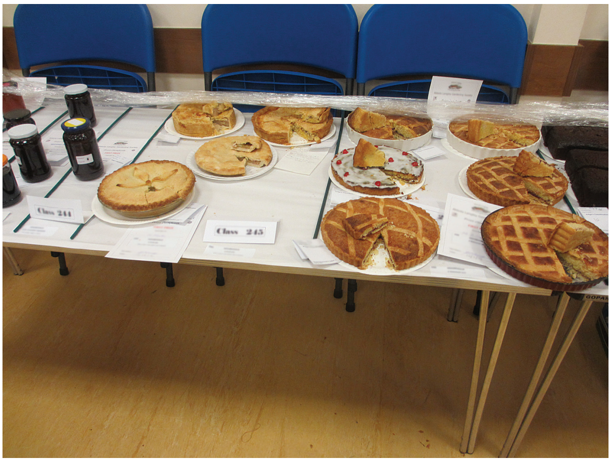

Fig. 1.6 The annual gardening and produce show

commitments of work and family result in detachment from the wider village. Men who would once have had more time for drinking in the pub and other local activities now spend more time in family-related leisure and household chores.

The Glades becomes important again at the time of retirement. As a result there is an astonishing number of societies, including half a dozen amateur dramatic groups, for example, some dedicated to Gilbert and Sullivan and other very 'English' musicals, Christmas pantomimes and also to more serious drama of remarkably high quality. There are also sports clubs, gardening shows (Fig. 1.6), bowls, the Women's Institute, philanthropic associations and so forth. Though few still attend church, there is a considerable amount of volunteer labour.

Grace is one of those who represent the 'life and soul' of Leeglade. She was probably the single most likely person you would meet at any society or village function, and she was always very friendly and helpful, as well as amazingly philanthropic. She taught computer courses to the elderly and of the 3,400 friends she has on Facebook she imagines about 2,000 of them are people she has taught. Grace also enjoys playing games on Facebook – whichever are current, from Candy Crush to Flappy Bird. Her intense relationship to social and other media reflects rather than detracts from her incredibly busy social life. At the heart of this is family. Her mother was one of 12 children and two of her uncles had 16 children each, so there are 82 close relations of her generation, 156 in her daughter's generation and 231 in her grandchildren's generation. There is also yet another generation, since she has one great-grandchild.

Yet, in addition to family and her media relationships, Grace knows everyone (as in anyone-who-is-anyone) in Leeglade. She is very involved with the church and helped to develop 'messy church' for young mothers. She has also taken the main lead in developing a Credit Union so that the lowest income villagers do not have to pay the interest of credit loan sharks, but can instead use traditional forms of savings such as rotating credit schemes and Christmas savings clubs. She is also fairly notorious, being, as she would be the first to admit, open about topics such as sex and gossip – something not at all common for older people in Leeglade.

While Grace is exceptional, Bruce is not. Why does Bruce live in The Glades? 'It suited me, 'cos I worked from home. So it does not really matter where I am. I'm within easy distance to wherever I want to get to. I am based at home, but I do not work in the house. As long as I can get somewhere, and The Glades is very well placed.' Although Bruce now lives in The Glades, it is mostly an irrelevance to his life. 'I'm not sure the village thing is the thing that bothers me particularly. I would be happy here for location in relation to communications . . . We've never had anyone in the street in for dinner. None of our close friends live in The Glades. My children weren't at school here.' There are hundreds of such people who live in The Glades because it is convenient for transport, but they join no local societies and could not tell you the full names of their immediate neighbours. It was the fact that there are far more people like Bruce than there are people like Grace that was to make this research project very difficult indeed.

How we did this work

The intention was to carry out a traditional anthropological ethnography alongside the other eight projects. Ideally this would have meant living in the village, participating in public events alongside other villagers and making close friends from whom one could gain a sense of their private lives, both within the family and more generally. However, it soon became apparent that there was no point living in the village: developing a relationship with one household in The Glades very rarely meant any kind of interaction with anyone else. It was as though each household was its own field work project. Getting to know people like Bruce did not bring us any closer to getting to know The Glades other than as an aggregate of people like Bruce. For these reasons I decided I might as well commute from my family home.

