

UK encounters

Steve Empson

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**UK**  
**Welcome To My Journal**  
By Steve · November 15, 2013

Over my lifetime, I have grown to love shores and hills and empty landscapes – I have spent a lot of that time in them – days of close observation, trying to understand them, traipsing their rough terrain.

I also spend long hours scratching about in a studio.

In between I pass on any residual findings I have been able to articulate, in the form of teaching; and I sometimes have the privilege of learning all over again, by sharing in the creative play of many three and four year old children.

My world is one that interests me each and every day.

Somebody suggested to me that others may be interested in it too, and I have come ‘round to the idea that they might be right.

What gives me this conceited view is the fact that people are interested in my paintings – a product and an expression of this way of living.

I am a painter of place, and the places I paint are not celebrated places, they are lesser known, and they are seen in the way that I see them.

Without the fear that they will suddenly be swamped by thousands of visitors, for I am not producing ‘Heartbeat’ or ‘All Creatures Great and Small’, I have decided to blog about them and the resulting paintings.

I hope it takes this world of mine beyond the walls of my womb-like studio and I hope it interests you, maybe even inspires you, or, best of all, strike a chord with you. If it doesn’t, I hope you find a world that does.

Thank you for visiting.

**Run For Home**  
By Steve · December 15, 2013

## **December 2013**

It was in 1978 that I went to the Lindisfarne Christmas concert at the Newcastle City Hall.

I went to watch my mate Eric, dance with the Killingworth Sword Dancers, a warm-up act to the main band; but it was Alan Hull, the lead singer with Lindisfarne, who made the lasting impression on me.

Now passed away, he was a Geordie ‘Champion of the People’, and this was his platform. He created a euphoria in the audience, which I thought at the time, reached a climax with ‘Run for Home’, a song he allegedly wrote in his response to a distaste for London and the South. I was soon to realize that it wasn’t the climax, as everyone, already on his feet, rose to another level -they all swayed in an infectious tribal response to ‘Fog on the Tyne’.

Alan Hull had struck a deep chord with the audience, as over 2000 people expressed their pride and a profound sense of belonging to the North East of England.

Although I am not a Geordie, remembering these moments makes me tingle, because Alan Hull was appealing not only to Geordies, but to the whole region – one that is set apart from the rest of the country, one that has its own culture with a southern boundary somewhere just south of Middlesbrough.

It’s over 30 years since I have been a full-time resident of the North East, but I have never been able to refer to anywhere else as ‘home’ – that is still reserved for Hartlepool in County Durham.

I return there regularly, thinking of my visits as ‘reality checks’; references to the values that helped form me.

Throughout my life I have painted in the North East. During that time I have also spent periods in other regions of the world searching their colour and light; but two and a half years ago I felt compelled to return to the North East, and focus my attention on something that was so strong in me that I could not ignore it – it was time to ‘run for home’.

The forthcoming blogs cover the places I have been painting over that period of time.

## **Greatham Creek/Seaton Snook**

By Steve · January 15, 2014

### **January 2014**

Greatham Creek is a tributary of the river Tees, not really flowing into the river, but forming part of the delta, and joining the estuary at Seal Sands beyond Seaton Snook on the south side of Hartlepool.

I used to cycle there in the late 60s and early 70s when there was the remnant of a thriving houseboat community.



*Houseboat, Greatham Creek c.1972.*

Surrounding that community was an RSPB nature reserve, set up to protect the only feeding habitat between Lindisfarne to the north, and the Humber estuary to the south. It attracts many species of bird, particularly in winter.



*Jetty, Greatham Creek c.1972.*

This flat land is strewn with channels of brackish water, marsh samphire, springy turf and juncus; and finally, before the stretch of sea, sand dunes of blue and green marram grass with orchids, genista and sea buckthorn.

Visitors of the human kind are sparse, and it is a place of peace, if not calm – it was my place to escape to.

I traipsed the turf and squelched the mudflat, collecting things that nobody in Hartlepool called ‘objets trouve’.

I listened to the birds, sometimes I picked samphire for tea, and I enjoyed whatever circumstance might offer me.

This was my Narnia – a four-mile cycle ride was the wardrobe that gave me entrance.

After several trips, I began to feel that circumstantial offerings were not quite enough for me. I had an urge to make more of my visits; I needed to record in some way, what was important about this place. So, I started to bring my sketchpad and pencils with me, because who was going to believe my Narnia adventure if I didn’t record it?

The remnants of the houseboat community were a visual stimulation to me – they were packed with lines and textures, shapes and tones, all modified by the effects of winds and big tidal washes.



At that time I sketched without confidence.

My drawings were as thin as the paper they were drawn on, but I needed to do them, and my Narnia remained personal, because I never went public with the sketches; there wasn’t anyone to show them to.



*Sketchbook entries from my youth.*

I re-visited this place after the community had disappeared, and each time I still felt the urge to draw it, and only recently did I consider it not too late to do so.

So, why shouldn't I draw it now, having gained more confidence to do so, as well as the visual language to put something together? I still had some of the sketches, I had a lot of photographs, and I still had a strong urge to express the place – the drawings were in me.

I returned again, over 40 years on. The place was devoid of the structures, but other, perhaps less physical elements were still present. The dimension of time was not a barrier, and I began to draw what had been.



*Houseboat at Greatham creek, 1972. Mixed media. Drawn 2014*



*Mac's Island, Greatham Creek, 1972. Mixed media. Drawn 2014*

I always remember there being a wind at Greatham Creek – from a breeze to a fierce gale; a wind



carrying the smell of salt, and the sustained warble of skylarks in early summer.

In winter I remember the ‘kleep, kleep’ of the oystercatchers, and showers of squadron-like knots.

There was also the industry alongside the river Tees itself, the thud of heavy steel and machinery, muted by distance.

The six newly constructed, high concrete towers of the shell of a nuclear power station were a sign of what was to come.

It was here, wanting some cash so that I could add to my Joni Mitchell album collection, that I took a job for a couple of days as a chain boy, for a civil engineer. Clad in my thin school parka, I tediously hung on to a measuring pole, in the January sleet and high winds, whilst he took readings through his theodolite. In doing so, I had become part of the process that led to the devastating change of much of this environment, where I felt such a close affinity.



That community at Greatham Creek has long been swept away, the houseboats have gone, many of them mysteriously burned down. Now there is a high bund wall, it is long and straight, and covered only in grass. Like a main road through a dull housing estate, it’s the sort of place that seems to take an awful long time to walk through; it holds no interest. Within its secured boundaries, there is an oil terminal.



It is so gratifying to know that the devastation of this rich, vibrant, creative and frugal community, means that the likes of Lord Howell of Guildford can fill up their cars with petrol knowing that the view from

their own back gardens will not be disturbed.

Large chemical works have been constructed along the course of the river Tees itself, and I now consider both these areas to be somewhat out of bounds to me as an artist – the area where the oil terminal stands, because it is now as visually dull as the muddy waters of the creek itself.



*Oil pipes, Seal Sands, c.1995.*

And there is the river, which does still hold a visual interest – albeit of a new and very different kind – it now appears to feel threatened by my presence, evidenced by my being moved on by security guards at Philips petroleum when they spotted me sketching pipelines via their CCTV screens.

In one of my summer student vacations I worked as a security guard at Philips petroleum, and I nearly died of boredom; so this incident may well have been the highlight of their Sunday, and it is reassuring to know that they are saving the nation from potential sketching terrorists.

In spite of bulldozers and bullies, Greatham Creek still holds a great interest and a fascination to me as a painter. Alongside these chemical giants, smaller industries operated, with their rusting machinery and their corroding corrugated iron buildings, nestling into tall grasses and wind sculpted, stunted trees. this is what I drew and painted.



