

THIS
LUMINOUS
COAST

Also by Jules Pretty

The Earth Only Endures — 2007

Agri-Culture — 2002

The Living Land — 1998

Regenerating Agriculture — 1995

Fertile Ground — co-author, 1999

Trainers' Guide to Participatory Learning and Action — co-author, 1995

The Hidden Harvest — co-author, 1992

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Sustainable Agriculture and Food — ed. 2008

Sage Major Work on the Environment — ed. 2006

The Pesticide Detox — ed. 2005

Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Agriculture — ed. 2005

Guide to a Green Planet — ed. 2002

Nature and Culture — co-editor, 2010

Sage Handbook on Environment and Society — co-editor, 2007

THIS LUMINOUS COAST

WALKING ENGLAND'S
EASTERN EDGE

JULES PRETTY

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*For Gill, Freya and Theo
& Chris*

The land is always stalking people
The land makes people live right

Annie Peaches [Western Apache] Arizona,
in Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*

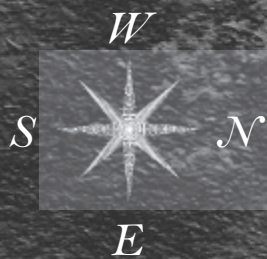
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ESSEX

SUFFO





N O R F O L K

L K

Preface

A Year on the Coast

This is a coast about to be lost. Not yet, but it will happen soon. A thousand years ago, a king showed his courtiers how absurd it was to command the waves to retreat from this shore. Others built sea walls and estuary defences around the whole of the region. Small stretches of cliffs provided natural protection, as did shingle heaped up by the sea. Revetments have been added, and sea walls raised, and even though they mostly did their job, with some long-remembered exceptions, churches, houses and some whole settlements fell into the sea. The common-field system came and went, then the agricultural revolution, and lately came the industrial age. We thought we were in control, with the means to remain an island of a size largely unaltered since the last ice age. There were siren calls, but we ignored them. Until this last generation, when the dots were finally joined.

Fossil fuels that drive our industrial economy, which in turn brings so much, have polluted the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and other waste gases. These absorb reflected light from the earth and warm up, and more atmospheric energy provokes climate change. A warmer world also makes water expand. And for the 70 per cent of the earth's surface covered by oceans and seas this means one thing: more than a billion cubic kilometres of water have to go somewhere. And that is upwards onto the land and its beaches, marshes, dunes, mudflats, grazing meadows and shingle banks. All are now under threat. And as if this is not enough, East Anglia is sinking too. It seems doubly unfair, but since the glaciers retreated from northern Britain, the land there has been bouncing upwards and thus levering down the south-east.

Some predictions are gloomy. In 50 to 100 years, perhaps no landscapes by the sea will survive quite as they are today. What, some may ask, is there to lose? The interface between land and sea is ever-changing: it will adapt, as will the wildlife. We can, as it were, manage the retreat. We may lose a remote house or two on a cliff, a slick and grimy marsh, a Victorian waste tip, a windswept grassland peppered with skinny sheep. Maybe a beach will lose its sands, but how often does the sun

shine on a North Sea shore anyway? Besides, our clever industrial age will come up with a fix soon enough, and all those doom-mongers will have to eat their words.

I took out a large-scale map to look more closely at the three counties of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, otherwise known as East Anglia, and traced a line from south to north, measured distances, and realised two things. Most of the shoreline was in easy reach of where I lived, where I had grown up too, yet surprisingly there were many places I had never been. I knew them by reputation or from books, but not first hand. It was clear, too, from the map that much of the character of the region must be defined by its proximity to the sea. It's surrounded on three sides, intercut by rivers, suffused by the light off the water. Well-known wild places and natural landscapes sit side by side with settlements, power stations, military installations and clanging ports. I wondered, how would this rim of land by the sea look if you walked from one end to the other? Sometimes an idle thought is like a retrovirus: it gets stuck in your DNA and replicates. I came to realise I should walk the coast before it was lost. Perhaps this would be no more than a lament, but maybe too there would be the undiscovered in the near by.

