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‘The Sky is Too Big’: Reclaimed Flatlands and Their Communities, What Happens When the Edge of the World Becomes Its Centre, and Romanticization in Fieldwork

Paul Cowdell 

Abstract

Around the east and south-east coast of England are many areas of drained marshland and reclaimed flatlands. While their histories vary, many were specifically reclaimed for agricultural purposes, some quite deliberately as remote but resource-rich locations. Romney Marsh, in Kent, provided rich sheep grazing for upland farmers but was a hostile place not easy of habitation. What happens to such places as demographics, infrastructure, and access change? This article reflects on the author’s lifelong experiences of the Marsh and periodic fieldwork in its fishing and farming communities as well as among the more recent migrants. Even into the 1980s Dungeness had a reputation for remoteness, despite the presence of a nuclear power station. Feelings of surprise at increased traffic there raise questions of romanticization in folklore fieldwork.

Introduction

The culture of all working landscapes inevitably changes over time, in a complex interaction of developing technology, changing demographics, adaptation of the landscape, and the connection of all of these to wider social and economic processes. The complexity is compounded by the theoretical assumptions we bring to such questions as culture and tradition, especially when we researchers may ourselves be part of the demographic change to which we are reacting. This is further intensified in the case of deliberately manipulated and regulated landscapes requiring continued maintenance, whatever their population make-up, above all with land originally reclaimed for agricultural purposes. What makes such landscapes distinctive—wide, flat vistas on or below sea level—requires constant attention to maintain that critical balance between land and sea, even as their population expands to include those who do not rely directly on that reclaimed land for their employment.

This article will discuss an area I have known my whole life, and which has seen quantitative population changes in that time. Romney Marsh, in south-east England, covers twenty-five miles of mostly Kent coast from Hythe to Rye Harbour in Sussex, pushing ten miles inland to what was the Saxon shoreline (see Figure 1). I follow local terminology in using 'Romney Marsh' (more accurately 'Marshes'), or just 'the Marsh', for the four adjacent marshes between the sea and the Royal Military Canal, which were reclaimed at different periods. The Canal, cut between 1804 and 1809 as a defence against potential Napoleonic invasion, now provides a convenient and roughly accurate internal boundary. I have visited this area repeatedly since my



Figure 1. Undated map (probably late 1990s/early 2000s) produced for the leaflet *A Romney Marsh Heritage Trail: The Mediæval Churches of Romney Marsh* by Shepway (now Folkestone and Hythe) District Council. Hythe is five miles up the coast from Dymchurch. Ashford is six miles north of Hamstreet on the A2070 (author's collection).

infancy, from childhood trips to see family friends to regular adult stays after my parents moved there, often combining such visits with scheduled fieldwork or performance work. I am myself implicated in the processes I will be considering, which poses particular questions and challenges for theoretical understandings of how and why we conduct folklore research.

Much of the direct comment here is drawn from fieldwork interviews conducted chiefly between 2000 and 2007, some of it for an MA dissertation on traditional singing in social contexts (Cowdell 2008). The content is more widely drawn, however, so some interviewees are also cited from broader conversational events. This reflects what in research terms can best be interpreted as participant observation as a birdwatcher (1980–85) and community theatre actor/facilitator (2001), alongside constant and regular discussion with family members resident on the Marsh until 2019, and their friends and neighbours.

Autoethnographic reflection on this engagement with and research into a community requires coming at the same point from two directions. There is a need to understand the assumptions behind my reading of the environment and community, the feelings that inform my interpretations of the area, and the implications these may have for that reading and interpretation. It is also necessary to consider how folklore collection and analysis have been formulated in the development of our discipline. The two approaches feed into and inform each other, and a close examination of the personal engagement should also allow for a more critical assessment of the underlying assumptions. There is a danger of a false objectivism built on avoiding any appraisal of our subjective role in the research. Fieldwork and analysis are not neutral activities, but we will improve the quality (and, arguably, the value) of both by a more thoroughgoing and explicit study of their implicit bases and ideas at both theoretical and personal levels.

It is necessary to acknowledge and critique two basic implied conceptions lurking behind folklore scholarship historically, not least because contemporary folklorists might be overly hasty in assuming we have either completely moved beyond them or fully understood their difficulties. Both involve some level of romanticization of folklore, of tradition bearers, and (by extension) of the landscapes they inhabit.

One problem is folklore's early focus on the lore as artefact rather than on the social interactions of the folk necessary for its transmission. Dan Ben-Amos noted the wider theoretical problem this generated, with the tendency of 'most definitions' to present folklore 'as a collection of things', resulting in 'a methodological abstraction of objects from their actual context' (Ben-Amos 1971, 9). In England, the romanticizing character of this foundational salvage ethnography could be most clearly seen in folk-song collection, which long prioritized artefacts—songs—on aesthetic grounds over their performance context. The tendency is not, however, confined to folk-song collection. This is relevant here, as my first directed fieldwork (rather than wider social participation) on Romney Marsh was in folk song. It also provided an early example of the unconscious orientation towards artefact over context. The assiduous song researcher George Frampton alerted me to the existence of two cassette tapes of Lydd singer Jack Flisher, very generously forwarding a copy of the one containing singing, but not the tape of Flisher's reminiscences. That this

bias was unconscious is borne out by Frampton's extensive wider contextual fieldwork in Kent and the Cambridgeshire Fens.

Ben-Amos's attempt to counter and oppose the artefactual tendency raises the other problematic underlying conception. His redefinition of folklore as 'artistic communication in small groups' (Ben-Amos 1971, 13) may inadvertently have perpetuated some of the very foundational romanticism of salvage ethnography he was trying to oppose, through its characterization of the folk groups performing that communication. Many folk groups are small, and some folklore does aim at self-definition and ensuring delimitation of the folk group by excluding outsiders, but this can itself lead to romanticizing groups for their smallness. The tendency extends to the landscape they inhabit: limited population numbers due to difficulties of physical access can be read as a geographical imposition of Ben-Amos's 'small groups', leading towards a tempting romanticized glorification of such areas as *the* locus of folklore. Cecil Sharp explicitly articulated this position for folk songs. Seeing such areas as potentially more successful locations for song survival, he inscribed them into his understanding of the genre. Sharp described folk song as the song of 'common people ... found only in those country districts which, by reason of their remoteness, have escaped the infection of modern ideas' (Sharp 1972, 5). My MA fieldwork used the Marsh to test Sharp's untenable theory against local practice. Some of my concrete examples will therefore be drawn from song research, but the tendency and its pressures apply more widely across folklore studies, as the history of folkloristic use of metaphors from deep excavation and rural practice attests (Bennett 1993, 1994; Nicolaisen 1995).

