

IN SEARCH OF THE ENGLISH

A Walking History



by Chaobang
2018-2022 CE



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For the English – now fix your bloody country

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Preface



Corpses.

Poverty.

Lies.

Abuse.

Corruption.

Arrogance.

Rupture.

Witness, the English.

They've met with a terrible fate, haven't they?

Were these people always like this?

Once upon a time they got confined to this remote and rainy island, where they smashed up their monasteries, decapitated their king, learnt to harness energy and make stuff, then tried to take over the world but got it wrong. At the dawn of the new millennium they still oppressed and violated and impoverished one

another, still perpetrated ugly wars, and still offered especially little to envy when it came to international sport. But these were hardly distresses unique to them, and the general sense was of a people that had found themselves, won at history, and were pressing forward on confident foundations that made each generation happier, healthier and more prosperous than the last.

Had they been paying attention, they might have acknowledged the cracks in their story. Now those cracks *are* the story as they break all else asunder.

Are the English at last confronting a truth that concerned neighbours outside the national windows, and their own forsaken in the national basement, have been clamouring into their ears all along: that that daydream of an England secure in its prosperity, identity and place in the world was riven with fundamental faults? For all the signals were there, and none was more ominous, nor indeed blatant, than that which burst into flames in the early morning of 14th June 2017 when they allowed seventy-two people to burn to death in a tower block in their capital city.

Grenfell Tower, as it was known, burned because almost every part of the civil and political power structure – the national and local politicians, the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, the building regulators, the cladding manufacturers and the London Fire Brigade, among many others – failed in their duty of care to its residents. Straight away the flames seared far beyond the skyline of that one West London neighbourhood and into the burning heart of English national consciousness. Most people had a sense of the culprits, even if none have ever been held to account. They grasped that this fire was an outcome of ideas and practices embedded in the power structures of English society – that it was, in other words, a very *English* fire.

Was the Grenfell fire not the distress beacon of a people in trouble? Was it not the English moral compass itself that blazed in exhibition of the terrible adversity to which an entire nation had come? A funeral pyre not only of lives and dreams, but of any serious belief that English society had made it into the twenty-first century in reasonable condition – for surely reasonable societies, let alone those that call themselves ‘free’, ‘advanced’ and ‘democratic’, *do not immolate their people in tower blocks?*

How had the English come to that?

Simple answers, including variants that land account upon the murderous shoulders of their Conservative Party government, are commonplace among them and not entirely without merit. Nor however are they enough. Humans are complicated life forms, and what they *are* is a function of all the things they *were*;

that is, of their journey. They are not lumps of inert matter that behave according to fixed and simple laws of nature, but characters in a story – or more accurately, stories. And for a social species which transmits its memories, practices and problems down generations, many individuals' stories started long before they crawled out of a womb.

Take the Grenfell Tower Disaster. How, in the first place, did they drive so many people, mostly from ethnic minorities, into such deprived and dangerous living conditions in perhaps the most reekingly affluent and prestigious part of the country – the same Kensington internationally renowned for its mansions, museums and palaces? We can't understand this just by looking at the English people today. When a society fails so abjectly as that, something deeply systemic has gone wrong. The greed, disdain and prejudice aren't just there by nature; they came from somewhere. In this case you can pursue them through cracks in the English inheritance that zigzag a long way down. To its violent contests over how to distribute its wealth and political power, for example; or to its extremely problematic relationship with people it regards as different, foreign or poor. Grenfell Tower, in other words, belongs to these same old stories which saw them blast each other to smithereens in their struggles between monarchs, churches and parliaments; to their conflicts with peoples on their own continent and beyond; and to their property-based caste system whose dominance is as obvious as it is ignored.

Grenfell was thus about more than a tower in flames. The light of its blaze fell on currents of unresolved exploitation and prejudice which bubble forth through the institutional pores of the English nation. It falls on the policy-driven generation of refugees and homeless people, and on cultural reflexes to target these with unbridled hatred. It falls on a standard of public conversation from which reason, sincerity and empathy have haemorrhaged like the blood of a man who has jumped gleefully into a pit of spikes, to leave a clotted ooze of insults, bays and death threats that lumps back and forth between their populace's ever-narrowing echo chambers. And as all this takes place, their society's institutions funnel away their wealth and narrative focus: up, up and away from their most vulnerable and miserable, up and away from those they taught to believe that working hard will get them a decent life. Upward, ever upward, to an insulated cockpit at the top of their society where they smile and insist that all is well, their nation is functioning, their nation is great.

Thence Brexit, the lethal harvest of COVID-19, and the reckoning with the monumental structures of racism, gender and class on which the lost English future was built. The English spirit has sundered in two. One part, prostrate in grief, despair and frustration, attempts to face up to the crisis head-on but more often ends up gnashing against itself. The other has turned away completely, surrendering all contact with reality to gloat in ever more destructive delusions of triumph and superiority.

What a mess. And they call this a *developed country*?

Perhaps that is unfair. They might protest that little has gone wrong here that might not be found, after all, in varying permutations, in all the nations of this world. This is true – but whataboutery is in all situations a cop-out which warrants no further consideration. Another atrocity can always be found to distract the critical witness, but pull it in front of you as a shield against responsibility for your own atrocities and we are left with atrocities all the way down.

Of greater importance in this case is that the English themselves have been so forthright in their claims to be one of the strongest, richest and worthiest civilisations in the world. And indeed, many outsiders, at least till the implosions of recent years, have respected that claim and looked to the English as a model of successful national journeying. What is certain is that they have held enormous power in this world; and the greater the power, the greater the responsibility. We would be doing them an unforgivable disservice if we failed to hold them to their own high standards.

So then. England. A shambles. A society experiencing a collective crisis of mental health, a national nervous breakdown.

Why?

Why is the English kingdom in such profound upheaval? Why have prejudices against the impoverished, the foreign and the different been vigorously renewed and allowed to rampage with cannibalistic impunity, to say nothing of why they were created in the first place? Why has government policy driven sadistic forced deportations and hollowed out the vital infrastructure of society, especially those mechanisms designed to support its most vulnerable, leaving a trail of shattered individuals and communities but also engineering a cultural shift by which this kaleidoscope of humanitarian breakdowns, any one filament of which might have merited nationwide outrage in earlier decades, now receives but a shrug of

indifference – when not of satisfied glee – from a population made complicit in it? Why, in its dealings with the world, is this country sabotaging its hard-won relationships with the European neighbours and Celtic partners it relied on for so much of its journey, even while it alienated and violated them mercilessly, and leaning instead towards the world's most dangerously abusive and violent authoritarians just as those emerge to pose the worst threat to humankind since their mid-twentieth-century feast of blood and bone?

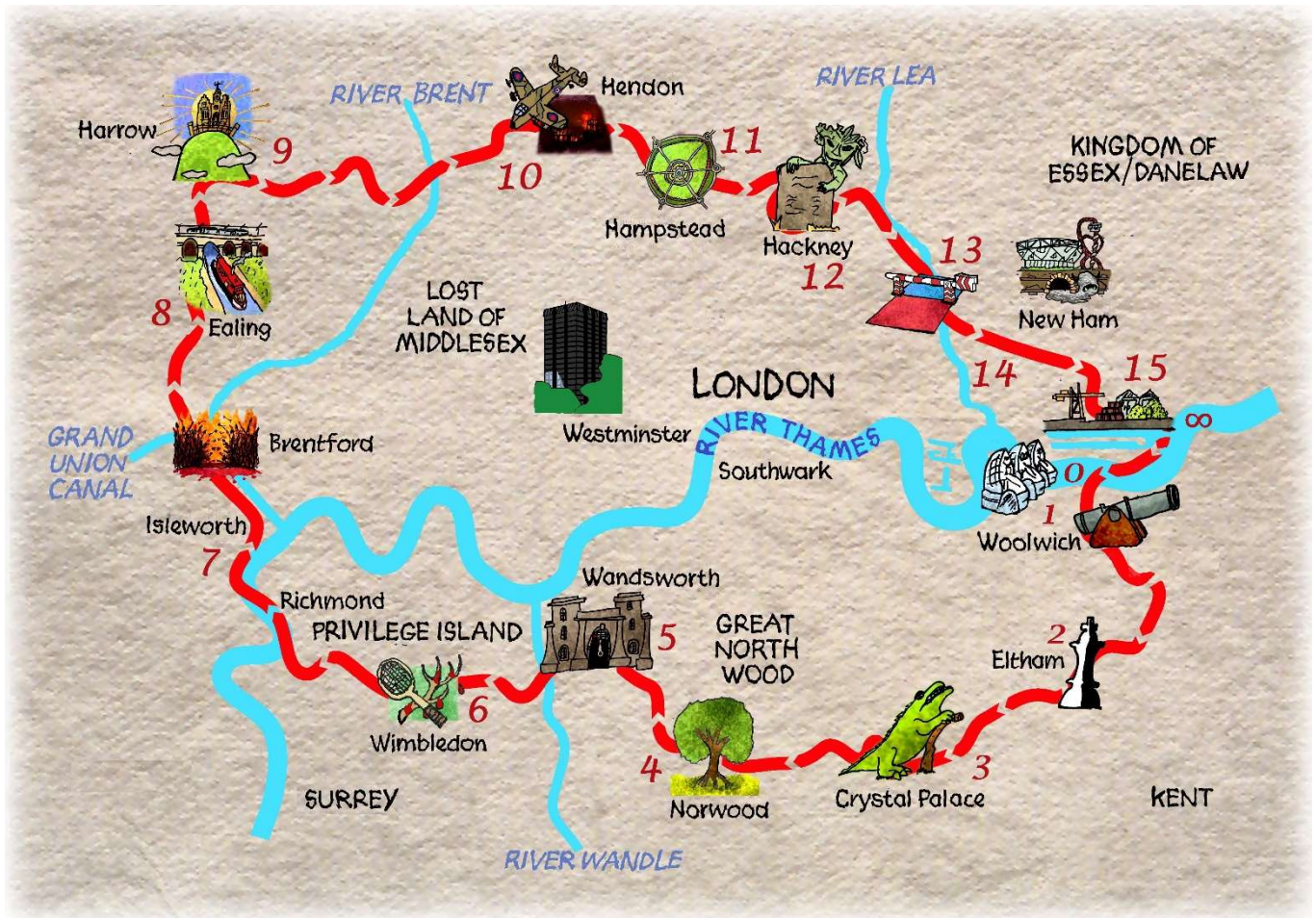
To make sense of this present, we must look to the past. Those words might mislead, because they suggest the past and present are separate things. They are not; no more than water in the estuary of the Thames, their principal river, is separate from the water at its source. They are the same water, carried on a continuous journey by chains of gravitational and climatic decision points, just as a chain of political, economic and cultural decisions carries a people through time.

My name is Chaobang. I have spent many years in this land, yet remain a stranger to it. Its ways are alien to me. But I have endured enough of it to bear at least a passing acquaintance with some of its stories. Wade into those stories and you find, as I have, that its present ills, though alarming in their scale and confluence, are nothing new. The English like to project a branding of themselves by which human rights, democracy and Enlightenment rationalism are writ in their national DNA. But twist the knob on your binoculars for a clearer focus and you see instead a turbulent torrent of struggles wherein killings, persecutions, divisions, otherings, violent exclusions and a staggering capacity for wilful ignorance are as much a part of this people's experience as anything that love-capable life can respect them for. How far does their mess of a past account for their mess of a present?

Here perhaps is one way to find out.

To journey. To run our boots across their time and space; delve for ourselves through the experiences that made them who they are. That might help untangle one or two of the English ropes that have at last woven themselves into this knot of humiliation. They are too thick, too tight, too hairy, not to have been threaded together over years, centuries, even millennia of action by trembling hands and improperly-calibrated mechanical looms. Let us see if there isn't a deeply historic Englishness to the abuses they are spinning out today – and just perhaps, to potential ways out of them.

Yes. A journey. A quest, to plot the arc down which they cartwheeled into their present abyss. Would you like to come along?



Here is a map. At its centre: London, the English capital, site of the Grenfell fire and front and centre to a great deal of their history. The year is 2018: the height of Brexit upheaval and breaking point of a full range of national woes, just before their bitter refraction through – not, notably, their creation by – the prism of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

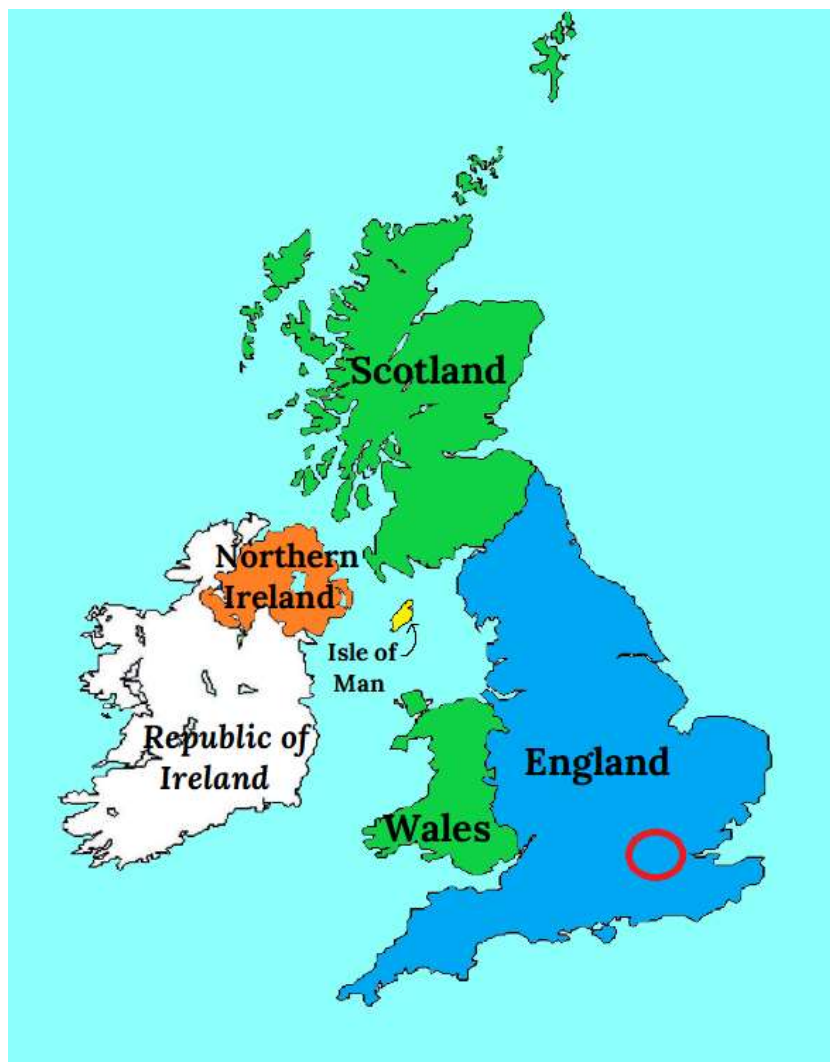
There are limitations to studying the English so close to their metropole. Certainly London has cooked, served and swallowed much of their story. But it is also clear that the megacity's distinct situation makes it unfit to represent the condition of their nation as a whole, most of all its northern regions, and for reasons far more troublesome than distance.

This, though, shall be the field of our journey, because this is where my ship cra- *ahem*, because for most of their story most of this land has not been London. Till the last one or two hundred years the bulk of memories here are of an England beyond the capital: a middle distance of provinces only partially tamed, and thus

a ring of bridges, as it were, between England's core and periphery. As a hunting ground for stories that sets it up well. Anything that happened in the relationship between the English core and periphery, from infrastructure projects to armed rebellions to the processes by which *core* and *periphery* were defined in the first place, would have to have happened through this liminal ring.

On top of that, the stories we come across will surely far outrange the sites where we encounter them. In some cases they might necessitate detours around this land, or even far across the sea. Oh yes – the English's relationship with the outside world will be a critically important theme in our investigations.

You might have noticed too that we speak of them as the *English*, as opposed the larger vehicle their nation currently rides and in whose image they are usually addressed, the *British*. This is important, so here is a second map to get this clear from the start.



Britain refers to two things. First, this island (or by extension, its archipelago, the ‘British Isles’) as a geographical unit, although note – *very well*, if you know what’s good for you – the independence of the Republic of Ireland therein. Second, the British political construct, in which the English joined up, gradually and through much contestation, with their neighbouring peoples the Scots, the Welsh, some of the Irish, and various others who no longer get their own lines on the maps like the Cornish, or who balance part in and part out like the Manx. The sum of these make up the sovereign unit of which England is presently a part: the *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* (‘the UK’). This was and is a complicated assembly and the English like to pretend they partake in it as equals, but in fact they drew it together through a great deal of coercive violence and secretly take pride in considering themselves the leading members. Doubtless the ancestral voices we shall hear on the road will have much to say about this *British* project.

To be clear then:

England (blue) + **Scotland** and **Wales** (green) = **Britain**

Britain (blue + green) + **Northern Ireland** (orange)
= **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** (‘UK’)

UK + Crown Dependencies (e.g. Isle of Man) and Overseas Territories* =
(remnants of) **British Empire**

In that midst, the English remain distinct. They share many problems with their fellows in the British union, but those fellows’ own national vehicles run their engines on different stories, while different languages issue forth from their

* Current to this exploration, the UK has three *Crown Dependencies*: the Isle of Man, and two islands in the Channel: Guernsey and Jersey. Its *Overseas Territories* are almost all small islands: Anguilla, Montserrat, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, and the Turks and Caicos Islands (all in the Caribbean); the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, St. Helena, Ascension Island and Tristan de Cunha (all in the South Atlantic Ocean); Akrotiri and Dhekelia (military bases on Cyprus); the Pitcairn Islands (in the South Pacific Ocean); and Gibraltar. Its claims to part of Antarctica are suspended like everyone’s under the 1961 Antarctic Treaty. Its claims to the Chagos Archipelago (‘British Indian Ocean Territory’), seized by force in the 1960s with the violent deportation of its native peoples, are rejected by the international community and likely to become unviable in practice in the near future.

radios. They deserve to be understood through journeys of their own, not, as to their exasperation is so often the case, as appendages of the English journey. So let us keep our focus on the English, shifting to *British* in only two cases where it is necessary: a) to refer to the British island or isles geographically; and b) when for plot reasons it only makes sense to treat the English in compound with their neighbours, especially when dealing with their most important combined function, the *British Empire*.

Have you made your own journeys through the English past before? If not, you might quickly find yourself as baffled and disoriented as I was when I first came in contact with it. Do not be alarmed. These people really are that bizarre. Give yourself all the time you need to adjust to their questionable conduct, and look for patterns of human familiarity you can latch to for support.

Then again, if you *have* so journeyed, I am sure some of the encounters ahead will not be your first. Certain people and phenomena run large in the English story and are impossible to avoid: kings and queens in clothes far too big for them, ridiculous wars that killed lots of people for no reason, and intense religious types who insist they are always right. You might already be fed up with them if you were dragged into their presence against your will by the sorts of history teachers who make them boring because their stake is more in upholding their country's politically-loaded school curricula than in the stories themselves. Perhaps approaching them here will make for more interesting encounters, seeing as you are here on your own terms this time and have with you a stranger to grill those characters with awkward questions. But we must also be on the lookout for the people and stories the English do not decorate with such attention – whether because the storytellers find them embarrassing, or because the characters themselves cannot or do not so shout from hilltops through loudspeakers. Characters like hermits, footballers, prisoners, boat people, students, religious dissidents, eccentrics, social reformers, and the spirits of rivers and forests – and so too, of course, the residents of Grenfell Tower – have just as much right as monarchs, generals, and entitled landowners who take the names of the provinces they seized, to have their voices heard and their experiences counted as part of the story.

And finally, if you yourself are one of the English, this voyage might challenge you. It might even upset you, if it hasn't already. If so I apologise on behalf of those of your ancestors who saddled you with an inheritance so in need of reproach, for to wind you up is not why we are doing this. You are a difficult people, but you are

still a people: that is, you still bear the capacity for intelligence and love. You are in possession of all you need to create a society worth living in for everyone in it, one which improves the world and harms no-one. If scrutiny falls ahead on the ways you have fallen short of that reasonable expectation, the purpose is not to embarrass you but to help you find ways to steer your nation to its true and better potential. Regardless of divisions and delusions, is that not what you all want?

But to do that, you must come to terms with your history. Take heed. Its place in your collective identity is under steady erosion from those among you who preach that history no longer matters. They are wrong. These stories are incredibly important. They make us who we are. They make and break civilisations. They decide whether you get to have a roof over your head, food to eat, and people to call your home. Because of their neglect, your real and complex stories are giving way to narrative void in your people's consciousnesses, and into that space are advancing mistakes, manipulations and plain lies – lies of traditions of freedom, of imperial benevolence, even of ethnic purity – spun by those with an interest in telling your nation's story that way, in order that they can write it onwards to bloodcurdling depths where no people wants to go, but where all have stumbled; yours too.

That is not new. Your statues to glorify slave-traders, erected generations ago in exactly this exercise, attest to that. But it has reached a point, in this high-stakes age of instant communication and mass misinformation, where it can no longer continue lest you, like so many others, follow it into irredeemable peril.

You can stop them from doing it again. But first you must equip yourself by embarking on as many historical journeys as you can, eyes and ears open and under your own steam, and making of each of them a quest for the armour, weapons, and immunological resistance to stand face to face with those powerful anti-stories. It is there, on the battlefield of stories, that your nation's future will be won or lost.

But enough about that. It is time to embark. If you are coming, meet me at dawn at the water's edge in the town they call Woolwich, east of the city centre.

And bring your coat. This country pisses with rain.

0. Water



We begin with the River. It is the most important character in this story and a principal reason that England exists.

In the district of Greenwich, east of the city centre, a bizarre set of structures rises from the tides. They line up from one bank to the other, curvy and pointy like mechanical shark fins or some extraterrestrial sensor array. Supposedly they form a barrier – the Thames Barrier, in fact – but you would not guess that on sight. Indeed, peer closer and they are downright suspicious. Bunker-like cabins, fences, flotation rings and bright yellow cranes protrude from stainless-steel casings, each collection mounted on a snug-fitting concrete platform. Obviously they are up to something.

This creature is the most recent sentence in the oldest and longest story around, that which precedes everything else in or near the English capital city. All those others are extensions of it, or bridges to stories from elsewhere.

But let us not start here at the Barrier, where the epic of the Thames is still being written. Let us instead head twenty miles downstream to where it flows

past the town of Gravesend. It is there that in 1899 the river provided the setting for just one from that multitude of stories. It was told by a seaman to three companions on a little yacht, bobbing in the evening gloom. Ostensibly it was about a different river, the Congo in central Africa. In fact it reflected more on the people of the Thames than of any other watershed.

‘And this also’, he began, suddenly, ‘has been one of the dark places of the earth.’

His name is Charles Marlow, and he is the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad’s harrowing exploration of the rage and fear that lurks not so much in the African rainforests but rather in the heart of the colonial European. And while most of its story takes place on the Congo, it opens with some telling reflections on the Thames.

The two rivers are set up to flow in parallel – but at different stages. The Thames precedes the Congo in the story as though the Congo of that day, seen through the conceits of imperialist eyes, was like the Thames had been in primitive ages gone by: ‘Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages...cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here.’ The contrast is with the Thames of Marlow’s modernity, which ‘after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth...crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or the battles of the sea...What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!’

And yet those delusions of racial superiority came crashing down in the depravity and petty barbarities that Marlow found the white people reduced to on the Congo, coalescing in the character of Kurtz, the charismatic ivory trader turned murderous megalomaniac, and shattering his faith in the Europeans’ pretensions to civilisation. As he finishes his story we return to that boat on the Thames, and now it, too, is chilling. For now it is *this* ‘tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth’ that ‘flowed sombre under an overcast sky’, and ‘seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness’.

The slow physical and moral dismantling of the British Empire has since removed those blinkers of triumphalism from the foreheads of many of its children, the more reasonable of whom have started to look back more critically on inherited portrayals of coloniser and colonised. Are the English’s struggles with their poverties and prejudices today in part the legacies of their imperial adventure, in part the fallout from its failure? How far is it the arrogance of their

imperialist pretensions – pretensions thick enough to wave away genocide – still running strong through their cultural and political storytelling, that acts to erase, and thus perpetuate, that present misery? Whatever the answer, the progress of decolonisation helps us complete this re-calibration of the two rivers, and to bring the Thames and the Congo into a fairer and more accurate alignment: to treat them as equals in a diverse and complex world.

In the course of this *Heart of Darkness* has itself come under attack, most famously from the mighty Nigerian author Chinua Achebe who in 1977, with typical eloquence, launched a blistering fusillade in which he accused it of reducing Africa to ‘a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity’: nothing more than a foil for Europeans’ imagined civilisational supremacy and false displays of liberalism in which they affect to be moved by African suffering, but only to appease their own consciences while stopping short of changing the oppressive ideas and practices through which they are causing it. *Heart of Darkness*, in Achebe’s verdict, was ‘an offensive and deplorable book’ written by a ‘thoroughgoing racist’, who only got away with it because dehumanising stereotypes of black people have been and still are the normal way of thinking in the white imagination.

Whether or not Conrad is guilty – and there are avalanches of material at hand for any would-be prosecutor or defender – is beside our current purpose, for which we can suffice to thank Achebe for a critique that helps bring the Thames’s own horrors well into relief. By that we mean not only the horrors that have happened upon it, but still more the tendency of its natives in our time, and of many outside observers, to continue imagining it as that river of accomplished ‘good service’ whose English courtesy and cleanliness, solid embankments and grandiose monuments and dignified sips of tea beneath the donges of Big Ben make it a foil for rivers around the world that can only wistfully aspire to its civilisational pedigree.

No: a resident of the Congo basin – let us say a citizen of the Fang people, as Achebe identified them – could have travelled up the Thames in any time, including right now, and come across emanations of an English darkness every bit as shocking and absurd as what Marlow found in Africa. Marlow recoiled at the sight of severed human heads drying on stakes outside Kurtz’s station on the Congo, but so too perhaps did the lawyer Paul Hentzner – a Pole, like Conrad – who travelled to England during the reign of Elizabeth I and counted more than thirty heads impaled on pikes above London Bridge, then the city’s front entrance

and the customary place of display for decapitated political and religious dissidents. The ‘gloomy circle of some Inferno’ for which Marlow took the company base, strewn with starved and diseased labourers waiting to die, would have found plenty of mirror images in London’s own slums, workhouses and mental hospitals, where the English forsaken were equally left to rot ‘in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair’. Even outside their walls, conditions cannot have been much better during the horrible disease epidemics which the river itself, on account of the vileness the city dumped into it, eagerly helped to spread. And goodness knows how many Kurtzes have laid waste to the people of the Thames; you certainly need not look far to find his reincarnations directing the manias that drive their rituals, panics and superstitions today.