I bought more detailed maps, cut them up, stuck pieces together, and started taking notes about the named places of the coast. And also notes on the gaps, the apparently empty quarters. I came to realise there were many but of course none was empty. I built a small library of old books with faded dust jackets, and new ones that shined. I searched bookshops and websites for the discontinued ones, and they came musty, matured, smelling of ancient farmhouses. My first idea was to make one long walk, a single grand expedition, but this plan would later change. These three seaward counties of the East Angles and East Saxons were once joined to Continental Europe, when the last ice age locked up so much ocean water in ice. Now the coast strongly defines this region. Beach, salting, seawall and marshland. Fishing and smuggling, farming and sailing. Birds watched and birds shot. Created communities, deserted resorts, eroded cliffs, villages underwater, caravan parks and whole new invented places. All on a linear stretch of land and sea hundreds of miles from the Thames Estuary at the east of the capital to the Wash at King's Lynn. The more I read, the more I realised that I'd already started, anticipating what might come, and so walking a future memory.

How far would it be? It's one of the first questions for any expedition. Yet coastlines are famously fractal, just like tree surfaces, as Richard Mabey has observed. How long really is a coast? Do you measure around every small cliff or promontory,

around every stone on the beach, or even every grain of sand? Walking takes you around more twists and turns than a line drawn on a large-scale map. Do you measure the high tideline, or the shorter low one? Which islands and rocks should be included? And where does the salty coast end and freshwater rivers begin? On some estuaries, imposing flood barriers separate salt from fresh water. But on others, the shore and river are constantly intermixed, changing with every tide. In truth, the coast and shore is not really a line. It's more of a zone. At a guess, there are 400 miles or so in Essex, with its five long estuaries; then 220 in Suffolk, of which only 50 are by the sea, and the rest on tidal shorelines in another five rivers; and 70 or so in Norfolk, mainly because few rivers penetrate its barrier coast. Maybe 700 miles in all? But far fewer if you only count the parts that face the open sea. The simple plan was becoming more complicated.

Another uncertainty lies in the region's name and thus identity. East Anglia itself is a slightly problematic term. On large maps, it tends to include the lowland Fens and shire counties of Hertford, Bedford, Northampton and Cambridge, as well as the three coastal counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. But this is strictly larger than the kingdom of the East Angles, which did not include Essex. And Essex now as a county does not include swathes of eastern London and recently established unitary authorities, even though people there still feel they reside in Essex. East Anglia seems to cover Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk reasonably well, as that is how we generally understand this bump of land on eastern England today. It is curious that these counties should even have different identities. The borders are, after all, only administrative lines on the map, ancient though they are. One of my aims, therefore, was to walk the whole coast and its communities and ecologies, and learn what I could about the specificities of place.

I knew that this would also feel partly like my land, as my mother's side of the family lived in the east of London and then migrated out to south Essex, and my father's side had long been resident in Suffolk and north Essex. I had been native to some places, a bedroom looking east over the North Sea; others I had never been to at all. Some I knew from only certain times of my life, but never visited since. A further idea, therefore, was to create some kind of memory map of this coastline. The journeys would explore words and images in a remapping of the coast, in which I intended, as Marina Warner recommends, to listen to other people's ghosts as well as my own. An aim was to interweave stories of the land and sea with people past and present. I would come to meet and listen to stories from oystermen,

wildfowlers, reed-cutters, lifeboatmen, barmaids, farmers, solicitors, nature wardens, writers, artists, ferrymen, priests, businessmen, and a whole lot of taxi-drivers.

