

Where the Thames Meets the Sea

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To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are nearly as eternal as any earthly life can be. -Rachel Carson

It would have been a shame to have missed the scale of the night with sleep and, besides which, it has been too cold. A late May frost has crept across the land, stiffening stalks and deep-freezing my bones. A super-moon has drowned the night with light. It is three in the morning. The ducks who have been swimming all night keeping warm and alert, are now calling to each other in short whispered wheinkk - wheinkkks. An owl patrols the path at the foot of the sea wall and on the silver band of silent water before me huge supertankers hum and throb their way up-river towards London's ports.

The Thames Estuary is not beautiful in any conventional sense. Joseph Conrad, who is probably the estuary's greatest champion wrote, 'it has no noble features, no romantic grandeur of aspect, no smiling geniality'. For centuries, its marshes have been a place for dirty industry where 'tall slender chimneys smoked, speaking of work, manufacture and trade as palm groves on a tropical island speak of luxuriant grace, beauty and vigour of a tropical nature'. Nowadays the chimneys have largely been replaced by the squat tanks and twisting pipes of oil refineries, gas and petrochemical works. Acres of imported cars twinkle like gems in the sun and cones of sand and gravel peak like extinct volcanoes.

But, beyond the cement and aggregate works of Gravesend, is the wild and mysterious Hoo Peninsula. Conrad wrote of the area that it appealed to an 'adventurous imagination'. He wrote of the 'wide open, spacious, and inviting place' which is 'hospitable at first glance'. It is a haunting place where skylarks and curlews have shared the space with convicts, cordite and malaria. The critic, novelist and London biographer Peter Ackroyd, wrote 'even at the beginning of the 21st century, walking alone by the shores of the estuary, it is possible to feel great fear—fear of solitude, fear of being abandoned, fear of the river itself'.

In Gravesend's last pub before the isolation of the marshes begins, grey-haired men with big bellies slouch in metal chairs, drinking mid-morning lagers at the Ship and Lobster. Two St. George flags twitch on the beer garden's fence and another flaps from a flagpole. I walk past the crumbling Victorian warehouses and join a fence which borders the path. A red flag, agitated by the stiff easterly wind, warns of a firing range. A group of police marksmen in fluorescent jackets gather by a firing wall. They shall be the last people I'll see for more than 24 hours.

As the land breaks free from the town, the horse-cropped grass is firm and fast to walk upon. This is that lovely moment at the beginning of a walk when one feels that one could walk forever. A sure and clear path, a wind and a cloudless May sky. Sandwiches, coffee and soup in the back pack. Ahead, avenues of pylons stretch from horizon to horizon and along the sea-wall stubby hawthorns whistle in the wind as they prepare to burst their buds. Wild gypsy horses with huge furry forelocks nibble at short stems. Supertankers filled with oil, others labouring under cliffs of containers, ply the river. They seem ponderous and slow, burdened by their loads, but I cannot keep up with them as they sail downstream. I even ran for a short section, but they are fleetier than they appear.

After an hour or so of walking—and some running—I arrive at Shornmead Fort, one of several built in the 1860s to counter a new French threat. It's no mediaeval fantasy of square keeps and round towers, but rather a low black wall with gun ports on top of a bramble-covered bank. The state had ordered the Royal engineers to blast it in the 1960s and what remains is under the control of the local youths who have mounded earth in the former parade ground to make jumps for bike stunts. Each gunport has its collection of cheap lager cans and NO2 gas canisters piled into a corner. I have the place to myself today and it is perfect for a coffee stop—art on the walls, ingenious inglenooks and wildflowers in the courtyard.

Further along the path, towards Cliffe, near to the low mound of the next abandoned fort, a hawthorn bush bursts with photos and mementos which were tied on to it last week. Dayton Webb, a railway worker, had misjudged a jump on a trial bike and was killed while having reckless fun. He was 23.

This place—this marshland—has a narcotic effect on me. It's my 'go-to' place when I need space in which to breathe. This is where

my spirit rejoices and my mind empties of concerns. I am almost skipping along the path as it continues along the top of the sea wall. The air is rich with sea smells and the light phosphorescent. An unseen moon pulls the trickling tide-waters away from the bank, leaving mud which ripples like a blanket on an unmade bed. Dunlins, black-tailed godwits and shelducks feast on worms and shells. Gulls loll like teens in the sky. Purpling sea lavender and grey green sea purslane grow in the muddy creeks and I pick shoots and leaves as I walk. Tastes of the sea fizzle on my tongue.