But our Congolese traveller would also have run into more comforting things, just as if a different Marlow journeying up the Congo in a different moment might have learnt of that river’s ‘good service’ to those it has sustained, and encountered people, ships and memories as worthy as the best of those that have travelled upon the Thames. The Thames has had its light and its dark, like any other river in the world, and these have mixed. Its stories are far more complex than the linear progress out of the murk into a glorious, prosperous culmination of history, as the undead plotlines of both imperialism and ‘developed’ versus ‘developing’ countries would tell it. No, they deserve to be told in that full complexity, from as broad a range of perspectives as possible, much as the peoples emerging from colonial ordeals have been reclaiming their own stories from the opposite caricatures and retelling them in realer depth and diversity.

And here the opening scene in *Heart of Darkness* has true power. Because it does not take its setting of the Thames for granted like the herds of natives who troop over it every day, but implies a story of it – and to do that, however partial in the telling, is to demonstrate that there is a story. The river is not just a piece of scenery but has its own roles, its representations, its gravitas, its mystique. For it is the Thames that was the basis of the present English power core’s existence in the first place; that has sustained and shaped all human activity in it from distant prehistory to the present day, and been shaped by those humans in turn. To gaze into its currents is to see the reflections not only of the events it has witnessed, but also of the problems that recur again and again as they wind and flow down the length of those humans’ meandering and often turbulent history. To embark on any historical exploration here requires first that we give the river

its due. Let us hear what it has to tell us about a land whose story it has sat through in its entirety and written a good deal of itself.



The river embodies the British island's link to the European mainland, a relationship as old as the river itself.

First, when its course took shape perhaps 40 to 50 million years ago, it was on a Britain connected to the continent by a land bridge. This was part of a chalk ridge, the *Weald-Artois Anticline* to give it its fancy name: a single structure which stretches from the Downs of southern England to the hills of the French Pas-de-Calais.

In other words: Britain is a European peninsula. (And Europe is an Asian peninsula, but that is a whole other story.)

Second, then as now, the river was a highway. For millions of years it has ferried life from the outside world into the British peninsula and out again – forerunners for the people, goods and ideas that would enter and leave it throughout its human occupation.

But it would be a mistake to see the river as an inert piece of infrastructure. It was and is a complex living system that has widened and narrowed, raged and

calmed, shifted from place to place. Its floodplain has journeyed back and forth across the broad spectra of biology, geography and climate, in some ages a lush tropical rainforest, in others a frozen wasteland whose savage cold drove everything that lived here back out to Europe. It has supported remarkable animals, including huge ones – the fossils of lions, elephants and hippopotamuses found under Trafalgar Square offer but a glimpse. In different periods mammoths and mastodons drank of it, as did tapirs, rhinoceroses, reindeer, bears, and the magnificent aurochs, the ancestor of modern cattle.

The most dramatic of its transformations came with the great glaciations of the last two million years, when the Arctic ice sheets descended upon the river. These froze up most of the North Sea with the significant exception of a lake in its lower corner, fed by the Thames and great rivers of Europe and dammed up in place by the chalky ridge that still connected Britain to the mainland. Eventually this lake's overspill became too much for the dam and it dramatically collapsed, unleashing colossal masses of water which smashed through the ridge and carved a path all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. This trail of destruction is now known to the English as the Channel, and by its creation, Britain was severed from Europe. And you can still see the wounds: on one side they are the white cliffs of Dover, and on the other the precipices of Normandy's Alabaster Coast.

So began a conflict that has thrashed in the heart of this land ever since and defined its entire human history: the tension between being fundamentally of Europe and violently *not* Europe. The paradox of the people of this land embracing continental Europeans with one arm but slamming the door in their faces with the other echoes deep in the geological ancestry of the land itself. When researchers studying the undersea holes left by that breach in the Dover Strait dubbed that event 'Brexit 1.0', perhaps it was not with their tongues entirely in their cheeks. This carving out of the Channel could be seen as the most important event in British history.

Imagine the currency that both sides of the quarrel about leaving the European Union (EU) might make of this event. No doubt the English nationalists would celebrate it as their ultimate independence day, when their land literally struck out on its own for a glorious future unfettered by continental constraints and thus became Britain, the *island*. The cosmopolitan counter to that, reading from the same geological processes, is more profound. Britain is no island. It is *pretending* to be an island. It is a European peninsula in denial.

Imagine for a moment that the ridge had held, and the ice sheets receded to leave a Britain still a permanent part of the continent. If it had never become an island, the people on it should never have come to think of it as an island country. Perhaps a totally different national psychology would have emerged, inviting comparisons with peninsular countries like Italy, Malaysia or Korea. How might that have affected their senses of identity and their interactions with others? They might well have become a very different Britain, with a very different story.

The destruction of the bridge to Europe was not a final break but the beginning of a cycle. When the climate warmed and sea levels rose, Britain remained cut off. But when it cooled and sea levels fell, it found itself joined by land to Europe again. In fact its geological instinct against the threat of violent separation seems to have been to embrace Europe tighter still, because by the later cycles it was not just a land bridge that connected it but a vastness of hills, plains, rivers, marshes and rich hunting territory known as Doggerland, which rose from the North Sea to fill most of the area between Britain, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands and made of them a single giant landmass. Britain was once again in and of Europe. The Thames was a tributary of the Rhine.

Then the glacial ice melted, the sea rose once more, and Doggerland looked resigned to a gradual surrender to the waves had not one of the worst landslides in history done for it in one go. The Norwegian word *Storegga* means 'great edge', and describes the jagged continental shelf west of Norway whose collapse around 6000 BCE, known as the Storegga Slides, released a volume of undersea debris so huge that it cannot enter the human imagination. The resulting mega-tsunami swallowed most of Doggerland's vestiges whole. Devastatingly, most likely.

Britain was cut off yet again, this time in roughly the shape it has kept to the present day. Yet Doggerland did not die. Rather it waits, now as the sandy submarine shallows of Dogger Bank, whose rich biodiversity made fantastic fisheries for the Dutch in their *dogger* fishing boats – hence its name. Perhaps one day it will feel the warmth of the sun again. The cycle of Britain's relationship with Europe continues; it will take more than the present drama to resolve it. It is plausible that one day Britain will again be quite literally a European peninsula – whether or not there are still people who call themselves British around to see it.

The river too was shaped by these glacial cycles, constantly altering its course and leaving a series of terraces which have preserved remnants of the animals

who trod on them. Eventually these included handaxes and spear points made by the ancestors of modern humans, likely for preparing some of those creatures for dinner. And so it is none other than the river that has preserved for us the richest archive of those who came and went, by which we can trace the immigration that even then defined the life of this island as it would for millennia to come.

These immigrants had to cope with extreme fluctuations in climate. And the back-and-forth shapeshift from island to peninsula to island again brought them a new challenge: Britain would alternate between opening up to the outside world and sealing itself off, isolating those upon it, for better or worse, from mainland populations. The river, through the testimony of its sand and silt, tells us that humans as we know them arrived around 40,000 years ago. But even they, like a million more years' worth of old cousins like *Homo antecessor*, *Homo heidelbergensis* and the Neanderthals, were driven out time and again by the return of the punishing glacial tundra. There are terraces from periods with no evidence of humans at all, between particularly vicious glacial ages which it seems did not provide a long enough window for them to return, and which may also have finally finished off those huge land animals that roamed the watershed in warmer times. It was only around 12,000 years ago that humans began to settle its valley for the long term, marking a new chapter in the river's story.

The river's buried records tell us that many sophisticated immigrant groups made its floodplain their home. Its water was the basis for the peopling not just of the London area, but also much of the British interior for which it served as a gateway. In human terms the people of the Thames now place themselves supreme atop their national population, but most forget that for the longest period the London area was one of the most backward in the country: a sticky, soggy mire of unworkable bogs and forests that chewed up anyone reckless enough to settle there, sinking them into muddy oblivion while far better-established cultures were building comfortable houses, putting up huge stone monuments and observing the cycles of moon, sun and seasons in places like Wiltshire and the Orkney Islands, or mining tin for the whole continent in Cornwall.

Nonetheless, the Thames eventually condescended to let people stay. It bestowed on their communities water to drink, to wash, and to irrigate their farmland, as well as fish to eat. They navigated and traded by the generosity of its currents, and relied on it for their livelihoods, from harvesting its flint to soaking

deer antlers in its water to craft into harpoons. And to it they returned their waste and their dead, which it took away and recycled. More symbolic offerings have also been found – swords, axes, daggers, shields – which appear proffered deliberately, and speak of a deeply spiritual relationship through sacrifices, purification ceremonies and hydromantic rituals.

These exchanges set a pattern which has metamorphosed down the centuries but never truly ended. They would reverberate into the eel traps, industrial watermills and enduring religious imagery of the river, from the use of its water for Christian baptisms to the persistence of its Celtic personification as ‘Father Thames’, a grizzled veteran whose most recent cultural outings include the novels of Philip Pullman and Ben Aaronovitch*, and whose statue maintains a commanding watch atop the old Port of London Authority headquarters on Tower Hill. His river continued to remove the dead, from the plagued corpses dumped into the river during the Black Death, to all the murder victims that unsavoury people in all periods have shiftily entrusted to its tides in the night, though often it has refused to oblige them and looked after those bodies till it could pass them to archaeologists or the police. Meanwhile its centuries of use for waste disposal reached a crescendo in the industrial age to transform it into a stinking hell of effluence, sewage and cholera.

But just as it would endure such abuse, it knew how to dish it back. The early settlers had to contend with what every generation of the Thames’s inhabitants since has had to come to terms with: the river’s own volatile temperament. Its relentless floods and undulating tide levels would regularly overwhelm settlements, drown hunting grounds and low-lying forests, and demand constant adaptation from those who dared stick it out on its floodplain. This has never changed, even if current generations have their awareness dulled by their ever more sophisticated locks, embankments and feats of engineering.

Could this capricious side to the river’s nature have given rise to land and resource pressures, and driven the inhabitants into competition? What role did the river play in the emergence of their vehement beliefs about private property? It is ambitious but tempting to see here a foreshadowing of the violent and oppressive economic hierarchies, and the struggle to overturn them, that would dominate the English story right down to the attempt of twentieth-century free market economists to assert scarcity as a fundamental fact of life, as well as the

* The latter also introduces a ‘Mother Thames’ goddess to compete with him for river territory. She is Nigerian. This works perfectly.

callous mindset that underlies present-day austerity policies and the victim-blaming, when not systemic torture, of those they have impoverished – a psychology for which the enclave of skyscrapers on the lower river's north bank is now both synonym and symbol. To say it was all the Thames's fault would be too much, but perhaps the river did see it coming.

Eventually there came a new group of immigrants from Rome, who, with their republic succumbing to military strongmen, certainly knew a thing or two about violence and oppression. The first of these to land a force on the island was Julius Caesar, in two invasions in 55 and 54 BCE where he clashed with some of the settled peoples and formed alliances with others. On the second of these outings his army made it as far as the Thames, where he wrote that it 'can be forded at one place only and that with difficulty', and had been fortified with sharpened stakes by the inhabitants. Those prior inhabitants, who were diverse, sophisticated and well-connected with the continent, are usually bunched together under the label of *Celtic* peoples – problematically, not least because so much of what is known of them comes from the Romans who looked down on them as barbarian tribes.

Caesar left without setting down any permanent presence, but the Roman Empire returned in force in 43 CE. Through a lengthy and painstaking process of overcoming or co-opting the various established peoples, the Romans became the first known to imagine this island as a singular political unit: the province of *Britannia*, from which today's Britain descends in both name and notion (and which, not for want of trying and to everlasting significance, did not include the unconquerable peoples of *Caledonia*, now known as Scotland).

On their return the Romans established a bridgehead on the northern bank of the Thames. Many uncertainties surround the rise of this settlement, but a prominent theory has it that the legions sent by the emperor Claudius, like Caesar's a hundred years earlier, were challenged by the width and strength of the river and, likely drawing on native names with Celtic or pre-Celtic origins, came to refer to it as *Plowonida*, 'the fast-flowing river' or 'the river too wide to ford' – from which emerged the Latin name for their settlement, *Londinium*, and eventually modern *London*.

It is this ancient Thames, 'when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day', that Marlow imagines as the bellicose, disease-ridden mirror of the colonial-era Congo. Whether the Romans or the peoples already there would have agreed we can only guess, but what we do know is that this

garrison steadily expanded into an administrative centre for the whole of the Roman occupation. Thereby it grew up into a nexus of the Roman road network (whose routes remain the basic template for the national road system today), and a major international port connected by the river to all the waterways of the empire. It also gave rise to the river's first known permanent bridge, built of timber: the ancestor of London Bridge, and the only one across the lower Thames till Westminster Bridge was opened in 1750. A smaller settlement grew up to defend the bridge's southern end, the beginning of what is now called Southwark.

The origin of the river's own name, *Thames*, called *Tamesis* by the Romans, is more obscure. And here Marlow's words about it having been 'one of the dark places of the earth' return to perturb us, for the most prominent theories point to *Tamesa* or *Tamasa*, 'dark river' in the Celtic languages of those pre-Roman peoples. The Thames might literally be *the Dark River*. The word has cognate equivalents across many European languages, with the most ambitious theories connecting it as far as Sanskrit in India.

In all cases, two things are clear. First, the river is the reason the present core of English power exists, and the common thread that ties the disparate stories we will come across into one collection. And second, the very names *London* and *Thames*, now symbols of English and British geographic identity, reflect the multi-ethnic and multicultural hands that have shaped this city, and this country, from the beginning.

For all the Romans' bloodily-deserved reputation for violent colonialism, none of it was based on an ideology of higher and lower races like those which came to define the European empires of more recent centuries, and whose lingering poison in their peoples' collective subconscious was alluded to by Achebe. Rome was not an ethnic empire, nor even a European empire – *Europe* in any civilisational sense did not yet exist, let alone racial notions of *white* or *black* people. No, the Romans were Mediterraneans: their world was as much of north Africa and west Asia as southern Europe. Indeed, most of western and central Europe, including Britain, were on the barbaric peripheries of their atlas.

Furthermore, hold the Roman Empire to account as we must for its penchant for murderous conquest, its expansion was not simply a steamroller ride across every people in their way. Rather its lasting power relied on the flexibility to draw in people of different languages, cultures and forms of political organisation into

a unifying Roman identity, even while leaving many of those indigenous systems intact and indeed depending on them to carry out their rule. There was simply no way a single city, administering a domain of more than fifty million people spread over five million square kilometres, would have the resources to flood the lot with its own soldiers and administrators, least of all from their own ethnic bit of it, in order to rearrange it all into a single image.

Roman Britannia was a case in point. The Thames would have witnessed them play this game here as everywhere else: observing the complicated politics between the peoples here; playing them off against one another; reaching and revising decisions about who to ally with, who to bribe and who to march on. And the settlers, merchants, soldiers and diplomats they brought in to do this came from all over the empire, sometimes from as far away as North Africa and Syria.

Sometimes they got it wrong. Less than twenty years after it got its first structures, Roman London was devastated by the rebellion of Boudica, queen of the Iceni people in what is now East Anglia, in response to the brutality of their treatment by the Roman invaders. The rebels visited considerable bloodletting on the city in return, burning the settlement and bridge to ashes and – if the Roman historian Tacitus is to be believed – butchering most of its population. They were eventually defeated by the professional soldiers of the Roman army who rushed back from campaigning in Wales, but it was a costly lesson that the iron fist cracks and melts in the magma of rage it releases when it swings down too hard, and the Romans would not soon forget it. Later governors like Agricola made more of an effort not to alienate the locals, but it would be far from the last time blades or flames would feed the Thames with blood.

Once legacy of this revolt was the three-mile defensive wall they added to the rebuilt London. Its position would end up defining the shape of the city's core for two millennia, although most of the wall itself has long since disappeared. The German bombing in World War II exposed a few forgotten chunks of it, and you can go and touch a sizeable piece which still stands next to Tower Hill station.

The Roman settlement peaked and declined, but the river would continue to carry in immigrants and invaders alike, including groups from Angeln, Jutland, and the Saxon and Frisian coasts, in today's Germany and Denmark, who after the evaporation of imperial control in the early fifth century replaced the Romans as the dominant peoples here. It is thus of note that the name *England* is also imported, having its origins in some of these so-called Anglo-Saxons' ancestral home, the Angeln peninsula in present-day Schleswig, Germany.

These newcomers settled widely across the Thames watershed, well beyond the site of the Roman city. And though it is likely that people lived on in its languishing remnants, its centre of political and economic gravity seems to have shifted upriver – first to the site of *Lundenwic*, their *wīc* or specialised trading and crafting centre, and then, nearby, to what would become the second of London's two traditional hearts, the City of Westminster.

Unlike the Romans who governed Britain as a province of their empire, these arrivals came from disparate peoples and ended up creating separate kingdoms. Power over *Lundenwic* and the Thames valley was highly contested, with the kingdoms of Essex, Mercia and Wessex – all Anglo-Saxon names still in use today – each holding sway over it at least once. Though it was not until late in the day that the city revived into a nexus of governance, trade and communications like it had been under the Romans, the Thames continued to sustain the communities who lived off its water and bring in ever more people, goods, and ideas, with one in particular – Christianity – having more than a little impact. Then from the ninth century onward a new ingredient was introduced to this cauldron in the form of the Vikings of Scandinavia, who overran most of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and rearranged their territories into the Danelaw. For another two hundred years the Thames valley would experience raids and sieges, and London changed hands multiple times as the Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons jostled for supremacy.

Somehow it seems counter-intuitive that the next set of lasting transformations to the world of the Thames took place in the midst of this chaos. And both the German immigrants and the Scandinavian immigrants made major contributions. The Wessex king Alfred, known as 'the Great', is usually credited with capturing London from its first Danish occupation in 886 and reviving the old Roman settlement into a fortified centre of wealth and governance known as *Lundenburh*. More *buhrs*, or fortified settlements, sprang up all around the Thames watershed to protect Anglo-Saxon territory, from which originate what the English now call *boroughs* (including the one across the bridge in Southwark, whose famous market today still bears no additional name than Borough). When the Danes returned they found the city's inhabitants unusually tenacious on account of this newfound vigour. All kinds of negotiations and political manoeuvrings were required to retake it, and when they did in 1017 under their own 'Great' king, Cnut, he took care to preserve and develop all the economic, spiritual and defensive power it offered to incorporate England into his unified Scandinavian empire.

Let us look closely into the water now, because at least two things the English take for granted in its landscape go back to this period. The first is in the river's literal reflection: the tradition of massive buildings on the riverbank, raised to tower over the surroundings and awe everyone in their shadow at the political, economic, religious, scholarly or military clout of their erectors. Edward the Confessor, the last Wessex king, received control of London after Cnut's dynasty faded away in 1042, and built a monastery west of the city for his own burial – the *west minster*, which through several reincarnations became Westminster Abbey, the coronation and burial site of English kings and queens ever since. He also commissioned a royal palace near where Cnut had built his, which has likewise cycled through appearances to become the present Palace of Westminster, the seat of the English parliament. It was Edward who began the habit of conducting most of his administrative business from this area, and that is why the flamboyant palaces and ministries of Westminster, not the Roman city centre, provide the imagery of this island's royalty and governance.

And the banks of the Thames would become ever more favoured for this kind of visual theatre, especially under the next set of immigrants, the Normans. The invasion in 1066 by these Frenchified Vikings from across the Channel swept aside the Anglo-Saxon order, and with considerable violence, threw down yet another layer of shapes and structures to what would become England – so transformatively as to leave many English people with the one scrap of their history, 1066, they still learn off by heart in schools. Characteristically the Normans' most obvious addition to the massive edifices on the Thames were ridiculously over-the-top defensive castles, some of which went on to join the highest tier of English visual identity. Among them were Windsor Castle, later a royal residence, as well as arguably England's most notorious building of all, the Tower of London. This would serve as a dread political prison and ceremonial killing ground for hundreds of years before its repurposing as an overpriced temple of tourism where visitors can take giggling selfies atop the corpses of a millennium of dissidents while being boasted to that freedom and human rights are in the country's national genome.

If one transformation was physical, the other, just as important, was spoken and written. Most geographical names in the Thames valley today have their origin in this period, and to glance at them on maps and signs is to run a spade through a richly-layered linguistic palaeontology to which all these groups of immigrants left contributions. The Anglo-Saxon languages, which became the backbone of the

Old English that evolved into English today, supplied the majority of these names: a small selection might include Haca's isle (Hackney), Beornmund's isle (Bermondsey), Berica's settlement (Barking), a landing place for boats, either chalky or for cargoes of chalk (Chelsea), and Wemba's clearing (Wembley). The Vikings gave rise to Brondesbury, Finsbury and Gunnersbury, which likely indicate the manors of Brand, Finn and Gunnhildr respectively, all Scandinavian names, while more obvious homages are found in St. Clement Danes and any churches or schools named after a St. Olaf or Olave, as well as Tooley Street, a weird mutation thereof (it seems the last *t* in *Saint* fell off and landed on Olaf's head). Then came a Norman French influence, still felt in names like the 'strong hill' (Richmond) and 'beautiful seat' (Belsize), as well as names that refer to Norman individuals or families, such as Falke's Hall (Vauxhall) or the manor of de Blemund (Bloomsbury). The Romans left less of a linguistic legacy here than elsewhere in Britain, but many names refer back to their infrastructure, above all the London Wall, all six of its gates (Ludgate, Aldgate, Newgate, Bishopsgate, Cripplegate and Aldersgate), and waypoints on the Roman road system like Stratford and Streatham which come from the Latin *strata*. The final word goes to the Celtic peoples who preceded all of these, who speak to us in whispers rather than shouts, but who you can still hear if you listen: say, in the wood's end, *penceat* (Penge), or a certain goddess called *Brigantia*, from that ancient world of river worship whose echoes have never fully faded and which persist in the tributary and borough of Brent.

Needless to say, the multi-lingual threads that weave together this tapestry of toponyms also make up the whole English language. The irony of the nationalists' tendency to demand everybody speak English, as though it be a standard of ethnic purity, is that it is exactly the opposite: a patchwork of foreign tongues, sewn together through the continuous interactions of immigrants and overseas experiences over hundreds of years, and which has continued to take in new threads from an ever-widening linguistic range ever since. The river gets it – just ask it – because it brought most of them here in the first place, and also launched pages of that spoken symphony off to other lands, like America, India and Australia, where they have branched off on journeys of their own.

Everything that people did on the Thames from then on, as their identities metamorphosed into what the world now calls London, England and Britain, can be read as variations of patterns by this stage well-established.

The Thames bore witness to pivotal events in the shaping of local and national senses of self, of which the Magna Carta in 1215, the Great Fire of 1666, and the Blitz of 1940-1 are only the most advertised. It continued to supply its people with water, food and fuel – first wood, then coal – as its role as a driver of production and conduit for goods only grew, with market towns like Reading and Henley popping up along its valley, grazing sheep and growing rich from the trade in their wool. This long story of production and consumption climaxed first in the teeming mills and docks of the industrial revolution, whose mark on the land and imagination has far outlasted their decline, and second in the preposterous glass phalluses of its London waterfront's present occupation by the financial sector: only the latest, and unlikely the last, in this long tradition of stamping down a political point through ostentatious building projects. In the meantime, royal palace complexes like the red-brick monster of Hampton Court and the palaces of Richmond and Greenwich, as well as more curious constructs like the Skylon and the London Eye, have used dominance of the Thames's landscape to project their own messages; others, like the Millennium Dome, have been not so effective. The consecration of the river's banks by countless churches, including the mightiest of them all, St. Paul's Cathedral, attests to the spiritual charge that still flickers in its currents. Perhaps it was a charge of that kind that placed the Thames at the heart of another great complex, Oxford University, where it is known as the Isis and runs through that place's sense of itself at a level well beneath the rowing and punting traditions for which it is famed. And because this is England, the tapestry would not be complete without picking out the thread of war: the fortifications Caesar encountered, the Roman walls, the Anglo-Saxon *burhs*, the Norman castles, and all the invasions and battles upon the river, most of which, tellingly, were of English against English – the 'Anarchy' (1138-53), the Peasants' Revolt (1381), Jack Cade's rebellion (1450), the Civil War (1642-51) – and following it through to the docks, forts and military bases of the imperial era, from which the English set out to explore the world then intentionally or not, admitted or not, to subject and pillage it to its knees. It is along this thread that we find the forts of Gravesend, Tilbury, and also Woolwich, where our own exploration shortly begins.

Beneath all these stories, settings and symbols through which the English have projected their faces upon the world, the river flows on. It is the cable within which all these wires intertwine, and which lends them a unifying power.

Perhaps one of its bigger surprises then is that in spite of all this activity, the lower river made it to the eighteenth century with just the one permanent

crossing: London Bridge, the stone descendant of the wood bridge built by the Romans. By concentrating tolls, ferries and businesses into one place it made the city authorities and merchants so wealthy as to fuse them into a clutch of vested interests who opposed resolutely any new bridge construction. And we might indeed wonder how different a place London might have become had there been other bridges, for it was this jealously protected infrastructural status quo, more than anything else, that cemented the position of the people at the north end of London Bridge as the disproportionately powerful material core of city and nation, no matter how either grew or changed in shape. Nevertheless, the brighter its glow became, the more its bridge suffocated in congestion till demand for new crossings could no longer be ignored. The country was at any rate about to enter an industrial frenzy in which grand feats of engineering were king, and in the space of about two hundred years the eruption of road bridges, railways and tunnels across the Thames turned it into the most heavily-bridged urban river in the world.

But it is the darker side of the Dark River that accounts for its crowning structure of today, that array of techno-sharkfins before us. And we cannot set off with our backs to the water until we have made acknowledgement of that darkness: the violence exchanged in the relationship between river and people.

The human side of the equation is by far the weightier in guilt, and most of that weight came from the incalculable amounts of literal and metaphorical crap they forced the river to swallow as an open sewer. The mistreatment reached an apex when the waste of households and markets was joined by a new mix of chemical hideousness from the belching mills and power stations of the industrial Thames. This Thames was not the ‘babbling procession of the best stories in the world’ from *The Wind in the Willows* but the murky dystopia of drownings, robberies, suicides, slums and cadavers depicted by Dickens, whose sordid mists suffuse and mirror the human sordidness in many of his tales.