*Sea buckthorn and shed, Seaton Snook, Ink drawing. 1995.*





*Sketchbook entries for Seaton Snook, Crayon, charcoal and pastel. 1995.*

.Seaton Snook is an area of dune land lying cheek-by-jowl with Greatham Creek. They are linked together by a road romantically known as the Zinc Works road. It begins with a curve that entices you towards the dunes. At the end of a dry summer the grasses take on ochre colourings; road edges of grit and dust are ambiguous, and there are isolated, sculpted shrubs.



The road has now been re-surfaced and contained by a rigid 4 inch concrete kerb – this presumably is ‘planning gain’, a condition of the new chemical works development at the end of the road, emitting odours that make one feel sick in the pit of the stomach. The softness of the landscape has disappeared; it has been imposed upon, suburbanised.

I am not objecting to progress here; I am downhearted that these kind of insensitive changes should be perceived as being progress.

Am I the only person who prefers an ambiguous road edge in such a situation of relatively infrequent use?



*Zinc Works Road. Pastel drawing. 1995*

I feel alone in expressing this – am I the nutter going on about kerbs and grit? To many folk, I would be; but I do wonder how many people have really looked and thought about it – none of the braying councillors or planners, I’ll bet.



Both Seaton Snook and Greatham Creek are places that belong to the few. People are few and far between. It is an exposed area of marshlands and sand dunes with industry. It is strong and not always comfortable, but full of surprise and interest.



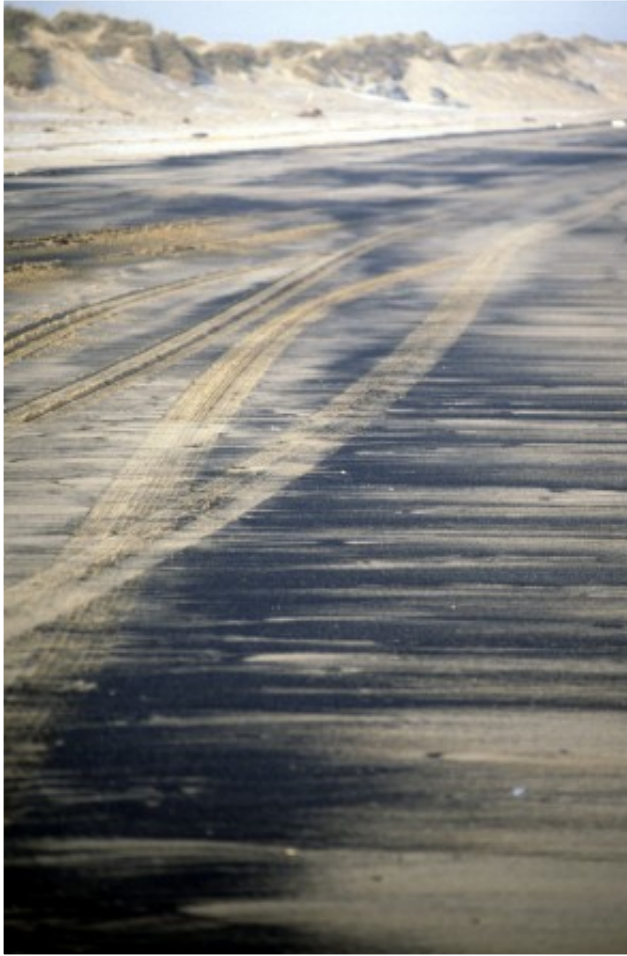
*Resting surfaces of a steel oil tank and a corrugated iron shed. 1998.*

The industry soon acquires a patina, lending itself to a rich abundance of textures – these salt encrusted sheds have now replaced and lost their rich texture – but nature will start again in creating another.

There is a rich abundance of visually stimulating material







*Patterns left by the tide – fine sea coal. 2003.*



Seaton Snook. 2003.

The dunes and the beach are shared. No longer by the seacoal gatherers, because there is very little seacoal left to gather, but the dog walkers are there, the odd runner, a handful of bird watchers, the few who have learned to love the place, and the artists, well there's me (if there's anybody else out there I'd love to know).

The light is often so fresh that it lightens the step – there is a lot of space here; large skies and open water – its emptiness is one of its great attractions, but being largely devoid of human activity is a mystery to me – especially when you no longer have the inconvenience of driving down a road with potholes and an ambiguous edge to get there







*Sketchbook entries of 'The Blue Lagoon'. 2012.*



*The rich flora of the dunes. Seaton Snook. 2013.*



As a child, the dunes were an exciting place – perfect for re-enacting heroic deeds from the second World War.

They are still a joy, but not as a theatre to gun down imaginary enemy soldiers – now I appreciate the tall grasses for other reasons; I like their movement, their texture and their colour, so I draw them.



*Coltsfoot growing behind the dunes (detail). Pastel drawing. 1995.*



*Summer grasses and wild flowers behind the dunes (detail). Pastel drawing. 1995.*

The dunes are like an armchair of memory foam – for lying in and watching the life of the river and its industries across the estuary. This inlet, by the North Gare, is known locally as ‘The Blue Lagoon’.







The shipping lane is constantly busy, and the steelworks at Redcar, an arms length attraction.

Plumes of white steam are thrust into the sky at the quenching of a coke oven; the sky glows orange at the tapping of a furnace, there are thuds and screeches of steel and trains. I can enjoy these, they are the region's raison d'être, but there is also, on a bad day, the gut-wrenching smell of chemical works.

It is not possible to accurately describe what a place is like without qualifying the time and conditions; even your own mood affects the way in which you perceive a place.



It is behind the dunes where I returned to paint more recently. This hinterland is crossed with rivulets and dotted with ponds, reflecting a moving sky, a shifting light and changing colour



It is low, hummocky land with the sounds of associated birds and the not-so-distant sea; there is the smell of salt (but sometimes chemicals), in the wind.

It is a fine environment for private thoughts and reflection.



*Sketchbook entries. Pastel. 2012.*



UK

Greatham Creek/Seaton Snook

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*Rivulet at Seaton Snook. Mixed media. 2011*



*Passing storm, Seaton Snook. Mixed media. 2011.*

This is a small, yet enormous, area that has had a considerable influence on me.

There are other parts of County Durham and North Yorkshire, that have also had such an influence, and each time I return home I prepare myself to look closely at them.

### **Blackhall Rocks**

By Steve · March 15, 2014

## **March 2014.**

Just 4 miles to the north of Hartlepool lies the former colliery village of Blackhall and Blackhall Rocks, at the southern extent of the Northumberland and Durham coalfield, and what a place it is!

In my initial blog I said that the sort of places I painted were not celebrated places. Well, for a day or two, back in 1971 (I think), Blackhall Rocks was indeed a celebrated place. Graced by the presence of Michael Caine, the beach was the location for the final scene of the much-revered film ‘Get Carter’.

I don’t think Blackhall Rocks is ever going to rival Malibu, Cannes or Acapulco for movie star spotting; the beach at Blackhall Rocks was chosen as a bleak, desolate and sinister, industrial wasteland; a fitting finale for the plot of a dark, gangland killing.



*Timber hut (since destroyed). Blackhall Rocks 1973.*

Bleak and desolate and a place to avoid is the popular view, but it is not mine; I saw it differently.



*Sea stack and layers of industrial waste. Blackhall Rocks. 1973.*

To me it was extremely atmospheric, a wonderful place to comb, a place for local characters only, and admittedly, on occasion, it would feel slightly threatening. Yes, it was a beach covered in industrial waste from irresponsible, indiscriminate tipping from the adjacent coalmine, it was littered with burned-out cars, shopping trolleys and other scrap; there was stuff that it was probably best to remain ignorant of; but it interested me.



