

# A Tale of Two Towns? More like The Return of the Nativism

Alison Lindon



The government's latest attempt to fix its own failures may leave us all depressed, hostile, and lacking any national or local pride

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Tulips at the Charleston Farmhouse in Sussex, in bloom before the yearly festival

If most people hear the name Charleston, South Carolina, they would be forgiven for grimly recalling the church shooting of July 2015, when a white supremacist named Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans during a study session at their local church. That heinous crime made headlines all over the world and shattered a once peaceful community, leaving scars that many believed would never heal. For me, the name recalls something different, it brings to mind an evening in 2019, at a venue just round the corner from the Mother Emanuel Methodist Church, where I sat and listened to an inspiring young Black novelist named Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah talk about his new work, *Friday Black*.

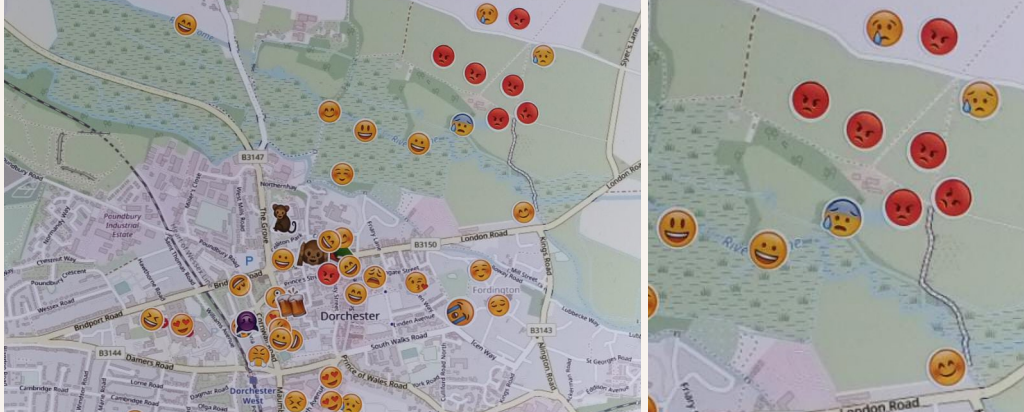
The event was part of the Charleston to Charleston Literary Festival, founded in 2017, two years after the church massacre, that connects this city on the Atlantic coast with a famous farmhouse in Sussex, once home to the Bloomsbury Group and still host to its own revered cultural festival each spring. The connection created by the pairing of these two celebrations of culture has meant that a city that was so recently faced with being marked forever by the trauma of racial violence is now an attractive destination to those who might never have considered visiting it. The revitalisation of one community by association with another half the world away, based on no more than a shared name, is proof that national boundaries need not define friendship nor common values.

Since its announcement last week the government's Tale of Two Towns initiative has divided a nation already at odds over so much. While the Shadow Secretary for Levelling Up has tried, admirably, to put the attention back onto the Tories' failing record on local regeneration projects, the furore over her colleague's now infamous "Siamese twins" comment in Parliament has taken almost all of the media focus and is now close to reaching the lofty heights of culture war. While #Siamesegate continues to trend and more Labour supporters begin to insist on using "Siamese Towns" as a way of lambasting the insular focus of the initiative, a more troubling reality of the official title has gone largely unacknowledged.

Only a government so blind to its own faults as to be nearing the point of parody could think to invoke Charles Dickens when designing an initiative related to the kind of increasingly Victorian social conditions that have been wrought by more than a decade of austerity. As more of our towns and cities come to display the Dickensian effects of the government's long-term disregard, one begins to wonder whether the entire thing was cooked up as a joke by an English graduate who ended up reluctantly working for a political think tank. It barely needs pointing out that *A Tale of Two Cities* is about London and Paris, two great capitals which, although not formally twinned, are joined by a train line that heralded a new friendship between two nations that had historically been at near perpetual war.

With all due respect to Dickens (which is much more than the Tories have shown him), of the great English Victorian novelists, I myself am more partial to Thomas Hardy, so it was with some interest that I saw that his hometown of Dorchester had been chosen as one of the trial pairings for the identical twin towns scheme. Like Charleston, SC, it has become dear to my heart in recent years with the advent of a new cultural festival – The Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair, which started in 2019 and celebrates the novelist's birthday with a variety of events in the town for the benefit of local people and visitors alike. I assumed, perhaps naively, that any scheme designed to energise local pride, particularly among the young, would reach for a figure so significant to this small town's heritage.

In fact, in the first release of the Wessex Regeneration Project, organised as a way of introducing Dorchester to its new friends (or siblings) in Darlington, we see that residents were encouraged to place emoji stickers onto a map of the town to convey how they felt about it. Quite aside from my scepticism that civic pride was something that could be generated or measured in the manner one appraises the success of a Tesco self-service machine, I was left wondering how one was meant to read these maps.



Emoji maps of Dorchester from the Wessex Regeneration Project

I was much less familiar with the town than those taking part, but looking closely I saw at least that one person had had a similar experience to me there – there was a very happy looking face at the roundabout where the Hardy statue stands. Many stressed, sad or angry sticker faces rested along the fields just north of the River Frome though – what was the story behind this? Did something terrible happen there? If so, I wondered whether this was an appropriate means for inviting people to express their feelings – would the residents of Charleston feel that sad face emoji stickers could adequately convey *their* emotions about the events of 2015?

A quick Google led to me that the area on the map hosted a caravan park, so the preponderance of negative stickers was surely an expression of the sort of hostile feelings that have come to define both small town xenophobia and that small-island mentality that fuels initiatives like the identical twinned towns. Read like this, as it no doubt would be by groups from Darlington, the map warns visitors about the places in Dorchester to avoid, just as news stories about violent shootings inevitably warn foreigners about cities to avoid in the US. It leaves one wondering whether negativity and closed-mindedness can ever be relied upon to help in the important work of local regeneration.

I didn't lose hope though. Below the negative faces was a rosy-cheeked smiling emoji stuck on at Ten Hatches Weir, key site of Hardy's humorous poem 'The Curate's Kindness'. Though I don't expect that the sticker was placed with this work in mind, I was moved at the idea that someone had had an experience at that spot just as Hardy did a century before, showing that a place could inspire multiple histories, which *is* something to celebrate. Wouldn't it be better if the residents of Darlington were introduced to Dorchester through its history as Hardy's Casterbridge, rather than in relation to the mood of its current residents after years of Tory rule? Should we be encouraging young people to express their disaffection with the mess that their government has made of their future through inward-looking art that is then shared with other groups facing these same problems?

The fact that the team behind the equivalent project in Southend have workshopped stickers reading "Southend's Not a Sh\*thole" doesn't fill me with hope, either for improvements in civic pride in Brexit Britain or the future of this latest Levelling Up scheme. I have faith that as a nation we can do better, but it will be by rebuilding bonds that have been strained or broken in the years since 2016, and finding ways of connecting with our own history that we can then share with the world. Not by using stickers to patch up holes left by political negligence.

If I were given an emoji pack of my own right now to express my feelings about this country, I would use the thumbs down sticker, and I would place it squarely on 10 Downing Street, London.

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\* Correction - this article noted that the "Southend's Not a Sh\*thole" workshop produced stickers, they were in fact badges.