At the same time people were drinking, bathing and washing their clothes in this filth, which probably felt like how it sounds, and at any rate made the river’s revenge inevitable. We cannot know exactly how many were killed by the infectious diseases that thrived in this poisonous spawning pit, but they must certainly have been a leading cause of death in industrial times here, especially before the connection was understood with the rise of modern epidemiology. The

most dreaded of these afflictions was cholera, which arrived in the nineteenth century and struck in a series of epidemics that mowed down thousands of souls at a time; the Soho outbreak of 1854 is particularly notable for its investigation by the physician John Snow, who in tracing its source to the Broad Street Pump proved cholera's water-based bacterial transmission. Four years later the horror culminated in the Great Stink of 1858, by when the stench had grown appalling enough to reek its way through a Parliament whose authorities had thus far refused to take responsibility, but could hardly maintain that stubbornness once they were choking on odours now clogging into their own curtains and carpets. The river that had sustained its people since their arrival was now as 'a stygian pool, reeking with ineffable and intolerable horrors', as complimented by then-Chancellor Benjamin Disraeli, and now it was engineering to the rescue as a massive scheme of sewers, embankments, drainage outfalls and pumping systems came together under the direction of Joseph Bazalgette, one of that age's exemplary engineer-heroes in the English imagination.

These manacles restrained the monster of sewage and sickness the Thames had mutated into, but it would thrash on for a hundred years yet, asphyxiating anything that came near it. When the *Princess Alice* pleasure steamer collided with a collier ship and sank near the outfalls in 1878, depositing its passengers in the river, the toxic repugnance collapsing out of the sewers coated the tragedy – and the lungs of victims who might otherwise have survived – in an extra layer of misery and contributed to the more than 650 fatalities. It was on this pitch-black excrescence in Joseph Conrad's time, not the (relatively) cleaned-up Thames of today, that Marlow would have sat in a yacht in *Heart of Darkness* while he impressed upon his fellows the darkness of the Congo, a river whose contents would at least have still resembled water. He hardly needed to invoke the days of the Romans to imagine London's 'venerable stream' as 'one of the dark places of the Earth' when a look out the window might have done it.

The pollution became so bad that in 1957 the Natural History Museum declared the river 'biologically dead', and the fact that you can take a tumble into it today without instantly dying should not be taken for granted. Its recovery came only thanks to a sustained determination in recent decades, from both government leadership and popular activism with the rise of the environmental movement, to put an end to the abuse in this relationship and rescue both river and people from that violent heritage. Treatment plants were built to clean the water as it was pumped to and from houses, the sewage system received improvements, and

legislation was passed to regulate the discharge of waste from factories. What we see now when we look at the river attests to the monumental effort of those who pushed through these measures, and they would be the first to remind us that this story is not over. Yes, life has returned to the Thames, with over a hundred species of fish supported along with birds and even the occasional dolphin or seal. But plastic waste is emerging as an ominous new threat, sewage overflow remains a problem, and the current political culture based on unfettered free-market values and a stigma against public interventions has empowered those who would pollute with indifference. Water companies in particular have been fouling the country's waterways with effective impunity: in only 2017 Thames Water was fined a record £20 million in court for pumping a billion and a half litres of raw sewage into the Thames a few years earlier, devastating local people and wildlife in a reprise of the terrors of industrial times. It would be premature to assume those problems are settled, and the natives would do well to remember that when they violate the river, it is just as capable of violating them back.



There is one other challenge the river has put to its residents, and it is the oldest of all. The Thames is tidal all the way through London, rising and falling seven

metres per cycle, twice a day, and has its mouth open in exactly the right position to suck up North Sea storm tides. Its inclination to flood has been a constant danger for every attempt to settle on its floodplain. From prehistoric settlers to the Londoners of today with their shiny and expensive technology, the fundamental problem has not changed.

It is easy to look out at the Thames Barrier and see in it the triumph of humanity over the tides. The truth is exactly the reverse. The Barrier stands as a reminder that even here, even now, the Thames's human guests must devote undivided attention and a sizable share of their resources to coming to terms with the water's power. Their ancestors sacrificed daggers and shields to the river in hopes that it would be nice to them. Now they sacrifice £8 million a year and the working lives of eighty staff for the same thing – and that is here at the Barrier alone.

Some of the most devastating floods on record are recent. In 1928 a storm surge and sudden snow thaw swelled the Thames to twice its volume. The furious river burst its banks, overwhelming Bazalgette's embankments and inundating everything from Hammersmith to the estuary. Fourteen people were drowned and thousands more made homeless as the water worked its way down a hit list that included the House of Commons, much of the London Underground, and the lower floors of the Tate Gallery at Millbank where hundreds of Turner oil paintings were ruined. In 1947 the river struck again, this time in a coordinated assault with rivers up and down the country to pile more misery on a war-torn population struggling through its most severe winter in a hundred years, and then once more during the calamitous North Sea floods of 1953 which divided their fury between Britain and the Netherlands, killing thousands between them and inflicting some £5 billion by today's reckoning in damage. Such experiences left these people in no doubt that this was a lucky escape they could not bank on again, and the river saw fit to remind them of this in the floods of 1968, this time making its point without killing anybody but wreaking dire property damage all the way up its watershed.

All this was typical of what the Thames had done to its inhabitants throughout history. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in November 1099, nearly a thousand years earlier, 'the tide rose so strongly and did so much damage as no-one remembered it ever did before'. Another great flood in 1236 was written of by the sixteenth-century historian John Stow in his *A Survey of London*, according to whom 'besides cattell, the greatest number of men, women and children,

inhabitants there, were drowned: and in the great Palace of Westminster, men did row with wheryes [wherries, or early skiffs] in the midst of the Hall, being forced to ryde to theyr chambers'. The same thing occurs in the copious diaries of Samuel Pepys in 1663, when 'there was the last night the greatest tide that ever was remembered in England to have been in this river: all White Hall having been drowned'.

Notice how all these accounts reach straight for the superlatives – the greatest tide, unprecedented damage, the highest number of victims. This was the trend to which 1953 belonged, and which convinced the English that if they imagined to turn the Thames floodplain into one of the most sprawling mega-conurbations in the world, then this was a vulnerability they could no longer afford. Simply building the walls ever higher was not good enough; a fundamental rethink was necessary. So they commissioned a review into the floods of 1953 under the mathematician Hermann Bondi, who reported back in 1966 with a new proposition: to build a barrier of steel across the Thames, with movable gates to accommodate shipping.

If Bondi gave birth to the idea of the Barrier, the man who gave it its shape was the engineer Charles Draper. Everyone the Barrier has protected owes a share of their thanks to his gas cooker, whose cylindrical taps inspired Draper's design for the Barrier's rotating gates. By 1969 he had come up with a working model, and in 1974 construction began. Eight years and £535 million later, Queen Elizabeth II stood before the completed Barrier and declared it officially operational, congratulating all those involved in the project for making a 'vital contribution to the safety of London'.

Needless to say, the Thames Barrier is the most ambitious attempt so far to renegotiate the power balance in the humans' relationship with the river. A landmark of mathematical precision and tried-and-tested engineering methods, its gates slide open to loose a pile of mind-boggling statistics: nine piers and ten rotating gates spanning a river width of 520m, fuelled by 11,000-volt power supplies, the four principal gates each weighing 3,700 tonnes and spanning 61.5 metres; full closure of the gates achievable within one hour and a half, utilising 1.1 megawatts of power; and 10,000-tonne concrete sills on the riverbed to catch and drain build-ups of silt. It has been shut over 170 times to protect the city from flood risks since it came into service, and has brushed off more than a dozen boat collisions in the same period. And so far, it has worked.

Yet for all this, the relationship between river and people has not changed. It is still the river that holds the power; the humans have not so much tamed it as bought it off. For all its impressiveness, what is the Thames Barrier, in the end, if not a sacrificial altar just like those of ages past, where the natives must offer the river a protection payment of electrical power, skilled craftsmanship and taxpayers' money to placate it into not submerging them for another season?

And alone it is not enough. There are other flood risks, such as from rainwater, which London's ageing, fatberg-clogged Victorian sewers are increasingly unfit to drain. The Barrier is just one small part of a comprehensive strategy that the authorities now rely on to manage present and future flood risks, which also includes other structural defences, monitoring mechanisms, flood warning and preparedness systems, scenario simulation and analysis, and rescue and recovery services for those times when inevitably the floods get through anyway. All this of course carries corresponding demands in money, time and effort, and the result is precisely the opposite of the myth that as society develops, it escapes the problems of history. On the contrary, as it has grown ever more complex and crowded, it has become more vulnerable, not less, to the temperament of a river which confronts it with the hazards of millennia. In that way the Thames is progressive. The prouder the people, the more in respect they must pay it.

Nor is the Barrier the end of the story. That continues so long as there is a river here, and so long as life moves upon its banks. Provided this society retains the stability to keep the sacrifices going, they have estimated the Barrier will continue to function until at least 2030. But it will not last forever, least of all in a world under the pressures of anthropogenic climate change. An unusually strong tidal surge in the winter of 2013-4 required the gates be brought down a record 28 times, bringing its total operations that year to 50, the maximum recommended annual number short of the risk of mechanical failure. As sea levels rise, rainfall intensifies and storm surges grow stronger still, officials are already arguing about possible new barriers further out in the estuary or pulling buildings back from the waterfront. If there is one thing lacking in any of these discussions, it is complacency. They have learnt by now the enduring power of the Dark River.

It is this, then, that puts to rest the illusion that opens *Heart of Darkness*, of a river that symbolises a clamber out of the abyss and arrival at some glorious, prosperous end of history. What we see in the tale of the people of the Thames is not a development escalator but a much more tortuous journey. Its world has seen many transformations, of which the Thames Barrier is only the latest, but most

are not so straightforward to think of as improvements. Some, such as its use as London's sewer, had to get a lot worse before they got better. Others, from the killing field of Tower Hill to today's luxury riverside residences not affordable to any reasonable person, have been clear slides down a chasm of inhumanity smothered in a definite darkness in England's national heart. What stands out far more than its changes is how much the Thames's world has stayed the same. Its diversity, enriched through all that the river brings in from the outside world. Its struggles, between the privileged and the oppressed, and between groups of people each convinced they are right. And above all, its vulnerability: how beneath the veneer of Marlow's 'greatest town on Earth' dwells a mortal people, a frightened people, so often at the mercy of the floods, invasions, rebellions, diseases, authoritarian tyrants and greedy developers who have rampaged upon the Thames's tides, and above all their own inner demons – a people who hurt when they bleed.

These are the rhythms of this people's heartbeat. Hear them reverberate from the lands we are about to explore. But as we proceed, beware of Mr. Kurtz, who survived his ordeal on the Congo and now stalks England. I hear he wears many guises.

1. Guns



If you tell the truth, you have infinite power supporting you; but if not, you have infinite power against you.

Charles Gordon in a letter to his sister, 1869

It is English custom to teach their history as a sequence of big names. Historical imagination in England is big people like Churchill or Henry VIII posing in big clothes, in big rooms, or in front of big armies and navies. Nowadays they are improving at broadening the picture to be more inclusive of all levels of society, but they are still some way off a day when names like Amaan Shakoor, Tanesha Melbourne-Blake, and Devoy Stapleton ring with that same sense of national significance.

They should. You will not find them in any history book, but as of now they are as essential as the big names to the English story. For they are the latest to join them, and millions of others, on a long list of people with one thing in common: an experience of one of the English's defining characteristics. Violence.

On the morning our exploration begins, these three teenagers have just become the latest of over fifty people, in the opening months of 2018 alone, to be killed by bullets or blades on the streets of London. We embark to the backdrop of news headlines dominated by despair and widespread panic that the police are ‘losing control of the streets’, as gun and knife crime erupt into a new humanitarian and political crisis.

The usual range of commentators have come out to critique these killings against their immediate context of present-day factors: cuts to police funding, youth alienation, institutional racism, drug politics, gangs and so forth. But it is also worth placing this violence in historical perspective. Not, of course, to lessen the pressure of responsibility on the leaders, institutions and populace of today, but on the contrary, to understand the scale and depth of the traditions they have grown out of – in this case, the centuries-old chains of relentless slaughter which in these weeks have accumulated fifty links more.

England is a violent country. There is no getting away from this observation. Violence – that is where our exploration begins.

To be clear, that is not to suggest that most English people do not live together peacefully, most of the time, as most humans around the world usually do. We can appreciate that while still acknowledging that they *have a violence problem*; have had it for a very long time; and perhaps, have their own variant of it on account of deep-rooted structural and cultural forces specific to them.

A closer look at the English capital’s first fifty killings of 2018 is likely to throw up the same violent phenomena that the English have experienced throughout the story of their country. They involve endemic systems of racism, sexism and gender-based hatreds whose currents of bigotry and marginalisation have drenched this land in generations of blood and suffering, in particular at the poorer, disempowered end of the social scale where victims’ names are of little interest to their chroniclers. The influence of gangs reflects a divided society in which corrupt authorities, in contempt of their side of what they call the *social contract*, deprive and alienate people into searching for alternative frameworks of authority or belonging; so let us not forget, in that connection, the time that such a failure reduced cities all over Britain to siege-blasted ruins, made exactly such an armed gang of their parliament. And all too often, as from their church-state struggles to their industrial relations, this has been a land of toxic power relationships, poisonous miscommunications, and collisions between arrogant people with something to prove and a reflex to bloodshed as the only way they

know to settle disputes. When was the last day, one wonders, when London alone did not experience shootings, choppings, muggings, suicides, forced evictions, domestic abuse, deaths in prison or police custody, or some epochal violent set piece like the burning of Grenfell Tower in 2017, the riots of 2011, or the terrorist bombings of 2007? ‘Violent Britain’ ran the screen on Channel 4 News through the months of panic and soul-searching that followed these latest killings, and it was absolutely right.

Lest our assessment risk becoming cynically one-sided, let us acknowledge that the same is true of the opposite trend. Those English who reject violence, are heartbroken by violence, and who are prepared to put their lives on the line to defeat violence are similarly part of a tradition that goes back as long as that violence. We might even meet some of their antecedents on the journey ahead, who battled to make their country a safer, fairer and more compassionate home, and on at least a few occasions succeeded.

The town of Woolwich, on the south bank astride the Thames Barrier, knows a thing or two about violence. Its architectural landscape is unique in the region, preserving gritty old buildings with red brick walls and white neoclassical facades past which you cannot walk ten paces without tripping over a cannon. Cannons are everywhere. Little dinky cannons threatening to annihilate your shoelaces, hulking monster-cannons whose bores you could sleep in, and all possible shapes and sizes in between. This is a place of obvious military pedigree, and proud of it too. Even the towering redevelopments that have sprung up to jostle with the older buildings seem not to jar as much as they might, perhaps because they share with the incumbents some kind of bellicose hard-nosed rectangularity. Or maybe there are just so many cannons that everything else is reduced to a setting for them.

All this makes it quite clear that Woolwich wishes to remember its armaments and munitions industries and military garrison. And well it might, for they gave it its meaning and sustained everyone who lived in it for five hundred years, moving on only in recent times. It feels a nostalgic and dignified remembrance. A peaceful remembrance.

That is, till we remember what cannons are.

Cannons are not peaceful. Cannons kill people. Killing people is indeed their entire point. And it was with cannons, among other weapons, that the English blasted their way across their colonies and enemies in America, Africa and Asia, plunging millions of people into untold sufferings no less grotesque than those

now endured by the loved ones of London's latest fifty shooting and stabbing victims. It was Woolwich which gave the British Empire the physical means to visit death and destruction on its foes, in an uninterrupted production line that began with the timber warships of the Tudor kings and ended with this country's first atomic bombs. It could be that these very specimens perched on the streets of Woolwich have killings to their names.

What are we to learn from such a place? Perhaps that violence is often more complicated than it looks.

The Royal Arsenal. Royal Military Academy. Royal Naval Dockyard. Royal Artillery Barracks. There are so many Royal Military things in Woolwich that we are challenged not to get them mixed up, but that may be of little consequence when their sites and activities so overlapped. At its height this town was one single complex of soldiers, crafters, chemists, munitions factories, firing ranges, naval yards and power stations: all the smoke and steam of a full-fledged military base in everything but name, right here on the riverine doorstep of the City of London.

It was not always so. Typically of the English, Woolwich's name is spoken differently from how it is spelt. Apparently you do not pronounce the second W. Even this discrepancy pales before its original name of *Uuluwich*, which goodness knows how any tongue was supposed to negotiate. But its name does provide a clue to its likely origin: a trading point (Old English *wīc*) for wool, that most essential of a textile-happy country's commodities back in the day.

That changed in 1512 with the militarisation of Woolwich's wharves by King Henry VIII of the Tudor dynasty, no amateur when it came to violence. He ordered the construction of a mighty flagship for his fleet, the *Henri-Grace-à-Dieu*, or colloquially the *Great Harry*: a beast for its time at 1,000 tons, with 1,000 crew and utterly armed to the teeth – not too different from what Henry might have looked like had he himself turned into a ship. Whether the bloody thing ever managed to kill anyone is another matter, but its launch here brought the establishment of the Woolwich Dockyard, by which the village took its first tentative steps on the military journey that would change its fate completely. That century's other frame-filling historical heavyweight, Henry's daughter Elizabeth I, had her own galleon built and launched here in the 1550s. By then supportive industries were gathering round, including one of the world's most enormous ropeyards. The docks grew on, sailing serenely even through England's seventeenth-century

descent into civil war, and in fact it was no king but the supreme king-killer Oliver Cromwell who vastly expanded the fleet to over 150 ships – which when the monarchy returned, fell neatly into the lap of the new king, Charles II, and evolved into what they now call the Royal Navy.

That was an especially violent century for the violent country. The English, Scottish and Irish were not only tearing themselves and each other apart but also having at it with a succession of European enemies. By the monarchy's return in 1660 the bogeyman of the day was the Dutch Republic, which had gone from an oppressed territory of the Spanish Hapsburgs to an ambitious independent world power in its own right, with a merchant fleet larger than all the other European powers' combined and a terrifying run of success at displacing them from their old holdings and trade interests from Brazil to the Indonesian archipelago. Under the direction of Charles II's cousin Prince Rupert, the alarmed English set about fortifying the Woolwich docks with a great big battery of cannons, to be better prepared should a Dutch invasion fleet come surging up the Thames.

In the event their battles were fought elsewhere. But it was this combative climate that set Woolwich into its new character: gun testing, gun storage warehouses, *gunpowder* warehouses, laboratories for inventing new guns and ammunitions, and the factories for making them, that came together as the central pillar of militarised Woolwich: the Royal Arsenal.

By 1700 this was the most important arms production site in the country. The army came along in 1716 to plant its first permanent artillery force, grown in the space of a few years from two companies with a hundred soldiers apiece into the Royal Regiment of Artillery. They would stay until 2003 when they moved off to the Salisbury Plain, though their massive walled-off barracks remains. Military engineers, miners and sappers were also brought together here as the Royal Engineers, and in 1741 the majestic Royal Military Academy sprang up to house and train all these specialist soldiers. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Woolwich had become the primary ordnance depot in the British Empire, and though the dockyards were languishing a bit, they were about to get jolted back to life with an injection of industrial-era steam and mechanisation.

For there was more violence to be wrought, this time against Napoleon's French who from 1803 to 1815 contested the British Empire and its allies across all Europe. These conflicts supply some of the most glorified war heroes and triumphalist imagery to the English imperial imagination, perhaps out of a combination of some stunning victories on the battlefield with it being sufficiently distant in time,

glamorous in its uniforms, and projectable on the French in fault (or at least less guilt-inducing than British colonialism), to forget the cruel bloodiness of its impact on actual people and the British share of responsibility for it.

Nonetheless it meant they required a lot more ships, guns, ammunition and officers, and every corner of Woolwich's operations flourished to provide them. Houses, markets, churches and pubs popped up to support its ever-growing population of workers and their families, some ten thousand people in all. Giants of the British engineering pantheon like Henry Maudslay and Isambard Kingdom Brunel (and here we must say British not English, because many of them were Scots) were drawn to the Arsenal's laboratories to weave their mechanical magic into its inventions. Underlying all of it still was the Thames, ferrying workers and materials in, guns and soldiers out. And when the Dockyard was retired in 1869, eclipsed at last by state-of-the-art facilities in places like Portsmouth and the Clyde, its remnants were absorbed into the Woolwich military organism to replenish and reinforce its capacity.

Next on the list of near-neighbours deemed in need of English violence were the Russians, on whom the British Empire went to war in the Crimea in 1853 to stop them benefiting too much from the slow disintegration of Ottoman Turkey. And once more Woolwich gleamed, swelled and morphed into new shapes in an upsurge of steam and chemical reactions. The stuff it produced was now at the front end of the dangerous innovations of industrial-age weaponry, and the bursting shells and sheer horrendous slaughter of the Crimean War that Woolwich helped to generate was but the first in a sequence of dread foreshadows which would ramp up, through the American Civil War (1861-5) and Russia's crippling confrontation with Japan (1904-5), to culminate in the cataclysmic carnage of high-tech warfare that brought Europe to its knees both physically and morally in the trenches of World War I (1914-18).

That war was a watershed in the history of every people caught up in it, and the English too still live in the world of its making. But the way they remember it poses serious problems. Every November, around the anniversary of the war's end, something peculiar happens. It is customary for these people to wear a red paper poppy on their lapels at that time as a symbol of remembrance for those that horrible orgy of bloodshed devoured. But the English nationalists repurpose it to tell a different story: that of a Britain which stood up and sacrificed for freedom and democracy against the despotic and ruthless monolith of the German hordes. To them, the violence by which means the foreign barbarians were vanquished

was of nigh-sacred righteousness, something to take pride in, and to denounce those fellow citizens whose pride they find wanting. Never mind that the last of that war's surviving veterans pleaded with them to learn its true lessons; never mind too that to sober eyes England in the 1910s was clearly neither democratic nor free (the exclusion of women from political life is reason alone, so for brevity let it stand here for the ten thousand additional reasons too). It is to England's abiding disadvantage that the self-congratulatory narrative slows their coming to terms with how their country shared responsibility for the war's cruelties, for the international system that produced it, and for the vengeful excuse for a peace settlement afterwards that all but guaranteed it would happen again.

For Woolwich, it meant demand for guns and ammunition on a completely unheard-of scale, and in turn for workers to produce them. In the course of the war the Arsenal's workforce grew from 14,000 to a whopping 100,000, almost half of them women – which in a reasonable society would be unremarkable, but here it has special significance and needs a further word. England, like many others, was and is a gendered country. Among other characteristics, that gendering is both *binary* – most of its members believe that all people are men or women and that the two are fundamentally different – and *patriarchal*, in that most of them believe men are stronger, superior, and better suited to violence than women, and so accord them greater power in their society. Do not ask me where they got such ludicrous fantasies from, but they appear to have seen fit to submit their society to them a very long time ago and have never since recovered.

Gender is therefore one of the most important problems in their history, which has shaped all aspects of their lives and whose constant injury to reality still generates immense suffering. Naturally, this means they have also produced people to challenge it in every generation, and that is the context in which the large numbers of women working in military factories during World War I stands out. Such industrial work had been seen as a masculine role, but with such unprecedented numbers of male labourers sent to fight on the front, the desperation of total war impelled them to turn to women to make up the numbers. Thus the imagery of women radiating skill in their hard hats and goggles as they muscularly hammered away on tanks and shells, both in reality and on the public advertisements to lure them to work, undermined patriarchal mythography and is seen as a significant moment in the rise of English feminism, not least because it happened right at the peak of the struggle for women's right to vote.

Female, male or otherwise, these workers laboured away for over twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with curtailed opening hours at the pubs and ever fewer holidays to keep them at their machines, on an entirely self-fed and self-powered 1,300-acre compound that had long outgrown the old town of Woolwich and spread east to devour three miles of the Plumstead marshes. Yet even with this mammoth commitment they struggled to keep the army equipped for the high industrial-age killing fields of Europe, where ammunition shortages and faulty shells brought a shame on Britain's civil and military leadership that still taints their storytelling of that conflict today.

By now the pattern will be clear: Woolwich's lights went on and off according to how much violence to foreigners was in demand. But the grander the violence-mountains grew, the farther there was to fall when the armistices and peace treaties blew them away. The aftermath of World War I plunged Woolwich into its worst recession yet. Tens of thousands of workers were made redundant, including those women at the Arsenal; it is said their superintendent Lillian Barker had to give farewell handshakes to some 30,000 of them in a week, so ending up with her arm in a sling for a fortnight.

But never fear, because soon there came an even more hideous war, the direct consequence of the attempt following the previous one to return Europe to an order of mutual hatred and dehumanisation by self-interested nations who each considered themselves superior, as made manifest in the victors' punitive humiliation of the defeated populations. By World War II (1937*-45) Britain had somewhat dispersed its military machine, but now for the first time the war came back to Woolwich. Targeted by the German *Luftwaffe* in the Blitz, the bombers and V2 rockets blew up factories, homes and laboratories not just in the military town but also into the spread of residential neighbourhoods around it. These attacks killed over a hundred people and injured hundreds more. In response, more and more of Woolwich's capacity was hustled off to sites outside London.

It never returned. After the war the weapons production at Woolwich was to contribute to just one more conflict, in which the British went off to be violent towards Koreans and their Chinese allies. But by now the emerging private arms companies were taking over this work with their own facilities, and the guns and machines of the fading imperial era rusted into obsolescence. Nonetheless, the

* The conventional Euro-centric reckoning places the start of World War II in September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland, but a more complete perspective must extend to the Japanese invasion of China in July 1937.

laboratories of Woolwich had one more task to perform, one last tool of violence to build, and of course, it would have to be the most chilling and destructive of them all. Under the direction of ‘a rotund, rather owl-like figure’, as one of his colleagues described Dr. William Penney, a team of scientists working in the Arsenal in strictest secrecy came up with the detonators for Britain’s first atomic bomb, which was tested on the Montebello Islands off Australia in 1952.

As its functions wound down, Woolwich’s land was sold off or redeveloped into housing and industrial estates. The factories closed in 1967, putting thousands more people out of work. Though some vestiges soldiered on as administrative offices for the Ministry of Defence, these too shut down in 1994, bringing to an end nearly five hundred years of military identity and leaving Woolwich, like much of England, in a daze of collapsing industries, vanishing jobs, and evaporating hopes and dreams.

The journey this little trading post had first set out on as it pushed Henry VIII’s monster flagship down the slipway had come to an end, for good this time. Now it fumbles around for new meaning, getting targeted in the meantime for a residential renaissance that is spawning new riverside apartments and leisure centres. And yet, having made and been made by guns, the way it holds tight to all those cannons and Arsenal buildings seems hardly a surprise.