Approaching Lower Hope Point the path twists through towering cones of sand and gravel. Conveyor belts wheeze and whine. Tiny particles of silica roll down the steep sides. It is as if another world has been entered where nature has yet to settle on a design. The air smells ferrous and earthy. The path through the works is bordered by a high chain-link fence, on which notices hang warning of death by various means. Gold-green alexanders border the path and sweeten the air. The watery earth of the peninsula has always been exploited—Romans dug for salt, farmers dug ditches and during Victorian times, ‘muddies’ dug for the mud—Gault Clay—which made the hundreds of millions of bricks needed for the ever-expanding city.

At Cliffe Pools, birds convene in a raucous conference. This former gravel extraction site is now a nature reserve managed by the RSPB, where avocets, spoonbills and egrets roam. They say it’s the best place in Britain to hear nightingales. Today the pools are teeming with black-headed gulls, herons and egrets. On the shorelines, redshanks and Kentish plovers are probing the mud whilst a black kite patrols the skies above. In a few days, the rough scrub will tune to the throaty willow warblers, marsh warblers and blackcaps. To see such density of nature re-colonising the rough dug pits is joyous.

Peter Ackroyd wrote that the marshes ‘exert a primitive and still menacing force, all the more eerie and lonely because of its proximity to the great city’. It is not difficult to become lost in the autumn rains or in the low light of winter. Paths can take on the appearance of deep ditches and mists twist the shapes of huts and trees into something the irrational imagination fears. In the low, grey light of winter, when red lights blink on masts and pylons, when indefinable noises haunt the turbid air, and the sudden scream of vixen on heat, can chill already cold bones. Today is early summer and the light is full and bright, but a frisson of fear is stalking me as memories of an earlier time return. Now, the RSPB car parks are empty, and I am acutely aware again of the remoteness of these Pools. Here, many decades ago, I nearly met my end when a banger of a car, driven by a skin-head youth, misjudged a hand-brake turn and just missed me. On another occasion, a youth rode a motocross trial bike straight and fast at me, jerking out of the way at the very last second, spraying me with mud and gravel, after which a knot of malevolent youths appeared out of the scrub cheering and jeering, asking—‘whachya want mate?’ Not responding, I walked fast away.

On a wide sweep of the river stands Cliffe Fort. Domes of sand and thickets of bramble and thorn are piled against the black walls and two non-scaleable fences surround the ditch. Beside the fort are the remains of a Brennan Torpedo launch, one of only eight made, which was designed to propel torpedoes into the Thames. The rails emanating from out of the scrub onto the beach make a perfect place to stop for lunch. Eating cheese and pickle sandwiches, and a salad of fresh sea purslane picked from the shoreline, is the most perfect lunch. I watch ships, and inhale lungfuls of sea air which smells of shells and salt. I watch the waders prodding the mud and the gulls in the canopy of sky above me. There are no dogs sniffing around, no

joggers pounding past, no city people leaking their music and noise. These marshes were not always a blissful place to be. Peter Ackroyd described the lands beyond the Pools as ‘not a human place’. Malaria—or the ‘ague’ by which it was known—regularly swept away those who had to live nearby. The Anopheles Mosquito, the largest of its kind in the Western Hemisphere, carried a parasite known as *Plasmodium vivax* which had a fatal effect. People were still dying of malaria beyond the end of the Great War.

As the afternoon drifts into evening, the land carries a haunted feel. In the nineteenth century, Hay Merricks & Co. set up a small-scale gunpowder storage facility which quickly grew into a chemical explosives factory, producing cordite for the navy. Accidental explosions and deaths were common. Shadows from the now roofless nitro-glycerine huts lengthen across the grass and the hills bordering the flatlands turn a deeper shade of purple. The wind has died. Everything is very quiet. Across the Thames six skeletal monsters at the London Gateway port haul containers from the decks of ships two at a time and lay them down on the quay, where another automated crane carefully places them onto the backs of queuing lorries. Watching this silent and graceful movement is mesmerising.

I reach a large dent in the coastline; Egypt Bay. Google maps has marked the bay with an icon of a sun umbrella and beach ball. What a shift of imagination someone has had! In the waning light, there is a large curve of mud, channelled by shaky rivulets and near the sea wall, a wide expanse of purple sea lavender. The sea itself is a long way away, so far that the oil tanker passing along the river seems as if it’s gliding across land. In my weary state the bay seems benign, but it was a fearful place. There is no sign today of the rotting hulks of former ships of the line which, de-masted and decommissioned, spent their last few years as prisons on the Thames. Few sentenced to spend time on these prison ships ever re-emerged. They were chained to the decks, and succumbed to malnourishment and disease. Charles Dickens, who lived on the peninsula’s small spine of hills, was appalled by the conditions and campaigned for a more humane treatment of criminals. In his novel, *Great Expectations*, Abel Magwitch escaped from a prison ship in this bay before surprising Pip and demanding ‘wittels’ in the Cliffe churchyard up on the hill.