This is worth noting, because simply disproving such ahistorical thinking may not eliminate romanticization or romanticisms. Inhabitants of genuinely remote areas have often been among the most determined to remain abreast of contemporary developments, while shifts in land use and, correspondingly, population numbers and composition have informed shifts in patterns of folkloric behaviour and practice. My engagement with earlier folklore theorizing was not independent of my personal relationship with Romney Marsh. Examining its local social context of folkloric practices demanded also a reflexive examination of my less scholarly feelings, interactions, and attachments.

I was early imbued with a love of this landscape and the sense of emptiness it can convey, a sense that has also inspired the artists who have most visibly represented local demographic shifts. A romanticized 'isolation' can, despite our best theoretical intentions, still influence our subjective responses to a region. My own multi-form involvement on the Marsh has included artistic activity that is not wholly separable from my research interests; so art and artists may stand as a convenient axis of the many questions requiring scrutiny here. As a researcher, I am implicated in the demographic changes to which I am reacting. A sharply reflexive autoethnographic consideration of the very specific elements of my involvement with the Marsh may shed light on the broader problems of romanticization of place and how this affects readings of changing folk practices in light of changing land use and demographics. We need not stop being in love with a place to investigate it properly, but acknowledging

and understanding that love will be necessary to make sense of our investigations. The autoethnographic character of this article may make its particular observations specific, but they point both to methodological applications of wider concern and to some under-explored theoretical assumptions lurking in our thinking. Through these specifics, this article will examine ways in which researchers place themselves, and their own preferences, within changing landscapes.

Romney Marsh

There are many areas of drained marshland and reclaimed flatland around England, most characteristically along the east coast, where managed drained land stretches inland to the Cambridgeshire Fens. Regional histories vary (see, for example, Boyce 2021; Mason 1984), but these were developed as resource-rich areas. East coast reclamation may reflect a combination of available potential geography and a neighbouring population adept with such conditions: Dutch involvement in East Anglia is well documented. Romney Marsh, by contrast, was drained piecemeal over a protracted period from Roman settlement onwards. That earliest reclamation established drainage patterns, as the Romans lowered the water table by making ditches and constructing sea defences. W. G. Hoskins noted the result:

Such ditching and embanking was costly and possible only on a piecemeal basis. It gives us therefore relatively small enclosed fields, instead of the large-scale open fields, in which the ditches not only serve as drains but also as the boundaries of the newly reclaimed land. (Hoskins 1970, 78)

Artist John Piper attributed ‘an absence—considering this is a drained marsh—of straight lines’ (Piper 1950, 7) to this piecemeal development.

The ‘peculiar evolution’ of the Marsh owes something to the necessary continued drainage and management of areas where the sea has receded to ensure the run-off of land water, rather than the deliberate reclamation of marshland for fields, as in the Fens (Roper 1988, 4; Robinson, Midmer, and Roberts 1988). Suggestions of informal Dutch involvement on the Marsh, therefore, have been more in the nature of vague historical legend than documentary record. One can sympathize with Nicholas Brooks’s comment that the Marsh’s evolution ‘has been such a fertile ground for antiquarian conjecture and controversy ... that armchair historians might have learnt to leave well alone’ (N. Brooks 1988, 90).¹

The railway along the higher ground through Appledore and Hamstreet gives good introductory views of the Marsh’s landscape and its working history, including the nuclear power station at Dungeness. All four marshes are reclaimed, with few distinctions between them on the ground. The Romans reclaimed Romney Marsh, building the Rhee Wall from Romney Harbour (now landlocked Old Romney) to Snargate—what is now the B2080 road. Denge Marsh, which culminates in Dungeness Point, is the most evidently different, being the shingle land south of the B2075. It was reclaimed in the eighth century. To its north, Walland Marsh, reclaimed between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, stretches to the county boundary with Sussex (Kent Ditch). Across Kent Ditch, Guilford Level, which runs to Rye Harbour, was reclaimed last, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rye, on a hill

overlooking the flatlands, is often included in coverage of the Marsh, in part because of the demographic changes discussed in the following, but I take the Marsh proper as ending at its foot.

Habitation and Changing Economies

This piecemeal reclamation reflects and is reflected in the local economy, which has always centred on agriculture and the sea. The bigger towns of the Marsh came into being before the coast reached its current shape, initially emerging as islands. New Romney was a trading post in the European wool trade. By the time thirteenth-century storms were blocking Romney Harbour and changing the course of the River Rother, Denge Marsh was already a shingled area dotted with freshwater pits, recognizably becoming today's Dungeness. Within his lifetime, retired fisherman Ken Oiller recalled having to bring fresh water in pails from a hand pump thirty yards inland of his family's home (Oiller [n.d.](#), 13). If Denge Marsh was not the water-rich agricultural soil of the rest of the Marsh, its promontory was ideal for fishing. It also required habitation, as its shifting shingle mass posed dangers to shipping. There was a clear shared interest here, and the whole fishing community was active in the lifeboat services. (Fishermen's wives organized a women's boat.) The first light beacon was constructed in 1615, and had to be moved three times because the tide was continually reshaping the coastline. The eastward drift of the English Channel can deposit up to 100,000 cubic metres of shingle on Dungeness Point each year (BNFL 1999, 4). The Central Electricity Board (CEGB) did not take this into account when building the nuclear power station ([Figure 2](#)). Having placed the building too close to the moving shore, they then had to employ a fleet of lorries to carry shingle back from the east of the point to its south shore to prevent it sliding into the sea.