Guns are made to kill people. Generally speaking, this makes them unpopular. They have their enthusiasts, especially in the United States, where they retain a stubbornly potent cultural symbolism; but even there the firearms are falling to disgrace beneath a tide of rage and frustration in a country where their most visible role is the slaughter of children in schools. Small arms fire continues to rip lives from bodies and define the images of nasty conflicts all over the world, and is a regular counterpoint – or complement – to arguments against weapons of mass destruction, compared to which of course they have claimed an incomparably higher death toll. And in the present Britain, some of the angriest public grievances (though not angry enough, some might say) are directed at the private weapons companies, which have inherited the work of state institutions like the Woolwich Arsenal and whose lack of scruples funnels their weapons into the hands of murderous regimes worldwide, with their role in the Saudi destruction of Yemen the present standout.

But when the glow of glorious – and necessarily armed – national prestige smothers the wails of faraway victims, we often find these concerns suspended. This is surely true of other countries as much as of Britain, as we see in, say, French or Chinese military parades or the Russian veneration for Lieutenant-General Kalashnikov. Why is it that in some circumstances the apparatus of killing warms hearts and rouses souls, while in others it sickens and appals? Is the difference merely between ‘our’ weapons and ‘their’ weapons? Or is there more to it? In some cases, such as school shootings and colonial massacres, the evil carried out by means of those guns is defended only by the most compromised of people. But in other situations the moral faultlines are not so clear-cut, and their controversies can flicker on for generations.

Such is the case in the story of Woolwich’s most famous son. Most locals probably know his name, if for no other reason than that we can watch them setting up market stalls or bustling off to work, as doubtless they do every morning, through Woolwich’s central plaza called General Gordon Square. This goes back to the 1920s, having been transformed by public petition from its previous incarnation as the ‘Smokehole’, so known because passing steam trains would dump carpets of soot upon the wares of these traders’ predecessors. In recent years it has been rather done up, so now they can go about their business in the shelter of a granite oasis of lawns, lakes and plane trees, like badly-behaved

bits of garden come to serve out their time in purgatory, while a gigantic television screen delivers a morning shower of news about the latest London knifings.

The square's name is a tribute to Major-General Charles 'Chinese' Gordon, who was born in Woolwich in 1833 to a military family with descent from the Gordon clan of eastern Scotland. Charles Gordon is one of the most celebrated and contentious figures of England's nineteenth-century imperial mythology, yet his journey was not at all an ordinary one. It tended to swerve away from the British Empire's most illustrious killing fields in favour of settings more oblique from an English perspective, if no less violent, and not always with official sanction either. And it is worth a look for some of the more tangled tensions it offers between heroism and horribleness in England's trouble with violence, up to and including its sensational end on the stairs of the Governor-General's palace in Khartoum which propelled him to controversy immortal.

The story goes that Gordon followed in the footsteps of four generations of forebears by undergoing a military education, part of it at Woolwich's Royal Military Academy, to emerge as an officer in the Royal Engineers just in time to steam off to the Crimean War in 1855. At twenty-two years old he appears to have made an enriching experience of it, taking part not only in front-line fighting in the trenches at Sevastopol but also in the negotiations afterwards to settle the Russian-Turkish borders, which gave him the chance to do some travelling round the Danube basin and Armenia. He appears to have impressed a lot of people, not least in the British and French armies which both decorated him for his service.

It is here that accounts multiply of the mystique that would colour his drama to come. They say Gordon was decisive, charismatic, independent-minded, methodical, tireless, and celibate to the point of endless, and still unresolved, speculation about repressed homosexual and/or neurodivergent characteristics, neither of which the English have been admirable at accommodating or would have provided an easy environment to work himself out in, let alone express. He was intensely religious, but in an extremely eccentric Protestant Christianity unique to himself: among other things he expressed belief in reincarnation, and was convinced that the Biblical Garden of Eden had a literal location on Earth – specifically on the island of Praslin, in the Seychelles, where he took the suggestively buttock-shaped nut of the coco-de-mer palm tree to be a direct descendent of the forbidden fruit. He also took great interest in the martyrdom of Christ, which may have had a certain influence on his later decisions.

Within a year of returning to Britain, Gordon was bored and desperate for more action. He found it in the conflagrations of China, where the Qing dynasty of Manchu emperors, which had held power for two hundred years, was coming apart at the seams. This was partly Britain's fault. The British Empire's role in the nineteenth-century cannibalisation of the Chinese empire by European powers belongs in the darkest category of this country's assaults on humankind, with all the hallmarks of colonial brutality present in the mix: multitudes of people killed, countless more racked to bits by opium, magnificent buildings razed, antiques looted and pillaged, and the humiliation of an ancient country which has never forgotten it, and whose memory of it, and intent to put it right, still traumatises its national character and political decisions today, regardless of whether the English will ever get around to teaching it in their schools.

It began with opium. The British were hungry for Chinese goods, tea most of all, but held little the Chinese wanted in return. To resolve this imbalance, the British East India Company set about exporting to China the opium it grew in the territories it controlled in India. Through a network of smugglers and middlemen they funnelled vast quantities of the illegal drug into China, devastating the population with opium addiction and draining the Chinese treasuries of silver. When the Chinese authorities started banning and confiscating the shipments, the British brought in the Royal Navy and battered the Chinese Empire into submission in the First Opium War of 1839-42. To eternal Chinese resentment, the British imposed the Treaty of Nanjing, first of the 'unequal treaties', which gave the British extraterritorial rights (i.e. British people who committed crimes on Chinese territory could be tried according to British laws, not Chinese ones), forced open five treaty ports where the British could trade on the terms they dictated, and began the story of the colonial cession of Hong Kong.

Here then was one of the British Empire's tallest towers of ignominy. The unrepentant eagerness of British merchants and officials to ply a devastatingly addictive drug, a raw material for modern heroin, as a means to fulfil an agenda of barefaced greed should be a necessary study in the repertoire of anyone involved in drugs policy today, let alone anyone who claims to express an informed opinion on the so-called war on drugs, in which British authorities along with others have resorted to moralising violence against the victims of people doing what they themselves did to the Chinese. And as we weigh the balance of Woolwich, we are forced to admit that this, too, was a conflict the British won through the use of the cannons produced in this town, which blasted apart their share of 20,000

Chinese bodies and penetrated the self-esteem of a country which had thought of itself as the divinely-appointed centre of known civilisation for five thousand years. From this blow China lurched into an ever-worsening series of catastrophes which in 1912 would sweep its empire away.

The next of those was the Second Opium War of 1856-60, a reprise of the first with the added insult, also never forgotten, of the ransacking and burning of the magnificent summer palaces in Beijing by British and French soldiers – that is, a war crime, in the same category as Islamist extremists' recent demolitions of heritage sites in Palmyra and Timbuktu. This sort of thing is the background the English should keep in mind when discussing present-day abuse allegations in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan, for no-one else shares their delusion that such deeds are beneath them. For the Chinese the result was yet another unequal treaty, more treaty ports, more indemnity payments, more embarrassing concessions to foreigners, and the current Chinese eyes on the British Museum, where much of the stuff robbed from the summer palaces would end up.

This was the convulsing China into which Charles Gordon plunged in 1860, just in time to watch the palaces go up in flames. Having missed out on the British colonial beatdown, he instead stayed on to become a supporting character in an infinitely more complicated and calamitously bloody contest amongst the Chinese themselves: the rebellion of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.

Heard of it? You ought to have, because this fourteen-year civil war was one of the most awesomely horrendous conflicts in human history, arguably the worst after the two world wars, carving a storm of blood, plague and famine that killed over twenty million people across the formerly-prosperous fields of south China. In short, it started with a young man from a village near Guangzhou (Canton) called Hong Xiuquan, one of the Hakka ethno-cultural minority, who after failing in repeated attempts to pass the Chinese civil service examinations, suffered a mental breakdown in which mystical dreams merged with an interest in Christian missionary tracts to convince him he was the son of God and younger brother of Jesus Christ – literally – and that the Qing rulers were devils and devil-worshippers whom said literal celestial family had charged him to drive out of China. Hong began to travel around and preach, developing a sect of followers which by 1850 had snowballed to an army in the tens of thousands; the charisma of Hong's prophecies found a ready audience among people bitterly alienated by ethnic persecutions, economic hardship, terror at the hands of bandits, pirates and secret societies and humiliation by predatory foreigners. Emboldened by

victories in early confrontations with Qing forces, these ‘God-worshippers’ rampaged across southern China, amassing recruits and supplies with every city they captured. Coming to style themselves the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (*Tàipíng Tiānguó*), within three years they had seized the southern capital of Nanjing, where they massacred the Manchu residents, implemented a bizarre mix of severe social and religious policies – segregation of men and women, radical land reforms, paranoid political purges and bans on opium, alcohol and dancing, among other things – and aimed their armies at Beijing, the imperial capital. The Qing authorities for their part were torn in all directions between this, the Second Opium War and a clutter of other rebellions, leaving them powerless to do more than keep the Taiping contained.

Charles Gordon’s entry into this war represented a complicating of Britain’s involvement in China. Having just blasted the intestines out of the Qing armies, the British transformed into their temporary allies against the Taiping. The rebels baffled them at first, and it took them time to work them out, but they eventually reasoned that a pliant Chinese government they could push around suited their interests better than watching it evaporate in the face of an uncontrollable, chaotic and opium-hating rebellion. Besides, Hong Xiuquan’s take on Christianity terrified them – an apprehension shared by Gordon, whose initial excitement at the idea of eccentric Chinese Christian revolutionaries was shattered once he witnessed their atrocities in the countryside.*

Seen as a man of incorruptible integrity and self-discipline, Gordon was put in charge of a force of Chinese mercenaries led by British and American officers and led it to a series of striking victories against the Taiping, whereafter it became known as the Ever Victorious Army. Fighting alongside the regular Qing forces under the renowned scholar-officer Li Hongzhang, Gordon organised his mercenaries into a highly effective fighting force that broke the back of the Taiping resistance. Even as he quarrelled furiously with his Chinese allies about their ruthless executions of prisoners and struggled to keep his licentious mercenaries in order, he inspired respect and awe in many of those who laid eyes

* The Taiping did themselves few favours to win over the foreigners. Mutually curious at first as potential allies and Christian brethren, the Taiping retained more in common with Chinese imperial culture than they claimed, in particular a Confucian fixation on family relationships (hence Hong’s view of God as his literal, physical ‘Father’ and Jesus as his ‘Elder Brother’) and a distinct dash of cosmic arrogance. Their insistence that Hong was the rightful sovereign of the entire world and superior of foreign leaders – ‘You must tremblingly obey’, they told the Americans – put paid to any prospective understanding with the bewildered colonial powers.

on him. As they closed in on a battered and starving Nanjing in 1864, Hong Xiuquan met his death, either from food poisoning or suicide – it is still unclear – and Gordon pulled his army aside to allow the Qing forces to take centre stage in the characteristically blood-drenched siege of the city. Most of the rebels opted to burn themselves to death rather than surrender to those their Heavenly King had condemned as devils, and the surviving leaders, including Hong's fifteen-year-old son and heir, were caught and put to death by slow slicing. It was a nasty end to an exceptionally nasty war, in which any possible evaluation of its rights and wrongs had been blown to dust like Hong Xiuquan's ashes, fired from a cannon by the Qing as though to deny him any physical remains from which to pass on to his dreamed-of heavenly paradise. Gordon's conduct however had got him across this sea of horrors with tremendous Chinese admiration: high status and honours from the emperor in person, a massive reward of silver from the imperial treasury (which he declined), and the abiding gratitude of the country's traders and peasants. He returned to Britain to a promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel, adulation from the populace and press, and his new 'Chinese' nickname.

If this was a tale that cuts awkwardly through the standard clash of praise and condemnation for the British Empire, it was typical of the adventures that Gordon got himself into through the 1870s and early 1880s. The most fateful of these took him to Africa, where he served for a time as an official in the Ottoman administration in Egypt. With the Ottoman Empire moribund, Egypt was by now effectively an autonomous territory, where British and French tentacles wrestled each other in the background of the rule of the Europe-admiring Isma'il Pasha. The ambitious Isma'il had fed those tentacles a mountain of Egyptian forced labour to build the Suez Canal, and dreamt of expanding Egypt down to the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa as a great empire of its own on the European model. The British indulged him for a time, happy to exploit him as a buffer to keep out their French rivals, but it was a doomed dream which the peoples who actually lived in those places had no interest in, least of all the resurgent Ethiopians, who crushed a series of Egyptian invasions (and a few years later would shock imperial Europe by doing the same to the Italians). These wars left Egypt horribly in debt to the Europeans, which the British seized on as a pretext to move in to annex it. While they were unwilling to let Russia get its hands on the crumbling Ottoman fragments and sent Woolwich's firepower to the Crimea to stop them, it seems they had no such qualms about grabbing what they could for themselves.

Gordon entered this story with some years still to go before that, and as one of a catalogue of European officials hired by Isma'il, he waded through the mire of institutional corruption and slave-trading that passed for the Ottoman-Egyptian administration in equatorial Sudan, in general getting on well with the downtrodden peoples of that region while mapping the upper Nile and riling his superiors by trying to stamp out their inhumane practices. This culminated with a spell as Governor-General of Khartoum, where his drive for moralising reforms came to grief beneath the wheels of the soul-grinding bureaucratic coldness and greed that surrounded him, till he left, physically and emotionally shattered, at the end of the decade.

...or so the story goes. Beyond the hazy boundaries between history and mythmaking in Gordon's tale, we should bear in mind that the politics of the region concerned was extraordinarily convoluted at this time, with a multitude of conflicting identities and interests. Each would have likely offered very different accounts of this otherworldly stranger in their midst. In all instances however, these involvements in Africa were to set Gordon up for those final events in Sudan that became the one thing for which 'Gordon of Khartoum' is memorialised today.

He made his return there in 1884, with some initial reluctance on his part and considerably more on the part of his government. The British Empire was having a hard time of things in those years. Its armies had been dealt devastating defeats by the Zulus and the Afghans, and its policies in India and Ireland had brought about famines now regarded among the pinnacles of its villainies. Prime Minister William Gladstone of the Liberal Party had been elected on the basis that he would rein in this disastrous colonial appetite. So when another religiously-charged insurrection swept across another embittered populace on the imperial frontiers, Gladstone's instinct along with much of the British establishment was to want nothing to do with it. They did not feel enough of a stake in Sudan to stop it from falling to this anti-colonial Islamist rebellion of Muhammad Ahmad, a man of the same kidney as Hong Xiuquan who styled himself the *Mahdi* or messianic redeemer. Nonetheless they contrived to send Charles Gordon there amidst a swirl of media sensationalism and popular excitement, with orders to advise on the evacuation of Khartoum.

It was a highly constrained set of instructions, but driven now by increasing conviction in an impending religious destiny of his own, Gordon took matters into his own hands in the way he had always done. He engaged confrontationally with the Mahdi, including through an exchange of astonishing letters in which each

tried to convert the other while demanding the other's capitulation. Finally Gordon infuriated his government by defying his orders and refusing to evacuate Khartoum, instead announcing to its cheering crowds that he would defend it against the Mahdi's approaching forces no matter what. And Gladstone was powerless to stop him. Sacking Gordon would have been unforgivable in the eyes of a public that worshipped the ground he walked on, an admiration which ran all the way up to Queen Victoria who loathed Gladstone's guts. But leave Gordon to die in a blaze of glorious martyrdom, which was clearly exactly what he wanted, and their condemnation and rage would be even worse. In the end the government had no choice but to send the relief force Gordon was appealing for as the rebels strangled Khartoum and chipped away at his soldiers and supplies.

In the event they held out for almost a year, bombarded nonstop by the rebels' artillery and reduced to the verge of starvation. But Gordon's letters and messages out reveal a committed, even crazed determination to stand his ground to the death. He rejected all instructions to withdraw, even letters from the Mahdi offering him safe conduct and as much as begging him to escape rather than throw his life away. By the time the British relief force arrived, it was already over. Khartoum and all its remaining defenders had fallen, among them Major-General Charles Gordon, whose corpse was found on a staircase in a corner of the palace.

From that staircase he climbed into legends which far outgrew his life. The exact circumstances of his death have never been clarified. Instead they would refract through a kaleidoscope of differing renditions in books, films, paintings and eyewitness accounts of varying reliability. In Britain this was further disarranged by the outpouring of grief and hysteria for the empire's fallen warrior-hero, together with fury, from Queen Victoria down, at a government they held squarely responsible for letting him die. They reviled Gladstone as though he had murdered Gordon with his own hands, and would subsequently force his Liberal Party out of office. Only ten years later would they return to Sudan, defeat the Mahdist state* and formally incorporate Sudan and Egypt into their colonial territories in Africa.

But the Gordon controversies never ended. After decades in which the British put up statues to him as a venerated warrior-saint and superhuman patriot, revisionist perspectives emerged which painted him instead as a deranged and

* For the *Dad's Army* generation of English, it is to this round of conflict that the veteran Corporal Jones constantly refers – in particular the climactic and shocking Battle of Omdurman, in which more than ten thousand charging Mahdist infantry were mown down by British Maxim guns.

ridiculous demon, a whirlwind of death and hate who had more in common with the Taiping zealots and Mahdist dervishes, or indeed Conrad's Kurtz, than anything the British were comfortable locating in their civilised selves. And with the passage of another century, any view of Gordon now is distorted by further developments in those of his country's relationships he watched take shape: the British's nervous love-hate relationship with China, and their perennial bouts of misunderstanding and conflict with political Islam which, now as then, are as much about politics and economics, human dignity and humiliation, as about religion. The stories he featured in are still underway, and there are plenty of vested interests around with their own ideas of how to represent him.

What, then, does Charles Gordon leave for our exploration of British violence? From one angle he was the very archetype of it, an avatar of coercive colonial power and a creature of the nineteenth century world of its making, who walked in the midst of some of the very worst oppressors, murderers and racists ever to set foot upon this world. Look from a different direction, however, and suddenly too many bits of him are the wrong shape to fit between those narrative riverbanks. Through most of his journeys he took the role of a supporting character in stories already unfolding in lands the British regarded as alien and inferior, and arguably worked with the people there as an equal, rather than smothering their stories under a supposedly greater and worthier British one. He followed a calling that seemed more his own than anything instructed to him by his country; sought to walk a path of impossible moral rectitude, as defined only by himself, even to the frustration and political ruin of his paymasters, through some of the most uncompromising oceans of corruption, fanaticism and bloodshed in the world of his day – a world whose institutional violence far exceeded the violence any one person's heart could hold. As a man of war he was certainly violent, and absolutely was implicated in the deaths of large numbers of people. At the same time he sought to subordinate that violence to a higher framework, in which at least some of it might have prevented still more violence, and to which certain types of violence – the executions of Taiping prisoners, the brutality of the Ottoman *bashi-bazouks* or the North African slave traders – were totally condemnable, compelling him to wrestle with his allies to stamp them out. The symbolism of his refusal to carry a gun or sword, and preference for his trademark rattan cane, might have been more than a mere gesture.

The least we can say is that to Charles Gordon, violence was not simple. He is one of those most baffling of enigmas, on the like of which you should trust no

lone account to dictate the truth. Evidently, truth was important to him (a noteworthy trait here, we might observe); he spoke of truth and lived a truth very much his own. But what was that truth, and its relationship with reality? Is there anyone, indeed, whose truth is now harder to excavate safely from the flames of the British imperial dig?

Not all violence is physical. There is also structural violence, which is when systems or institutions hurt people or prevent them meeting their needs even if no-one is shooting or stabbing them in that moment. Its destruction is the equal of physical violence's and many times more insidious, because it disperses responsibility through societies where any number of people might be participating in it while knowing little and caring less.

Consider 'owl-like' Dr. Penney, who directed the British atomic bomb programme in the Woolwich laboratories – the supreme instrument of violence – and yet was beloved to colleagues who attributed to him a keen sense of humour. By a similar token, the private arms companies of today employ hundreds of thousands of people, each of whose handiwork feeds the carnage wrought by their products, but it is unlikely that each and every one of these is a sadistic individual who eats children or searches for small furry animals to hit with their umbrellas on the way to work. Doubtless many of them fail to even imagine what will be done with the fruits of their labour, whether because they have been led to believe it will protect good people from bad people, or because they are just too preoccupied to think about it in a society where merely putting food on the table has been made a mortal struggle.

We have looked at the sorts of people who consumed Woolwich's products or were consumed by them. But to round off its story we also must look at the people who made them. The workers in Woolwich's armaments factories were both separated from and implicated in their killings by violent structures and systems.

A closed system – a universe of its own. Inevitably what Woolwich's labs and factories got up to was extremely sensitive, with large areas classified on maps. And as in many industrial communities of the day, their work was not merely work, but a way of life. The Arsenal, Dockyard and military institutions propped up the entire economy of this area, supported all its social relationships, and gave rise to many of its cultural practices, not just for the workers but their friends and

families and all the merchants, doctors, teachers, priests, firefighters, police and other service providers who settled here to cater to them.

Some of the most vivid impressions of Woolwich in its emergence after the civil war come from the diaries of Samuel Pepys, who as a naval administrator had frequent cause to visit it. If his testimony is to be believed his experiences of it could be less than wholesome, as when he was accosted by a labourer with a cudgel while walking home one day, or when he and his wife moved there to escape plague and fire, both of which ravaged London in the 1660s. But as Woolwich industrialised, drawing thousands of people into its ever more crowded, noisy and filthy streets, it became typical of another strain of English violence: the hazardous machines, ramshackle housing and desperate poverty this country has been known to inflict on its labouring population. While class oppression is hardly unique to this nation, its industrial revolution expanded it beyond recognition and set a model that has since been replicated far beyond its shores, based on new values that are taken for granted today: repetitive work as both supreme virtue and inescapable shackle; standardised all-day five-day working weeks; the abusive control of employees by employers; and countless industrial influences beyond the workplace, among them the dominance of work-oriented office blocks in urban design and the social hegemony of the nuclear family.

Nineteenth-century industrial Woolwich was an inferno. Residential terraces grew ever more cramped to accommodate the influx of workers, with the most impoverished inhabiting a maze of slums and alleyways known as the Dusthole. This was a hellish dumping ground for society's most destitute and deprived, where the local soldiers were forbidden to tread (although the rougher ones went there anyway) and police dared not enter unless in pairs. The dwellings were flimsy, unhygienic and inadequately supplied with water, and the air stank from the consequences thereof on sewers and drains, as well as from open fires, decaying food and horse manure. Smog and coal dust clogged the air, which shrieked with a cacophony of hissing and clanging factory machines, clattering trains, and relentless gunfire from the testing ranges. Children were among the workers who operated these dangerous contraptions for long hours, took in feeble wages, ate lousy meals, wore tattered clothes, lost a huge chunk of their income in rent, and bore housework burdens that, this being a gendered country, were largely shouldered unpaid by women and girls. When people became sick or injured, which in an environment like this meant every day, there was no public welfare system to care for them. And though this scene of godforsaken squalor

could have come from anywhere amidst the factories, mines and smokestacks of industrial-age Britain, whose worst excesses we must hope it has banished never to return, the fundamental characteristics of this exploitation will be quite familiar to the great number of people trodden beneath them in our time.

For here was and is the other side of English violence, embedded in the national consciousness by a deep heritage of class hierarchy and ferocious systems of prejudice that hold that if you are poor it is your own moral fault. Slither and shapeshift as this spirit of violence might behind the ever-changing faces of this country, in its present age of stagnant wages, job insecurity, policy-driven poverty creation, unaccountable bosses, ruthless landlordism, and the reconfiguration of the welfare system into an instrument to torture those it was meant to support, it remains alive as ever. Indeed, the economic violence of twenty-first century England, though in form a creation of the theological revolution of the free market, in essence can only be understood as the continuation of this heritage.

Its worst excesses are directed against vulnerable, forgotten and hated groups in society; here and now these include immigrants, sex workers, disabled people, neurodivergent people, and people who fall into the prison system. And Woolwich, too, participated in these dehumanisations through its darkest secret of all: prison hulks.

Prison hulks have disappeared from Britain, but their very conception is a stain it can never erase and whose memory should chill it to the bone. They were ruined ships, no longer seaworthy, and three of them lined the river at Woolwich where they housed several hundred of the most miserable people in the country. Among these convicts would certainly have been some legitimate villains, but the larger number would have been either political prisoners or people from those deprived corners of society where the law was not there to protect your rights but something that happened to you. They were often imprisoned on the most trivial of pretexts, then dragged to Woolwich in leg-irons and chain-gangs to serve as slave labour for the worst of its dredging and pile-driving.

In the eyes of mainstream society, whose spectators would have shown up at the docks to watch them work, it was as if these forced labourers were no longer human beings. Beyond what their arms could contribute they were totally expendable: worked till broken, stashed in those overcrowded and dysentery-ravaged zombie-ships, shot if they tried to escape, and destined if they survived to be shipped as far away as possible and dumped in the infamous British gulags in Australia.

All this may seem to cast Woolwich as some demonic pit ablaze with fire and sulphur. If so, let us turn our attention to some of those people who attempted to douse it. Just as physical and structural violence have been built into English society, so have people emerged from it in every age to hack at the bases of those pillars, often at considerable risk to their own heads. Out of this abyss of injustice and deprivation, too, voices rose to demand a society that treated its workers better.

To the reform of working practices, safety regulations, welfare support, trade unions and the rise of the labour movement, the people of Woolwich contributed their share. In 1868, for example, twenty workers from the Royal Arsenal led by Alexander McLeod and William Rose joined together to open a part-time volunteer food store with the aim of offering safe food to Woolwich's workers at low prices, under the motto 'Each for All and All for Each'. Within a decade the Royal Arsenal Cooperative Society (RACS), as it became known, had over 500,000 members, was selling all over London and surrounding counties, and dealt in not just food but milk, fuel, books, shoes, education and other essentials, all to provide local labourers with a better lot than the one they had been saddled with. By 1900 it had gone into housing too. The RACS would go on to affiliate with the socialist movement, organise rations during World War I, and continue its work all the way to the 1970s when it merged into the broader Co-operative Group, one of the principal ethical consumer cooperatives in England today.