*Burned out car. Blackhall Rocks 1973.*

It interested me because here there existed a microcosm; there were men who scraped a livelihood from the place – collecting coal to keep their families warm and selling any surplus to buy food; collating bundles of scrap and cashing it in, picking up wood to repair allotments, or fishing for codling and mackerel from the shore.





*Shore Fishing. Blackhall Rocks 1973.*

These men didn't discuss their low carbon footprint at dinner parties but, out of necessity, they were the most efficient re-cyclers, responsible for cleaning up the excesses of a profligate society.

They were tough men, scraping together heavy sacks of wet coal, hauling them up a slippery, tortuous cliff path, and pushing them home on the crossbar of a bicycle, sometimes four sacks high, each hessian sack leaking seawater into their boots, through their socks and between anaesthetised toes – their fingers numbed by a cutting north east wind, thrusting sleet through the fibres of their clothing, and penetrating their very being – leaving them thoroughly sapped, their sinews exhausted in the quest to survive; the only remedy is humour.

'Y'aal reet Tommy?'

'Bloody champion son, nivvor better!'

'Canny day like.'

Aye, not so bad.'

The skin on my face was stinging, and my eyes watering.

Here lies the basis of much of what I like about the prevailing attitude in the North East. For many, life

can be hard, but on the face of it, it is not taken so seriously. Traditionally there is inter-dependence in order to survive. In the mines, the steelworks and the shipyards, you work together with your colleagues for your safety, in order to achieve a level of pride in your work, and to earn bonuses. You don't, like a stockbroker, compete in order to survive.

The consequence of this is that people are more likely to speak to you in a public place, treat you with genuine warmth, and communicate with humour and a lightness of being.



*Strangers on the Shore. Four lads with a spark about them. Blachall Rocks 1973.*

A sense of adventure, and a desire to see other parts of the world drove me along paths that led elsewhere; but I miss this positive side of life in the North East. This is why I keep returning, and this is why I now feel the need to paint there.

The beach at Blackhall Rocks would no longer be suitable for a film like 'Get Carter'; it's more likely to be chosen for an episode of 'The Famous Five'.

I must admit that the 'improvements' there are a disappointment to me. The whole place has been cleaned up, the detritus taken away, the pit closed down, the striking concrete columns and overhead cable structure that deposited mine waste, via huge metal buckets, into the sea have been demolished, and the place features car parks and coastal footpaths with tasteful wooden signs leading you to the right places.

The environmentalists, along with changing times, prefer tourists to those tough survivors. They have dismantled the microcosm and taken ownership now. These authorities have closed off the locals' preferred routes and lead them to an inconvenient car park equipped with maps, information boards and litter bins, none of which they are in need of.

In spite of all this, there is a residue of all the recent mining activity that makes it interesting to me as a painter.



*Blackhall Rocks on a chilly autumn evening. 2012. Sketchbook entry.*

There is a superb range of rocks and pebbles on this beach, and a particular belt that has been affected by the leaching of the industrial waste, colouring the rocks an unlikely orange; juxtaposed strong ochres, and a belt of white and grey pebbles, then a band of Van Dyke brown sand; the beach takes on a surreal quality.

The cliffs of Magnesian limestone are perforated with fantastic caves and blowholes – they support a unique flora and fauna. All of this was still there when the place was 'desolate', and that contradiction was one of its great attractions. Now it is called a 'heritage coast', it is a nature trail (as advertised in the brochures aimed at luring you to the Durham coast); it's there for everybody to see, in its glory. For those

few earlier adventurers, like myself, the elements of discovery and surprise have gone.

The stones remain, and they are my subject. They have witnessed the passing of many eras, including the mines, and they will witness many more.

New folk will find their own areas of interest here and come to regard this stretch as their own, for whatever reason.



*Beach at Blackhall Rocks. Mixed media. 2012.*

This tonal study of the beach is in pencil with watercolour applied afterwards, and then some pastel.

The beaches of Britain are covered by billions of stones and pebbles, so why do I want to paint these?

Sometimes I want to paint them just because they are stones on the beach, with their infinite arrangement of shape, pattern and texture. They change colour and mood with the changes of time and light, and the interest is therefore constantly renewed.



*Studies of stones found on the beaches. Sketchbook entry.*

As I have already referred to, it is those that seem to be unique to this beach that I find most alluring, and so I embarked on a series of studies that led me to a new exploration of Blackhall Rocks beach.



*After the Colliery, mixed media. 2012.*

Whatever ghastly material was dumped here has leached into these rocks, rendering them, at their most outrageous, almost cadmium orange.

The mining processes have led to a preponderance of finger-shaped, and saucer-shaped pebbles in raw umber and deep alizarin crimson.

The strata of Magnesian limestone, prevalent in the cliffs and rock pools, is naturally a Naples yellow when split open, but because it's here, you can add yellow ochre through to burnt Sienna.

The closer you look, the greater the interest and the excitement, and some of the colour relationships soon

struck me.

There were areas of what seemed to be contaminated sand that took on a Payne's Grey colour, which I wanted to set up against the unlikely oranges – that became the basis of the painting.





*Stones on blue sand at Blackhall. Sketchbook entry. 2012.*

The chance patterns of stones left by the tide each time it ebbed away, also interested me.

I spent many hours on this beach choosing the patterns I wanted to work with and I became something of an interest to the odd person passing by with a spade or a fishing rod, wondering why I might be staring into 'nothing' for such a long time. But then everyone just gets on with their own particular interest here, happy to briefly share conversation with each other, but not to the distraction of their own personal objective.

My objective was to find arrangements that interested me.

Moving to another part of the same beach offered new considerations. The Payne's grey 'contaminated sand', threw up arrangements of light pebbles in blue and white with fragments of broken brick.

It took millennia to create many of these objects and an instant to randomly throw them together on an incoming tide.



*Blackhall stones. Mixed media. 2012.*

The patterns of the tide create clusters of stones that are pushed and shoved, jostled around and sometimes, just nudged into new positions.

Each visit is new, so the beach holds an infinite interest, if you are of such an inclination.

Harmoniously heaped together, this subtle shift of shape, colour and texture is an offering of nature. Free entertainment. Calming, strengthening, satisfying, beautiful and by many, unnoticed.



*Blue and white. Mixed media. 2012.*

The larger rocks at the shoreline capture these smaller stones and pebbles and spin them around like a washing machine twice a day, creating rockpools, ornamented by strands of black seaweed and green algae draped across the yellow Magnesian limestone.

A piece of concrete, tempered by years of tides, stands in the centre like a dollop of tutti frutti, crowning an ice-cream cone.



*Magnesian limestone. Mixed media. 2012.*



*Seaweed. Mixed media. 2012.*

The residual pools of seawater, slowly leaking away, distort the colours and the form of the stones. They support clumps of handsome, tousled seaweed and an ecological microcosm, that lies within the old socio-economic microcosm that Blackhall beach used to be.

What a place it is!

There are many places, so go and find one, and I urge you to look closely, for that is what will turn it into a world that teaches you something, and a world that is yours.

If Blackhall Rocks didn't get Carter, it got me!

### **“How Long Did It Take You To Do That?”**

By Steve · May 15, 2014

## **May 2014.**

Looking at paintings, people often seem to want an answer to the question, “How long did it take you to do that?” It's difficult to offer a reply.

I can work out the hours I spend in the studio at an easel, applying media to a surface, but that would only give part of an answer.

I could add to that, a drive of five hours to Co. Durham; followed by four hours on a beach, looking, disseminating information and refining an idea (should you be blessed with one).