I’m tired now and the day is done. The sun is setting. I walk on to where the OS map describes a ruined building as ‘Camp Abandoned’. It is a 3 metre square block of old concrete which has been much holed by time, guns and youths. On the inside wall is written, ‘Datse loves girls’. The floor is sand banked with dust and dried marsh dirt. In a corner, empty Diet Coke cans and a Subway sandwich packet jerk idly across the rippled concrete floor. I kick away the worst and unroll my sleeping bag.

It is nearly dark and near to freezing. Supper is chunky warm soup. The night quickly turns from chilly to very cold. A gentle wind whines, and ghouls patrol the outside marsh and steal my sleep. However the night is magical. The Rose moon, one of three super moons of the year, is now so large and bright that the marshes glow in a light of silver gilt. Mist steams from dykes. I watch the ducks paddle in circles. Reeds twitch. Ships continue to throb and growl. Lights on the opposite shore blink red and white from towers, chimneys and cranes. In the night light they seem like fallen stars. Directly opposite me is the London Gateway port where the world’s largest dockside cranes work in total silence through the night, relieving two ships of their containers. To be so alone and so far from the city, yet so close to its workings, is an extraordinary and thrilling feeling.



Stillness
(Julian Kirwan-Taylor).

Dawn comes early, and after a cup of barely warm coffee from a flask and a chew on a very squashed croissant, I set off into a thin line of mist which lies across the ground. I cannot see my legs, nor anything that is below waist height. I feel my way along the path and make for posts which float like wood on the sea. Birds and fowl commute on invisible lines in the air. Across the river, Southend begins to wake and traffic noise drifts across on the tide. By the time I reach Allhallows-on-Sea I'm nearly ready to re-enter society again, after my time alone with ghosts and the cold. Some early dog walkers are about. We nod as we pass each other in early morning greeting.

As the sun rises on the caravan park, I pass a new concrete and gravel-filled plot commemorating 2nd Lt. Armand John Ramacitti. He'd been flying his first combat mission in a B17 and was returning from northern France. He'd been hit by flak and lost an engine. Over the Thames another engine failed. As he struggled to control his plane, it veered into his section leader, lost a wing and nose-dived into the Thames. He was only 15 minutes away from landing at his base in Essex. A mile or so further on, is a stone memorial to a boy who drowned in the Yantlet channel. The copper plaque with his name and story has long since been prized off and melted down. To those Romans who fell chasing the woad-covered Britons, to the malarial victims, to the women in the nitro-glycerine factories, prisoners, sailors, smugglers, fishermen and others who've died on these watery lands, there is no monument other than the living and ever-changing memorial of the marshes themselves.

Beyond the Yantlet, it really is the end of the world. An obelisk marks it so. Joseph Conrad wrote of this place as where 'the sky and sea are welded together without a joint'. The solitude and immensity is beyond words.

I turn inland and am met by great rusting coils of barbed wire, along with notices warning of death. The MoD shells have long been removed from this firing range but it still remains closed. I toy with the idea of trespass but after such a blissful solitudinous time, I'm in no mood for an argument should I meet a ranger. So I take the new and more circuitous England Coast Path towards the huge cylindrical containers of the Isle of Grain, some white, some rusting brown, some aged grey, resembling gigantic African huts.

On the Isle of Grain there are tank traps along the shore, and another disused fort which is much loved by brambles. Walking along the streets of Grain, and passing un-glamorous housing, is a 'coming-back-to-earth' experience after the euphoria of being in space. The little stains of sadness which inevitably smudge the emotions after the passing of so fine a time, mix with the knowledge that all things must end.

In a public park, beneath the fort, there's a bench with a table where I sit and watch the sun sparkle on the silver sea. A man is mowing the grass creating long horizontal lines of green with his sit-on mower. He decides it's time for a break and so drives his noisy machine straight towards where I am sitting and parks it right in front of me.

'Coffee break', he says and sits on the other side of the table blocking my view of the sea. I have left my words out on the marshes so nod by way of reply. Reluctant to leave, but in need of some sleep and food, I walk towards the stop where the bus will come and take me home.