This instance of infrastructural misjudgement based on differing demographic and cultural requirements is emblematic of the broader contextual issues. When the CEGB was assessing Dungeness as a potential power station site, it ignored the small resident inshore fishing community along the beach. The squat habitable developments along Dungeness beach, from the Pilot Inn at one end to the old lighthouse at the other, are of varied type and use. There are timber cottages built for the fishing community, some of which have now been modernized in sympathetic style. Closer to the Trinity House lighthouse buildings, adjacent to the still-operational light railway from Hythe, there are converted railway carriages, brought down and repurposed as holiday accommodation in the 1920s. The CEGB's planning maps, however, identified all the buildings as holiday accommodation, with no mention of permanent residents. This studied avoidance of the fishermen resulted in the misjudgement of the shingle: the CEGB surveyors' view that its shifting posed no long-term problems came from not having asked the people who knew more about it. The CEGB's refusal to engage with the fishermen's knowledge apparently caused other problems. One local told me that the CEGB had misjudged the necessary length of their warm water outlet pipe, learning the hard way in their first operational season that it only reached into the sprat breeding ground, where it clogged up with fry.



Figure 2. Looking across Denge Marsh to Dungeness power station and lighthouse (photograph by author, 2006).

As a long-term visitor to Dungeness since childhood, in various capacities, I have heard many such stories and this interpretation of events, not just from the fishing community but (particularly) from regular visitors to the bird observatory, which occupies a brick-built former fishermen's dwelling near the power station. When the CEGB attempted to improve relations with other inhabitants and visitors, it provided the observatory with a hide on the beach, for watching passage birds, overlooking the rough water area caused by the water outlet, known to birders as The Patch (BNFL [1999, 5], written after relations improved, explains the water circulation process.) The nature reserve inland of the observatory came later, but there has been close interaction between the observatory and the fishing community throughout. The naturalists have long engaged with the fishermen's observations of the world around them—birdwatcher Barry Banson mentioned his confidence in the ability of one resident fisherman to identify songbirds by call (Barry Banson, pers. comm., 1981)—and the BNFL's environmental information publication (BNFL 1999) was part of a joint exhibition with English Nature and Kent Wildlife Trust.

The CEGB's earlier community outreach was not uniformly successful or rapid. In 2000, Ken Oiller, then still living on the beach (he moved later to Lydd), said that 'for the first ten, or even more, years [the CEGB] seemed to refuse to admit that there was a community living here', and described the constant annoyance of tannoys and steam discharges. The CEGB 'finally decided', he said, that "Yes, we ought to treat the local people as if they were people" and not just something that happened to be in their way' (Ken Oiller, interview, 26 February 2000). Oiller attributed this to wider

unease about nuclear power, but the CEGB's belated first attempt to demonstrate the power station's safety to local residents only compounded the problems further. For their practice emergency evacuation procedure for staff and residents, they fixed the muster point inside the station's gates, taking residents towards the site rather than away from it. Friction settled eventually into a working coexistence, thanks in part to a local liaison committee in which Oiller participated as a local councillor in Lydd, and he said he has now all but forgotten about the power station's presence. Most of the station's staff drove from Lydd and entered the compound without passing through the fishing community at all.

Health Conditions and Outsider Views

Building on shingle did cause problems elsewhere on Denge Marsh, as one interviewee told me of difficulties with shifting foundations at a factory in Lydd. (Given commercial sensitivities, I provide no further details.) The other marshes faced different problems. Managed but inadequate drainage had created rich grazing land and unhealthy living conditions. In 1596 William Lambarde said the Marsh had 'sundry villages although ... not much inhabited because it is ... Evill in winter, grievous in Summer and never good' (Roper 1988, 1). Notwithstanding regional differences, one should bear in mind here James Boyce's comment on the Fens regarding overstatement of such problems by outsiders, with an accompanying tendency to over-stress remoteness (Boyce 2021, 6). The Marsh, like other comparable areas, had a reputation for 'marsh ague'—malaria. Again, Boyce's cautions should be weighed carefully, as malaria's presence in the Fens, cited by outsiders as evidence of noxiousness, was accompanied there by relative longevity (Boyce 2021, 152–53).

The Marsh's small population, by contrast, was not so healthy, with Mary Dobson (1980) offering a helpful analysis of mortality rates. Confirming how outsiders viewed this, however, she quotes reasons offered by eighteenth-century vicars for not living in some parishes, including 'the general opinion of the unhealthiness of the situation' at Lydd and 'frequent illness' at Newchurch (Dobson 1980, 368). A 2001 local history project at the demographically much changed Newchurch made this last a badge of honour, offering the following autoethnographic reflection on 'Newchurch People': 'Once the unhealthiest place in Kent, Newchurch benefitted from improved farming and sanitation to become a thriving community with some fascinating characters' (Newchurch History Project 2001, 37).

The sense of a changed demographic population justifying its presence in this publication was expressed in comments on it from outside the village. Andrew Sinden, born into one of the older established farming families in nearby St Mary in the Marsh, queried the significance of some of the details listed in the Newchurch pamphlet, particularly around its air force advanced landing ground during World War II (details and context in R. J. Brooks 1998, 243). He was not questioning its accuracy but its noteworthiness, as the experience was locally typical. Wartime deployments continued the region's long military associations (in coastal defences and army training, above

all) as a further element of landscape use alongside agricultural and fishing work. The long-term turn by artists to this landscape is also a recognized and integral land use, however different it may be from earlier farming practice.

The Marsh's rich grazing land led to a pattern of land usage where upland farmers rented land, employing the relatively few residents to tend their animals. From this developed the distinct local employment practice for watching sheep. Where elsewhere shepherds were employed directly by a farmer, on the Marsh self-employed 'Lookers' would oversee a specific area where the flocks of several upland farmers were being grazed. 'Acre Lookers' were paid by the area they covered, with retired Lookers taken on as 'Lambers' during lambing season to assist a Looker. Farming has changed across the Marsh, but sheep remain the livestock most commonly associated with the area, in part because the Romney local breed was such a successful export. Newchurch farmer Anne Cragg grew up on a sheep farm in Kenya. She joked that the sound of Romneys, familiar from her childhood, must have been what attracted her to husband, Andy (Anne Cragg, pers. comm., February 2019).

Changing land ownership, in part associated with improved drainage and access, gradually changed this pattern, although the Marsh remained largely pasturage until the Second World War, when sheep were moved off by train and fields were ploughed for arable usage and mixed farming. John Piper offsets his observation that 'At present the sheep farming here is on the decline' by insisting that 'There is very little loss of beauty', indicating the complicated romanticization of a changing landscape (Piper 1950, 10). Arable farming has become vital to the local agricultural economy (for a useful introduction, see Cook 2012), but still having unploughed land also conveys a certain prestige, according to Violet Link of Newchurch (Violet Link, interview, 17 June 2006). One farmer said he no longer farmed Romneys, but had switched to a breed that shed wool and did not require shearing.

