

## **A Remembered Landscape**

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### ***WHERE IT BEGINS***

It starts with the worn steps of a mounting block at a church in Bradwell and a mother's childhood; a remembered landscape from before the Second World War, on the Dengie peninsula, a remote tongue of land extruded into the North Sea, squeezed by the rivers Blackwater and Crouch with barely a mile of land between.

An area haunted by history but hunted today by those in search of the wild. My mother did not need to search. She roamed both on and off shore, from Sales Point to Stone; this was a place of solitude and discovery. Growing up in the 1930s, the Dengie was a land farmed but not tamed. A child could spend all day building dens, looking for lapwings and wandering unhindered in this Essex outpost.

Visiting now, sixty years since the war ended, there is no trace of my family's beach hut. But some things still remain: the steps of the mounting block that so fascinated my mother, indented with years of use.

### ***TOUCHING THE STONE***

It was a November day with sun so bright it could have been our lost summer. We stopped at Bradwell-on-Sea, an Essex village of weather-boarded houses, pink washed cottages with dormer windows and a church perched paternally over it all. Following the lime avenue down from the porch, I found the worn steps of the mounting block, the focus of my mother's childhood memory. It seems a small and insignificant feature from which to launch a discovery of the Dengie peninsula. But it is a reminder; a reminder of the effect of time on memory, on materials, on the land.

I came to the Dengie peninsula guided by photos and stories from my mother. I also followed the trail of author, Robert Macfarlane who was in pursuit of migrating birds and the wild country described by John Baker in his book, *The Peregrine*.

It was the coincidence of these writers' travels to the place of my mother's childhood that prompted this autumnal visit. I too find myself searching; looking for lost childhoods, looking for memories. It feels strange to stand beside the mounting block that for sixty years has been part of a remembered landscape. My mother's childhood was wild and free, an uninhibited and unstructured relationship with place that bred an unfailing desire for wilderness. Who had shaped this place and in whose footsteps would I follow as I crossed the peninsula?

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A sense of place is influenced not only by geography but also by the imprint of those who lived there and the perceptions of those who visit. Since the Stone Age, people have moved through this coastal area. Some have left no trace, some have left their memory in place names or occasional artefacts dug from the soil and others have left buildings, fashioned landscapes and written accounts of their time here. I wanted to explore the make-up of this land, its geology, history, economy and natural history.

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It is the geological and glacial history that provides the beginning of the story. The most severe spell of glacial cold brought the ice sheet down as far as Essex. The Dengie, as a result, is a mixture of alluvial soils, London clay and sands and gravels.

Looking east across the North Sea, it is difficult to imagine that around 9000 years ago this peninsula was far inland. As the glaciers retreated, rising sea levels pushed back the coastline

until about 3000 years ago when the Dengie, and its embracing rivers, the Blackwater and Crouch, more closely resembled today's outline.

For a true perspective, one should approach the area by sea, navigating in through the maze of buoys along the Blackwater, half way between St Peter's Chapel at Sales Point and the Nass Beacon to the north. Beating up river, a small boat can slip into Bradwell Creek or anchor south of Osea Island as no doubt the Danes did many centuries ago. It is in a boat that one can sense the rhythm, the power and the fickleness of the sea.

This is a salt kingdom, accessed from the sea and shape shifting over centuries between sea and land. The relationship is central to an understanding of the Dengie. Perhaps this gives it its wildness. It is a transitory insecure place where generations must have lived in fear of invasion by both men and sea. It is a landscape of loss – loss of land to the sea, loss of homes to invaders, loss of nature to civilisation.

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In 1210 a law was passed requiring landowners to pay for sea defences. Since then, periodic combinations of wind and high tides have caused severe flooding. The solution has been to keep building higher walls. Maintaining adequate defences has to be a joint effort since a breach at one point can inundate the land of neighbours. Lack of funds was a problem in the nineteenth century and it is again today, when other options are being tried, including the deliberate realignment of the sea walls to create areas of marsh which absorb flood tides.

After the war, new housing was built on low lying ground and people moved in, probably unaware of the potential for another event such as "Black Monday", the devastating flood of 1897. When the 1953 flood came, populations were vulnerable and the loss of life and harrowing tales of survival are still bitterly recalled.

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The sea is not the only invader against which successive generations have prepared defences. The once extensive Essex forest was a forbidding and perilous barrier to travellers overland so the peninsula would have been accessed more readily from the sea. It is from the sea that Dengie's history comes – raiders, missionaries, mariners and smugglers.

My mother has a 1949 travelogue in the *Vision of England* series. The author of the Essex volume, Phoebe Fenwick Gaye, tunes into the landscape by reaching back to the origins of this kingdom of the East Saxons. Starting her journey in Maldon, she observes that:

*The Forest of Essex once enclosed Maldon like a horseshoe, making of it a great place for defence. Yet the river Blackwater runs towards it like a spear; taking cover on the way behind Osea and Northey islands, and striking forward into the little town's heart; a great place for attack.*

The Romans built their fort at Othona as part of a coastal defence system against attacks from Germanic tribes. The Essex coast would see successive developments to protect against invaders, culminating in the pill-boxes and airfields of the Second World War.