Time waiting for the right conditions (should you ever get them), then return to sketch for a few hours more. Add a return journey of five hours, and a few hours for working out ideas, stretching paper, collating materials and then tot up the hours working on the final piece, (which may or may not come to anything).

If it does come to something, you have a piece of paper in your studio, which then has to be presented, and you hope, be sold – add an indeterminate number of hours more for that, resulting in an annual pay that probably falls short of Craig Gardner's daily rate as a premier league footballer; and he's often not very good at that.

Oh yes, add the lifetime it took you to get into a position to be able to do it.

The only reason I am whining on like this, is because an interesting situation came to me this year where I found myself replying, ‘Just over 40 years’ to the original question.



The reply was with tongue in cheek, but it did beg a further question: 'Is it possible to take over 40 years to complete a painting?'

In the early 70s I made thin sketches of places that were meaningful to me. I had a strong feeling for those places, and I visited them many times; they were my 'other worlds' that helped me feel expansive, but it was also a frustrating time, as my visual language was not very well developed and my craft still unrefined.

Much practice was needed.

When that was achieved to some degree, those places were no longer convenient to me; I had moved my home, but I did re-visit them from time to time.

My attention had become absorbed by other places, and my drawings and paintings focused on many trips to India, Scandinavia, Greece and my new home in Oxford.

I still had a deep passion for those early places, my 'other worlds', many years later. So, I went back with a clear head, and focused my attention on drawing them.

I had wondered if those feelings would have passed me by. Could I still feel the situation? And would I regret not being able to express those feelings at the time?

What I found was that the places had changed greatly, but there was something constant there, and it is something that I have found all over the world.

What I found to be constant is that each place has its own light and its own air.

This makes it different to other places, and it affects a place's colour, its tonality, its texture and it goes towards determining the way you might feel about it.

These responses make it unique.

Occasionally they may visit you, like a thought does, whilst you are in another place –it can catch you unaware.

The moment may be insignificant; you may be putting the bins out on a grey day, and a breeze brushes your cheek – so transporting you to another time and place.

It happened to me recently. The light was soft – an even grey that some may call 'dull', and there was a stiff breeze carrying the distant sounds of children playing in a not-so-far-off school.

It took me to Sunderland in 1978 – waiting for a coach to take us, a group of architects and planners, to a behind-the-scenes visit of Durham Cathedral. The weather conditions were similar, the light was similar and the air was similar. We were standing at a spot overlooking the town, and all its muted sounds drifted towards us.



There was melancholy in the situation, a melancholy that was held in a moment isolated from a transient life.

I don't know why those feelings should have visited me at that time, but the point is that what I was feeling was very specific to that time and place – Sunderland, April 1978.

I can't begin to explain this, I only know that it happens; and to me, I am pleased to say that it happens quite often.

'What has this got to do with drawing?' I hear you say.

Well, in the context of these particular drawings, quite a lot.

In re-visiting these places, the responses you may have felt on a previous occasion can also be re-visited – that 'isolated moment of melancholy' – if they were strong enough at the time, and if they remain within you.

Dawdon Colliery used to be a pit village; it lies just to the north of Easington Colliery in County Durham – the place where 'Billy Elliot' was filmed, and also the place that drove me nuts in the 1970s.

It did so out of frustration – little to do with Easington, which was a place I liked, and more to do with my position.

I was working at the District Council as a landscape architect; a new profession, that was trying, amongst many other things, to encourage the Parks Department to use botanical names.

It was something I was in favour of, for several reasons.

The established labourers, understandably, were not.

I would never refer to botanical names in conversation with them, but I always used them on design drawings.

In a site cabin, during a tea break, one of them asked me why I was wearing a copper bracelet.

"Desperate measures", I said. "I've got something called Ankylosyn spondilitis."

He looked at me, slowly sipping his tea, and replied, "Haven't wa just planted some of them in the King's Head car park, son?"

I have a lot of fond memories of times in that office, and enjoyed such moments of conflict expressed in such a subtle way and with good humour.

I have other memories, that I found utterly frustrating, those that would throw me into a more serious personal conflict.

One morning I was in disagreement over 'tidying up' an area of allotments.

The Council considered this was necessary because they could be seen from the main road –it was something I saw as part of a society's obsession with neatness – a suburbanization of the rural fringe.

The supposed unsightly borders of old doors, bed-heads, bits of leftover plywood etc., that formed the fences of the allotments were to be swept away in favour of a neat fence in a straight line, with a sharply edged path running alongside it.

To me it meant the destruction of something of great visual interest, something of character, something that contained many an untold story, something that would attract me as a subject to paint, in favour of something that satisfies this fashion for bland neatness.

I was being asked to be part of this, and I could not put my heart into it.

I later returned to my office to witness a petty squabble over someone taking a haircut in 'work's time', and at the tender age of 25 I began to wonder what my life had become.

I couldn't wait until the lunch break to escape what was becoming a depressing realisation; this is where Dawdon colliery comes in – I contrived a site visit, got into my car and drove there.



*sketchbook entry, Dawdon colliery 1977.*

I sketched the streets leading towards the pit-head.

In making this sketch I could leave everything the office had thrown up that morning, behind me. I was content, I was focused, and I felt a heightening of all the senses the morning had been grinding down. There was now a good reason for being where I was, and for doing what I was doing.

This was my solace. I was probably there one and a half hours; it seemed like a lot longer, for the sketching is what I remember of the day.

Returning to the office, I began to think that I had chosen the wrong profession.



*sketchbook entry, Dawdon colliery 1977.*

As you might imagine, there were other such occasions, and I sketched the same spot again, in the snow, and later reversed the image in preparation for an etching, which I never got around to doing.

This 'isolated moment of melancholy' remains with me. It was a poignant moment, one of viewing circumstance from the edge, or from the outside.

That street in Dawdon was empty, as I imagined the men hewing coal, the women at home ironing or cooking, and the children all at school – following the more clearly defined roles of the era.



UK

"How Long Did It Take You To Do That?"

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*Towards the pit-head, Dawdon Colliery 2014.*

It was some 36 years later that I re-visited Dawdon and used these sketches, to make the drawing I didn't make at the time.

The moment was still in me, and crucially, the urge, the impetus, the fire, was still there to enable me to make the drawing. That moment had never gone away, and my desire to express it had never properly been fulfilled – until now.

There are several other examples of this. I will show them to you, sparing you the details of my life that go with it, even though they too were as fresh as the visual recollections that enabled me to make the drawing. They seem to go hand in hand.



*Pigeon crees, Sunderland 2014.*

This is Sunderland in 1979.

Moving from Easington District to Sunderland Borough Council was a move from the frying pan into the fire, for someone with my outlook.

Escaping another office, I found myself by a set of allotments bounded by those old doors etc. that I was being asked to sweep away in my previous employ.

They contained the structures so characteristic of the North East, known locally as pigeon crees (lofts). The branch line to Hylton Colliery swept by the perimeter.

The circumstances were similar to those at Easington, and another moment contained was finally expressed.



*Fog on the Wear 2014.*

In my initial blog 'Run for Home', I referred to 'Fog on the Tyne' as being a regional anthem. Many people living in Sunderland may not consider this so. They understandably often feel overshadowed by their more illustrious neighbour, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

I don't share in this unhelpful conflict (except on occasions when the 'Mackems' take on the 'Toon' at football), as I can enjoy what both places have to offer. My meagre attempt to redress the balance towards Sunderland is to title this drawing 'Fog on the Wear'. It is another example of a moment lying dormant for 35 years.

Before experiencing life in the wider world of the Durham pit villages, I still had my own special places.





*West Harbour Hartlepool 2014.*

The West Harbour in Hartlepool was one of them.