Another front in this struggle concerned women, who as we have seen came to make up almost half the Arsenal's workforce. In a country as misogynistically violent as England, the rise of women's participation in the realms of weapons and heavy machinery was a major upset to established myths of female weakness, and helped them begin to kick down the doors of workplaces sealed to them. Still, they worked the same unrelenting hours on high-precision tasks with dangerous machines and explosive materials; by 1915 that included TNT, whose poisonous dust turned hair and skin yellow and at its worst was killing two workers per week. Through outrage, scandal, and the efforts of people like that superintendent Lilian Barker, who not only encouraged women into the Arsenal but advocated tirelessly for their health, safety and general welfare in and out of work, these women extracted ever more regulations on working hours and health and safety procedures, thus participating in the struggles that would empower the twentieth-century labour and feminist movements at precisely the time that both peaceful and violent sides of the suffrage movement – and both were important –

were holding British institutional misogyny to task. Once more Woolwich was both contributor to and microcosm of Britain's struggle against the structural violence of gender and class.

Woolwich memorialises another figure in this tradition. On the river promenade, not far from where another pair of cannons sits warily eyeing the Tate & Lyle sugar refinery across the river, the defiant blues of sea and sky strike out from a fading mosaic, placed by the Elfrieda Rathbone Society in 1984. Its namesake was a teacher who came down from Liverpool and founded a series of schools and clubs for children rejected by society as 'ineducable' – another front in which the struggle against structural violence continues today. Rathbone's work demonstrated that children who are still rather euphemistically generalised under the term 'special needs' were entirely capable of flourishing if they were provided an enabling environment that suited them as unique human beings – a shift in locating the problem, in other words, so that rather than viewing individuals as defective, it was for society to take responsibility for accommodating all of its diverse members. The organisation she founded has since split into various branches, which have carried on her work ever since.

Let us reserve final mention for a group of Woolwich people whose confrontation with English structural violence pitted them against nothing less than their hometown's existential condition as a manufacturer of killing machines. Certainly, overturning this was not the central purpose of the *Peace Arsenal* campaign, which grew out of the masses of Arsenal workers dumped into unemployment after World War I. They called for the state to ensure that work continued in Woolwich: that is, for sections of its arms production to remain permanent, but also for more peaceful alternative work to be provided, such as building locomotives. The *Peace* in Peace Arsenal was thus about *peacetime* jobs in the Arsenal, rather than advocacy for peace as opposed to war. Yet the campaign did make important contributions to those broader questions of how to build a peaceful world, in particular about what place and organisation armaments-makers ought to have within it. Amidst the 'never again' fallout of World War I, and perhaps paradoxically considering their goals, the workers argued that a state-run weapons industry made future wars less likely than putting that production in the hands of private arms companies, who hungered for markets to sell their weapons for profits and so promoted militarism and warmongering foreign policies by their nature.

The companies of course resisted fiercely, and in the long run the Peace Arsenal movement was not successful: tens of thousands still lost their jobs, the Arsenal still collapsed, and now the merchants of death have their day. Yet the effort cannot be so easily dismissed as a concern for economic self-interest devoid of higher moral principle, and its arguments still pose pertinent challenges. Many English people's livelihoods do now rely on powerful private arms companies, selling their wares on international markets to clients whose uses for them are not only egregious but also destructive to England's standing in the world. Yet politically the issue is so sensitive that successive English governments seem effectively hostage to those companies, and national policies on violence to their endless appetite for profits from it. This, too, is part of England's violence problem; the Peace Arsenal's prophecy has been proven correct. And if downtrodden labourers in the 1920s Woolwich slums saw its hazards clearly, surely it is not too much to expect the same of current English eyes.

All of a sudden it seems we are in a different place. Woolwich, which forged the guns that roared at the vanguard of the British imperial expansion, whose noxious chemicals corroded the flesh of its workers, a mirror of English violence within and violence without. That people who stood up to hurl back the tides of that violence clambered out of such a place might seem unlikely, but they were real, and the English still benefit from their legacies. Through their courage lives were improved, rights for the weak and obligations for the strong were hammered out, and although this country might still not be a pleasant place to work or to live, they sure made it a lot better than it otherwise would have been.

Most countries have something like that – stories of lasting good that came spontaneously out of the institutions of violence. It might not justify those institutions, but it is still important to acknowledge them.

The military story dominates Woolwich's surroundings, but it is far from the only story. Other memories weave round that great apparatus of cannons and factories, and some go back much further than its inception.

In Woolwich's western shadow we come to the district of Charlton. An ancient manor village absorbed by the area's industrialisation, it is now perhaps best known for Charlton Athletic Football Club, whose Valley stadium dominates its residential landscape. What is less obvious is that the stadium, whose name is a possible clue, sits upon one of several large sandpits which embodied the main

work in that area till industrial times and supplied London with most of its sand. Another pair of these pits has since been turned into parks, named after the powerful Maryon-Wilson family who came to own the Charlton estate.

Up the hill an outstanding E-shaped thing of red bricks and white rectangular window frames stands prominent. It is Charlton House, a Jacobean creation – from the reign of the first Stuart king James I, 1603-25 – which claims to be one of the finest pieces of that period remaining in the region. It is a relic of the old Charlton village, and its front lawn used to be the village green, as well as a battleground for a more perplexing front in the wars of English social violence: the tussle between licentious revelry and gasping moral panic. At issue was the Charlton Horn Fair, a riotous procession of people getting drunk out of their skulls and taking part in unimaginable recreations, possibly of the sorts involving bodily fluids and certainly with much disruption to gendered norms of dress, while wearing horns on their heads. Among those aghast at the sight of this was Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, who in the 1720s described it as a ‘yearly collected rabble of mad-people’, the ‘rudeness’ of which ‘ought to be suppressed, and indeed in a civiliz’d well govern’d nation...may well be said to be unsufferable’. Views like this found a ready audience in a country prone to bouts of hysteria about people having fun, especially when it involved women enjoying their own bodies, and in the 1870s the Horn Fair was indeed suppressed. But the people of Charlton have since brought it back and now hold it every October, albeit toned down to a more sober format.

At times English hysteria plunges to darker depths. Just up the road from Charlton House is the Royal Artillery Barracks, where the namesake branch of the English military grew up. They have since moved away and the Barracks has been used by various other army units, as well as hosting the shooting competitions in the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics. But it acquired notoriety in 2013 when Lee Rigby, a soldier in the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, was brutally murdered by two Islamist extremists on the street outside. The harrowing manner of his killing sent shockwaves through a nation already shaken with insecurities about the part-real, part-perceived threat from Islamist terrorism, and whose ugly altercations on the subject went back at least to the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. The real story of Britain’s troubled relationship with political Islam is vastly more complex, and as we saw in Major-General Gordon’s misadventures in Sudan, goes back a lot further than is usually recognised. But the murder of Lee Rigby galvanised the loudest and least agreeable participants

on all sides of the national shouting match, some of whom were soon abandoning debate altogether for – you guessed it – violence. Assaults against Muslims and mosques erupted across the country as the uniformed image of Rigby became a totem for nationalist and white-supremacist groups, among them the English Defence League and Britain First, who exploited it to fan the flames of hatred against anything with a hint of connection to Muslims, immigrants and foreigners.

The reductionist hatreds of these movements, and the poisonous stories they radiate, have since seeped through national life to become arguably the most serious threat to England's security and stability, on account of their ethnic nationalism's political grip, deep historical roots, and proven consequences in the world. And in June 2016 they resulted in Britain's first political killing since the Troubles in Northern Ireland when Jo Cox, a progressive Member of Parliament, was shot and stabbed to death by an English nationalist. When asked to confirm his name in court, her assassin answered 'death to traitors, freedom for Britain'.

The threat to England from the violence in its own national soul has exceeded that of violence from abroad for most of its history, if not all of it. We now turn south from Charlton and Rigby's End to cross Woolwich Common, which served as a training ground and firing range, as well as an assembly point for soldiers: they would stop by the Arsenal to pick up their weapons then board ships on the river, embarking on their journeys of violence. But on the other side you come to Shooter's Hill, and oh yes, as its name evokes, this is a place steeped in violence. But here let us give the English a short break and look for a moment at other people's violence.

We can look at the Romans for example, who paved the ancient trackway over Shooter's Hill and incorporated it into what would come to be known as Watling Street. This was arguably the most important road in the country, running from the island's front entrance at Dover all the way up to the doorstep of North Wales, and the southern part, from Dover to London, has remained more or less the main land entryway to the capital since. The road also provided the venue for the Romans' final defeat of Boudica's rebellion, gained extra prominence in this stretch through Kent as the route for pilgrims and tourists to the city of Canterbury, and afforded the high ground of Shooter's Hill a strategic significance it would still hold two thousand years later when it became part of a 'stop line' to guard the capital against potential German invasion in the First and Second World Wars. As it turned out, the main peril on both occasions came from the sky. In the first war it took the form of the feared and hated Zeppelin airships, whose

incendiaries gave England its traumatic first experience of aerial bombing and earned the airships the moniker 'baby killers'. In the second came the considerably more destructive Nazi bombers and V-2 rockets.

In the latter conflict they answered by having Shooter's Hill live up to its name and installing anti-aircraft batteries upon it. This however was not the first time actual shooting had taken place on Shooter's Hill, and for that it is to English violence that we must return. There are three theories regarding its name. One involves archery, another hunting, but the third and most plausible refers to the lawless banditry that infested this area before urban London grew out and subdued it. Travellers from Dover, and by extension Europe, had to walk or drive their horse-drawn carriages up Watling Street through this densely wooded and unpoliced back of beyond, and we can only guess how many met their ends in encounters with brigands like the legendary Dick Turpin who roamed it. Successive generations of city authorities fought back with equal ruthlessness. A gallows appeared at the crossroads, where highwaymen would be summarily hanged and their corpses put on display atop the hill, perhaps as an appetiser for travellers ahead of the main course of political dissidents' heads upon the gates of London Bridge. Its edginess crept into its representations in literature: it is here that Lord Byron's Don Juan is ambushed by a mugger ("Perhaps," thought he, "it is the country's wont/to welcome foreigners in this way"), and where in the opening of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* the Dover mail coach struggles up through the dark mist of the hill to its fateful encounter with a horseman.

Shooter's Hill has little to show for this grim record today, but perhaps it has switched to a preference for more structural robberies instead. Most of its venerable public buildings, including the Royal Herbert Hospital, the water tower, the old police stations, and even the Royal Military Academy, have been repurposed as luxury residential apartments in a city becoming rapidly too expensive for most of its residents. Indeed, as Don Juan stands over the dying mugger he has just shot in the 'pudding', he reflects: 'now/I remember some innkeepers who don't/Differ, except in robbing with a bow/in lieu of a bare blade and brazen front.' Violent England knows many ways to rob.

London has not been a safe place for wilderness, and by the nineteenth century these wilds on its threshold were counting their days. As with many areas close enough to commute to the capital but not close enough to smell it, Shooter's Hill

found favour with rich people looking to build grand suburban mansions in a greener setting. The woods that had ruled here since time immemorial were suddenly on the back foot, and as the houses, roads and farms sliced up their ancient domain, the trees were brought to bay with their backs to each other, penetrated with new light, and all their mist and menace evaporated. But in that light, people started to realise that it was the woods that made it such an attractive place to live in the first place, not to mention providing them with air they could actually breathe. And so a struggle began between people who wanted to build over the woods and people who wanted to keep them.

This was a story that would play out under different circumstances across the country, and we shall come across it again, but here at least some sense prevailed. The public concentrated their voices and funds, and so the authorities bought up the remaining woodland and have since protected it for everyone's benefit.

Some of these woods are incredibly old. The largest, Oxleas Wood, is a deciduous sleeping giant that supposedly dates back over eight thousand years, and thus would remember when Britain was still a European peninsula at the end of the last ice age. Perhaps that is why to step into these woods is to feel you are leaving behind that world of cannons and factories and escaping into an altogether different reality. But only a few steps in we come to one last bastion of that military world, a forward observation post of sorts in the borderland – but one that now serves not conquest, but knowledge, recreation, teas and cakes. Let us stop by to hear one last tale of this area's link to British colonial violence.

It calls itself Severndroog Castle. This is confusing, because it is a 19m-high dark brick tower – gothic, triangular, with three crenelated turrets – not a castle, and moreover has a name you will never hear anywhere else. And that is because that name has travelled from India, specifically from the fort of Suvarnadurg on the western coast, and been mutated in that infuriatingly random way so enjoyed by the English tongue.

India is the most massive chapter of all in the story of the British Empire, regardless of whether it is told to defend or to damn it. This country's involvement there was a long and complicated affair, but there can be no doubt it was one in which coercion, pillage and slaughter – again both physical and structural – far outweighed any cherry-picked benefits to Indians from the rule of the East India Company (1757-1858) and then the British Raj (1858-1947), and it is in connection with that violence that this idiosyncratic tower in the woods comes to be here.

The year is 1755. India at this point had been controlled by the Mughal Empire for over two hundred years. The Mughals were Muslims who had swept down from Central Asia, and at their height they controlled a mighty, prosperous and extremely diverse domain across almost all of what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as parts of Afghanistan. But by the 1750s they were in serious decline, buckling under invasions, rebellions, and a population fuming at intolerant and divisive rulers. By the time the British arrived on the scene, Mughal power had deteriorated to the point where the authorities in Delhi had little to no functional control over much of the country. Many provinces were in effect autonomous states, directed by princes or governors whose relationship to the Mughals ranged from nominal loyalty to bitter open warfare.

British involvement began with the British East India Company, which negotiated with the Mughal authorities and their local proxies to set up factories in a few coastal towns. Slowly, surely, and more spontaneously than through any grand plan, the Company's trading presence grew into a trade monopoly, and from there into an administrative structure, which interlaced with the local Indian power structures and brought in its own courts and soldiers to back it up. It grew larger and larger through arrangements and alliances with some of those local rulers against other more hostile ones, which led to conflicts and annexations, which led to more arrangements, more conflicts and more annexations, until all of a sudden the Company was the dominant power in eastern India. In that position it ascended to a new level of contests with the disintegrating Mughals, as well as with other powers rampaging through their ruins for control of the Indian subcontinent. All this took place under the initiative of the Company as a private corporation; it would not be for another hundred years that the British state would step in to formally place India under imperial rule.

One of those other challengers was the Maratha confederacy. The Marathas were a warrior people who had emerged as the dominant power in central India, and it is from them that the present-day Indian state of Maharashtra gets its name. They were no friends of the Mughals, had played a large part in their decline, and a few years later would finish them off for good. Their forces included an imposing navy which operated out of a series of forts along the western Malabar Coast, one of which was the Suvarnadurg with which we are here concerned.

But the Marathas' territories were huge, and in times of weakness they were as susceptible as the Mughals to undermining by local upstarts. So it turned out with the Angre family, which had risen to prominence a few decades earlier when

Kanhoji Angre, Admiral of the Maratha navy, gained the status of a local legend through thirty years of relentless terrorisation of any ships that challenged his power in the region. Not even the colonial might of the British, Dutch and Portuguese could stop Angre's navy, which frequently attacked and captured their merchant vessels and sold them back for massive ransoms. Each of these European powers sent fleets to attack his forts, sometimes together, and each time Angre's navy broke them to pieces, to the point that astonished and impressed European sailors started showing up to work for it as mercenaries. In the process Kanhoji Angre grew powerful enough to break away from the Maratha government altogether, leaving him effectively an independent admiral in control of a long and strategically crucial stretch of the west Indian coastline. He died in 1729 at the peak of his power, supposedly never once defeated.

His control passed to his sons, in particular Tulaji Angre, who continued the tradition of very successfully harassing all comers – including the ships of the British East India Company who by the 1750s were so fed up that they resolved to do something about him. Most of the British lacked understanding of Maratha politics, and with typical colonial condescension viewed Angre and his navy as little more than pirates. But they were also approached by the Maratha prime minister, who resented Angre's arrogant independence and was eager to borrow the Company's violence to achieve their common interest of reining him in. So at the end of March 1755 they attacked the forts together, and this time, overwhelmed by the Maratha army on land and the British fleets at sea, Angre was finally defeated and taken prisoner by the Marathas.

In time the partnership cost them dearly. The British secured huge amounts of armaments, supplies and treasure from Angre's forts and seized some of those forts themselves, while the damage done to the Maratha navy would hurt it further down the line. That happened when relations broke down and gave way to a series of ferocious wars between the Marathas and the East India Company, from which the latter would emerge victorious, in the 1810s, to find themselves in control of most of India.

And that is where we shall leave them and return to Severndroog Castle, whose origins we can now identify. The commander of the East India Company fleet that joined with the Marathas to attack Angre's forts was one William James, Commodore of the Bombay Marine charged with protecting the Company's ships along that coastline. A few years after the battle he returned to England, where he was knighted and served as a Company director and member of parliament till his

death in 1783. At this point his second wife, Jane Goddard, who inherited his wealth, decided to have a tower built as a memorial to his adventures in India. In a display of that timeless British struggle with foreign names, it was named Severndroog, after the redoubtable Golden Fort of Suvarnadurg his fleet had conquered with a cautious tactical finesse which, for all the dismissal of Angre's forces as pirates, suggests he must have respected their worth as opponents.

In India the ruins of the fort remain, and can be visited by boat from the Maharashtrian port of Harnai. And so too still stands this English tower that attempted to borrow its name, whose strategic position on Shooter's Hill made it an ideal triangulation point for the Anglo-French mapping project of the 1790s that gave birth to the Ordnance Survey, as well as an observation post during both World Wars. The tower was mismanaged by Greenwich Council and came under various privatisation and redevelopment threats in the 1990s, but local activists rose up to rescue it, and after years of concerted efforts managed to create a trust, with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, to preserve it as a historic site and restore and re-open it to the public. And so it stands today as a welcoming outpost in the woods, where anyone can climb its stairs to learn more about Britain's misadventures in India, and when they are done, proceed to the roof for a most definitely strategic view across the capital.



Castle Wood. Jack Wood. Oxleas Wood. Shepherdleas Wood. This interconnected mass of old wood is not vast, but from inside it might as well be neverending. The leaves are crisp and the air is rich with birdsong. Squirrels scamper in the undergrowth; one dozes in the cradle of a four-trunked tree. They are a concentration of whatever the opposite of London is. Dreamy, but soberly so.

The feeling is liminal: a sense of having crossed a threshold to somewhere else. Somewhere suspended out of time, above the material realms: a wood between worlds, the kind of nexus you get in video games where different paths or passageways will take you to different levels. It is a place from before national distinctions existed, and where in all significant respects they still do not. But every now and then an Englishness flits in, a fleeting reminder of the worlds to which this nexus is closest. A site where one of those expensive mansions once stood, long since vanished but haunted still by its heavy ghost of privilege; a portly elderly gentleman walking a Labrador, and also talking to it, probably about religion and politics. The dog's attention is drawn to a muddy puddle off the path. 'Don't even think about it', the man remonstrates.

London is a violent city. England, a violent country. Complicated or not, violence is violence. But maybe in places like this, just for a time, its people can leave the violence behind. Shelter in an ancient peace.

A trail turns paved, and leads out to a hilltop clearing. The man and dog follow it up to a red tiled-roofed cabin. It looks south across the rolling slope of a meadow, surrounded on all sides by woods. The low chalk ridge of the Downs rolls across the horizon. Green grass, blue sky – it is disconcerting, because everyone knows the 'green and pleasant land' the English sing of does not exist, and indeed that song's whole point can be read as a lament for the loss of that land, its green charred to black in the fire and smog of the industrial revolution. It is said a bunch of socialists tried to rebuild it after the war, till their vision was brought low by the Thatcherite revolution. More violence. But if the green and pleasant dream still lives, perhaps its vision is sustained by places like this: small patches where the landscape enables such vision, rather than crushes it.

The cabin is a café. Of course – in that space between the end of one level and the start of the next, there are supposed to be these vendors, these benches, this place of rest. More dog-walkers have taken their pause here, and of course the dogs interact. Small children play, climbing around on the picnic tables and fences.

What worlds await them on their journeys? Even in this tiny glimpse so far, there seem so many possibilities, but all united by one thing.

Violence.

Might that kid there one day found a naval dockyard, or a weapons factory? Could that one walk the path of a Charles Gordon or a William James, with gun-barrels blazing upon her word for better or for worse? Or might it be the path of a McLeod and Rose, or a Barker or a Rathbone, fated to grasp the raging behemoth of English structural violence by the horns? Perhaps that child there is Hong Xiuquan, and that one is the Mahdi, and that one Tulaji Angre.

Any one of these children might be an Amaan Shakoor, or a Tanesha Melbourne-Blake, or a Devoy Stapleton, or a Lee Rigby, or a Jo Cox. Or, they might also their killers. At the least they will be the quarrelling interpreters of others' killings.

We were all children once. Really we all still are.

And here they are, all these not-yet perpetrators, not-yet-victims and not-yet-witnesses, playing together on green and pleasant land.

Violence is complicated. And if there is one thing that the guns of Woolwich make clear, it is that the reason it is complicated is that it is systemic. People carry it out, but so rarely out of the free and informed individual choice that the myths of modernity insist all actions are. It is violent *systems* that turn their hands to violence: by leading them into it unwittingly; by encouraging them to think of it not as violence, but as liberation, or justice, or self-defence; or by making them feel afraid, or alone, or in pain. And through these systems every act of violence is connected to all the others, bound together in a superstructure of all the violence in the world.

In the end, violence has no flag. Through its systems all of us are perpetrators, and all of us are victims.

Consider the Woolwich military town, a violent place if ever there was one. It was certainly a perpetrator. The guns, bullets, shells and soldiers produced there were destined to ride out on the Thames and fan out in all directions to build the toothy maw of the British Empire, the instrument by which it brought suffering to all the people it devoured on every inhabited continent. It destroyed staggering numbers of human beings through physical violence alone, and unspeakably more when structural violence – famines, impoverishments, opium addiction and the like – is factored in. There is no defence for that. And the country responsible, still so stuck in denial, will one day have to come to terms with what it did.

Simultaneously, Woolwich was also a victim, in that hundreds of thousands of people there found their lives woven into its violence production systems, often by circumstance rather than choice, and were denied any imaginative access to the consequences of their work. They too suffered, in some cases as horrendously as their victims in the colonies – the convicts chained up in prison hulks, the workers who lost body parts to the machines, the residents who went up in flames under Nazi bombing. And from the depths of all of that violence, there were also those who said no: those who sought to steer the colonial apparatus towards more respectable outcomes, or to fight for a better deal for the workers, women, and other marginalised people around them.

So long as England is a violent country, it will continue to produce violent people. This too it will have to come to terms with. So long as it commits to ignoring the problem by framing it as a fault within individuals in an otherwise reasonable society whilst lauding its supposed ‘British values’, it will continue to miss the point entirely. But precisely because violence is complicated, could there not too be hope? If exploitative and alienating systems make people violent, could compassionate and empowering systems not heal that violence away, and channel what remains in directions that need not rob people’s futures?

We shall see.

Now in order not to track gunpowder all the way from here on, we should wash off that violence with something different. There is one more legacy the military town of Woolwich has left to the world. It is one so much more heartening than all its clanging machines and bursting shells, and that is because it managed to transcend its origins in the manufacture of violence to blast on an altogether healthier plane. Indeed, it is possibly the most powerful cannon Woolwich ever made. To this day its boom resounds deep in the hearts of hundreds of millions of people in all parts of the globe, and just occasionally – though maybe less so since the departure of its most illustrious French general – appears to bring them joy.

In 1886, a group of workers in the munitions factories came together to form a small football club. It was captained by a Scot called David Danskin, and they named it named Dial Square after the little space with a sundial in front of their workshops. It was a foolhardy venture. With rugby the dominant sport in England’s south the atmosphere was remorselessly against them. They had neither pitch nor dressing room, and each member had to dig a large chunk out

of his meagre wages just to put together enough cash to buy a football and some mismatched kit.

Their club secretary, Elijah Watkins, was not encouraged by the circumstances of their first outing against Eastern Wanderers at Millwall. The pitch, he recalled, 'eclipsed any I ever heard of or saw...it was bounded by back-yards as to about two-thirds of the area, and the other portion was – I was going to say a ditch, but I think an open sewer would be more appropriate. We could not decide who won the game because when the ball was not in the back gardens, it was in the ditch; and that was full of the loveliest material that could possibly be'. And yet, a result was recorded: 6-0, in Dial Square's favour.

Thus launched, they would soar. They renamed themselves to Royal Arsenal, the better to represent their home. In 1891 they turned professional, the first London club to do so. They joined the newly-founded national Football League, and also registered as a limited liability company, changing their name yet again, this time to Woolwich Arsenal, because 'Royal' could not be used in a company's name without special dispensation. Soon they were appearing in a new uniform: red, because then they could borrow the shirts from their goalkeeper's previous club, Nottingham Forest, who wore the same colour.

Their rise was not without setbacks. Financial difficulties, falling player subscriptions and bad losses on the pitch drove them to breaking point, a position made all the more precarious by the British war with the Boers in South Africa from 1899 to 1902. This one really was a war of naked colonial aggression, motivated by a mad rush for gold and strewn with appalling atrocities that included the first appearance of an ominous new British invention, the concentration camp. It was a costly piece of recklessness that drained soldiers from the Woolwich garrison and committed the club's members to the munitions factories even over weekends, leaving their finances so dire that they had to relinquish some of their best players to other clubs. And yet, savvy managership and determined play drove them through this crisis, and paid off with a sensational 1903-4 season that saw them promoted to the First Division.

Those who follow professional football today will be familiar with the rapid cadence of its changes of fortune, the ephemerality of its triumphs and its long, inescapable purgatories of disaster. And sure enough, the club soon tumbled back into the latter. But they soldiered on, in large part driven by their own grit, but also thanks to timely entries of skilled players, managers and rich investors – sometimes the same people. The challenge now was to find a decent ground. The

most promising option turned out to be some way across the river in Highbury, for which they finally took their leave of Woolwich in 1913. The move was a painful one. It left them buried in debt amidst the hardships of World War I, awoke the hostility of football-hating local residents, and placed them in direct collision with their new North London neighbours, Tottenham Hotspur, who remain their fiercest rivals to this day. And yet it was momentous, for it was there that they would climb to the pinnacles of English football and grow an international fan base in the tens of millions under the name they took on when they changed it again a few years later, and this time stuck with for good: The Arsenal Football Club, or simply Arsenal. The *Gunners*, as they are known to their fans.

Of all the guns of Woolwich only one remains in active service, more than fifty years after its factories closed their gates for the final time. One does not have to have any stake in English football to acknowledge that the cannon mounted on the red badge of Arsenal Football Club has proven the town's most powerful gun of all. It is not uncorroded by the bleak stain of hooliganism, prejudice and corruption that runs through English football and sport in general. Nevertheless, by choosing an ammunition of peaceful inspiration rather than bloody violence, it has conquered more people than the British Empire could ever have dreamed of.

2. Kings



A high priority must be for society to purge itself of such racist prejudice and violence which infected those who committed this crime...