Once, our ancestors walked the world. Then came domestication of animals, the wheel, and now the car. Today walking can be hard, as settlements and transport have become rearranged beyond our control. Many people still walk for pleasure, but few of us now walk far as part of our daily lives. Ronald Blythe remembers that the region's footpaths were once full of people moving about, working, interacting. These were like today's main roads, except people talked and walked and watched. The old countryside was peopled. Blythe writes, "Friends never tire of telling me that my life would be transformed if only I could drive a car, quite forgetting how transformed it has been because I cannot." The trouble is, we get out less today, and the resulting alienation from nature is contributing to environmental problems. We are suffering from an extinction of natural experience. "I wish to make an extreme statement," said Thoreau. "Walking is about the genius for sauntering. It is not about getting somewhere, but being somewhere." Edward Abbey was blunter: "You can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees." By being in places, we put nature back at the centre of human affairs.

During this period of preparation, the bat came as a messenger. On a warm spring evening my daughter calls from babysitting. A bird is in the bedroom. I slip round to the neighbour's, intent on a quick release, and find instead a bat, silently gliding around the room. I stand still and watch its path of laminar flow, sweeping up over my face, and down behind, filling the room, and yet to my ears in utterly disconcerting silence. I open the window wide, but the bat seems to pick up the central spar on its sonar. For close to an hour, I try to shepherd it out with a towel. I fail, but we grow close. The light dims towards night, and still it glides and fills this mental and physical space. Then suddenly, it settles behind a yellow curtain, and I step forward, and pick it up. It's a mistake, though I don't know it yet. I carefully hold it with neck between finger and thumb, wings and body enclosed in my palm. It is a large pipistrelle, and fits my hand nicely. I intend to show the other two, for it is not often that you see a bat of such beauty up close.

Before I take a step, the evening slips gear. The bat slowly swivels its head, around what seems like a full 180 degrees, and calmly looks me in the eye. The world stops. Eye to unknowable eye. Then the pip yawns wide, and bites down hard on my thumb. No warning at all. I blink, once, twice, and grit my teeth. I open my hand, and it

hangs down, teeth gripping, blood dripping, our hearts hammering. I change plan and step towards the window, put my arm out, and shake it in the humid gloaming. The bat flits away, and we are separated forever. It's left me behind to make calls to helplines and nurses, who don't believe what they are hearing, and then there are doctor's visits to be punctured with jabs. I am lucky. I don't need the full course of five. But I cannot get out of my mind the alien look on my bat's face. It offered no thanks for its rescue. The incident was a lesson in humility, and suggested that the undiscovered and wild are near by, awaiting expeditions and journeys.

There have been some great individual walkers, and I am not intending to compete. Robin Hanbury-Tenison says exploring should always change the world. Wordsworth is said to have walked the equivalent of 10 miles a day every day for fifty years. Coleridge, Hazlitt, Stevenson, Thoreau and Kierkegaard all walked and wrote, as have Chatwin, Solnit, Sebald and Macfarlane more recently. John Muir walked the Sierra Nevada to discover Yosemite, and helped set up the world's first national parks. Bill Bryson walked more than 2,000 miles of the Appalachian Trail, declaring it was "absolutely the most blissful, happy, restorative experience". Hamish Fulton completed a 1,022-mile walk, and resolved only to make art from the experience of walking. Francis Alÿs walked urban streets carrying a punctured can of paint and unravelling a knitted jumper. Richard Long walked 600 miles in twenty days on a trip from Aldeburgh to Aberystwyth and back, carrying one stone from east to west, and bringing back another. From one sea to another, never linked before in this way. By all these means, land is animated by changing space into place.

I began with one ten-day walk, and ended up walking for a year. Time distorted. I made different types of walk. The multi-day walk, where the continuous rhythm changed perceptions of light and time, but during which I did not have enough time to stop and talk. The single-day walk to link places and meet people. The layered walk or boat trip, revisiting places in different seasons to see how things change. It was a year containing forty-five days of walking 400 miles and boating another 100. I did count, but who really cares about the number of miles? What matters is what happened during this reinhabitation. Some days I was scorched by sun, others battered by wind and snow. Some days the fog and mist closed the landscape, on others the air was clear and the vault of the sky so vast I could see to another age.