The place has now lost its texture.

Worn-smooth setts and stones were discarded in favour of sharp-edged concrete, crossed with zinc-coated railings.

My memory of the original materials returned vividly, as did the texture of the sounds and smells, as I tackled this drawing.

There was a fleet of small-craft berthed here, their rigging whipping against their masts; their owners hammering and sawing from sheds on the adjacent shore.

The nearby workshops rang with the clatter of metal on metal and gulls screeched. The taste of salt penetrated the nose and throat; there was the scent of diesel on the nose and workshop dust from the stripping of ships’ boilers coated the sketchpad and the lungs.

I have mentioned the two following drawings in a recent post ‘Greatham Creek’, so I won’t repeat myself here.



*Houseboat Greatham Creek 2014.*

I simply include them because they are further examples of what I am talking about – drawings completed

some 42 years after making the initial sketches.



*Mac's Island Greatham Creek 2014.*

I am happy that I have finally completed them, and can turn my attention back to those things I continue to discover. It has been an interesting project to work on these six drawings. At the same time I have revisited so much of myself.

The same places continue to give, and although they are vastly changed, there is something that remains constant . . . . .

### **Staithes (Part 1): The Village.**

By Steve · May 30, 2014

I stepped down from the ‘United’ bus at a junction on the main Redcar to Whitby road, and found myself on the edge of a small estate of unprepossessing council houses.

Feeling underwhelmed at the climax of my journey, my 12 year-old legs dawdled 300 yards further, and I began a new trip, from the prosaic into the poetic.

This was Staithes.



At the Captain Cook Inn the flat road began its 1:4 descent; the tarmacadam surface gave way to polished cobblestones. What had looked so ordinary became so much more alluring.

Of a sudden, the village revealed itself before my keen eyes. The curtain had opened on the most sumptuous of theatre sets.

Small cottages stood cheek-by-jowl with handsome town houses, they appeared to clamber over, and hug each other; there was a network of enchanting alleys and yards. The piercing 'keeow' calls of the herring gulls, and the taste of salt and coal smoke were in the air.

The road curved, enticing me along a High Street of brick, render and stone, of slate and pantiles and impressive chimneys.

There were women sitting on occasional chairs outside their open front doors; they were knitting (my aunty Betty reckoned this gave them something to think about whilst they were talking). They were the guardians of the peace; with their kind but strict faces, they surveyed this network, and little got past them. Some wore strange looking white bonnets.





On the pavement there were freshly made crab sandwiches inviting visitors to take one and leave their money in the basket; it seemed like a trusting place, and why wouldn't it be?

I remember there being three pubs, and a butcher's shop; there was a grocer's, a gift shop and a post office, even a bank, and there was Toffee Crackle House – that was where I wanted to live.

And finally, beyond the Cod and Lobster Inn, there was the sea.

The high, gull-laden cliffs embraced it all, they seemed to protect and threaten the place. All this was spread before me, and as if it wasn't enough, my youthful imagination led me further, into another realm.

My mind, like a Chinese lantern, flashed images onto these beguiling streets and passages.

*There were fishermen in oil-black sou'westers, speaking in a dialect thick with Scandinavian words; wives shawled and bonneted, and with missing teeth, gutting mackerel on the silver-scaled street; bearded smugglers heaving barrels of brandy into back yards; sails unfurling in the harbour, a stiff breeze whipping the rigging.*

*I thought I glimpsed Captain Cook leaving the chandler's with a handful of mahogany things a sailor might use.*

*There was a storm brewing, a swell on the wicked, grey sea; petrels and fulmars circled above and there was a sea fret on my face. The taverns offered a refuge, sending smells of sour ale and comforting tobacco, out onto the street.*

*Beyond the village there was the horizon. What lay beyond that? Nordic ports of the former Hansiatic League and folksong crossed my mind. The question prodded my curiosity for years to come.*

The truth of these fanciful, if clichéd images, is contained in Staithes' history, but there is enough still present, to satisfy the romantic mind.



UK

Staites (Part 1): The Village.

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*This is a photograph I bought from Terry, the owner of the wonderful shop in the High Street, it sells all things useful and useless; his father owned the original plates.*

The history of this tough, practical, yet absorbing place is deeply branded into its fabric, and that is part of its appeal, but there are important details that currently set it aside from other visually attractive coastal villages.

Day-trippers trod a path down the High Street to the beach via the teashop and the ice-cream van. Wherever I have been in the world, I have learned not to travel in their wake.

Mercifully they do not swamp Staithes, that fate is reserved for the prettier coastal villages nearby that most people seem to flock to. Such destinations seem to take pride in their league position of 'most visited places'. Long may Staithes dwell nearer the relegation zone.

*Pastel drawing of a lane adjacent Roxby Beck.*

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UK

Staithe (Part 1): The Village.

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*Pastel drawing of a lane adjacent Roxby Beck.*

I tend to take the lanes and alleyways less travelled, for Staithes is such a permeable place with passages so narrow, where even the bandiest of legs could stop a runaway pig.



*High Barras, sketchbook entry, 2012. Watersoluble graphite, black ink.*

They lead to the most intimate of spaces, that don't let you down – they often contain an interesting cottage of colours that can lift your mood, or an authentic Victorian lamppost, an inviting bench, a collection of plants in pots, or just things that people have left outside their front door. There are instances of voices revealing their daily business, for there would be little privacy living in a place like this.





*Painting of the cinder path from High Barrass to the High Street. Pastel over watercolour, 2012.*

Some of the lanes are still cinder paths, with tiny spaces of land overgrown with weeds and bordered by fences in need of repair. One such space looks down upon the High Street and much of the lower village; it has a bench, and it is my favourite spot to sit and consider the place. Should I have been blessed with the talents of Dylan Thomas, this is from where I would observe my Llareggub and write my 'Under Milk Wood'.





Staithes is changing more slowly than some of its neighbouring villages; there are details I feel comfortable with, and my connection with what is still a meaningful place to me, remains.

It was a working village when I was a child, well populated but beginning to decline – its fishing industry was dying and people were dying, neither to be replaced in sufficient numbers.

Nearby were the villages of Runswick Bay and Robin Hood's Bay – these were the places that everyone seemed to flock to, but they seemed too precious for dustbins and lines of washing. They were very pretty, but for me, a little too sterile. The Staithes of today is not yet a bijou resort, but the hanging baskets are starting to appear.

On three occasions I have taken a cottage there, and remembering those women with kind but strict faces, I sat on my occasional chair, in the High Street; I had no wool to knit, nor mackerel to gut. I simply watched the hikers and geologists heading to their points of interest.

A small child, a girl of about 8 years old, approached me, the stranger, with a tray of fairy cakes. She had made them with her grandmother's help, and asked me if I'd like to buy one for 50 pence, in order to raise funds for the RNLI. She had a sparkle in her eyes that contained a sense of fun and adventure. She spoke with a confidence that came from a place of wellbeing. It was heartwarming, but for a moment I felt sad, as I realized that what I was witnessing used to be commonplace, but was now a rare occurrence. What a place for a child to grow.

Staithes doesn't flaunt itself. It remains understated. It doesn't succumb to flattery. Because it still has something of a permanent population, people just get on with their lives as window cleaners, postmen or shop assistants, but they are fast dwindling in number.

It has reached a stage of transition, and is becoming a place to look at. Its cottages and houses have become a means to make money.

The 'Farrow&Ball' colour range appears here and there, replacing the traditional colours of the leftover paints used on the fishing boats. There is a feeling of inevitability that if Staithes is to survive, tourism is probably the only economy that can support it. My fear is that what has been such a strong place, will become just another space, and a thin experience replaces an all-consuming one; a benign comfort to post to 'Facebook' friends to strengthen the image of a worldly and exciting life.