Report of The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry a.k.a. The Macpherson Report, 1999

Never mind that Britain has a German royal family, a Norman ruling elite, a Greek patron saint, a Roman/Middle Eastern religion, Indian food as its national cuisine, an Arabic/Indian numeral system, a Latin alphabet and an identity predicated on a multi-ethnic, globe-spanning empire – ‘fuck the bloody foreigners’.

Akala, rapper and activist, in *Natives*, 2018

At the edge of the woods an unearthly roar rises from the boundary river. It is the Stygian A2, here called the Rochester Way Relief Road – one of several stretches where to meet the needs of modern motor traffic, the way to Dover no longer adheres to the old Watling Street. The only crossing is a graffiti-strewn bridge

with high grey walls. Let us cross to leave the wood between worlds and enter a new area. It is Eltham: a land of kings.

Eltham Park eases us through the transition. It has one foot in each world. Eltham Park North is a wild-fringed parkland which gazes at the city's far skyscrapers as though through an interdimensional window. But Eltham Park South is formally laid out and belongs physically and spiritually to the English. Its concrete trail marches through an avenue of horse chestnut trees, whose conkers the children of this country used to smash against each other's for fun before video games became necessary to shelter from broken socio-economic realities. Beside the trees runs a green iron fence; through its gaps, a golf course leers.

This is stereotypical English suburbia, and sure enough the park dumps us out amidst its residencies: detached brick houses with tiled roofs, back gardens, wooden fences, lined up along quiet tarmac streets that lead onto not-so-quiet tarmac main roads. Is it not a strange way to live? Each household clusters into its own exclusive fortress – so jealous; so lonely. And yet if not for the agrarian snapshots that puncture the scene here and there – quiet little dirt lanes out back, past wide-field stables where horses munch on hay towards you – these could be the outskirts of any city in England.

But they are not just any. They are Eltham: the land of kings. Its appearance as the converse, a land of the commoners of English modernity, is deceptive. In fact it threatens to bring us in contact with a full assortment of those big-surnamed people who, whatever their costume changes, have ever called the shots in this land.

The first hint of this dwells down another of those dirt lanes, in a little meadow concealing itself behind back gardens. In it retires an elderly red-bricked structure in a lush cape of moss. Its main body is pyramidal, with an arched entrance closed off by a grille. A long appendage sticks out of its side and ends with a square opening on top, also barred by a grille. Its name is Conduit Head, and it is the first piece we meet of something much bigger: the great complex of Eltham Palace, cherished summer house of hundreds of years of English royal dynasties. And that is where we shall come into the presence of the kings and queens of old, and of new, and at their summer recreations at that, where we might find them in different airs away from their strongholds of power – although let us manage our expectations in that regard, for everyone knows that in this part of the world, *summer* is a hypothetical term.

A land of kings, and of queens. The monarchy stands crowned, robed and glinting at the centre of English national imagery, its position there one of this country's surest constants. But to take that for granted is to miss that it is extraordinary. It has survived almost uninterrupted (though the *almost* is important) on a planet which has largely tired of monarchical rule and its tendencies to despotism. England's monarchy shared in those tendencies and invited the same responses as in other kingdoms, like violent revolution and the defenestration or lopping of its rulers. But through it all it has somehow adapted, showing a remarkable ability to metamorphose for its life through challenges that buried far heavier crowns elsewhere. It has phased from swaggering absolutism into its politically subdued but symbolic role of the present, while its kings and queens have in turns been nation-builders, slave-traders, tyrants, visionaries, victims, maniacs, and sometimes all of the above – yet the institution beneath remains intact. Today the media and parts of the public ridicule it to the heavens for a pastime, while more serious critics call it at best a pretentious irrelevance, at worst a nucleus of sordid colonial legacies and inherited class privilege in a country which has a serious problem with both. A passer-by might guess that the monarchy is about to get either laughed or damned into the sea at any moment. But its occupants have endured far rougher treatment in their time; the present incumbent, at least, has yet to be put on trial by her own government, or be driven to hide in a tree trunk from a hostile populace seeking to kill her. Barring some disaster at least that bad, the monarchy still clings to a critical mass of respect and a capacity to adapt that will see it subsist for some time yet unless it does something ridiculously stupid.

Whether it will subsist as the monarchy of a United Kingdom, or indeed a united England, is another matter.

Conduit Head, our red-brick friend, was its summer palace's water supply, no trivial matter in a country for whom procurement of safe water was never a strong point. The structure probably appeared under Henry VII, establisher of the Tudor dynasty, and would have collected water from nearby springs (hence Conduit *Head*), filtered it from chamber to chamber, then piped it off to the (many) taps of Eltham Palace. Nowadays it collects a sadder cargo: plastic bottles and aluminium drinks cans, discarded by passers-by into the bed of dry leaves in its settling tank. Let us reflect on what that tells us about the English, and move on.

The palace itself awaits. Its story spans a thousand years, and it has a great deal to tell us about this land and the types its people put in charge, so we shall spend

a fair share of time there. But before that we must make a detour to the north, for there is another king we must meet first. This is a monarch whose name you will not find on the lists in textbooks, yet his reign has been the most influential of all, and the man who shall introduce him to us is called Stephen Lawrence.

Stephen Lawrence, eighteen years old, was a native of Plumstead to the north of Shooter's Hill. A black British man of Jamaican descent, he was an aspiring architect and enthusiastic athlete studying design technology and English literature. On the evening of 22nd April 1993 he was on his way home with a friend, Duwayne Brooks, waiting at a bus stop on Well Hall Road which leads north from here to link Eltham to the Woolwich Ferry. Lawrence wandered up the pavement to see if a bus was coming, then turned and headed back to the bus stop, whereupon Brooks called out to ask if he had seen one. This call appeared to draw the attention of a group of five or six white youths on the other side of the road, who responded, to immortal opprobrium: 'what, what nigger?'

In moments they had swept across the road and set upon Lawrence in a sustained assault, beating and kicking him to the ground before dealing him two deep stabs with a knife, both strikes severing arteries before penetrating through to his lungs. It was noisy and merciless, and when they were done the assailants escaped into the night. Lawrence staggered to his feet, wounds gushing with blood beneath his layers of clothing, and attempted to follow the horrified Brooks who was fleeing and attempting to call for help, but after 120 metres – a remarkable distance, given his injuries – he fell once more. By the time the ambulance arrived, Stephen Lawrence was dead.

If the murder was as shocking as anything we have seen in our brief consideration of English violence, what followed turned it into a defining historical event. Within a few days five prime suspects had been identified, most of whom were already known to the police for previous racist attacks, but it was not until May and June, the day after a visiting Nelson Mandela had boosted the case's publicity, that they were arrested and charged with murder. Soon after, the charges were dropped on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

One year later Lawrence's family, frustrated by the lack of information and the patronising attitude of the police, managed to launch their own prosecution of the five suspects. Among the evidence was chilling footage from police surveillance cameras, revealing those youths to be dedicated racists who prowled

with machetes looking for trouble and bantered about the gratuitous carnage they longed to inflict on black people. Nonetheless, three were acquitted and two had their charges dropped at the start. Under laws dating back to Norman rule, people in England could not be put on trial more than once for the same crime: the suspects were now immune to further prosecution. But then in 1997, four years after the murder, matters came to a head when in the first official acknowledgement of the nature of the crime, the coroner's inquest found Lawrence had been killed 'in a completely unprovoked racist attack by five white youths'.

By this stage it was clear that something had gone seriously wrong in the original police investigation. Facing a media and public outcry, Jack Straw, the Home Secretary (the British interior minister) in the newly-elected Labour Party government of Tony Blair, ordered a full public inquiry into 'the matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence', to be led by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny – a High Court judge and hereditary chief of the Scottish Clan Macpherson. The inquiry worked for almost two years, hearing evidence from 88 witnesses and examining more than 100,000 pages of documents. The Macpherson Report, as it was popularly called when it came out in February 1999, was dynamite. Its clear-worded assessment, presented in 47 chapters over almost 400 pages, condemned a litany of 'fundamental errors' made by the police in its handling of Lawrence's death, including in its liaisons with the Lawrence family, its investigation of the suspects, its attitude to evidence, and its insensitive behaviour towards the prime witness, Duwayne Brooks, who had seen his friend slaughtered in front of him. Its conclusions were clear. The investigation had been marred by 'professional incompetence', 'a failure of leadership by senior officials', and worst of all, in a damnation which has resonated far beyond the story from which it emerged: *institutional racism*.

The gravity of those two words might not be self-evident. Perhaps the accounts of two among those who gave evidence to the inquiry, Doreen and Neville Lawrence – Stephen's mother and father – help to illustrate it. In describing their experience of dealing with the police, Neville stated that 'it is clear to me that the police come in with the idea that the family of black victims are violent criminals that are not to be trusted'. Doreen put it starker still: 'no black person can ever trust the police'.

Individual sentiments, biased by personal trauma? No: the general condition of English society, on which it is hard to better the summary of the writer, musician and activist Akala:

In some cultures, they mark your entrance into adulthood with a spiritual quest, a physical challenge, a camping trip, a commune with the elders or with an exchange of long-held ancestral wisdom. In the inner cities of the UK, teenage boys racialised as black are instead introduced to the fact that the protection of the law does not apply to our bodies. There is no equality before the law. The whole of society knows this to be true, yet they pretend otherwise.

We are almost ready to meet the king we came for, but it will better prepare us to follow this story through to the end, or rather to the present, because it is still not over. The Macpherson Report instigated wide-ranging changes to police culture and practices, including a reform of the ancient law protecting people from trial for the same crime twice: re-trial was now permitted for serious crimes if new evidence warranted it. And in 2007, after police inspector Clive Driscoll took it on himself to thoroughly re-examine the case, new forensic evidence did emerge, and at last, in 2012, two of the five suspects – Gary Dobson and David Norris – were re-tried, found guilty of Lawrence’s murder, and sentenced to life in prison. But the institutional racism of London’s police proved tougher to dislodge, and its poor relationship with black communities again came to the fore in August 2011 when they shot dead a young black man in Tottenham, Mark Duggan, and so set off that year’s eruption of riots in English cities. Then in 2013, more baleful evidence emerged suggesting the police had not only bungled the original Lawrence murder investigation, but had been infiltrating the Lawrence family’s campaign all along in search of ways to disrupt their credibility and bring an end to public pressure for a proper investigation. On top of that, additional evidence suggested that Clifford Norris, father of David Norris and a powerful drug smuggler, had used his contacts with corrupt police officers to protect his son and the other killers from the investigation. These explosive revelations led to a whole new set of investigations, among them a fresh public inquiry into the dirty tricks of undercover policing. As of the time of our journey these appear to have petered out into the usual miasma of setbacks and ‘insufficient evidence’, as has the effort to bring Stephen Lawrence’s remaining killers to justice. Twenty-five years after his death, his story is far from finished.

Stand, then, to meet that most aged yet vigorous of England's kings: the usurper, King Racism. He (or she, or it, for this is a monarch who transcends gender) is a tyrant who in every age has brought down his boot-heel in the face of English society and ground it into a mess of blood and bone. We already heard the dread bay of his battle-horn in the distance from amidst the factories of the Royal Arsenal, but having taken our first steps into Eltham we must now confront him face-to-face, where his bloodied blades brought about the most nationally significant event in this district's history.

This king has killed more people than you have met. We dare not go further without paying him his due.

Let us be clear from the outset that by *racism* we are not, here, speaking simply of that nasty habit of human societies to distinguish between favoured in-groups ('us') and feared out-groups ('them'), and to behave with violence and cruelty towards the latter. That is a problem that afflicts societies in many times and places and exceeds the scope of our exploration. Racism here means something more: a special experience among the English, their European neighbours, and their offshoot settler cultures around the world like the United States and Australia, for most of whom it became their original sin and abiding destroyer. Ethnic prejudice is a menace; but racism as a comprehensive prejudice system is a monster on a whole other order of magnitude, a historically-constituted apparatus of imaginations and institutions put together piece by piece, on purpose – and a great deal of whose assembly was done in England.

That assembly produced that most pernicious idea we now call *race*. This idea held – and holds – that as a matter of objective fact, humans can be divided into different groups, or *races*, identified by superficial factors like skin colour; that a given race group possesses characteristics that are intrinsic, heritable, and universal to every member of it; and that these races can be ranked in hierarchies, generally with those of paler skin at the superior end and those of a darker pigmentation towards the bottom.

These hierarchies were and are applied to all aspects of life. Hence they imagine race into existence in terms of a moral hierarchy of good races versus evil races; a civilisational hierarchy of advanced versus primitive races; a psychological hierarchy of rational versus impulsive races; a political hierarchy of races fit to rule versus races in need of domination; a developmental hierarchy of mature,

advanced, adult-like races versus primitive, child-like races; and an economic hierarchy of hard-working and prosperous races versus races lazy and disposed to poverty. Recall Akala's description: not *black boys*, but *boys racialised as black*. Race is not the colour of their skin, but the mass of inferiorising beliefs attached to that colour by the brains – not the eyes – of the beholders.

As at the individual level, so at the universal. It became standard for racist societies to celebrate themselves as inherently heroic, hard-working and virtuous, gleaming in the light, while projecting all emotional instability, laziness, submissiveness and scary barbarism out onto the inferior and usually dark-skinned other. We are back with Chinua Achebe as he bursts into the cabin on the boat off Gravesend and administers his beatdown to Conrad's Marlow.

The idea was imaginary. Race had never existed. It exists now only in so far as it was believed with such arrogance and passion as to reshape the world in its service. Belief in any scientific basis for it has been discredited in its totality by modern genetics, not to mention its horrific consummation under the Nazis, and at any rate any person can observe in any land that human beings are diverse, regardless of their skin colours, prevailing cultural tendencies, or of misguided social attempts, all too common, to suppress that diversity. Nonetheless, in the face of all that, belief in race not only survives but continues to dominate, and that alone is testament to King Racism's frightful power.

Where that power comes from, or where the idea of race itself came from, is its own universe of problems. Encountering it as wayfarers, we can do little more than dip in, rummage around, then pull out before its poison overcomes us. Yet if our purpose is to build some understanding of the English, this dabble should suffice to give us the least we require: first, an acknowledgement that racism is one of the most important, yet least acknowledged, historical forces that have shaped the modern English nation; and second, a sense of least of some of those historical tributaries which flowed together, in this country's imperial age, into a river of blood which still divides the English into those who sail comfortable and oblivious in airtight boats, and those pushed overboard to swim for their lives.

If there was a threshold, it was science. How did racism survive the scientific revolution – that period when the self-styled civilised nations of Europe, with England at their helm, supposedly graduated into an enlightened way of life in

which they put superstitions and prejudices behind them and turned to facts, objective reasoning, and scientific method to light the way?

The answer of course is that they never did. Instead of waving goodbye to myths of ethnic hierarchy as the evidence of diversity dispelled them forever, they instead raised those myths upon their shoulders and carried them straight into the corridors, laboratories and lecture halls of the scientific establishment, whose very infrastructure they turned into a foundry to hammer onto those prejudices an unbreakable suit of armour: theories, ideologies, of race. It was in the clothing of objective science, which this process perverted to its roots, that these baneful notions of superior and inferior races would from then on be presented as truths of the universe. The English scientific establishment was at the vanguard of this, from where it spread to the corruption of English social beliefs and practices. That is why even if professional science has long since moved on, lay society has been far slower to recover.

Racism, by that process, became a creature of a completely different nature from mere suspicion towards outsiders. It was a systematic enshrinement of irrational prejudices into a full-scale belief system about the superiority of some categories of people over others, done with all the cold and calculating logic of the European scientific machine. It grew into a basis for entire academic disciplines like eugenics, craniology*, and Social Darwinism, theorised and implemented by respected scholars, writers and policymakers in all the decorations of a self-congratulating Enlightenment Europe.

This was what made it different. That was why the racism of the European empires was distinct from the us-versus-them instincts that plague humankind in most places and times. It had its central nervous system bound to the European scientific revolution, whose entire point had been to try and get beyond those instincts, prejudices, superstitions and vested interests to see the world in all its realness and complexity. The moment they swerved towards scientific values, the notion of race should have been one of the first things to be relinquished. Instead they raised it to the stars.

Then came its feeding hour.

The ideology of race was infused into a political mission of either elevating or controlling what the Europeans decided were the lesser races of Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Pacific. In practice this meant pillaging the societies, cultures

* The pseudoscience of measuring the sizes and shapes of people's skulls, especially to identify imagined differences and signs of superiority and inferiority between races.

and homelands of peoples they saw as little better than vermin, and in some cases wiping them out completely. To be sure, this was already centuries underway when racism became “scientific”; indeed, it was this galloping hunger for land and resources, and the moral inconvenience of the foreigners at the expense of whose suffering it came, that perhaps did most to drive the determination of them as less than human so as to erase them from the moral and economic equation. The Spanish and Portuguese had got started in the Canary Islands and the Americas in the fifteenth century, then the Dutch in maritime Asia and South Africa, and when the English’s turn came sheer greed sufficed to unfurl, with them at the helm, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, by common consensus one of the worst horrors ever perpetrated on the face of this Earth. Nor can this be shelved as merely some spirit of the time. Plenty of people in the guilty societies knew full well these were crimes against humanity, and there were always those – this is where they cite the famous names like William Wilberforce and Bartolomé de las Casas – with the courage to say so. What changed when this emergent racism picked up a lab coat was that it gained the clout to sweep aside that growing counter-chorus, and instead super-charge its vision with comforting justifications that all that suffering was an inevitable part of nature, whose law was simply that the strong consume the weak. Accepting this was now an *educated* attitude; objecting to it was *naïve*. At last, King Racism could openly and shamelessly celebrate his endgame: genocide.

From there on this thinking inspired the European empires’ colonial tempest of exploitations, massacres, wars and exterminations of peoples they saw as closer to monkeys and other apes than fellow humans, before it finally turned round and devoured the Europeans themselves in the atrocities of the Holocaust. That was the logical culmination of this process, and let us be clear about it. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were not aberrations that climbed into our world from some interdimensional pit. They were mainstream human beings made of exactly these beliefs nurtured under the long reign of King Racism in Europe, and their deeds were but more of what his citizens, the English included, had been doing across the world all along. The Nazis are not remembered as the supreme evil in European historical memory because they dehumanised and butchered millions of people. They are remembered because they did it to *white people in Europe*. Had they done it to dark-skinned people in the Americas, Africa and Asia as had been the practice till then, their continent would have forgotten them just as easily as it forgets those who did it in the Caribbean, Patagonia, Tasmania or the

Canary Islands – all exterminations of entire peoples in the same tradition. This is the same reason they also forget, say, the *Porajmos*, or ‘devouring’ – that part of the Holocaust that happened to hundreds of thousands of Romani people, whom the Europeans even now do not accept as *white* and therefore fully human.

King Racism reigned. The entire world had been served upon his plate, and how he fed. That was always his purpose, the final destination of his rule. So it was for the charismatic Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, whose every progressive ambition, every high-minded desire to bring the blessings of civilisation to his dark-skinned brothers and sisters in the colonies as set forth in his magnificent pamphlet, collapsed to but one simple conclusion, scrawled in a maddened hand across the text: *Exterminate all the brutes!*

Extermination. That is the dreamed-of destiny in each of the millions of tiny flecks of racist expression in England and beyond. Behind all its defensive euphemisms – civilisation, democracy, development, culture, managed migration, law and order – that is the spark of will that truly lurks. Genocide.

England became a racist society. Tainted at every level by the poison of race-based beliefs, its worldwide crimes in their name would desecrate and waste away the branches that bound it – have always bound it – to the wider family of humankind.

That it remains a racist society is beyond honourable question. What happened to Stephen Lawrence and his family gives us just one cross-section of that reality: in England, people regarded as of inferior race are at heightened risk of being assaulted and killed because of it. But beyond the physical violence there is also the structural. London’s Metropolitan Police failed to investigate Lawrence’s murder with the proper rigour and competence because as a dark-skinned person, his death was considered not important enough to warrant due process. On top of that, they carried out violations against his parents’ campaign that surely any society with belief in rule of law would consider reprehensible. *Institutional racism*: the *institutions* that bind these people into a nation, in this case those of law and justice, privilege individuals considered of superior race, and discriminate against those considered inferior – a problem borne out by countless other accounts from dark-skinned people and communities in England, whose typical experience of the police is of an ever-looming menace which harasses them, beats them up, stops and searches and arbitrarily arrests them with impunity: not a

protector of their rights, but an abuser, a humiliator, something that happens to them. Rule of law in England is the privilege of people who meet certain conditions, and the foremost of those is being born with the correct shade of skin.

Yet there are more complicated forces at work here. Certainly it is dark-skinned people of African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and South Asian connection who endure the worst of English racism today. But in the great convulsions over the referendum to leave the EU, a sizeable wedge of the cake of English racism is also brandished at pale-skinned Europeans from places like Poland or Romania. There is also a definite religious dimension in that Muslims are a special target of violent demonisation in England these days. So what is going on here?

Well, racial differences are by definition not based in facts, so racism has no qualms bending its rules to suit the circumstances and thereby having its cake and eating it. Historically, too, English racism has been flexible – a trait it may have inherited from long before its development into a structured ideology, for it used to be not Africans nor Asians but indeed, other Europeans who were the target of derogatory stereotypes that twisted and turned as fast as England changed its choices of enemies. As an island people, or rather a peninsula in denial, the English have xenophobic form in seething behind the windows of what they see as their island fortress, from where they peep down at the carousel of foreign barbarians they are convinced are out to get them. They have fought with the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish, the French, the Dutch, the Danes, the Spanish and the Germans – all their immediate neighbours – among many others, with each of these peoples having its turns as the principal phantom of the day.* Their struggles with the French in particular, in earlier centuries when the English controlled lands on both sides of the Channel, were the very abattoir in which an English national consciousness was carved out, with their defeat and relegation to this island in this so-called Hundred Years' War the spur to search instead for a territorial destiny as an *island country*. That is why their short recent decades of cooperation under the EU are an anomaly. Rather the English are heirs to a millennium of fear at their continent as the enemy at the gates, and the result, even now, is an exceptionalist sense of themselves as a chosen people superior to the perennially conniving troublemakers of Europe. It has also given them centuries of practice switching their animosity to a new target, immediately

* We should also mention Iceland, with whom the British got involved in some vicious clashes over fishing rights in the North Atlantic – the so-called 'Cod Wars' – in the 1950s and 70s. Iceland won all three.

convincing themselves it deserves it absolutely and forever – at least until the next switch.

This sense of superiority, however murderous at its heights, is of a separate species from the racist doom-scripts they visited upon the darker-skinned peoples of the world. But we see a closer resemblance when we bring religion into the picture, because here the Islamophobia of today has a much closer precedent: namely, the hatred of Roman Catholics that used to rampage through English veins. This has since subsided, so the English of today may find it harder to imagine that for four centuries it was every part as virulent as racist caricatures of Muslims today (and racist they are, in that they merge in English imagination into ethno-cultural stereotypes of brown-skinned Arabs with beards and headscarves). In the same pattern, Catholics were reviled as irredeemable terrorists, whose loyalty to alien powers and the dreadfully un-English values of ‘popery’ – a word whose panic-triggering effects echo those of *jihad* today – made them a rancorous, rapid-breeding threat to all that was pure and clean about a safe, sovereign, hard-working and morally upright England.

We must take a few moments to explore the historical processes from which this came about, because they feed critical ingredients into the English racism of today. In short, a great deal of the early English story concerned the power struggle between *political* authorities – that is, its kings and queens – and Christian *religious* authorities, specifically the Pope in Rome and his minions here, the bishops, who held real clout in this land. Then in the sixteenth century European Christianity went through the Reformation, in which religious dissidents called the Protestants declared that they had had enough of the corrupt and nefarious power of the Pope and his Roman church, and took up arms to throw his influence out of their lands. Europe split dramatically along religious lines. Some peoples became Protestant, others remained Catholics loyal to the Pope, and many others still had trouble deciding. Together they ushered in a new chapter of European history where they all had at it with each other over religious differences through two hundred years of stupendous bloodletting, which only ended when they realised how senseless this was and, in order to stop it, invented *sovereignty* – the idea that what happens inside one country’s borders, including choices about religion, are not other countries’ business – thus giving rise, eventually, to the territorially-defined sovereign state model of today.

Neither Catholic nor Protestant Christianity was morally unblemished at the best of times, and now as each insisted that it alone was the sole and true

representative of their One True God's intent, the two competed for ruthlessness at smashing alternative views of the world and persecuting dissidents in a paranoid and bloodthirsty race to the bottom. The Catholic church bellowed with all the authoritarian arrogance of its long and wealthy incumbency, guarding the memory of its thousand-and-a-half year monopoly over spiritual power in Europe; power which now came as much from the barrel of a cannon or the dripping tip of an inquisitor's cruel instruments as from inscrutable dogma and sanctimonious raving. The Protestants for their part were iconoclasts bent on sweeping away everything that stood between them and the literal word of the Bible, every speck of dirt they blamed the Catholics for allowing to contaminate their relationship with its truth: altars, crucifixes, curtains, statues, images, festivals, the scripts of sermons and prayers and so forth, anything at all that might serve as a symbol or vehicle for the Pope's corrupting influence. These rebels further branched into a mosaic of different identities, the most consequent of which in England snowballed into the all-suppressing, anti-everything juggernaut of the Puritans who at their most intense not only showed murderous hostility to all other approaches to religion – the more peaceable and tolerant, the more deserving of lynching – but also shut down theatres, dancing, card games, even the celebration of Christmas. Yes, these people literally opposed fun, and when they got fed up of England as a lost cause, many went off to settle in Northern Ireland or America so they could abolish fun there too. Those Christian extremists today who seethe at imagined plots to abolish Christmas might do better to reflect how the only people to ever actually do that in this country were their own Protestant forebears, who at the height of their power literally had patrols of soldiers entering people's houses to check they were not cooking Christmas dinners. Needless to say, the Protestants could be as intolerant of dissent as their Catholic adversaries, and a great many victims of either side's persecutions would have been ordinary folk who as real human beings were too complex to meet these factions' impossible standards.

It would be unfair to represent all Catholics and all Protestants with these images of bloodthirsty bigotry, so let us acknowledge that then as now, there was nothing inherent in the depths of either movement that excused their followers from being reasonable and compassionate human beings as a great many certainly were. But the fifteenth-century schism in European political Christianity was a time neither of reason nor compassion. There is no religious hatred so cannibalistic as that against people who hold the same religion as oneself but in a

different way, and the sheer length of the butcher's bill delivered in the name of these competing visions requires that we recognise what they became at their worst, and remember their casualties whenever the notion of Europe as a 'Christian civilisation' comes up in conversation.