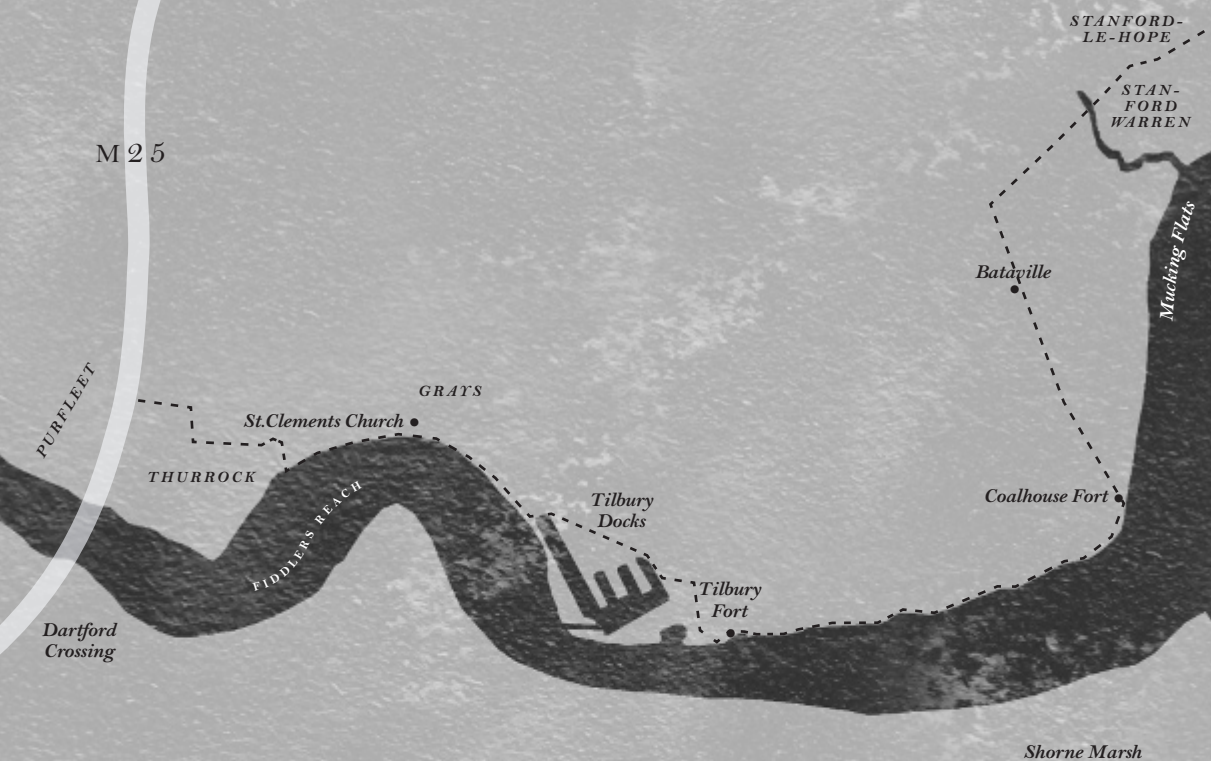
I was wet and cold, dusty and sweaty, content and sad, welcomed and lonely. I walked alone, with friends, with family, and alone again. As local people say, huge skies are a special feature of the region, bringing space, air, freedom and the sense of a long land that is both near and far. All the way up the coast, there seems to be a settlement on a slight rise ahead, or a pier jutting out to sea. When you drive to them, you do not notice a few metres in height. But when you walk 5 or 6 miles, they seem to rise from the sea or saltings like great castles. Every time you look up, they seem to shine in the sunlight.