I am not the first person to want to paint in Staithes. It has a long association with painters, a fact that initially stimulated me further in wanting to work in the village.

The Staithes Group established itself here as 25 painters came together towards the end of the 19th Century. Dame Laura Knight and her husband Harold Knight being the two most renowned, and their stay has been well documented.

The group's legacy is substantial; their paintings offer a fine social record of this hard environment. If it interests you, I would urge you to look them up.



They also stimulated a century of untold numbers of paintings of Roxby Beck and fishing boats, to the point where I wouldn't mind if I didn't see another. Partially as a result of this, my fervent zest to record my feelings for this place no longer lied within the village, but somewhere beyond..... (To be continued).

## **Staithes (Part 2): The Strand.**

By Steve · June 14, 2014

On North Yorkshire's Jurassic coast, where Roxby Beck meets the North Sea, there is just enough space to squeeze in a landing place.

The Old Norse word 'stoth', means a wharf, but in the North East of England, under Danelaw, the word in common usage was 'staithe', and although it is now considered archaic, the word is still in use there. When a village grew up in this tiny hollow in the cliffs, it was therefore appropriately named Staithes, and many tons of herring, cod, haddock and mackerel have indeed been landed there.

It is much more than a landing place – its organic growth at the foot of the cliffs, and along the tight valley of the beck, have led to a settlement with a strong community, a long history and a deep culture.

Taking a wider, less anthropocentric view, Staithes is merely Man's foothold on a coastline that supports many other forms of life. That coast has a much longer history and it is the *raison d'être* for Staithes itself.



*Sketching on the wave-cut platform, north of Cow Bar.*

Venture beyond the enveloping headlands of Cow Bar Nab to the north and Penny Nab to the south, and you are in another realm, a transient realm, the details of which change with every tide. When I began to

wander these boulder-strewn strands, I felt immersed in their world.

As a visual artist, I was the wan faced child at the baker's window, keen to sample everything on offer.

It was almost too much, and the thoughts and events I am recalling here aim to be a reflection of just how ideas switch from being detailed, to taking the broader view; how fantasy and memory turn up; how a mood can slip into something else. Here and there the result may be a painting.



*Enveloped by cliffs, with Denmark over the horizon*

For years, I have traipsed these strands at low tide, scouring their surfaces for things that might interest me; it was only a matter of time before I satisfied a growing compulsion to paint it.



*From the cliff at Port Mulgrave, looking down onto the scratched rock strata.*

At low tide, the wave-cut platform revealed large striations, creating life-supporting rivulets that ran fast with rushing sea water, flowing one way or the other, depending on the state of the tide.

In a situation of apparent calm, I would feel at peace with myself, and the day. Slowly I would become aware of this distant rushing sound. Upon investigation, I discovered these gushing channels and wondered where the pumps were, that were driving this seawater at such a pace. There were no pumps, just a puzzling set of Nature's laws creating a phenomenon beyond my comprehension, so surprising that it would raise a smile of acceptance on my face.

Every step was an interesting one, and knowing that you have only so much time to pass a particular headland before getting cut off by the tide, you cannot allow your attention to be captured for longer than your allotted time.



But you don't want to miss anything – another pool, this one, like peering into a tray of developing fluid, slowly reveals the image of an ammonite fossil.





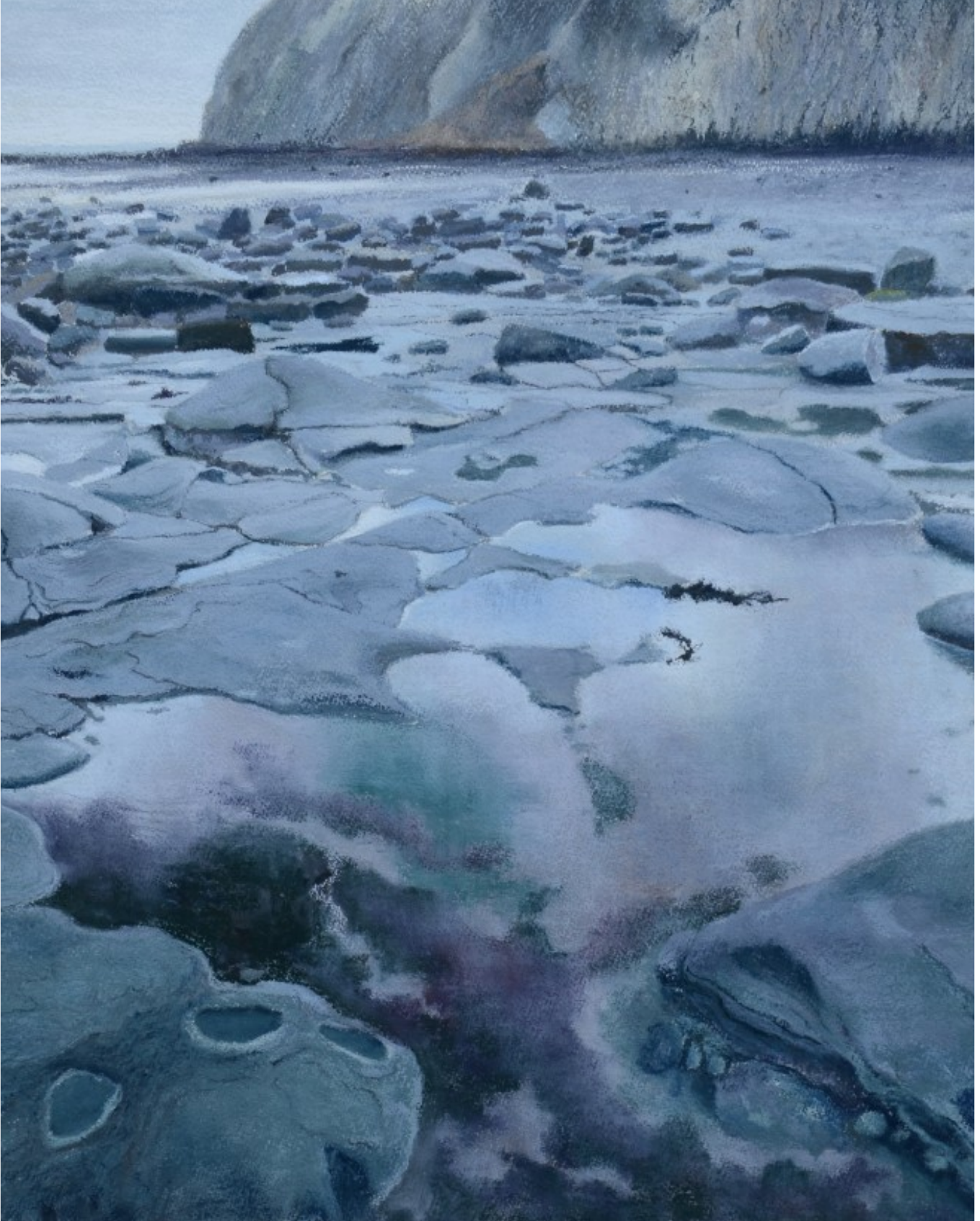
Other things, that a geologist could probably explain, also puzzled me.

The ground could take on the appearance of a petrified bowl of bubbling porridge.



Shallow domes of rock, often cracked, featured across the strand. The temptation to consider oneself an inter-galactic surfer, was too great.

I remain ignorant of how these features might have been formed – ‘mermaid’s dining tables’, was the local explanation of what they might be. That was good enough for me.



The wet grey-blue rocks reflected a blue-grey sky; rock pools swayed from within, with purple and green vegetation.