England was an integral part of this, but its Reformation experience was typically confused. The Pope's power was banished under the Tudor king Henry VIII, not on account of any high-minded theological principle, but because the king wanted to cancel his marriage to his first wife, the Spanish princess Katherine, so that children produced by sleeping with his second, Anne Boleyn, would be recognised as his dynastic heirs. Marriage laws were the domain of the church, still a separate locus of authority, so this required the Pope's approval. When that approval was not forthcoming, Henry's response, by the time of its full maturation, was ruthless and total: the clergy were dragged under royal control, monasteries up and down the country were smashed and plundered, abbots and religious dissidents had their heads handed to them, and for the first time Henry cemented the monarch's absolute power over *both* religion and politics in England. But because this was more about Henry's political ego than the principle of it, it left no permanent arrangement after he died. Instead the English got a bitter sequence of back-and-forth struggles in which the smugly dominant parties of one day were the terrified and persecuted fugitives of the next. Henry's son, the Protestant boy-king Edward VI, continued the assault on the monasteries and crushed Catholic rebellions during his short six-year rule. He was succeeded by his resolutely Catholic half-sister Mary I, who for five years swung the pendulum into reverse as far as it would go, burning hundreds of Protestants at the stake in some of England's most well-documented religious mass atrocities. It was only Henry's other daughter, the Protestant Elizabeth I (who Mary had locked in the Tower), who laid the foundations for a longer-term stability by confirming the monarch as the supreme head of the English church – this time for good. It is a status still held by her present-day successor and namesake, Elizabeth II.

From then on the triumphant position of the English Christian establishment would be that Protestants were good and Catholics bad, but it had been about the most shambolic, divisive, and psychologically ruinous way possible to arrive at such a settlement, and the bad blood and lingering resentment it spawned would feed English hatred of the Catholic church for centuries to come. To make matters worse, all that shaking, slicing and burning also meant that the English Protestants had themselves split into many factions, including the Puritans, and each was

went to panic at the others' diversities as signals of a relapse back to popery. Over the next hundred years these sparkling, flaring circuits of criss-crossing prejudice would rip across the Stuart dynasty and burst in violent flashpoints. They would stamp the image of Catholics as terrorists into the national consciousness when a bunch of Catholic conspirators attempted to bomb parliament in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605: an analogue to Islamist bombings in the present day, whose failure, and the ritual slaughter of its participants, has been celebrated ever since in the Bonfire Night fireworks of November 5th. The same prejudices would then bring all of Britain to its knees in the civil wars, before hounding the last Stuart king, James II, another Catholic, out of the country in the revolution of 1688. And this time Catholics were barred from the throne once and for all, though James's supporters never gave up, and in the next century would make no fewer than half a dozen attempts to get back in with the help of foreign powers like the French as well as Catholics who still lurked in Britain, especially the Stuarts' ancestral Scotland – never successfully, often bloodily, but always to the effect of a new shot of fuel into the English anti-Catholic panic machine.

In the 1790s, as the French Revolution started munching on the bones of its own Catholic clerics while fixing the English with its stare, people started remembering that Catholics were humans too. Gradually their hostility wound down, and by World War II it was largely forgotten (unless it involved Ireland, which we shall come to). But whenever you are kept awake by the drunken whooping and banging on the night of November 5th, you should know that that is a remnant of days when it was considered normal to tremble in fear at the puppets of the Pope, who supposedly prowled everywhere, from illegal churches in the shadows of seedy countryside villages to the space under your bed, just waiting for the chance to leap up and supplant civilised, Protestant 'British values' with their savage rituals and alien dogmas.

Sound familiar? Surely this is the ancestor of modern Islamophobia, which is not a reaction to any threat to Britain on the scale of the Roman Catholic church of old (though to recognise that is by no means to excuse the persecutions of Catholics for half a second). Political violence by Muslims in England has been comparatively rare, and does not even begin to compare with violence by the English against Muslims elsewhere. When it has occurred, such as in the terror attacks of 2005 and 2017 and the murder of Lee Rigby, it was committed not on the authority of external forces with credible designs on capturing Britain, like the Pope or the Stuart pretenders were, but by extremists whose absurd beliefs are

rejected by the vast majority of their own religious communities. Nor does it justify such violence to admit that it, too, has been fuelled by bitter alienations and grievances stemming from a far longer story of British abuses against Muslim populations, which we glimpsed in the adventures of Major-General Gordon; these have taken place largely outside Britain, the supreme case being the fate of Palestine, and most recently the 2003 invasion of Iraq and British-assisted laying to waste of Yemen by Saudi Arabia.

As such, the Islamophobia which forms a core component of modern English racism is not just a reaction to recent Islamist attacks. Rather it might be seen as the continuation of a tradition of fear and hatred of ethno-religious difference, and of the stereotypes and propaganda these produce, that go back at least as far as that long animus towards Catholicism – an animus begun, perhaps familiarly, by leaders who played up its image as a hostile foreign element on English soil, which by its monsterring and violent expulsion, shaped the very mould of Englishness as an ethno-territorial concept jealous of its imagined purity and independence.

Is it plausible that the anti-Catholic hatred that grew out of this blew up a massive cultural prejudice-space in the English psyche which, once carved out, has ever needed an inferior foreign enemy to fill it? That when nothing remained to support a fear of Catholics, it was communists who replaced them in that void? The echoes of that in English imagination can still be heard when they speak of Russia as some monolithic Mordor, rather than a real and complicated country whose problems with violent autocracy emerge not from nature but from historical experience. And with the sense that the threat from communism has passed, it is at last the apparition of Islam that has been hauled up on ropes to fill the space. Who will it be next?

By now we might appear to have run off on an almighty tangent from that street in Eltham. We have not. Every part of this has been necessary, although if you grew up in the English education system then I ask your pardon for dragging you back through those long-winded dramas you slept through in history classes. But we have to understand these strands, because it is only their combination that could produce the concoction of modern English racism from which leapt forth the five young men who killed Stephen Lawrence. The impulse that this is an exceptional island nation at the apex of a pyramid of humanity, which grew out of

constant conflicts with the continent; the sustained exercise in raw, shrieking terror and hatred towards an ethno-religious other, born of the bloody indecision of the English Reformation; the cold-hearted rationalisation of prejudice under early-modern pretensions to science; the economic interest groups that rode their way to power on the wealth they amassed through the enslavement of human beings and the plunder of foreign riches; none of these things could have done it alone. It was only by weaving them together that the British Empire assembled prejudice into the *system* of English racism: a constitutional machine, unimaginably vaster than the sum of its parts, which has kept itself going ever since on account of the reasoned certainty, unstoppable emotional zeal, and supreme impulse of arrogance allied within. The behaviour of the Eltham five – Neil and Jamie Acourt, Gary Dobson, David Norris, and Luke Knight – when they struck down Stephen Lawrence, then paraded their swaggering contempt through the judicial processes that followed, was a theatre of that system's triumph into a new millennium. And still the English are in denial.

Here then are the main strands of English racism. Their intertwining becomes a lake too deep to plunge with our current equipment, but if you wish to pursue them – and you should – there are further groups of people worth consulting. The most obvious is black English or British people, of whom little needs to be added here other than that England should listen to them more. Another is the Jews. Jewish people have lived in England since at least Norman times and their experience of antisemitic bigotry here goes back equally far, with all the same uncompromising hysteria faced by the Catholics. That they were also put through comparable hells in other European countries and suffered ultimate catastrophe when the monster of genocidal European racism, thus far deployed on the wider world, returned to consume the continent that birthed it, joins rather than separates the English to the wider story of that racism. So too, here, do the travelling Romani have much to teach us.

But if there is one group of people who know well the full range of depredations from King Racism's reign over the English, it is their next-door neighbours, the Irish. In a thousand years on Ireland we see all those ingredients of English racism acting independently through the centuries of colonisation, settlement and conflict, then together as the pseudoscientists got hold of the accumulated caricatures of broken beer bottles, pigs, filth, indolence, Catholic priests and crowds of bawling offspring, and empowered these into formal theories that the Irish were an inferior people to be controlled, brutalised, dispossessed,

extinguished by force and famine, and certainly never listened to. This was the upshot of a millennium of English interventions, misadventures and debacles on Ireland that spun into a neverending cycle of blood and guts, especially once they became permanently invested there with their settler colony in Ulster, of which the unique sub-polity of Northern Ireland is the result. Every calamity dragged the English deeper into the mess they had created, but their condescending prejudices, which grew ever more preposterous with each ounce of pain exchanged, left them incapable of understanding the Irish and so guaranteed the reproduction of that suffering from one generation to the next. No-one is better placed than the Irish to tell you of the transformations of English racism.

Perhaps now we can understand what the model and activist Munroe Bergdorf meant when, in August 2017, she remarked on social media that ‘all white people’ were complicit in racial violence and that their ‘entire existence is drenched in racism’. What she meant was not, of course, that each and every pale-skinned individual acts out a conscious belief in racial hierarchy. The ballistic truth in her words was the very opposite: that as a *system*, racism is built into every layer of English and other white societies through historical norms and practices; that these have benefited or punished people in accordance with how high or low they are on those hierarchies; and that those outcomes are inherited, thus, in general, systemically offering those at the top more affirming social environments, better opportunities in work, income, housing, access to services like healthcare and education, and lower likelihood of experiencing racist exclusion or violence *even if they are not aware of it or do not hold racist views themselves*, while at the same time depositing a likewise *inherited* unfair struggle on those at the bottom.

In other words, the shape of English society today is the product of King Racism’s reign, in the same way that it is the product of the Plantagenets, the Tudors and the Stuarts. And whether they like it or not, whether they want to be or not, everyone who lives in this country is one of King Racism’s children.

It is in the face of that that we find the true significance of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry’s utterance of those two words, *institutional racism*. It was not that an essential pillar of English society – the police – had people in it who were racist or had behaved in racist ways. That multiplier, *institutional*, placed its meaning on another level entirely: an acknowledgement that the pillar itself was built of an inherited racism that corrupted every movement in the edifice it held up. It influenced police officers’ behaviour, and compromised their function as representatives of a law before which every citizen is supposed to be equal,

whether or not those officers were aware of it at the time. That is the crux of King Racism's power.

Look around English society and you will see that inheritance everywhere. Killings like Stephen Lawrence's, and abuses of police power against ethnic minority communities; the scapegoating of immigrants for stealing English jobs and polluting English culture; the abiding narrative of continental Europeans as the bad guys, especially as embodied in the bureaucracy of the EU; passive disdain for the Scots and the Irish, and hence the failure to understand pro-independence sentiment among the former and the anxieties of the latter about the consequences of leaving the EU for the Northern Ireland peace process; the casual cruelties of the 'hostile environment' policy by which wanton deportations, splitting up families, separating caregivers from dependents, and corruption of doctors, teachers and other services into collaborators in such evil, has become a blood sport for Home Office ministers and civil servants as well as all those citizens who participate; persisting fringe pseudoscience, which attempts to keep serious ideas of biologically-rooted racial differences alive; and enduring images of the cultures of Africa and Asia as dark and inferior otherworlds, fundamentally different from white people's and never to be mutually understood. We see how politicians, from Enoch Powell then to Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson now, always take the lead in setting the tone and legitimising racist expressions. We see the continuing role of the media who flesh out the stereotypes and work the pumps that keep the bile circulating, just as they used to wheel off propaganda prints of Catholics impaling babies. Most of all, we see it in the continuing use of that word and concept that had no basis in reality but now has been artificially grafted into it, *race*; and in the paradox of how England, a nation with no ethnic bedrock, built by generations of immigrants, cowers and claws at itself in fear of crude and fantastical caricatures of outsiders.

The 'hostile environment' policy alone, most symbolised by but far from limited to the Windrush scandal, has generated such abject suffering, and such gleeful malice in its carrying out, that the future generations of any reasonable England will no doubt look back on it as a crime against humanity. Indeed, it would seem to fit the description of an attempt to 'render an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from an area' – that is, the United Nations definition of ethnic cleansing. If they fail to acknowledge it as such today, history allows only one explanation. When they see in a person what their instincts parse as markers of foreignness, especially in skin colour, that

person is shunted in their minds to the bottom of a racial hierarchy where they no longer count as human and their suffering merits no care. And beneath it all, supporting it all, runs that same dream, the same ultimate aspiration of all of these sentiments: *Exterminate all the brutes!*

Consider, too, extermination in the wider context: what they euphemistically call the migrant crisis. That is, the tens of thousands of refugees who come to Europe fleeing hardship and persecution, only to be drowned in the Channel or the Mediterranean Sea, abused by people traffickers, shot or crushed by tyres or suffocated in cargo trucks as they desperately search for ways past sealed borders, or otherwise rounded up, torn from their families and herded into detention camps as a matter of deliberate government policy to placate a populace which calls them at best *economic migrants*, at worst *swarms* and *cockroaches*. They are able to do this because they have inherited those attitudes, subconscious or otherwise, that these people from Africa, Asia and Latin are inferior *rac*es, and thus that their perishing is not significant, is even desirable. It is the same mix of intent, ideology, and indifference that has driven all Europe's genocides, and that this too qualifies as genocidal behaviour must be left in no doubt. King Racism is back with a vengeance. Indeed, he never left.

But here is Stephen Lawrence's legacy. In those words, *institutional racism*, dwells a recognition that racism is a problem embedded in the values, norms and practices of English society, and one that emerges from substantial historical processes. And that judgement was uttered, no less, in the conclusions of a public inquiry, itself one of the highest limbs of English officialdom, appointed by a Cabinet minister and led by a High Court judge. There had been hints of such recognition before, such as the Race Relations Acts and the Scarman Report after the Brixton riots of 1981; the judge overseeing the latter, Lord Scarman, had warned that racial disadvantage was 'a fact of current British life', and that 'urgent action' was needed to prevent it becoming 'an endemic, ineradicable disease threatening the very survival of our society'. But as for so formal and explicit an admission amounting to a rebuke of one part of the national establishment by another, this was the first time England had done anything of the sort.

After ages of racist rampage, and ages more of denial, England had finally given its first official admission of 'Yes, this is a racist country, and that is a problem'. Or to put it another way: 'No. We are the brutes.' The backlash is fierce and ongoing. For the nationalists, the Macpherson report is an icon of hatred. The country has further yet to go than it has so far come. King Racism retains control of a network

of institutional castles where the battle hymns of inherited prejudice thunder through the corridors. They are garrisoned by those tough parts of the population too comfortable, too misinformed, or too violated in pain and in need of their ready scapegoats, to think a path through that symphony of lies. English people by and large remain in slumbering ignorance to the gravity of the crimes on which both the English nation and the British project is built, preferring to cringe at the very whisper of 'race' and plead that they 'move on' instead of acknowledging their role in the creation of racism and the fact that it still exists. But in a moment right at the end of the millennium, for once, the country had been prised from the doorframe, drenched in a bucket of humility, and compelled to consider coming to terms with those appalling torrents of history we have glanced at here.

England is a racist country. Britain was forged into a racist concept. Only when they have come to terms with that reality can they begin to escape it.



The Eltham sky is darker than when we arrived. We now know that this sleepy suburb was one of King Racism's parade grounds, a hotbed of white-supremacist malice in its chain of South London strongholds. To that extent, Eltham, this land of kings, killed Stephen Lawrence. It is important we took the time to understand that.

Now we have done so, we can advance to where the sky is brighter. So far Eltham has shown us one half of the story of England's relationship with the outside world. But it also knows the other half. Let us hear it as we arrive, at last, at Eltham Palace.

As we cross its moat over an old stone bridge, you would be excused for the impression that this could be any of those luxurious country mansions built by the royals and their titled, landed minions – or worse, the imperial class which amassed its wealth on plunder and slavery – up and down the English countryside. But it is not so. Turn a corner and more of it comes into view, at which point you find that Eltham Palace is a temporal and architectural jigsaw puzzle, the like of which is found nowhere else in this land.

Here, too, is a structure more than the sum of its parts. Front and centre in what looks like a magnificently bombastic country house, something already feels off: red bricks, cream stone, concave triangular roofs, arches and colonnades, stripes and circles and rectangles are all composed into a neat regularity, geometric and eccentric. This is not the style of the English dynasties but an altogether different movement they call Art Deco, which came from France in the 1920s, grew big in the United States, and may be most familiar to present generations through its prominence in the underwater city of Rapture in the video game *Bioshock*. But Art Deco never really took off in Britain, and a palace built to it here is instantly incongruous.

And that is not even the half of it. Literally: the mansion extends into a structure that has been built into it in such a way as to make them appear an organic whole, yet is obviously a completely separate entity. It expresses its grandness in venerable stone: an ancient hall, gabled of roof, its tall windows letting it appear to tower over the newer palace even though they are the same height. And that of course is the old heart of Eltham Palace, the hall of the kings and queens, although at its far end the Art Deco takes over again for one last little length of orangery. The whole creation is framed in a paradise of lawns, hedges and meadows designed to challenge the mightiest regiment of gardeners. Yet throughout them,

old walls and foundations rise from the earth and speak of more layers still to the story of these protean grounds.

Archaeologists have yet to breach the deepest of these, but a few that they have point back to the Plantagenet dynasty. There already must have been some kind of manor house here by the time they came along, as Eltham appears as *Alteham* in the Domesday Book, this country's first comprehensive land survey in 1086 under its Norman conqueror William I. Its name indicates a homestead frequented by swans – Old English *elfitu* – or if not, then of someone called Elta. But the lasting basics – a grand house, high walls and a moat – were built when it came into possession of the Bishop of Durham, a man named Antony Bek.

This fellow appears to have been a big deal. He was close to king Edward I, the ruthless Longshanks of William Wallace fame who consolidated English laws and institutions, many of them bloodily unpleasant, and decided that England's territorial identity was to be defined by violence against Welsh and Scottish people. And indeed Bishop Bek participated in some of these campaigns, a reminder of the powerful roles church officials played in England's civil and military affairs in those times.

On his death in 1311, Bek passed his Eltham estate to Longshanks's son, the new king Edward II. This Plantagenet is one of the most controversial rulers in English history because he appears to have had a gay lover called Piers Gaveston, to whom he gave much political influence and in so doing infuriated the earls and barons of the nobility. The precise nature of Gaveston's relationship with the king is difficult to pin down when seen from the far end of seven hundred years of turbulent contestations in gender and relationship norms. Do we see here early evidence of the hostility to sexual and gender diversity that was to become such a corrosive force in English society? Or were the nobles' grievances more straightforwardly about political power being given to some random mate of the king at their expense? Either way they assassinated Gaveston, then eventually drove Edward himself out with help from the church, the French, and his estranged wife, and most likely killed him too, in some accounts by sticking a hot iron poker up his arse.

Violent country, yes.

Poker or no poker, Eltham Palace was now in the hands of the royal family and would remain there for the next four hundred years. This was because they liked it very much. Like the country mansions whose ghosts still linger round Shooter's Hill, it was close enough to London to get in and out, while distant enough to

breathe real air and see green things. Furthermore it stood close to the main road to Dover and Europe, which was more important than it might sound, because these were Norman and Angevin* rulers. Many of their territories were still on the mainland, and through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they had to be able to get there quickly in order to get killed by the French and lose that territory.

And so a succession of Plantagenet rulers spent their youths at Eltham Palace, or made frequent visits during their reigns. Each time they added a few more improvements: buttresses to strengthen the masonry, or new lodgings, kitchens or service buildings. They enclosed more land to the complex, converting it into walled gardens, vineyards, and a park full of deer for hunting. Soon it was looking extravagant, and its great hall with its stained-glass windows and oak hammerbeam roof was the perfect place for holding raucous Easter or Christmas parties, or entertaining foreign dignitaries like the Byzantine emperor, the king of Armenia, or perhaps during negotiations or lulls in the fighting, the king of France.

These functions survived the violent dynastic conflict that brought the Tudors to power, the short version of which is that the Plantagenet dynasty, enfeebled, bankrupted and confined to this island by their crushing defeats in France, and confused by their own rules on royal succession, fell prey to a spectacularly vicious thirty-year power struggle between competing noble families, whose feudal vassals and private armies went about massacring each other in a chaos of marches, battles, rebellions and miscellaneous nastiness that nobody understands. It was later named the Wars of the Roses because the strongest contenders, the Plantagenet branch houses of York and Lancaster, had a white rose and red rose respectively as their heraldic symbols, and it only ended in 1485 when Henry Tudor, a marginal relative of the Lancastrians of Welsh descent, was the last contestant standing. This was the man who became king Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty, who brought together the two flowers into the combined red-and-white Tudor rose and spent much of his reign killing off remaining challengers for the throne. In between choppings – and alright, let's be fair, occasional magnanimous pardons – he must have found time to build the palace's water supply conduit we saw earlier.

Enter Henry VIII, who has already barrelled into our path several times. He has a habit of doing this in English history stories, not least because just about everywhere has the ruins of some monastery he demolished. The young Henry

* From Anjou, in western France.

VIII is remembered as a more vivacious, sporty, jocular bouncing figure than the all-dominating ego-monster he later became, and like his predecessors he spent much of his youth here at Eltham. He was passionate about jousting, so a new tiltyard featured on his list of investments in the palace. It also continued to receive distinguished visitors, among them the great Dutch humanist Erasmus; and it was where Cardinal Wolsey, whose meteoric rise and fall as the most powerful individual in the country next to the king is one of the English's foremost political cautionary tales, took his oath of office as Lord Chancellor.

But Henry VIII became hungrier for bigger, better and more. The shift in his personality and reign towards the temperamental mammoth he is better remembered as is reflected in his move to a much more massive and famous palace, Hampton Court up the Thames. He initially had it built for his favourite Wolsey, but when Wolsey failed to convince the Pope to cancel Henry's first marriage, the king stripped him of all his posts and received his property for himself, including Hampton Court, which he made his own home and headquarters. Wolsey was called back to face Henry's wrath, but by a great stroke of luck, fell ill and died on the way. Another palace, in nearby Greenwich, also took off on its rise to prominence at this time, preferred for its easier access by river.

All of a sudden Eltham was no longer needed. A slow, sad decline followed. The last Tudor, Elizabeth I, mostly ignored it. She died without children in 1603 (but gave birth to Britain, runs the cliché); which meant the king of Scotland, James VI of the Stuart dynasty, was next in line, and so he came down to London to become James I of England. For the first time both kingdoms were ruled as a combined realm, if only through the glue of one man's character rather than any shared identity or institutions as yet. He too paid little attention to Eltham. The final monarch to visit it was his son, Charles I, and by then the place was in steady decay.

But this is the history of England, a violent country. Things do not die of old age here, they get killed. And Eltham Palace was killed. For this was the Charles I who came into conflict with the English parliament: an institution which had bobbed along for a few hundred years, mostly as a tool for kings and queens to control the nobility or legitimise their policies, but was now evolving into an angrier, more assertive body whose members had ambitious interests, were critical of the arbitrary power of the king, and demanded permanent authority of their own. But Charles was having none of it, so king and parliament both raised armies and plunged the British Isles into civil war. London was parliament's stronghold in this

conflict, and it was their soldiers who ransacked Eltham Palace to death. They looted and damaged the buildings, swept its gardens and parks of trees for firewood, and killed the last of the deer who roamed its grounds. By the end of the war, little was left but a ruin.

The palace was for all intents and purposes deceased. When the English monarchy was restored under Charles II in 1660, defiant but also changed forever, the king released it from royal ownership by giving it to one of his barons, John Shaw, whose family kept the land for another two centuries and did a bit of work on it, mostly of an agricultural persuasion. But the ruins themselves were unlivable, reduced to little more than improvised barns. The rotting great hall became a favoured subject for romantic artists, who depicted it in the nostalgic rural paintings that became a hit around this time, as the English, dabbling in introspections in nature to try and find themselves, decided that rather than fighting each other, it was healthier to project their violent energies onto distant shores instead.

After death, the resurrection. Eltham Palace might have remained an obscure shell of stones if not for the coming of a new category of king and queen in the 1930s, by when the monarchy's had waned from a hard to soft variety of power. The real clout in England had passed into the hands of a new class, the capitalists. The industrial revolution and expansion of the British Empire had given them the wealth to supplant the old royals and nobles at the top of the power structure, in practice if not in principle, especially as many of the country's colonial lurches were driven as much, if not more, by corporate interests like the slave-traders and East India Company than by state territorialists.

Out of this milieu sprang the Courtauld family, who rose from the silk mills of Essex to become giants rolling in the riches of the textiles industry. One of their sons, a Stephen Courtauld, left the mills to spend his dynasty's millions on pursuing his travelling and mountaineering passions, although he also served in World War I, whose horrors left him shaken as they did most people. Climbing in the Alps in 1919, he met Virginia Peirano, born in Romania to Italian and Hungarian parents, and they grew close. This being England, a gendered society with rigid expectations around relationship structures, they married four years later and she took his name, becoming Virginia Courtauld. It was they who in search of a nice

expensive property in the countryside came upon what was left of Eltham Palace, decided they liked the look of it, and undertook to restore it to habitable glory.

Except, this was more than a restoration. While they took pains to preserve and tidy up the historic ruins as best they could, they commissioned the architects Seely & Paget to integrate those into a whole new palace of their own, unlike any ever built on English shores. This was the origin of the Art Deco mansion that is now the centrepiece of the palace complex, designed in accordance with the Courtaulds' favourite tastes and styles and rousing all the controversy you would expect. One historian wrote to *The Times* in dismay that the Courtaulds had managed to 'destroy one of the most beautiful things remaining in the neighbourhood of London...(with) what I first took to be an admirably designed but unfortunately-sited cigarette factory'. But others were impressed by what was ultimately a rescue job no-one else had found the botheredness for, and the design stuck. Eltham Palace was now more of the *Bioshock* world of enterprising imagination than the I-am-the-State royalist world of its Plantagenet creators.

Stephen and Virginia Courtauld were characters straight out of Andrew Ryan's Art Deco deep-sea utopia. Stephen was scholarly and reserved, prone to burying himself in research and endorsing Arctic expeditions. He loved his orchids as much as his classics, hence the renewal of the palace's lush gardens and shiny new orangery. But the dominant member of the pair seems to have been Virginia. Lively, dashing, impulsive, tattooed with a snake down her ankle, she was the sort of person who went all-out on everything she did, and a lot of what she did involved high-society cocktail parties. The contrast in their bedrooms mirrors that of their personalities: Stephen took refuge in a wood-panelled room with Kew Gardens wallpaper and straw insulation in the walls for erudite warmth and quiet, whereas Virginia dwelled amidst the lush armchairs, curtains and Persian carpets of a veritable goddess's lair, complete with high-tech onyx bath with a Greek sculpture of Psyche mounted atop its gold taps and spout in a niche of mosaic gold. This fusion of ancient and modern rippled through the palace's entire rejuvenation project, with Virginia the source of much of its vision and energy.