The Marsh was considered remote until even fairly recently, and that notional remoteness was shaped as somehow exotic and wild. In 1954, a correspondent from Ashford, a town combining a regional agricultural market and railway works, wrote to the *Opies* of May garlanding by three girls looking 'the Marsh or Gipsy [*sic*] type' (Opie and Opie 1977, 283). The coastal communities were perhaps genuinely more remote, although this too requires qualification. The Dungeness fishing community lived alongside manned lighthouse and coastguard stations. Dungeness Point had no metalled road until 1935, but converted railway carriages were already an established holiday destination by then. Kettle-net fishing stands on the shore were hired by families until 1953 and passed along through them, suggesting repeated patterns of visiting. I am aware from later family practice of regular day and overnight trips for rod-and-line beach fishing, as Dungeness had a reputation for excellent cod fishing.

Remoteness, too, is not absolute. Lydd-born local historian Ted Carpenter was a regular visitor to Dungeness and stressed the close interaction between the two communities. Ken Oiller had been schooled in both places, while Carpenter and Doris Tart noted the importance of Lydd's annual Club Day across their communities. But Carpenter also described as 'remote' some of the less habited regions towards Rye that he remembered from before construction of the power station, like Jury's Gap

where the Southerden fishing family lived (Ted Carpenter, interview, 29 November 2005). Some of this may be exacerbated by the relative emptiness of these places now, as that area has long been in military use as firing ranges. Doris Tart's family were moved from The Brooks in 1865 when it was requisitioned for ranges, and her birthplace, Spindal Cottage,² was demolished for the power station site.

Constructions of remoteness may therefore be a romanticization, but the fluctuations of resident small family groups emphasize genuine precariousness. The Tarts relocated along the beach, but the Southerdens left, as did the Prebble and Freathy families later, although the Fair and Richardson families had by then joined the fishing community. The two best-known Dungeness fishing families, the Tarts and the Oillers, were themselves earlier incomers. Local tradition has it that the Oillers came from Cornwall in the mid-eighteenth century while the Tarts were early nineteenth-century Huguenot arrivals (Robinson 1998, 27). That their occupations were susceptible to disruption under often difficult living conditions led to communities bonding around livelihoods and lives. Dungeness's most famous incomer, the filmmaker and artist Derek Jarman, wrote that the morning after the Great Storm of 1987, 'I emerged to find my neighbour, Sylvia, who had came [sic] to see if I was all right' (Jarman 1995, 66). 'Sylvia' was Ken Oiller's wife, and Prospect Cottage, Jarman's famously decorated home, was previously the residence of fisherman Charlie and Lil Richardson, known to Ken and Sylvia's children as 'gran and grandad Char' (Oiller n.d., 42).

Dungeness is now a closely regulated planning conservation area to ensure appropriate renovation of the carriages and cottages, as St Mary in the Marsh farmer Jill Cole explained in relation to requirements for work on her son's cottage there (Jill Cole, pers. comm., 2001). None of the residents, however, romanticized the weather or the conditions. Ken Oiller said his new uPVC window frames were not the prettiest, but were 'a godsend' (Ken Oiller, pers. comm., November 2003). Doris Tart finally moved off the beach when she thought she would no longer be able to dig herself a new freshwater well if needed. Dungeness, having no natural waterways, is dependent on rainfall for fresh water (BNFL 1999, 4). Doris moved to Dymchurch, which she said she had only passed through before (Doris Tart, interview, 22 October 2005). Jill Cole, whom I first met through a community theatre project discussed below, later showed me a newspaper clipping about a couple who had bought one of the former lighthouse buildings. They clearly only used this at weekends, being evidently uncomfortable with the bleakness and the noise of driving rain. We both expressed surprise at their unease with bad weather, wondering why anyone would choose Dungeness if they were not prepared for that (Jill Cole, pers. comm., 2001). My earliest overnight stays in a railway carriage near the station were punctuated by the foghorn.

Changing Demographics and Autoethnography

Such misjudged expectations of weather conditions offer an oblique insight into changing land use across the Marsh, and southern England more generally, since 1945. The Marsh has been mostly identified with incoming commuters, weekenders, and, above all, artists following Derek Jarman's lead, but this was not new. Progressive population growth based

on incoming residents and the cultivation of tourist destinations has been accompanied by consolidation and adjustment within the farming community, sometimes directly connected with that demographic shift. Changes include not just turns to different crops, livestock, and breeds, but also Jill and Denis Cole's experiments with organic farming and the more recent automation of the farm shop at Honeychild Farm in Ivychurch, described by the farm as 'the first of its kind' locally. The Marsh is no longer grazing land for off-Marsh farmers, nor are its farmers all old local families, although many are. Andy Cragg's father Bill had moved down from Lincolnshire. Many people in local agriculture spoke of Bill's readiness to diversify and experiment in farming, as well as his willingness to offer labouring work. Honeychild Farm exemplifies such developments, hosting the Marsh's last dairy herd and identifying its online shop venture as part of the need for 'All farms ... to diversify in the current climate to survive'. Its owners describe themselves as 'third generation farmers based on the beautiful Romney Marsh'.³

Other farmers had been broadly local but still off the Marsh, which is where my autoethnographic involvement starts. My mother's father, Charles Cowdell (1903–83), was born in Battersea, south London. His family was itself migratory, having followed railway works down the east coast. He spent his working life as a precision engineer and volunteer first aider at the Ashford works, marrying local girl Edith Ellen Maud King (1906–95).⁴ They bought a new-built house on Bond Road in South Ashford, an area expanded for railway workers in the 1930s, where they lived their whole lives. This was still a close-knit community, with my grandfather's spinster sister Win living in the bungalow next door (much to my grandmother's irritation). Mayhew Close, a later construction off Bond Road, was named after a neighbour and friend who served on the town council. The continuing development can be seen in the history of an area of council farmland at the end of the road, farmed by the Thompson family. Farming and railway work were both reserved occupations during the war, and Charles Cowdell became great friends with Mr Thompson (1910–2000) when they remained at work while their families were evacuated. The formality with his name is deliberate: my family always called him Tom, and only at his funeral did I learn that his name was actually Albert. Confirmation of how close-knit this community perceived itself to be, even after its dispersal, came in a conversation with my uncle Vernon Cowdell ahead of presenting an earlier version of this article at a conference. Vernon's response to my saying I would be talking about Tom in Hull was, 'Well he won't mean anything to people up there' (Vernon Cowdell, pers. comm., July 2023).