This close colour harmony was slightly melancholic in mood, and with my watercolour box virtually devoid of Payne's grey, I now had a crisis on my hands.

There were other natural features, and their formation amused and interested me.



To the south, pinnacles like prostrate elephants were regularly resisting the pounding of the tides.

To the north were several sculpted rocks resembling capstans (how very appropriate for a staithe). I considered it Nature's providence for those looking for a seat from which to work.





And so I sat there.

Alone with the sea, the blue sky, the birds and the winkles – I desired for nothing. The small anxieties and niggling bodily pains most of us carry around with us, eventually became noticeable by their absence; I even suspended my concern for the incoming tide.

I expanded to fill the near silent space, and I watched a fulmar riding the updraughts; it's white underparts against a pale cobalt sky.

An early addition to my vinyl album collection entered my head.

Joni Mitchell's 'Song to a Seagull' could only have been written for this occasion, and not for the first time, I felt a debt of gratitude towards the songwriter to whom I was a total stranger, but who seemed to know me so well.

*Fly silly seabird, no songs can possess you,*

*No voices can blame you for sun on your wings.*

*My gentle relations have names they must call me,*

*For loving the freedom of all flying things.*

*My dreams with the seagulls fly,*

*Out of reach, out of cry.*

She has been kind over the years in writing so many songs for me, so often striking a chord. Joni Mitchell considers herself firstly to be a painter, secondly a songwriter; both processes seem to satisfy a similar compulsion.





Progressing through this patterned landscape, the textures underfoot would change; the bubbling porridge now a slab of cracked toffee, and exaggerated joints that divided the polished surface of the rock, contained perhaps the tiniest amber coloured pebble, or a wrinkle, or an unidentifiable fragment of rusty metal, perhaps discarded by a ship on its way north to Narvik.

I found this stretch to be a very beautiful surprise amongst the boulders; a relief, an opportunity to glide and slide instead of clamber, to make up time against the incoming tide; but why should you want to do that?

I paint this place because I am stimulated by its space, and I would hope that the paintings offer an opportunity to step into those spaces, to wander and wonder, and to feel it's different textures.



*Towards Kettleness. Pastel over watercolour 2012.*

*This painting won the 'Buzzacott' prize at the Pastel Society's exhibition at The Mall Galleries 2012.*



At my feet were microcosms contained in each changing rock pool, the colours of which could occupy my interest to a point where a passer-by might think there was something wrong with me.

In one moment such a space is contained within a rock pool; a quick glance up, and the space stretches, uncontained, beyond the horizon; both of these views contain the Universe.







At a point where the wave-cut platform extends beyond Cow Bar Nab, the tide that sometimes musters its wrath to lambast the harbour walls, gently trickles away, revealing the eastern extremity of this part of northern England.

It was from here, and other similar points nearby, that I would gaze, as an adolescent child, into the little known void beyond the horizon.

At that time there was an annual boat race from nearby Hartlepool to Ijmuiden; consulting my dog-eared Philip's School Atlas revealed that I would need to turn my head to the south to consider life in that strangely spelled place, where I imagined people filling their mouths with condensed milk in order to speak the language.

I preferred to look north, as it was Scandinavia that captured my interest. My hometown of Hartlepool had links with Norway – it kindly sent us a Christmas tree every year in recognition of our wartime comradeship; their boats would harbour in the town during stormy weather, there was a Norwegian grocer's in Northgate and it was not uncommon to see Norwegian sailors, especially in the pubs flanking the docks.

I'd had some exposure to Grieg, Munch and Ibsen by then, and I liked the sound of the language and its strange extra three letters.

That's what the horizon meant to me, and in the ensuing years I looked at it from the other side, as I spent times painting in Scandinavia. It held quite a different meaning.

I am aware at this point, that I make these strands around Staithes sound like placid places of contemplation, somewhere to therapeutically fill the senses.

And they can be, there are such days, which offer the wanderer a sublime, I would even say surreal, experience.



At Hummersea, a sub-Saharan sky is reflected in still water, in which boulders appear to float, and a benign breeze sweeps the face. The days are not always like that.



*Stormy sea at Sandsend Ness. Watercolour and white chalk. Sketchbook entry 2012.*

There have been days when I have walked there with a sense of achievement at remaining vertical; the wind so biting that I have had to kneel down, in an undignified manner, a foot and an ankle immersed in a rock pool and a hand slipping on some unidentifiable slime, to prevent it throwing me headlong into a boulder, or carrying me out to sea.

Don't consider the sea to be your friend, for it is a traitor; it will betray you and turn on you when you don't expect it. Show it the utmost respect.

During an early adventure onto this wave-cut platform, I found it to be a foreboding place, even though the sea was not an immediate threat.

I was apprehensive with every step I took, and although I had a copy of the Whitby tide tables in my

pocket, I did not know the topography intimately enough. How long would it take to get back to safety? How far away was the next escape from this potentially fatal strand? How treacherous a surface would I have to traverse – and at how many miles an hour? All these questions raised anxieties in me.



Passing Penny Nab, any view of Staithes disappears; the stretch ahead to Old Nab is without refuge. A decision needed to be made. Had I enough time to get beyond the next enticing headland? And if I did, where would the next escape point be? Until enough experience was acquired I erred on the side of caution, but that did not prevent my mind becoming overactive, inventing ghastly fates that might await me.

There was nobody about, and there was no mobile phone reception; there was no fleet of rescue helicopters hovering above. I had doubts that any school of dolphins would appear, at a point of drowning, to whisk me off, and deposit me at the doorstep of the Cod & Lobster Inn; a pint of Timothy Taylor's 'Landlord' awaiting me, in a straight glass, on the bar.

I hugged the cliff, which is not the safest thing to do, and I found the surface to be sodden and slippery with mosses. I took a breather from clambering over and between the enormous boulders. It was a relatively cosy spot, but for the foreboding anxieties.

As I settled into this dank open tomb in order to sketch, I imagined myself breaking a limb, and lying



prostrate in a pool of salty water, limpets attaching themselves to my forehead, my echoing calls unheard. The time would pass and the tide would roll in. It would lap at my materials, which would float off towards Denmark; my watercolour box would leak its pigments of rose madder, gamboge and purple lake, creating ephemeral taffeta patterns on the surface of the sea. My plaintive pleas would attract the attention of scavenging seabirds, which would see me as an opportunity for a gorge; I think the eyeballs are the first to go.

Shaking my head of this nonsense, I'd get back to my drawing; next time perhaps, I should bring a distress flare.

Nowadays I am happy to join those folk searching for a small seam of jet, a relief of a fossilized ammonite, or a bucketful of winkles, in spending hours just looking, and hoping to find.

I remain compliant with the threat the tides pose, for there are lessons to be learned; many have capitulated here to the overwhelming ferocity of an angry, indiscriminate tide; I am sure that they did not go gently.

Those folk have been tearfully remembered to the accompaniment of an upright piano in one of Staithes's several chapels, as an ebullient congregation responded to the opening bar of 'Eternal Father, strong to save .....

Please donate generously to the RNLI, for those in peril on the sea – it receives not a penny from the government.

I have learned to embrace any sense of foreboding as a valuable part of the experience in getting to know this coast. Accept all it has to offer, not just the nice days, for there is a lifetime to discover it.

## **Two communities at the Edge: Seal Sands and Dungeness**

By Steve · July 14, 2020

I am a painter of place, and through a series of largely mixed media compositions, I attempted to express something of what it means to me, to know a place 'at the edge'. The resulting paintings can be seen in [Gallery 2](#)

I observed two communities: Seal Sands (Greatham Creek) in Co. Durham, which forms the northern fringe of the Tees estuary; and Dungeness in Kent, an expanding land of pebbles at the end of a cul-de-sac on the south coast of England.