What is ethnography? This may be defined as a commitment to contextual holism. Nobody lives within one topic or with only one role. No one lives *only* on social media, in the same way they do not live only with family or only at work or only with their religious beliefs. Ethnography is holistic because that is true of the lives of people, who live all of their contexts together. To understand any single aspect of a person's life, one wants to have at least some sense of all the rest. Furthermore you cannot predict which other elements and contexts are going to be most important in explaining the one that has been chosen as the focus of research, in this case social media. So the main reason anthropologists spend 15 months living with a population is in order to encounter all these potentially relevant contexts before deciding which ones are significant for their topic of study. The second main reason is in order to encounter the broadest possible range of people, spanning gender, income, education and all other parameters of difference. The third main reason is that people live increasingly private lives. If much of their time is within their own homes, how can we understand them if we cannot also be inside those homes? If much of social media now consists of quite private and intimate discussion on WhatsApp, then how long must we know someone for before he or she will trust us with that content? In anthropology the commitment is to *observation of behaviour*, not simply to the claims and accounts about people's behaviour that one would find from surveys, questionnaires and focus groups. So although ethnography was invented for the study of tribal and other small-scale societies, it may perhaps achieve its true potential in modern metropolitan society. It has become the only method that follows people into the private domains, which is where they live most of their lives.

This is the ideal. In practice it was more difficult conducting an ethnography in The Glades than any of our other field sites, and the result may be the least ethnographic of all our field site studies. English informants are simply not comfortable with the idea of someone just hanging out with them. One needs to have a purpose, such as an interview. In response, the study tried at least to secure breadth. Overall we interviewed over 370 individuals, many more than once. In addition there was much hanging about in public places such as community events, pubs and restaurants (especially pubs!). Fortunately one way we could accomplish the more conventional ethnographic method of participant observation was simply following (with their explicit permission) the social media platforms of our informants. Being able to follow 130 people on Facebook, 80 on Twitter and 50 on Instagram included many of the relatively private exchanges within families and between friends that was otherwise missing; sometimes we also asked to view WhatsApp or Snapchat. In this instance, rather than ethnography gifting us social media, it was often social media that helped gift us the ethnography.

Chapter 5 describes two subsidiary and more applied projects. One was carried out with patients from the Hospice of St Francis in Berkhamsted, many of whose patients came from similar villages to The Glades. This was carried out together with Kimberley McLaughlin, a senior hospice professional. The other was conducted with four local secondary schools; it included 80 interviews with the 16 to 18 age group and some teachers, as well as a general survey of social media use among 2,496 pupils aged 11 to 18. This research in schools, along with much of the main ethnography, was conducted together with Ciara Green, then a student in the UCL Digital Anthropology programme. As a result this book refers to 'we' in conducting research.

Pilot research, along with two interns, began in April 2012. The main field work in The Glades lasted 18 months, from April 2013 through to the end of September 2014. During the first year Ciara and I concentrated on going door to door in streets that looked as though they would characterise the range from most to least expensive. We began by leafleting about the project, then calling to ask for a possible interview at some point in the future. Often people would agree to this and give contact details, but equally often they would fail to be present at the agreed time. We had the experience of some individuals cancelling five times without ever admitting that they did not really want to be interviewed. People in The Glades do not like to say no, even when they mean it. Nevertheless the bulk of our contacts with villagers came through this method, which required considerable perseverance.

The reasoning behind this method was that most studies of communities emphasise the people who actually join community groups. A truly representative study, however, would focus just as much on people who join no such activities and do not really want to be included in an ethnography, so this was the only method to ensure that this book is in some ways representative. Working with schools and the hospice helped in this respect, since everyone equally goes to school and will at some point die. Our additional book *Visualising Facebook*, which compares what people post on Facebook in The Glades as against Trinidad, has already been written and will be published in 2016. Together with the other volumes in the Why We Post series, it helps to sustain the arguments of this book with regard to the Englishness of English social media, but in that case through comparison and contrast.[20]