With the post-war development of South Ashford, the farmland was compulsorily purchased for a college, as it remains (in different form) today. Tom bought farmland at Snargate, and the family's farming subsequently expanded across the Marsh. Tom never forgot his migration. At Edith Cowdell's funeral, near Bond Road, he told me, 'I don't recognize anyone here, and South Ashford used to be my area. Mind you, that was over forty years ago' (Tom Thompson, pers. comm., May 1995). This occupational migration bears comparison with the accounts of the fishing families moving in (and out) of Dungeness. Ken Oiller, when there was little fishing work available, had worked away, including on the railway and at Lydd military camp (Oiller n.d., 40–41).

My introduction to the Marsh came with family visits to the Thompsons, often including a trip to Dungeness for lunch. These places retained a reputation for remoteness which still incorporated a pattern of visiting largely confined to a broadly local constituency. This served to confirm both the tightness and the intensity of the 'local' experience: at the Pilot Inn at Dungeness, for example, before it was as widely visited as today, I saw my grandfather bump into a former Ashford works colleague. By the 1990s, patterns of migration onto the Marsh had changed further, thanks in part to improved rail access to Ashford. Most Marsh branch lines were closed in the 1950s/60s, including Dungeness's closest station, Lydd-on-Sea, making the fifteen-inch gauge light Romney, Hythe, and Dymchurch Railway still a necessary part of the local transport network, including for the school run to New Romney. More significant, however, was that quicker access to London from Ashford made the surrounding area increasingly viable for commuters. Again, we should not exoticize this as if the residents were excluded. Incoming Dungeness resident Derek Jarman travelled to London for work and for medical treatment, certainly, but Ken Oiller met Sylvia while working away for British Rail. In the 1990s my parents Anthony (Tony) and Janis (née Cowdell) Day left London for Newchurch as part of a phased retirement, initially still commuting to work in London via Ashford. This was relatively common, and as well as farmers their Newchurch neighbours included many who had retired from or were still working in London or elsewhere in Kent. Some close London friends also followed them down to the Marsh.

Water Management

Janis's family history meant my parents were not total outsiders. She boasted of exploiting the considerable cultural capital of knowing the Thompsons when they first moved, but other local migration compounded this. When they first arrived in Newchurch, an older neighbour whose husband had also worked on the railway recalled the very tall Charles Cowdell as 'The high man!' (Figure 3). Nor was this simply about personal kudos. Arriving in any managed landscape requires some adaptation and assimilation, because of the exigencies of existence. At or below sea level, water handling is critical. Sewage treatment requires different management in areas that cannot support mains drainage. Standing water is an issue. My parents learned how and where to cut gullies in their lawn to allow run-off into the dyke at the foot of their garden in extreme cases to prevent their house flooding. Older neighbours also told them where the drainage bung was in the kitchen wall of some properties if residents could not forestall the flooding, either natural or domestic.

Individuals still confront the same problems of water management as farmers, albeit on a different scale, and the seasonal dyke-cutting programme is accepted as an essential part of local life, however disruptive to traffic. Janis and Tony Day quickly settled into this necessary pattern of life, in part through their familiarity with Tom Thompson. Tom, by then, was a major figure in Marsh farming, whose standing reflected and was reflected in long involvement in the local Drainage Board.



Figure 3. Charles Cowdell, not being entirely serious (photograph probably from the late 1950s/early 1960s; author's collection).

The jurats⁵ of the Marsh were first granted liberty against interference in ensuring against flooding in 1252 (i.e. during the major reclamations, which consolidated agriculture across the area), leading eventually to creation of the Lord Commissioners, Bailiffs, and Jurats of the Level of Romney Marsh, known as the Lords of the Level. They retained their status in water management until the creation of a more integrated system of local catchment and internal drainage boards by the Land Drainage Act 1930. A 2001 reshuffle saw a further regrouping into a wider 'Romney Marshes Area Internal Drainage Board'. 'Lords of the Level' was retained as a local title, often granted to farmers with significant involvement in water management.

As one New Zealand newspaper observed, reporting the 1930 Act, 'Romney Marsh, in Kent, lies several feet below sea-level, and requires very careful watching' ('Lords of the Level', 1930). This affects all land use and occupation, and thus all incomers.

Dymchurch, for example, shared the familiar portfolio of agricultural, military, and coastguard economies, but its sandy beach also made it attractive for tourism. Its seawall, originally established in the sixteenth century, was progressively strengthened, being finally ragstone-secured in time for the Victorian seaside boom (Robinson, Midmer, and Roberts 1988, 162–63). Ted Carpenter has described Dymchurch as ‘a popular little holiday resort’ (Carpenter 1994, 29), although this is an understatement: at one point it boasted the largest holiday camp in Kent. Its identity, torn between older ideas of itself as a village and the reality of a developing town with new housing stock, occasioned some comment among interviewees outside Dymchurch. Joyce Fagg of St Mary’s Bay (an incomer since World War II), called it ‘Grimchurch’, while Janis Day asked scornfully, ‘How can somewhere that size be a village?’ (Joyce Fagg, interview, 15 November 2005; Janis Day, pers. comm., 2006).