These walks changed me. Most significantly after a ten day walk. I felt I was carrying an imprint of the sun holding position somewhere slightly behind my right eye. I had gone east, north, occasionally west inland and east again, and so the light was almost always ahead or off to starboard. It left me with an imbalance, and a sense that the whole world was luminous on one side. When dark clouds raced over the water, it was slate grey and menacing. But when the sun was out, the water became a shimmering mix of silver and mercury, and I was lit from below as well as above. When the tide receded across the wide mudflats, distant container ships elevated as mirages, or sank into perfect reflections. Birds invaded the muds. After a baking walk one day along the sands, I drove west, and the light refracted from behind low clouds and created a piece of linear rainbow. I had never seen such a thing. It pointed the way home as the beach traffic streamed out of the town. This luminous light of the coast stayed behind my eye for a couple of weeks. I carried with me the vast skies, stretched lands of golden cereal, dusty combine harvesters, sea walls of dried grass, thistledown and golden samphire, and white sails gliding across the land on invisible creeks. There was also the hammering of hail on a river wall, drenching rain in a pine forest, crisp hoar-frost on grass at winter's dawn. I heard the curlew and redshank, the outpourings of skylarks, and the crump of waves on the beach.

I have the coast in front of me now in this assortment of stones, shells, badges, china, leaves, bark, bog-oak, feathers, cartridges, bones. Their textures and shapes contain larger stories, and these are part of yet more patterned aspects of land and seascapes. There's a toffee-coloured stone with a hole from the shingle piled on a bomb-testing pagoda, exquisite blue and green shards of Victorian porcelain, a corner of fisherman's cork smoothed by the waves, a translucent moon-stone half-covered with lichen, a rusty 3-inch nail from a sea wall, bark of elm scoured by larvae of beetles, a pine cone from a shoreline forest, the featherweight bleached bone of a bird. These things talk.



ESSEX



Chapter 1





Chapter 1

There Be Monsters

I am standing under a road that descended on the lands of Essex and Kent and their dividing river. It didn't evolve from an ancient green lane, emerge from a farm track, or follow the route of a turnpike. It was dropped from above, this orbital macadam that goes nowhere except around. I look south to the cream piers suspending this grumbling motorway that leaps into thin air, held by spreading claws of metal hawsers, then up at its curving underbelly 60 metres above, and listen to the monster roar. At the edges of ancient maps are depictions of those beasts and wildmen once thought to be a threat to the known and civilised world: chimera griffins and elegant unicorns, pachyderms and prowling beasts, and barbarians too. Monsters have loomed large in our imagination, and fear of them has helped to define us. Yet what is wild is being rolled back in the face of industrialisation and urban expansion. But a succession has occurred. Humbaba, Gorgon, Grendel and all the old crew are gone, and the new threat, especially to the modern societies that believe they will go on forever, is consumption. It's the overuse of fresh water, clean air, biodiversity, fossil fuels and metal resources that is now putting our blue-green planet at risk.

I set off walking from a scrap of grass by a white cliff, remnant of the old chalk works, dwarfed now by steel and concrete. A beer bottle hangs in an ash tree. Scattered rubbish litters the green. Cars and vans rattle by down here. This doesn't look to be a good place for walkers. *Keep clear* say the signs on the road. A lorry driver leans forward and peers at me, and thunders by. The ancient communities of Purfleet, Aveley and Ockenden reside in this long dragon's shadow, surrounded by link roads and industrial debris, their mental space permanently invaded. The first Dartford Tunnel was built in 1963, another in 1980, and the motorway itself completed six years later. It was called the Purfleet-Dartford Tunnel, but Essex lost to Kent in the name game. The QEII Bridge was opened in 1996, and this giant is nearly 3 kilometres long, contains a tidy 19,000 tonnes of steelwork, and carries

150,000 vehicles daily. The M25 has only been open for two decades but as every driver now knows, it feels full. In the sky, the vehicles rush across the curves of concrete. Everyone is on their way to somewhere else. In fact, for most drivers, these shadow communities do not exist at all, even though Purfleet achieved some notoriety by featuring in Bram Stoker's tale when Dracula bought a house here. But who is going to drive a stake through the modern monsters? Where are Gilgamesh, Perseus and Beowulf when we need them?

