

## Footprints on the Tideline

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You look back across the years of landlocked life  
And call up the voice of redshank and curlew.  
You drift down, across sea lavender and samphire,  
To walk again through dune and marsh  
To the tideline, where you left your childhood.

*(Appleby, 2007.)*

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The sand is firm, warm, salt scented. Sanderlings scuttle before me, picking at strands of seaweed, running ahead like busy lawyers. It is September, at the point of the full moon, and a spring tide so high it had slipped up the lane to the village. Now it is retreating, sinking low into the northern horizon so that, on this shallow shore, there is a mile of abandoned sandbars, pools, shell banks and an ebbing sheet of saltwater.

I am walking west along the Norfolk coast, a shifting network of marsh, dune and creek. I am retracing my footprints from childhood. This is where I grew up; where I learnt about moons and tides, seasons and cycles, life and death. Behind me, the sea swirls sand into my prints, erasing them, removing evidence of my path. Have I left a memory if not a mark? Some cultures believe that, even after people have gone, something of them remains where they have walked.

Old Ordnance Survey maps mark this coast with the words 'Ancient Forest'. That it was here, submerged, was not in doubt. I had, as a child, collected peat pebbles, gnawed and rounded by the sea; broken them apart to find the shreds of plants still inside. At times the sea scoured out the beach, digging into old mud banks where brown crabs sheltered from sunlight, revealing the old forest floor. It was a series of just such destructive tides that, in 1998, exposed a wooden construction that became known as Seahenge.

A chance find of a Bronze Age axe, and the subsequent emergence of an oval enclosure of wooden posts, triggered investigations by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit. The 'henge' consisted of fifty-six oak timbers with their bark preserved on the outside, leaving the impression of one enormous tree. Sheltered inside was an inverted stump, also of oak, reaching down into the earth, its root shield looking up to the sky. There is increasing evidence that some prehistoric sites, including Stonehenge, are aligned to the midwinter

sunset and Seahenge had two timbers creating a narrow gap with this alignment. The construction has been dated to the early summer of 2049 BC.

Before it could be claimed by the sea forever, heritage experts and archaeologists prepared a plan for its excavation and removal. But other groups, such as neo-druids, wanted the 'henge' to stay put, to face an uncertain future of reburial or erosion. There was heated emotion on all sides. The archaeologists won. The timbers were removed and shipped across to Flag Fen, East Anglia's prime bronze age site. After treatment, they were relocated to Kings Lynn's Museum as a permanent exhibit.

The conjecture around Seahenge focused on the central upturned tree. Had it provided a place for excarnation, here on this liminal site, haunted by gulls and crows? The last resting place for a body to be picked clean by birds; for the soul to be released by the removal of flesh? In mythology, the tree links heaven and earth with its roots in the underworld and its branches in the sky. Celtic people, it is believed, venerated the oak, whereas Scandinavian cultures chose the ash. It seems strange to ponder a connection to the oak, standing on a wind-swept treeless beach.

Seahenge was built on the edge; a land of forest and fen looking out across what is now the North Sea. But at one time Norfolk was joined to Europe across a vast fertile plain known as Doggerland. This was largely submerged by 6500 BC, due to meltwaters from glacial ice sheets. It is slowly giving up information as fishing vessels and wind farm developers trawl up artefacts from the sea bed. These suggest an occupied land, where people would have roamed as tribes of hunter-gatherers. We cannot understand their culture, their association with the land or their beliefs. We can only surmise that they would have been concerned about the gradual loss of their hunting grounds, and that the forest must have begun dying from salt incursion. The legacy of this huge landscape and its loss may have carried on in oral histories and given rise to myths of spirits dwelling under water.

Walking along this tideline, empty of people, I can see recent evidence of the changing coast. Field drains from when the land was cultivated before the 1953 flood; concrete gun emplacements and pill boxes from the Second World War. Constantly eroding and rebuilding, dunes disappear and marsh creeps over sand. Growing up here, a place touched by man but still retaining its elemental wildness, I learnt respect for the sea, for what it brings and what it takes away. I saw how the moon, when full, pulled the tide up the beach and then sucked it out to the horizon. Some days the rotting planks of old wrecks were revealed, sticking up from the sand like the bones of a lost animal. As the tide oscillated, it shaped and

sculpted, left its signature in skeins of bladderwrack, cast off mermaids' purses and discarded starfish.

I walk past the site of the old 'henge' beneath the shadows of pine shelterbelts. Tucked into dunes, in an old war time bunker, is the Holme Bird Observatory where I once helped record the annual autumn migration. It still runs a ringing programme, capturing, recording and releasing the many birds that pass through this migrant staging post. It is a magical experience to sit on the dune ridge in September, and watch birds tumbling down into the sea buckthorn after a long flight. Fieldfares, redwings, finches, even robins and owls, all streaming in across the north sea.

I walk out further to Gore Point. The tide is still dropping. The point is a triangular ridge of hard sand that runs west towards the Wash. It can be completely submerged, but twice a day, the whole area is deserted by the sea and left as a rippled, salt strewn, unpeopled place. Knowing the time of the tide, I am fairly certain of my safety. I walk on. The sand is shell-less, paddled over by gulls and laced by threads of sea lettuce. Away to my right, the sea is sinking below the horizon; to my left, are the marsh pools and dunes between Holme and Hunstanton. The flat landscapes in East Anglia, particularly at the coast, provide a 360 degree distant horizon of sky, sea and land edge. Our prehistoric ancestors would have looked around and up at the sky. Circles within circles.

I walk further out into a salt sand desert. I become as small in the landscape as a Borrower beneath the floorboards. The gulls grow large. I am in their element. I feel disconnected from my world. I see no-one and smell only the sea. The gulls laugh at me as they lift into the onshore breeze. I stop and take a circular view.

Alone on a sandbank; all the horizons hazy. A distant light playing on water, a mist shimmering over land. It is now I feel fear. How long since I had left the shelter of Holme beach? How far to run back if the tide turns? The wind carries the calls of birds mocking me; sand whips round my ankles. I am stepping back through the glass, growing in stature as the sea fades away to a tideline.

Reaching the safety of Holme, I cross a shallow ripple of water. A redshank pipes out of a creek, the air smells of mud. I can hear the sea, like a constant breath, *whooshhh aahhh*, *whooshhh aahhh*. It never stops. I retrace my steps past the beach, emptied of its 'henge', wandering if the energy of the land has been changed. Where once the upturned tree reached into the underworld, now only a shelf of sand and mud remains. When it was removed, did the tree take with it our connection to the past and erase the memory of our ancestors?

What would they think of it now, housed in Kings Lynn's Museum? I feel compelled to offer something back, something of myself. With a razor shell, I describe a circle In the sand. Within the circle, I make a firm footprint.

And now it is time to leave. I take off my shoes in surrender to the open beach and run along the tideline. The sand is damp, clinging to my heels. Freedom comes in the wind and the feeling is elemental, old. Behind me the sea puddles in my footprints. I am a child again.

