

Sharon Feinstein

OVER the years, the residents of Grimsby have learned to endure an icy east wind and the mocking that accompanies any reference to the gloomily named town and its dependence on fish. But are they ready for Sacha Baron Cohen?

An inside account from the Cape Town set of Cohen's latest satire — based around the football World Cup and menacingly entitled *Grimsby* — has stirred local fury.

"I'm fed up with these film caricatures of life in Grimsby," complained Austin Mitchell, the town's MP. "We have a good sense of humour, but it's time to pick on another town."

At the centre of local alarm are scenes that are said to feature a group of heavily obese actors as badly behaved Grimsby Town football supporters — known locally as Codheads — who travel to watch the World Cup in Chile.

According to Maurice Maree, a South African extra who worked on the film, Cohen recruited six women, each weighing more than 20 stone, to run amok in scenes that feature binge-eating, copious vomiting and in one characteristically excessive scene, naked wobbling across a football pitch.

"The gang of supporters from Grimsby are all enormous and revolting," Maree told *The Sunday Times*.

The star of scathing box office hits such as *Ali G* *Indahouse*, *Borat* and *Brüno* is no stranger to controversy. In *Borat*, Cohen managed to offend the entire population of Kazakhstan with a bogus national anthem that celebrated the country's supposed reputation for "the cleanest prostitutes in the region".

In *Grimsby*, due out in July, Cohen plays a football hooligan who leads an unsavoury group of Codheads to watch England in action in Chile. There he encounters his brother, a British spy on the run, and general chaos ensues.

As part of his preparation for the film, Cohen turned up at a Grimsby game dressed in a team shirt, and spent time in local bars with fans. Some of those fans now feel betrayed at reports of the latest assault on Grimsby's already dismal image.

"We saw him in the town and he wasn't with any fat birds then," said Richard Finn, 39, who recently appeared in



Grimsby braced for Borat treatment in football satire

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Skint, a typically gruelling Channel 4 documentary about long-term unemployment, much of it filmed in Grimsby.

"You get lasses of all shapes and sizes here, but we're not the only place in the country to have a few big ones," Finn added.

His friend Alan Rutherford, 50, who works in a fish smoke-house, added: "It's a myth that everyone here is obese and

misbehaves. People just like to pick on Grimsby. It's a disgrace — leave us alone."

Nor were Grimsby's womenfolk happy with Cohen's vision. "It's an unfair representation of us, we're not like this," said Drifa Scarrott, a 29-year-old care assistant. "He could have picked any place in the country and found six obese women."

But Sandra Ottley, 67, suggested the film might provide a

wake-up call to some of Grimsby's residents. "I think Cohen has a cheek, but you can't deny it, there are a lot of fatties in Grimsby. I should know — I was one of them." She has since lost 4½ stone.

Helen Lewis, 31, a shop assistant, added: "Usually people just say we are fishy. I guess this will be something different."

A spokesman for the local football team — once managed

by Bill Shankly before he moved to Liverpool, but now languishing in the Conference Premier division — bravely declared that "we aren't precious and we can take a joke".

The club runs its own weekly "fat camps" for supporters. One of its groups, called 40/40, is for people aged over 40 with a waist of more than 40in. It has over 100 members.

"Cohen came here but never



Filming has been taking place for the new Sacha Baron Cohen film with the cast in South Africa, top

told us what he was doing," the club spokesman said. "We won't condone hooliganism, but we are looking forward to seeing the film."

According to Maree, Cohen deploys his taste for provocative excess in several other scenes, including a bizarre sequence involving sex with an elephant.

Among Hollywood stars who turned up in South Africa to film cameo roles was Penelope Cruz, who was apparently required to flash her breasts at Cohen. "They had to do eight takes to get the scene right," Maree said.

Daniel Radcliffe, the Harry Potter star, also filmed a segment. The role of Cohen's overweight girlfriend was played by Rebel Wilson, the generously proportioned Australian actress who was covered in England and Grimsby tattoos for the film.

Cohen had no immediate comment on Grimsby's complaints. Other scenes were said to show him snorting mounds of cocaine through a vuvuzela — the notorious South African horn that turned up at the 2010 World Cup.

The final match between England and Germany is disrupted by an obese streaker who ends up wrestling with stewards in a frightening heap of quivering flab. "The cast thought it was hilarious," said Maree.

Grimsby's MP thought otherwise. "The whole thing sounds barmy," said Mitchell. "I've never seen these 20-stone-plus fans at matches. One has to ask how anyone that size would get through the turnstiles."

While Cohen's film seems certain to unleash yet another torrent of anti-Grimsby jokes — about the football team's "shoot to miss policy", or about this year's Miss Grimsby ("it's not a beauty pageant, it's a public health warning") — there may be an upside for the town.

For all its rancid mockery of Kazakhstan, Cohen's *Borat* film sparked a mini-surge of tourism to the country, and one Kazakh ambassador declared that Cohen had "placed Kazakhstan on the map".

Will visitors flock to Grimsby to see if it is truly awful? If Mitchell is any guide, they may be disappointed. "It's a good place, full of good people," he said.