Art and Artists

Dymchurch’s popularity increased with the Doctor Syn novels of Russell Thorndike, who lived in New Romney. *Doctor Syn* (Thorndike 1964) was published in 1915, and its success led Thorndike to write another six novels. It has been widely and repeatedly adapted for film, theatre, and radio. Thorndike’s tales of the Dymchurch parson/smuggler featured local history and observation—one character, Sennacherib Pepper, was named from a headstone still standing in the parish churchyard—while incorporating Thorndike’s recollections from his childhood in north Kent. The books have also contributed to a popular understanding of water management. Carpenter wrote of Dymchurch’s flood defences that ‘Even today the old local saying, “God save the Country, long live the King, but watch the wall”, is just as relevant’ (Carpenter 1994, 29), but its flourishing longevity owes much to its regular invocation by Thorndike. Doctor Syn has become locally emblematic: as a child, I was inculcated with the Marsh as the world of Syn, although I was chagrined later to discover that my mother had not in fact read any of Thorndike’s books. Syn is now enshrined in local customary life, with a biennial Day of Syn, featuring re-enactors, that alternates with Hythe’s older Venetian Fête, a Victorian civic carnival on the Canal. Representatively, local songwriter Jacqui Wood’s CD *Romney Marsh: A Journey of Life* (2012) included ‘The Wages of Syn’, her take on Thorndike’s story, and two songs narrated by Thorndike’s actor son Daniel, then resident in his father’s old house.⁶

Russell Thorndike was a resident, not a visitor, who adaptively fed into the community’s local folk culture with his own cultural creation, which Daniel graciously continued. Derek Jarman was also no weekender at Dungeness, where his transformation of Prospect Cottage involved an idiosyncratic interaction with the working landscape. Sylvia Oiller related having to go and ask, ‘Derek, did you pick up something like this for your garden? Can we have it back please, it’s part of the boat!’ (Sylvia Oiller, pers. comm., November 2003). Jarman maintained Prospect’s older black-tarred exterior, decorating it with lines from John Donne. Jarman’s care of Prospect contributed to the further development of the beach environment. In 2003 a

cottage across the road was renovated in black cladding consistent with Prospect's exterior. Black Rubber House, as its architects name it, is beautiful. However different, it is, like the Oillers' uPVC windows, designed for local conditions.⁷

The cultural interactions defy easy divisions between residents and incomers, which locates me pivotally as an outsider with some inside insight. In 2001 my parents informed me that a theatre professional resident in St Mary in the Marsh was planning a community theatre production of *Dr Syn* for performance in some historic Marsh churches (Figure 4). Former actor and opera director J. Michael Fields's play would feature Daniel Thorndike, by then mostly retired from his professional acting career. I contacted Michael, who took me on as an actor/facilitator/animateur for the production. I was conscious of exploiting the same local social capital my parents had, as Tom Thompson's granddaughter was in the cast. Notwithstanding migration and changing demographics, these remain intimately connected communities: one cast member's mother worked for the funeral director who arranged my parents' interments in 2019. Viewed autoethnographically, it must be recognized that my engagements have been structured to position me within this community. Since the detachment of immediate direct contact, with the death of my parents, this present ethnographic consideration is itself a continuation of that process, shaped to accommodate my new distance from the Marsh (Figure 4).

J. Michael Fields's professional theatrical skills were not an intrusion or an entirely alien practice. They found a response because the community was already heavily engaged in and reflexive of its own cultural activity. Jill Cole, who appeared in Michael's play, had danced professionally in her youth, and had revived smoking



Figure 4. St Mary in the Marsh (photograph by the author, 2006).

concerts in St Mary in the Marsh, for which her sons wrote satirical squibs. The music hall songs performed in those shows may not have been those documented in local repertoire but they were consonant with it and demonstrated an awareness of previous bodies of performance. Denis Cole recalled such songs being sung in Dymchurch pubs, and recollections of the music hall repertoire of local farmer Charlie Sinden were also influential. Both Denis and Charlie's grandson Andrew Sinden sang me songs from that repertoire, and Andrew linked it with Charlie's church hymn singing. These performance activities contributed both to the developing cultural context and to its material base. Jill's smoking concerts helped raise funds for a new village hall, while Michael's play donated to the Romney Marsh Historic Churches Trust. Again, this was not unprecedented. The west gallery and box pews at St Clement's at Old Romney (where Jarman is buried) were renovated and repainted by the Rank film organization in exchange for using it as a location for their 1963 film *Dr Syn*.

Transmission of Tradition

My song research on the Marsh predated my theatrical work with Michael, but developed further as a result of it. I could not initially make sense of the gulf between what I found in these participatory communities and responses to my inquiries in local folk clubs about local songs. These clubs were less oriented around traditional songs than I anticipated, answering mostly with localized parodies of American songs ('There Is a House in New Romney', for example). These were suggested in the absence of knowledge of any local traditions, but the same tendency turned up somewhat differently elsewhere in my fieldwork outside the purlieu of folk clubs. Larry Prockter, who sang standards in south London pubs before retiring to Dymchurch, had listed local places in an adaptation of Percy French's sentimental 'Mountains of Mourne' for a performance in Lympne, suggesting that the actual transmission of tradition in practice takes place independently of any over-conscious identification of it as such. Boyce notes acutely that in the Fens,

Customary use did have a legal standing but to establish it there was a need to show ... that not only had there been a continuity in practice, but that this had been unchanged over time. Customs which adapted to changing environmental and economic traditions were not considered customs at all. (Boyce 2021, 116)

This should, however, be balanced against Boyce's own tendency to cite uncritically early folklore collections as evidence of customs that 'had been practised since pagan times' (Boyce 2021, 125), but that gulf between how we understand tradition in practice and how we recreate, reinvent, and/or replace it arose repeatedly here. Roger Ellis, the rural dean who served as Newchurch's vicar from 2000, made an attempt to localize hymns, getting his congregations at Christmas to sing 'When Lookers Watched Their Flocks by Night'. This was revealing for two reasons. Firstly, there were no longer Lookers, and the socio-economic context was completely altered. Secondly, Roger's good-humoured efforts were apparently oblivious to widespread survival of tunes for this particular carol that predated the standardization of the Church of England hymnal

in 1861. It is the most stubbornly persistent survival of such hymns in the national village carol tradition, with numerous tunes having been noted from locations close to the Marsh. Roger's localization marked distance rather than proximity.