Greatham Creek on Seal Sands had been such a stimulation to me that I continued to visit, whilst I still had family links with my home town of Hartlepool. As I now live in Oxford I needed to find somewhere not dissimilar in essence to Seal Sands, more conveniently situated.

I realized that the attraction of Seal Sands was that it was a place 'at the edge', not only geographically, but in so many other ways, and my quest was to find another.

There was a promontory on the south coast, a land of expanding pebbles, a cul-de-sac and Britain's only official desert – Dungeness.

I decided to go there.



*Britain's only desert.*

Neither of these two places is a place that you would normally pass through – if you were without a clear purpose, you would need a lot of curiosity to take you there. In that sense they are at the edge, and only the few will feel that they can belong to either of these places.



*Road to nowhere?*





*Drott shed*

They can be places to escape to for a calmer, quieter life, but they can awaken you from the hypnosis of television, advertising and shopping, for in their way, they can be intense. They are not always comfortable, but if approached at an appropriate pace, they will surprise you, enliven you, and sustain your interest.



UK

Two communities at the Edge: Seal Sands and Dungeness

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*The beach*

Like Seal Sands, Dungeness also exists at a point where a limb of land meets the sea. It is a protruding headland of shingle protecting the Romney Marshes from the sea.

It is certainly at the edge, but that edge is growing, at a fast rate due to deposition, stretching out into the Dover Straits towards France.

On entering this headland, there was a house flying the UKIP party flag, as if to gesture against any further deposition, in a bid to remain separate from Europe.



*UKIP – a brief moment in history.*

Both these environments are swept by strong salt winds and tides, and they support and harbour important, healthy bird populations. They display evidence of past, small scale communities eking out a

tough living, and they are both ecologically sensitive, and are designated as such. The irony of this is that the scale of the industry has changed, and both now host the foreboding, cumbersome structures of nuclear power stations.



*Dungeness nuclear power station.*

I became interested in what kind of person uses, or inhabits these places? Some may describe them as being ‘at the edge’ of society, definitely not mainstream. There are gleaners, loners, shore fishermen, dog walkers, bird watchers, men without sheds, men with sheds, collectors, writers, artists, the inquisitive, and even the odd internationally renowned film maker, in Derek Jarman.



*The house of Derek Jarman and Keith*

At Seal Sands I encountered Rick, walking his two greyhounds. In response to my pathetic question, ‘Do you come here often?’ he looked at me and said, ‘Aye, I’m down here every day, but I don’t just come to walk the dogs, I come down here cos it’s out the way of the town, out the way of every fucker.’ He gestured with his arm towards Hartlepool.

‘They don’t even know it’s here, this place, and they don’t know *what’s* here either– there’s deer, hares, seals, avocets, redshanks; they don’t even know what a fucking redshank is.’

After speaking very tenderly about his dogs, there was now a touch of bitterness in his voice, although a sense of privilege in sharing the sands, was still evident. It seemed that the inner peace observing redshanks had given him, did not remain with him when he encountered the people of the town.

I have a dislike of clubs, and their exclusivity. I also have a fear of becoming parochial, and it is with these things in mind that I can share Rick’s desire to escape to the sands to distance himself from the ‘clubs’, official or unofficial, of the town, and to embrace the wider Universe in the nature of the sands.

I ask myself if visiting the ‘Edge’ is part of being in a club, perhaps it is, but this club does not vet its members, it has no constitution, and you are not judged.

This connection with creatures and universal elements, and the ensuing heightened observations, seemed to lead to an awareness, if not an understanding, of one's place within the Universe. That's a good reason for coming here; it offers space and calm, engendering patience, empathy, humility and observation, providing an opportunity for those overwhelmed by the frustrations, the bitterness and the inanities of the people of the town.

On Dungeness I met a man with a rag in his hand. Jerry Oiler, an affable man, was pottering in his leaning shed. I asked him if he lived around here.

'Yeah', he said, with pride and a tone of satisfaction.

'Very long?', I asked.

'Oh, since 1746', he replied, quite seriously. Jerry's family was one of four to establish roots in C18 Dungeness, all four of them still having descendants present.

'We was Huguenots; we come over from France. Some went to London, but we come down here – been here ever since.'



*Surviving shed*

The Oilers had fished from their boat berthed on the shore, a shore that was over 100 yards further north in those days, and his predecessors had known good times from fishing.



*Dungeness's new 'tourist fishing' industry.*

‘What do think my grandfather was earning in 1953? I’ll tell you, £30 per week, and that was bloody good money then!’ he said.

He told me how the fishermen took their hard-earned cash to the pub, but not wanting their wives to know how much they had earned, they would bury notes in hastily dug holes in the pebbles, in order to hide it from them.

At the end of a night’s hard drinking, they’d leave the pub too drunk to remember where they had hidden it.

‘I tell you, Steve, this place is covered in money, if only you knew where to dig for it.’



*Outside the Britannia Inn – one of Dungeness’s two pubs.*

I suspected that Dungeness might be a very parochial place, so I was interested to know what Jerry thought of the LGBTQ community descending on his territory, mainly from London.

I asked him if he had had much to do with Derek Jarman, and what he thought of him. I waited for his reply with some apprehension.

‘Derek?’, he asked. ‘Lovely bloke.’ Jerry sounded very sad, as he shook his head, then he reiterated, ‘You couldn’t wish to meet a nicer bloke. And Keith, he’s a lovely bloke too.’

Wondering who Keith was, I asked him.

‘Keith is “H”’; well, that’s what they used to call him, when he was anonymous, “H”, but he can be Keith now – Derek’s partner.’

Keith still resides in the very stylish black and yellow bungalow, with the famous garden. This brings a lot of visitors who I wouldn’t necessarily describe as typical of those who seek out the edge.

Jerry wanted to talk about Derek Jarman, a man he was obviously proud to have known.

‘Do you know?’, he asked me, ‘They made him patron saint of gays and lesbians.’



‘Who did?’ I asked.

‘They did.’ He replied. ‘They come down here from London, about 500 of ‘em, with a throne of oak, solid oak it was, and they hoisted it up on their shoulders, and marched it all the way over them pebbles to the sea, and they anointed him. Hell of a party, it was. Went on for days, dancing and music all over the place.’

After being greeted by the UKIP flag on arrival, I was somehow expecting something more homophobic, more suspicious, more fearful, but Jerry had taken Derek and Keith at face value, and accepted them for the ‘bloody good blokes’ that they were.

So, at these two points, where the land runs out, and the colossal power stations dominate, but only when you chose to notice them, I can only guess what it feels like to be a resident. Those who are residents would probably say that they too can only guess, because for them, they are only being what they are, and doing what they do, Huguenot or not.

Being at the edge, there is always the possibility that you might fall off, but perhaps living with that vulnerability gives you a different view of life.

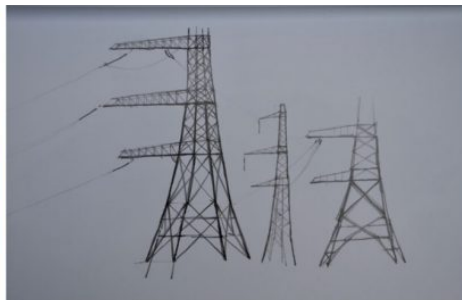


*Vulnerable remains of a thriving industry.*

I chose to spend many undisturbed hours, looking and sketching on Dungeness.



*Sketchbook entries*





For an artist, there is an attraction to the unresolved, ambiguous edge.

To view the paintings inspired by this landscape go to [Gallery 2](#)