After the Romans departed, the area remained a pagan country until the arrival in 653 AD of a missionary bishop, St Cedd. Perhaps the Dengie is best known for the isolated chapel which he built within the ruined fort. It stands at the easterly point, keeping watch over marshes and mud. We are drawn towards it for its solitude and its survival. It features in travel books from before the war as a romantic and forgotten relic.

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I walk out to Sales Point, the north eastern tip of the peninsula. From here one can look across the Blackwater to Mersea Island or south across Dengie Flats to Foulness. It is all mud, marsh and shell bank. Walking round the peninsula's rippled edge, there is a sense of history unpeeling at each tide. A wartime pill box peeps out from beneath the sea wall across a narrow stretch of marsh buffering the coastline. The mud lies dappled with saltwater pools below the seaweed strewn tideline. Sitting on the white stretch of cockle shell beach, I can see the barges scuttled to protect the saltmarsh from erosion and the lines of weathered and frayed posts that could have been a jetty or the remains of the Saxon fish weir discovered by archaeologists.

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The Flats that spread south from St Cedd's chapel are now reclaimed arable fields but once they were an important area for sheep. Recorded as early as the Domesday Survey, these coastal marshes or pastures, were measured in terms of numbers of sheep. Not only did the flocks provide wool and meat, their milk was used to make cheese. The dairy heritage of these now vanished farms is reflected in place names such as "wich" or "wick". For every ten pound cheese, a pound of salt was required. The Dengie Marshes offered all that was needed for a thriving industry.

According to myth, a Roman Commander based near Maldon, discovered salt production when his seawater bath was left bubbling as the fires burned underneath. He forgave his unfortunate slave when he realised this was a lucrative new occupation for him. Romans were paid in salt giving us our word salary. It is difficult now to appreciate the historic importance of salt. Its ability to preserve food was invaluable.

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Walking from Sales Point southwards, the marshes stretch before me studded with the seedheads of sea aster and lavender and dotted with the red tints of samphire. Behind the wall, the marsh is tamed and drained, green with young winter wheat. Flocks of plover wheel inland and Brent geese betray their grazing place with their musical chatter.

I had passed a group of bird-watchers, clustered round an array of telescopes, keeping watch for merlin and peregrine. With strange juxtaposition, their base was by the empty three roomed dwelling of the last of the Blackwater's punt gunners. Walter Linnett lived here in the shadow of the ruined Roman fort as his grandfather had before him. How different the world of the bird watcher and the fowler.

To go back to the records of those wildfowling days is to discover the true nature of bird numbers in the years before the war - geese passing across the sky in a "formation some half-mile long by a quarter of a mile wide" and at low tide "seven acres covered by widgeon, curlew and duck". The scale of the decline in those vast flocks of geese, ducks and waders is barely conceivable.

As a child of Norfolk, I am still mesmerised by the skeins of pink-foot that come off the saltings in the winter dawn or the gaggles of Brent geese that return to their saltmarsh at Holkham. But this Essex backwater, with its empty mudflats, must have been a humbling place to be; a landscape so full of wildfowl that the sky could blacken as it passed over.

There is now a sense of the thinning out of nature – wildlife I no longer see; the excitement of a flock of twenty finches not the hundreds of my childhood; the abundance of birds that my mother remembers that are no longer part of our lives.

## *END POINT*

I have walked across the Dengie and that process of walking, retracing paths, feeling the ground and smelling the salt wind, helps me reach back into the past.

The sun is beginning to drop behind the wooded upland of Baker's peregrine country and I must leave. I reflect on what I have learnt. Much has changed since my mother was here. The Second World War moulded the area for defence and a nuclear power station was later built on the airfield. The 1953 floods reinforced attitudes to coastal defence and left a legacy of respect and fear for the sea.

The agricultural intensification that prompted Baker's concern for the future of nature, has swept away many of the old mixed farms remembered by my mother; the community working together, gleaning the fields for spilt grain; milk deliveries by horse and indeed the loss of the horse as a working farm animal.

Dutch elm disease removed many of the majestic trees that defined the peninsula. The flocks of plover, widgeon and Brent geese, and redshank and curlew piping up from the marsh, are much diminished. The old wildfowler/naturalists are gone and with them the intimate knowledge of nature where man seeks to become part of that world, albeit taking from it.

Some things remain: the villages, their names, their churches and their history. The Blackwater is salty enough for the Maldon Salt Company to maintain a successful brand. The creeks and inlets provide passage for boats, even if mostly leisure sailing, and the land and sea yield up a rich harvest.

The Dengie is still wild. It is a remote open place in a constant shift with the sea. For anyone who is sensitive to the history, who can unpick the layers and recognise stories from the small clues surviving, this is still an enigmatic piece of country.

Whether from two generations ago or from recent years, most writers have observed that one can walk here all day and see no-one. Travelling along the paths and tracks is a journey back through time; a landscape of all that has been and all who have been here.

Childhood experiences are powerful and can create an emotional bond with a place. Although I have walked in my mother's shoes and explored her remembered landscape, it is not within me in the same way. I have come close to understanding its make-up, its wildness and its history. I have reached out and touched the stone but I do not belong.