No one smiles. Men stand at grimy factory gates and blankly stare, coffee cups in hand; lorries growl by on roads flanked with eroded and weedy pavements; a man snores at a security point. There are office blocks with broken windows, bleached curtains flapping from long-empty rooms. Warehouses are battened down as if for a coming storm. Metal grilles are bent and twisted, paint flaking on concrete. I feel anonymous, slowed down, and trudge on under low grey skies. Isn't there going to be any sun this summer? I later read that Iain Sinclair also found everyone along this stretch avoiding eye contact in his *London Orbital*. "Don't misunderstand me," he says, "I love the place." There is noise in the background and foreground: the constant grumble of motorway traffic and clanking factories near and far. Then after tarmac, concrete and abandoned roadworks, I find the hidden path by Proctor and Gamble's detergent factory and, squeezing past an old flint wall clogged with ivy and decorated with fluorescent graffiti that says *Bile, Bile*, come to the pilgrim's church in an oasis of wildness.

St Clement's church has a circular nave in imitation of the Holy Sepulchre, and churches built on this plan were funded by the Knights Hospitallers and the Knights Templar. That austere church in Jerusalem is part functionally bleak, part kitsch, contested by different factions, and no model for anything, it seems to me. This one, though, is a simple riverside church, lately famous as the location for John Hannah's eulogy in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. George Morgan described this church as "standing lonely in the marshes" just before the Second World War, but where are those wetlands now? The church has stripes of black flint and light-grey ragstone, and the towering factory is red and steel grey. At the entry to the graveyard is a blue board celebrating this patch as a wildlife sanctuary. Not surprising, really. There's little else that is green hereabouts. The church door is locked, but by the tower base it looks as if badgers have dug tunnels. Here are graves, too. I find a marble one for Albert Smith aged 64, died 1924, and his wife, another Hannah, Elizabeth, died 1928. *Peace, perfect peace*, it says. In 1906, a coffin discovered in a



Queen Elizabeth II Bridge

sealed vault was found to contain a body pickled in rum. It is difficult to know whether to be uplifted or entirely crushed by the surroundings.

Just beyond the church and thickets of brambles, I glimpse the grey Thames for the first time at Fiddlers Reach, where three drowned violinists play tunes from below the choppy waves. This is the line that can be walked, land to the left, sea or salty estuary to the right, and if I find a way to keep going I will eventually make my way around the entire coast. I head along the narrow concrete river wall. Down in the mud are rusting supermarket trolleys. No patch of modern wasteland is complete without one. The graffiti on the walls shows that people have been here and left their marks. They brighten the oppressive morning. Banks of fennel grow through the cracked concrete. I press on through Grays, past a bleak recreation ground where a woman walks two great leashed hounds that are marking the goalposts on a football pitch. I pass the listing Gull lightship mired in slick ooze by the boatyard, and come to the first of many new sacred places of the coast: a bright painting for *Ozone* and *Whys aka Wants*. Two graffiti artists killed eight months earlier by an underground train at Upney sidings. I stand and wonder why they

chose this place by the water for the memorial. And then a grandfather is pushing a small child towards me. “Morning,” he says. And smiles. That’s all it takes. He’s gone, but already the place looks better.

There’s a strong sense of swamped history along this reach of the great river. Richard I granted the manor of Thurrock to Henry de Gray, and Grays-Thurrock was known this way for centuries. Fobbing, Corringham and Mucking are each villages with more than 1000 years of antiquity. Further back, the Northumbrian Christian, Cedd, established two monasteries on Essex soil in AD 654, one at Ithancester, now St Peter’s at Bradwell, and the other mentioned by Bede as being somewhere here in West Tilbury. But interest in the specificities of place seems to have diminished. Now the new road signs by waterside housing developments indicate how little time it takes to drive to Lakeside and Bluewater, several hundred stores at each, and many tens of thousands of parking spaces. The very altars of consumption and marketed as destinations in themselves. Joseph Conrad thought this river was “one of the dark places of the earth”. Now the lost places of these marshes of Essex seem to be just shadows, covered by roads and factories and retail experiences.

Beyond Grays are the great Tilbury Docks. Time to contact the world. I call Caroline of the PR department at the docks.

“I’m here,” I say, and look at the 12-foot gate of vertical metal bars topped with threads of barbed wire.