The divergence within local traditions and vernacular practice has long been noted within folk revivals, although the place of the researcher's unstated assumptions about their field target is not so often incorporated into the consideration. A 1930 *Evening Standard* article satirized the folk-dance revival among an incoming demographic different to a village's previous inhabitants ('What we are short of, to make the thing really hum, is the Folk'). As Boyes notes, 'The satirical eye ... highlighted the impact of a new but fast-growing social group—rural commuters. Dedicatedly "doing all this for the Village", they were not "bona-fide villagers" themselves and, as the article makes entertainingly clear, found little support among those who were' (Boyes 1993, 95 and 108). Yet outside a self-conscious folk revivalism, some integrative interaction does occur that also recognizes the personal, social, and demographic differences, and offers some reflexivity on its consideration of material: Tony Day sent me a copy of Ken Oiller's memoir with a note that 'even without the references you need it makes interesting reading' (Tony Day, pers. comm., 14 April 2000). The traditional, cultural, and demographic divergences were apparent in the *Dr Syn* cast, and openly discussed. Alongside the long-standing farming families—in Dymchurch, Jill Cole pointed out the graves of several relatives, saying, 'There are Wraights [her family] buried all the way from Ruckinge to the sea' (Jill Cole, pers. comm., 2001)—there were also incoming families living in farm buildings now separated from the still working agricultural land around them.

Integration and Romanticism

The confirmation of an emic reflexive awareness of the individual's position within (and in relation to) traditions is particularly significant in considering the individual researcher's own position in our research into those traditions. I have often been unconvinced by autoethnographic writing, which can sometimes appear a way of evading rather than augmenting reflexivity, but it seems potentially more useful as a measure for assessing that reflexivity than as a research method. I became acutely aware of this tension through finding myself both subject and object of my research and representative of at least some aspects of the phenomena under investigation.

The critical question is one of integration within a community, even as that community changes and the integration itself furthers that change. I was struck, returning to Dungeness for the first time in some years, by the increased volume of road traffic since my earlier visits. (The light railway is the only public transport to the Point, so vehicular traffic is noticeable.) This was clearly recognized locally, with implications for residents and ecology alike, in ongoing discussion of extending the parking area along the road by the Britannia pub, close to the lighthouse and station, to meet demand. Duckboard walkways had already been laid across the shingle to minimize the ecological damage of increased visitor footfall. Despite its continued existence as a working location, this is also a recognized visitor destination. Its appeal to visitors is

complicated, being greatly driven by the artistic allure of what had been a resident population. My shock at the increased traffic volume at Dungeness may have been fuelled chiefly by returning to Dungeness as an outsider with some inside knowledge. There was a danger in my response of wishing to continue treating Dungeness as remote in a way that it perhaps no longer is (and perhaps was not, even in the period of my nostalgic recollection), thereby misrepresenting current engagements with it as a landscape. Any disdain I may have expressed for those drawn only by the Jarman connection was rather a snobbish romanticism that was itself representative of the alienation from the continued dynamic adaptation to and within the landscape I affected to be addressing (Figure 5).

Some habitation uses, such as weekend residency and a corresponding increase in holiday letting of the same properties to cover costs, may be difficult to square with such romanticization but still be consistent with historical usage of the beach over the last century, albeit on a different scale. Some of the railway carriage cottages are now occupied, while others remain holiday lets, as they have been since they were carried down there. When I first stayed in one, in the 1980s, its owner was a South Ashford neighbour of my grandparents, so the fundamental change may not just be increased numbers but, rather, constitutes an extension of earlier local visitation patterns. F. R. Banks's sniffy aesthetic comment that the Marsh's 'seaboard has not been improved by the numerous caravan sites and bungalow towns' was written in a county guide for visitors who would likely be using those sites (Banks 1955, 22). The distaste is misplaced, because it misunderstands the working nature of the landscape it is describing, as well as its own role in that process.



Figure 5. Dungeness lighthouse, with the Britannia pub to its left (photograph by the author, 2006).

Whatever I might like to tell myself, my involvement in this landscape, like that of other contemporary visitors, does also reflect artistic engagement with the Marsh. Jarman may be the most familiar now, but he was not the first artist to move there. Paul Nash, like Piper, lived in Dymchurch, frequently including its sea defences in his work. The landscapes of Romantic grandeur are, by definition, a poetry of mountains, waterfalls, and Gothic lushness. The ferocious intimidation of such Romantic landscapes allows the possibility of avoiding the fact that they are themselves the product of careful management. Flatlands do not dominate and impose in that way, so they defy easy romanticization in those recognizable terms. Their adoption as an alternative to Gothic grandeur, however, may equally involve a level of romanticization that is—ironically, for a landscape offering so few hiding places and somewhat resistant to Romantic notions of the sublime—not immediately apparent.

The modernist turn towards flatlands was twofold. It voiced the revolt against late Romanticism in the last decade of the nineteenth century before becoming more widely adopted during the nervous anxiety of the early twentieth century. Discussing the earlier period, Caroline Davison has written of the attitude of the nascent Bloomsbury Group and its peripheries to the East Anglian flatlands: '[John] Cowper Powys's rejection of mountains in favour of the monotonous fens sounds like a rebellion. Virginia [Woolf] Stephens's championing of the stony-flat hardness is in the same vein, as if the stark lines and utilitarianism of the Fens are an antidote to the over-emotional sentimentalism of the Romantics and the Victorian age' (Davison 2023, 149). This can in turn, however, itself become a bleak romanticization, as can be seen in comments by one of the best examples of that shell-shocked generation who found something romantic in the Marsh's unforgiving landscape. The Dymchurch paintings by Nash, who suffered a breakdown in 1921 following his war experiences, share much with his portrayal of the trenches. He wrote later of 'a place like that and its effect on me—one's effect on it. It's a curious record formally and psychologically'. He treated it as a therapeutic landscape with specific purpose for him: when he left it for Rye, he said he would 'never work there anymore'.⁸

The role of the Marsh landscape in Nash's post-World War I recovery has found more recent echo in the work of Noreen Masud, who has directly linked the austerity of flat landscapes with their therapeutic effect and with the conditions they are aiding. She explicitly identifies her own complex post-traumatic stress disorder as 'particularly difficult to treat, because—like a flat landscape—it didn't offer a significant landmark, an event, that you could focus on and work with' (Masud 2023, 9–10).⁹ Fishermen like Ken Oiller, who oriented themselves at sea by landmarks on shore, however minor, might have some comment on this, but Nash described the overall effect of a mysterious and mysticized landscape. In around 1940 he wrote that at twilight 'across the dyked flats to Dymchurch' he had 'noticed the strange unity of sea, sky and earth that grows unnoticed at this time and place' (quoted in Piper 1950, 6). This response is a more direct engagement with that meeting point of land and water than some of those following Jarman onto the Marsh (Figure 6).