“OK. I’ll be there shortly,” she replies, and I look again at the map to see how many miles will be saved by being allowed in this back door.

She arrives and flourishes a great key. But the lock is rusted fast. We look at each other. No one comes this way very often. She makes a call, beyond the line of duty, and then another. I look at the map again. And then a surprisingly jovial workman in oily overalls arrives, carrying a can of WD40, and clink. I am in. He waves away thanks, and slips back into the shadows. I reach for a hard hat and fluorescent top, and we walk past enormous mills and rows of silos that suck imported wheat from ships faster than any other facility in the world. Who’d have thought it? Tilbury Docks cover 180 hectares of former coastal marsh. It was from these docks that the £10 Poms left for Australia, and where West Indians arrived to monochrome England of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Today, the port is gearing up for all the extra business coming with the preparation for the east London Olympics, or as Stratford was administratively part of Essex until 1964, perhaps



Gull lightship, Grays

the west Essex Olympics. More development. More improvements, they say.

Tilbury is unkind after the silos. I say goodbye to Caroline, and promptly get lost. At first, I notice that every lorry driver smiles and waves, as if they recognise a fellow long-distance traveller. Nice. But then somehow I take a wrong turning, and find myself wandering along a peripheral road edged with another brutal metal fence curving into the distance. How did that happen? Lorries now seem to roar by, and I slowly pass vast warehouses full of boxes and tiny forklift trucks fussing like worker bees. I could go back, but don't want to do the same miles twice. My map doesn't look anything like the layout on the ground. I start to lose hope. This place now feels wild, threatening, even though I can't see any real wildlife. I'm later told that there are pigeons so full of grain that they cannot fly. Could be just a good urban myth; could be true, though. Fifty years ago, James Wentworth Day wrote that these docks were infested with foxes, as they knew this was a place to escape from the hunt. Then, an urban fox would have been a noteworthy sight. None today, though, in this urban desolation.

There's someone through the fence, standing by a lorry.

“You shouldn’t be in there, you know,” he states.

“Yes,” I say. “I do know.” And it doesn’t help.

But then he points to an escape route.

“Through there pal”, he says.

And not many minutes later I am walking outwards past a security guard, who jumps as I creep by. The sense of being lost simply evaporates, and here is the once grand passenger terminal, now a largely forgotten backwater alongside the modern warehouses and giant cranes. By the white clapboard World’s End pub before Tilbury Fort, I fall into conversation with a couple of black guys from Leyton, father and son in search of a good place to fish. I can’t help, but we walk together along the concrete river wall, talking about the river and its fish, turning to watch the foot ferry beat across the steely river to Gravesend, until finally we come upon a group of four older white fishermen.

They stop and look.

“There’s nothing here, mate.”

“Nuffink,” another says, straight away. “You’ll just lose your tackle in the seaweed.”

My two companions have got neutral faces on. Dad smiles, and chats. I look in the buckets, and hell, there is indeed nothing. Maybe they’re right. There are no fish. They do seem to be packing up too.

“I’ll be getting on,” I say. There are appointments ahead.

To the west the arch of the bridge is joined now in the skyline by port cranes and chimneys on the far side. Ahead is the first power station of the coast with its own jetties pressing into the river: Tilbury and its remnant of marshy grassland sprinkled with skinny piebald nags. In the middle of the station’s concrete and brickwork is another oasis. And here’s Lorna, proud manager of the environment centre here and soon to celebrate a first baby. We have a look at these new habitats she has created behind the river wall. Schoolchildren come to learn about practical conservation, which hopefully changes them as well as improves this place. Under government development plans to encourage growth along this Thames corridor, some 16,000 new houses are set to be built at East Tilbury alone, and another 34,000 at Thurrock. Where will they all fit, and how will those new residents use their local environments, if at all? It was here at the fort in 1588 that Queen Elizabeth I mounted on a white charger gave her famous speech to 12,000 troops before they set out to face the Spanish Armada. There will be no repelling of the new housing though. It’s a designated growth area, after all. As we think of all those new houses,