J. Michael Fields told me he knew 'many' artists who had moved to the Marsh, inspired by Jarman, who had not stayed long. They left, said Michael, because 'the



Figure 6. Looking across Denge Marsh (photograph by the author, 2006).

sky's too big'. They were not embedding themselves into this awkward working landscape the way Nash, Jarman, or Russell Thorndike had. This is corroborated by some writers who are often included in discussions of Marsh art but did not live so close to the water. Such discussions always include those writers living on the higher ground around the Marsh, like the cluster of writers who passed through Rye—Henry James most notably. The higher vantage points, however, literally elevate them above that intimate relationship with a land at sea level. E. F. Benson affectionately fictionalized Rye in his *Mapp* and *Lucia* novels, where his characters capture the distance well. In *Miss Mapp* (1922), we read that Diva Plaistow 'gazed out over the marsh ... Perhaps the wide, serene plain below inspired her with a hatred of littleness' (Benson 2011, 308). This is an etic view of Michael's emic appraisal.

Where Does this Leave the Researcher?

Even attempting to think analytically about Romney Marsh has confirmed my romanticization of it, predicated on a quiet joy in this working landscape, a joy that is equally informed by appreciation of a skyline that reinforces views of its relative remoteness. Working landscapes change with the work. Some of those living in former farm buildings now detached from the fields still cultivated around them, for example, were working from home offices in different forms of employment. Some changes were localized and obvious, like the transformation of a former military training camp at Brookland into a Philippine craft village. (This always fascinated

Tony Day, brought up in Essex, as one of his closest friends, his cousin's husband Norman Pidgeon, did part of his national service there.) Military communities may be more self-contained as occupational groups, but their presence across the Marsh remains, from the ranges near the power station to the urban combat training area close to Hythe. There is some interaction between military personnel and Marsh communities—local teenagers warned me off certain pubs—and I am aware that I have not touched upon these local land-users in my Marsh research at all, which may reflect an unconscious romanticization as much as it does the different problems of such investigation.

Other occupational transformations of the landscape were less apparent. A joke I heard repeatedly was 'Do you know what they call the Marsh now? Ashford. And do you know what they call Ashford now? London'. There is still, for fieldworkers, a risk of applying a different form of romanticization, but one that remains nevertheless a romanticization. I share Nash's appreciation of this strange landscape, so dependent on the borderlessness between land, sky, and water. My love of this working landscape is, I hope, historically informed and sensitive, but that alone does not eliminate romanticization. I have always found this an undemonstrative landscape and people, with an accent flatter than the fields around them, and recognize that this may have been fostered through family tradition. Janis Day told me a Marsh farmer she had known since childhood had been so enthusiastic about a performance of *Dr Syn* that he had said more to her in five minutes than she had heard him say in the previous four decades. As a sympathetic outsider, was I trying to maintain the Marsh as the edge of the world in some way by resisting the numbers of those for whom it is now the centre of the world?

Undemonstrative, of course, does not mean static: home-working does not stop this being a working landscape, even if those people are not working the land. This may mean a shift in responsibilities for the continued water management of this constantly jeopardized region—itself already a process, as the 1930 and 2001 legislation illustrates—but not their disregard. In East Anglian drainage systems, the option exists and is being discussed in some places for a Dutch-style partial reflooding.¹⁰ That is unlikely on the Marsh, in part because of the different reclamation histories. Enforced drainage of the Fens has resulted in the steady lowering of ground levels with the drying and subsidence of the exposed peat. Holme Fen nature reserve, on the site of the drained Whittlesey Mere in Cambridgeshire, now lies 2.75 metres below sea level after the loss of twenty feet of soil in the last 170 years (Boyce 2021, 182–83). One former resident of a Suffolk village currently at sea level told me he had recently left the area over long-term concerns at the prospects of flooding. The Marsh's different pattern of land reclamation, as well as its irregular pattern, the economic significance of both its farming and its non-farmed land (the latter in the context of that bitterly mocked expanding commuter belt), all point away from even partial reflooding schemes. That, however, simply underscores the continued need to maintain adequate drainage and water management, regardless of land usage: as the Internal Drainage Board notes, most of the Marsh is below mean high tide level. The need to maintain the ground stability and perhaps shape of Denge Marsh will demand continued shingle management even if the land-use focus moves more towards the nature reserve.

It is not inappropriate for researchers to love our research, to love what we see and who we meet, but that love also needs examination, to prevent it predetermining our findings. There are different ways of romanticizing different landscapes that risk downplaying the human involvement in their management. Similarly, our romanticization of small groups and (relative) isolation can also obscure the dynamic processes in a tradition which will continue to remain necessary for life on the Marsh.

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Notes

¹ The variety is evident in material published by the Romney Marsh Research Trust between 1987 and its dissolution in 2012. The Kent Archaeological Society now hosts an archive of the Trust's published material: for details and links, see <https://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/news/ahrefhttpswwwkentarchaeologyorgukabout-usgroupsgrouppostsromney-marsh-research-trustrumney-marsh-research-trustaarchive-now-available-on-society-website> (accessed 13 August 2024).

² There is a photograph of the cottage in Carpenter (1996, 49), incorrectly identified as 'Spindrift'.

³ <https://honeychilddairy.co.uk/about> (accessed 23 January 2024).

⁴ I use my mother's maiden surname for professional and writing purposes, including performance. That is a separate but not unrelated question.

⁵ By the twelfth century a code existed for ensuring maintenance of the sea defences. This *lex marisci* (law of the Marsh) came to be administered by twenty-four sworn men—jurats—elected by the commonalty. The bailiff, jurats, and commonalty were recognized in a Royal Charter issued by Henry III in 1252 (Roper 1988, 4 and 63).

⁶ I am grateful to Roy Gamble for sending me a copy of this.

⁷ <https://www.archdaily.com/421569/black-rubber-house-simon-conder-associates> (accessed 23 January 2024).

⁸ This is quoted on page thirty-six in 'Paul Nash: 26 October 2016–5 March 2017', the guide to a Tate Modern exhibition. The guide is available online at https://www.tate.org.uk/documents/1182/tb_exb_0039_paul_nash_largeprintguide_v1.pdf (accessed 22 May 2024).

⁹ Thanks to Kristof Smeyers for recommending this excellent book.

¹⁰ For an introduction, see <https://www.fensforthefuture.org.uk/challenges/> (accessed 22 May 2024).

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