The remarkable thing is that it worked. They somehow pulled it off with enough control that its extravagance comes across as comfortably stylish, even restrained, rather than tacky or daunting. What is most striking about the place is not that it was as though someone broke a thousand years of history into a sack then built the structure out of bits and pieces they pulled out at random, but rather how seamlessly those pieces come together into a complete whole. Because the

Courtaulds held nothing back: they wanted this to be a home as much to live in as to show off, and between their extensive art collection and classical statues they decked its interiors in all the cutting-edge technological innovations of the day: electric lighting, underfloor heating, synchronised clocks, a Siemens internal telephone exchange, even a centralised vacuum cleaner in the basement with tubes to all the major rooms. The look may have been *Bioshock*, but the feel must have been more in the region of *World of Warcraft*'s Karazhan or *Luigi's Mansion*. At the same time they had no intent of letting the place's history evaporate: the old great hall was repaired to as close to its original condition as they could imagine it, with a handful of updates in furniture, lighting and structural supports. Beyond those it was invaded only by an internal balcony overlook, accessible from the house's upper floor corridor, where the occupants could read and relax in that breathtaking space with the ghosts of royal festivals past.

They also brought back one of its leading traditions: the entertainment of guests. Indeed, many of the personages who showed up for Virginia's relentless social gatherings were rich and famous just as in the old days. Notably however, many of these people came from the new industrial classes rather than the fossilising old aristocracy, so reflecting the shift in the power strata of English society.

But in other parts of Courtauld-dynasty life the rulebook went clear out of the window. These kings and queens made their own rules, and if the building itself was not enough of a statement, their lifestyles would make up for the deficit. They had no children – a brazen defiance of dominant relationship norms – although their young nephews lived with them for a time. What they had instead was a small army of resident animals, including a column of dogs under the command of Caesar the Great Dane, a parrot known as Conga, and a bizarre ring-tailed lemur who had joined them from Madagascar via Harrods and somehow possessed them to name him Mah-Jongg. It appears Mah-Jongg was the real power in Eltham. He had his own heated quarters, painted with scenes from his Madagascan rainforest domains, and could leave or return to it at any time by way of a bamboo ladder and thus roamed the palace at will. From his lemur-scale deckchair in the garden he graced the other animals in his home with peaceful and benevolent rule, but knowing perhaps the inclinations of English humans to violence, concluded his sovereignty could best be protected by impressing it into guests with his teeth. Many a visitor thus received a timely dose of pain to their shins under the dinner table, and in his proudest masterpiece of diplomacy he managed to sabotage one

of Stephen's sponsored expeditions to Greenland by chomping through the hand of its wireless operator, severing an artery and ensuring it would not go near a wireless for three months.

All this came to an end, as so much did, with World War II. After a German air raid damaged the roof of the great hall, the Courtaulds converted the basement rooms into a makeshift bunker. There they lived out the conflict in relative comfort, continuing to house and entertain guests in the subterranean billiard lounge, but as the war dragged on it was clear there would be no going back. The blitzed and bankrupted England that came out the other side was no longer in the mood for lavish, carefree parties, nor an easy place to find the staff required for the upkeep of palaces and gardens on this scale. In 1944, wearied by the bombings, the Courtaulds left, at first to Scotland but eventually ending up in Zimbabwe, at that time the British colony of Rhodesia, where they spent their final years. Before leaving they passed Eltham Palace to the Army Educational Corps, who used it for conferences and functions before passing it on in turn to English Heritage in 1995. Relinquished by its kings and queens for good, Eltham Palace is now open to everyone, albeit for an entry fee that cannot be described as inclusive.

Unhinged homicidal monarchs. Wealthy industrial families with suits and dresses and high-society accents. Big dogs, big lawns, big gardens. White people. Beneath its idiosyncrasies, was not the story of Eltham Palace a classically English affair – a journey through that imaginary golden age dreamed of by nationalists before the foreigners came and ruined everything?

Such a view could not be more mistaken.

Eltham Palace is English, but its Englishness is very different from that which murdered Stephen Lawrence. If there is one theme, one principle that runs the length and breadth of the palace's tale, it is foreignness – foreignness, that is, as an essential component of what it means to be English.

Let's start at the top, with the kings and queens themselves. The Thames already introduced us to the Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Scandinavians of earlier times. The Normans, the Angevins and the Plantagenets were basically French. The Tudors, in their native language *Tudur*, were Welsh, from the village of Penmynydd in Anglesey. The Stuarts, that line of professional martyrs, were Scots. Then a Dutch guy came along to rule for a decade or so, and since then it has been Germans all the way down: first the Hanover dynasty, whose

first king, George I, famously couldn't speak English; and then the house of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, which arbitrarily changed its name to Windsor in 1917, during World War I, when Germans became the prejudicial punching bag of the day. And that is the main line alone; we should not forget how European royals, this lot included, enjoyed marrying into one another's families in the unsuccessful hope it would make them less inclined to start wars with each other. Countless such foreign injections took place all the way down this list, including the late Greek consort of the current queen. Their newest entrant, that American of half-European, half-African descent Meghan Markle, only continues this tradition.

In other words, the royal family, that most emblematic of all things English, has not a single thing English about it if Englishness is to be defined on an ethnic basis. The only way around that is to not do it – something the monarchs themselves generally understood. That is why so many of them had to search around for other bases to invent Englishness upon, whether it was laws and political principles, religion, industry, science, the empire, or the higher vision of a British United Kingdom. It did not always work, and sometimes the foundations they chose were unpopular, unsustainable, or just plain mediocre. It could cost them their dynasties, their colonies, their sanity, their pride, their heads, or their reputations for all posterity. But each go at it left some lasting bits, each stronger and more enduring than the fantasy of English ethnicity, and over the centuries enough of these bits held together to leave the English monarchical identity such a weird amalgamation of nonsense and genius that you cannot mistake it for anything in the world.

As with the imagined England, so too the physical. The archaeology of Eltham Palace has uncovered coins, tiles, and other architectural ornaments in use during the medieval period, many of which come from mainland Europe and imitate the styles of its peoples, or contain writing in languages like Latin, French or Dutch. This was not some hideaway in the hills where English monarchs wounded by continental arrows would retreat to grumble about the incorrigible outside world, but a guest house, *the* guest house, perched on the Dover road to look out on that world and receive it with celebration. And with the coming of the Courtaulds, most of all upon the vision of the Italo-Hungarian Virginia, it burst from its chrysalis as nothing less than a prismatic celebration of globalism. The most un-English Art Deco exterior is only the skin of it: step inside and the first thing you come to is a circular wood-panelled entrance hall of such spare and cosy coffee-and-cream Scandinavianism that it may as well be a part of Sweden, and was in

fact the work of the Swedish designer Rolf Engströmer. Many of the rooms and corridors owe their Renaissance elegance to an Italian designer, Piero Malacrida, and are filled with the international treasures – plunder or not – of the Courtaulds' art collection of Greco-Roman statuary, Chinese pottery and lacquer screens, Persian carpets, and a state-of-the-art projector in the Italian drawing room where the hosts would awe their guests with recordings of Cambodian temples, Komodo dragons and other exotic encounters from their travels across the Earth.

But the crown jewel of this globalism resides in a secret room, which of course a mansion like this has to have. The English Heritage conservators were initially puzzled by the little chamber hidden away behind Virginia's boudoir, and took it for some nondescript office or storeroom till, in 2014, they found a small fragment of map poking through the wallpaper. Intrigued, they brought in specialists to carefully remove the top layers. What they found was stupendous: the room had been coated ceiling to floor in magnificent hand-painted maps of different regions of the world. East and Southeast Asia, Africa, the Americas, the Middle East – all were there in excruciating detail, informed by the most up-to-date mapmaking techniques and data of the Courtaulds' age and designed for practical use in planning their voyages, but no less remarkable as masterpieces of cartographic art. And that was not all. Little paintings filled the gaps between the maps, delicate and charming motifs corresponding to the lands depicted beside them: a Japanese geisha in her kimono; Berbers with camels; gemstones, octopi, Chinese porters, more Komodo dragons, an Arabian roc carrying elephants. Though some of them verge on dodgy cultural stereotypes, they are on the whole portrayed less with the gawking otherisation of colonial caricature than with a restraint, respect and spirit of honourable curiosity.

There are problems in all this, which will be obvious to any seasoned critic of English class and colonialism. We shall get to those in a moment. But first, let us recognise that Eltham Palace at least makes the effort to offer a completely different concept of Englishness from that of the five white youths who killed Steven Lawrence and the police who failed to do him justice, and it does so in a language they cannot speak. This is a vision not of England the racist country, but of an integrally global England: a cosmopolitan nation that looks upon the outside world, likes what it sees there, and at its best seeks to share with it as an equal, to learn from it rather than lecture it, and to improve itself by inhaling of its diversity to improve its own soul. An England where there are no superior or inferior peoples, and whiteness means nothing: where any colour, any creed, any tongue

and any flavour is welcome so long as it is not poisonous to the others already there. It is that mindset, embodied in that jigsaw puzzle of time and space that is Eltham Palace, that has built the very best of England of today: where the hands that built the houses they live in or the roads and rails they travel on, that grow the foods they eat, that heal them when they are sick, that made the cars they drive, the books they read, the films they watch, the games they play and the music they listen to, and the gods they commune with, might hail from any of the European, Asian, African, Pacific and American worlds far beyond the little peninsula they have made their home.

A country, in other words, with no borders; which always knew that borders make you weak.

Alas, this was never the only vision. It was real – it is real – but it is only one of England's two faces. The globalist England and the racist England: two essences which utterly despise each other, and which have spent all of history attempting to tear the country off each other to the perpetual risk of splitting its head in two.

Neither vision has yet found fulfilment. Instead, each finds ways to sabotage the other's plans and corrupt its outcomes. The contest has yet to be resolved.

Eltham Palace: obvious problems. We have glimpsed the pile of hearts and bodies broken by the monarchs who lived there, whether to preserve their position at the top of the social pile or chase some national or religious purity-dream. As for the festival of globalisation lived by the Courtaulds, for all its multicultural splendour there is no getting away from the fact that this family was a creature of the world of industrial capitalism, and built its dreams on wealth whose acquisition would have been morally questionable to many and beyond the wildest dreams of most. To recline in their garden deckchairs and gaze at the city in the distance would have been to hold in their field of view countless thousands of people in the slums of London's East End and the docklands who had no path to the cushioned, globe-trotting lifestyles of people like the Courtaulds and were punished by the society that stranded them there if they dared even imagine a way out. Even if we are to believe that neither Stephen nor Virginia got their own hands dirty, violence and racism are systemic, and it was the violent and racist systems of the British industrial empire that made their happiness possible. How the Courtauld textiles company amassed its millions is beyond the horizons of our voyage, and I have no wish to sully their name if they honestly did their best to

pay their workers a fair wage, look after their safety and welfare, and prevent either English or Indian artisan weavers from being wrecked in redundancy by their machines or exports respectively, but the truth is that many industrialists did not, least of all the criminals who built their fortunes on the slave trade.

That is the true problem with England's open borders: not outsiders who come in and make trouble, but those of its own who abuse the same open borders to go out and pillage, plunder, and blight the soils of all the lands they can reach. Rather than breathing in the splendours of a diverse world, this country has more often exhaled the greed-soaked bigotries concocted in the worst of its laboratories, and with them wrought a globalisation of suffering.

But nor do the racists get it all their own way. When they plunged their knives into Stephen Lawrence, it was as though at some level they struck a wound into the body of England itself, and although it took some years for the pain to fully register, it did in the end jolt the populace into outrage. The spirit of a greater global humanity enthused a roster of antibodies who crushed England's institutions in shame, driving them to hold the racists to account and wrest them from power. These battles are far from over – England is still a racist society. But from those who fought to end slavery to those who confront, defy, or litigate against the Home Office's deportation squads, this nation does have some identifiable innate capacity to produce an immune response to that racism.

There we have what is perhaps the greatest puzzle of this country. We might call it the English Paradox: a contradiction in the English relationship with the outside world whose stable existence should be impossible. On the one hand England is a nation with no ethnic basis, peopled and built by immigrants since time immemorial. On the other it is the birthplace of a strongly-held, genuinely-believed concept of a pure and superior English race, with such burning contempt for all difference as to have left a trail of destruction on every continent, and which even now runs scissors through its own constitutional viscera.

How can both these forces exist in the same collective consciousness? How has it held them within itself so long without ripping itself apart?

English racism is inherently nonsensical – an oxymoron. By definition, English people cannot hate other 'races' without hating part of themselves. Might that be where it ultimately comes from? A deep and suppressed self-loathing, perhaps at some part of themselves they feel to be inadequate – their violent history; their industrial decline; the loss of their empire – which they thus externalise into an imaginary other they can take it out on in blame?

We might not know for some time. Racism is not of any realm of reason; it draws its power from anguish and arrogance, fear and lies. It is very difficult to communicate with it or get from it meaningful answers to questions. Perhaps when they find their way out of violence, and the clouds of pain are lifted from their populace, they will be in a calmer position to think about what they did.



It is time to head on. Let us take our leave of the Lawrences and the Courtaulds and pay them respects for speaking to us of this most consequential of English mysteries.

The path onward leads past the palace down King John's Walk. Another king, though it is not quite clear which. It could be the once-heir John of Eltham, son of Edward II – the one with the poker – but there is a likelihood it refers to another foreigner, Jean II of France ('John the Good'), who was held captive here during

the Hundred Years' War but supposedly treated well. Whichever John it was, his Walk slopes down through a rural scene of fields and stables, where horses graze and friendly donkeys trot up to you. Beyond lie more trees and residences, and beyond those, in the distance, the tiny skyscrapers of the city centre.

This is the suburb of Mottingham, which feels not too different from Eltham except for its echoes of a more agrarian heritage. Its houses carry names like Badger's Mount, The Croft, The Copse, Five Witches, and for the more literal-minded there is of course Mottingham Farm. They are little windows on a pastoral ancestry which offers a counterpoint to the world of monarchical urban luxury, privilege and artifice; that too is a tension between opposite poles in English identity, and though the people with their boots in the soil never became the bedrock of revolutionary energy they did in some countries – China for instance – this one has seen plenty of moments, from the 1381 Peasants' Revolt to the unrest of the industrial period, when they gave the kings an awful lot of trouble.

There is one more king we cannot leave without meeting, a certain doctor who lived out the last of his days in a beige-bricked house called Fairmount in the corner of Mottingham. Older, prouder generations of English people know him well; younger ones likely got their first sight of his disconcertingly colossal black-bearded figure when he burst from his grave bat-first and roared on to victory, startling the heck out of everyone in his path, in the Channel 4 promotional adverts during the 2005 Ashes cricket series between England and Australia.

England's distress in cricket is renowned the world over. The 2005 Ashes are famous because they actually won – just – but the jubilation that victory roused in them attests to its own exceptional nature. We have talked of violence and the English Paradox as core themes in this country's story; we might add as an equal constant its tendency, with almost cosmic inevitability, to lose at sport. This is not a land from which kings and emperors of cricket rise to the level of Australia's Don Bradman or India's Sachin Tendulkar. But once upon a time, one did. He was a giant, physically and proverbially, who revolutionised the game as the whole world knows it. His face, and there is no other like it, was widely spoken of as the most recognisable in England after Queen Victoria and Prime Minister Gladstone. His name was William Gilbert Grace (1848-1915), one of the few characters in English memory instantly familiar from his initials alone – W. G.

The supposed sport of the British Empire has changed a lot since W. G.'s days. If extraterrestrials were to land and make a cursory study of cricket today, they might reasonably presume it was invented in India. The vast broadening of its

horizons makes it challenging, perhaps impossible, to imagine the nineteenth-century world of English cricket: one perhaps a lot closer to the posh advert for colonialism that those unfamiliar with it tend to incorrectly believe it still is; one which, like many sports then, remained divided along class lines between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ players (the former playing for free and idealised with gentlemanly prestige, the latter taking in match fees and not); and one in which W. G. Grace of Gloucestershire, for a time, they say, *was* cricket.

To be gentle on those foreign to this game we shall limit the depth of this dive. Suffice it to say that W. G. so dominated the cricketing realm that it bent and buckled under his gravity into new shapes that persist to this day. This is a game that bursts with statistics and his tell much of his story for him. An all-rounder who specialised as a right-hand batsman, W. G. scored over 54,000 runs in 870 first-class matches, among them 124 centuries – some of them triple-centuries – at an average of 39.5, over a 44-year career beginning at 16 years old and ending only at 60, by when his iconic corpulence had got the better of his on-field dexterity. But like the most memorable kings, it was not so much the power he attained but the way he used it that sealed his legacy. His mastery of a wide repertoire of strokes, each chosen to suit the ball being bowled, was an innovation that set the template for modern batting, while the strength and skill with which he played them drew unprecedented crowds, inflating the ticket prices for matches he played in and raising cricket from a quirky village-green pastime into the swashbuckling mass spectator sport it is today.

W. G. was controversial, and has become more so as his glinting hagiography has flaked away over the decades to reveal murkier material. But even his notorieties resonate, whether as reflections of very English problems or of cricketing ones. He was hardly the most cerebral or diplomatic of individuals, and depending on who you ask ranged from dubiously unsporting to a shameless cheat. He was competitive to the point of menace, a noisy and overwhelming presence on the field that foreshadowed the sledging so quarrelled about in the modern game, towering intimidatingly over opponents and umpires to make aggressive trouble over every minuscule detail out of which he could wring an advantage. The marriage of cricket and advertising, so taken for granted today, began with W. G.’s deal to appear as a bearded billboard for Colman’s Mustard, and the blight dealt to the present game by big money finds some precedents in his infamous and corrupting weakness for the lure of coin. Indeed, it says everything about class privilege in Victorian England that he played officially as

an amateur but got away with raking in more cash through salaries, expenses, match fees and merchandise sales than most professional players, let alone the other ‘gentlemen’ he shared the field with. He was a master of self-promotion as much as of the bat, and if the *Sydney Mail* is to be believed, was not even above betting on the games he played in. The cricket writer Jarrod Kimber puts it most damningly of all in an article in ESPN’s digital *The Cricket Monthly*, tellingly titled ‘Cricket’s greatest bastard’, when he claims that ‘had he been a woman, or any shade of pigmentation darker than white, or poor, he wouldn’t have become a worldwide name’. In so far as this is true, W. G. Grace, too, was a prism of an England where all aspects of life, including cricket then and now, have struggled beneath the injustices of class, gender, and the racism we have here explored.

W. G. retired to Mottingham in 1909, where he kept up his sporting interests while growing asparagus in his garden. He was profoundly distressed by the German zeppelin raids of World War I, which he complained that unlike fast bowlers, he could not see coming. The stress may have contributed to the stroke that killed him in 1915, aged 67.

Much of W. G. Grace persists in cricket for better and for worse, but the game has also changed dramatically, and so is as suitable a place as any to complete our passage through Eltham, the land of the English Paradox. Along with monied greed and gender, racism remains a deeply corrosive rot at the heart of English cricket, as well as in other countries with poisoned colonial heritages (not least two of the sport’s great powers, Australia and South Africa). But on the better side of this coin is a sport that, at least in theory, has the power to bring peoples of disparate colours, languages and faiths into the peaceful yet riveting embrace of a common culture, a shared love for a game with its own colours, language, and faith (‘Cricket is my religion, Sachin is my god’, as is heard in India). A crossroads oasis, where any and all can come together – if, and only if, they protect it, by confronting those forces which would deprave it into a fount of abuse and exclusion.

They can and have shown they can do this. Cricket’s twenty-year isolation of South Africa for the evils of Apartheid, for example, dealt that system a more devastating blow of shame than any of the comparatively feeble diplomatic efforts to shake it. And it should give England hope in its own battles with racism, that cricket – again, at least in theory – allows people whose interactions past and present have been as murderous as they come to compete with all the passion but none of the violence of their nativisms, then keep one another company in a

shared imagined community whose bonds, in the final instance, are heartier than any nation's will ever be.

3. Steam



...we are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end, to which, indeed, all history points...

Speech by Albert, Prince Consort, at the Mansion House, 21st March 1849

A new area awaits beyond the Quaggy River. No I didn't name the thing. This sunken stream, which eventually feeds the Thames, marks the end of the land of kings and the start of a land of homes, or *hams* (as in *hamlet*) in Anglo-Saxon Old English. Downham, Beckenham, Bellingham, Sydenham – the way ahead is a sea of residential suburbs jostling on the map. Where does one end and the next begin? There is no answer.

The map shows large splotches of green, some of it dark. All indication is that this area belonged to the woods, and that after many cycles of clinging to its edges, the people of the metropole fused it into their built-up mass only recently. What brought them out here in such numbers? What is this area's significance in their

story? The answer lies a good trek west past all these *hams*, at a place whose name is most curious of all.

Crystal Palace. Yes, not Crystalham or Crystalton, Crystal Palace. The Anglo-Saxons are not going to help with this one. The name does not fit; indeed it sounds almost magical. It transports us to places like the Emerald City of Oz, or the Crystal Maze, or most distant still to Crystalgard, the great glass city of the Guild of Glassmakers for those ancient enough to remember the point-and-click adventure game *Loom*. But those are edifices you expect to see out in the desert or in some vast cavern glinting with stalactites, not in the anti-magical greys and browns of an English urban landscape.

Yet these people are not the types who would make up a name like that for no reason. Those are grounds to hope. Until you arrive there to find, and excuse the slight spoiler here, that the great disappointment of Crystal Palace is that there is no palace at all, Crystal or otherwise. In the end it is just another Londonese suburb, knuckling you in the face with its reminders that crystal palaces do not exist in reality.

A concern for history gives you the power to push those knuckles away. Because in an unbelievable twist, there actually *was* a Crystal Palace. Or alright, a Cast-Plate Glass Palace to be accurate, but close enough, because when it was built that material was so advanced it might as well have been magic. And that was the point. The Crystal Palace, which survives in drawings and photographs, was an enormous glasshouse built with one purpose: to host the ambitiously-dubbed Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations held in 1851. This was one of the first so-called international expositions or ‘world’s fairs’ and the great-grandparent of those Expo things that go on today.

Now this is England, so when it says the industry of ‘All Nations’, it actually meant the industry of Britain (and here it must be Britain, not England, given how far its accomplishments were built on Scottish scientific genius and Welsh iron and coal). In other words, an exhibition to show that British industry was awesome. An arrogant boast, but at the time not an idle one. The 1850s found Britain headlong in the fire and steam of the industrial revolution, hammering up and churning out incredible new materials, machines and technological marvels, and as uncle Arthur C. Clarke has told us, any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. The purpose of the Great Exhibition was to showcase these magical trophies to a Europe reeling from the revolutions of 1848,

and thus to impress on it a message that went on to suffuse the core of England's belief systems of today, so obvious as to be unspoken, unquestioned.

It was simply this: *technology will deliver us.*

A message of supreme confidence. A message, then as now, of supreme hubris.

To learn more we must reach the Crystal Palace's final resting place, some ten kilometres west of the Quaggy. Our target is visible from miles off because it sits on a ridge with a huge BBC transmitter whose pylon dominates the landscape this side of the city. That thing still sends out radio signals, though its television functions ceased with the digital switchover of 2012. No doubt its emissions will also tune us in to the threads of industry, science and technology as they are woven into the tapestry of English life.

These are serious threads. They spun their way in amidst spluttering embers and moving parts, taking over huge sections and weaving miraculous patterns that no-one could have imagined before their arrival, but in doing so snapped and burnt off many threads already here. Through their work, the fabric of Englishness was drastically rearranged. The people of this land are still living those rearrangements, and the devices that made them became so integral that the English give you strange looks if you point them out. But point them out we shall, because no sooner do we set foot into Downham than we cross the outstanding thread, the technology of technologies.

It fades into the scenery now, so unworthy of consideration that interest in it has become a prime marker in the pathologisation of autistic people. But it is inherently interesting, because it was beyond everyone's dreams for hundreds of thousands of years till its invention only two centuries ago. It transformed the English and their relationships, giving them a speed thitherto the preserve of their gods, and synchronised their nation into unified time. And then it streaked out its tendrils, first into Britain's wild places like the mountains of Scotland, then far across the continents, opening up their wildernesses for English shovels, sabres and teeth. Were it to disappear, modernity as they know it would instantly crumble. You already know what it is.

You can hear it as we march down Railway Children Walk, an alleyway aptly referring to Edith Nesbit's eponymous novel. It plunges into the deeps of a Downham neighbourhood. The further you descend, the louder it grows: an unbroken chunter of wheels upon tracks, the trumpeting of foggy horns. At the

bottom the path lobs you onto an iron-mesh footbridge, and there they are: eight or nine intersecting railways side by side, an iron highway fastened onto the earth. To the south, some kind of depot. To the north, the skyline of the City of London, to whose slaving maws those trains each morning serve the fresh meat of thousands of besuited corporate serfs, whose carcasses they will carry back out in the evening, to be stitched back together (or broken further) by their suburban nuclear families till the next feeding hour.

They see that existence as their absolute reality, but it is all so recent. It only became thinkable in 1804, when the steam-powered locomotive made its first journey hauling cargo between the ironworks of South Wales. In the 1820s the first proper railways for it appeared between Darlington and Stockton-on-Tees, hauling coal to ships in the mining and engineering centres of the English northeast. By the 1830s they were carrying passengers, on fixed schedules, between fixed stations, and the country began to organise itself around those schedules. And then in the 1840s the railways had their day as speculators went berserk, pouring their money into the scores of little rail companies that burst into being, slamming down thousands of kilometres of tracks into every corner of the country and so changing it forever. From all these trains came the chorus of whistling steam that would invigorate the pride of the Great Exhibition, never mind that being a speculative bubble, it would of course shortly collapse. But even when it did, the rails remained.

Stand on the bridge and watch these aluminium serpents rattle beneath. They have transformed not only the shape of the land, but the lifestyles, routines, values, even the cognitive functions of all the people they carry. This area's entire way of life is intertwined with the railways, so too this city and the lands beyond.

But what was the nature of that change? Did the trains give people the ability to move faster? Or do *they* move people faster? That is: in the relationship between human and train, who is the subject and who the object? Are their carriages chariots or chains?

At times they are coffins. Across the bridge a cemetery sprawls into the distance. Wherever the trains arrived they also brought new ways to horribly die. They brought death to the impoverished labourers who built the rails in the first place, usually in filthy and dangerous conditions; death to anyone who walks or drives over the tracks at the wrong moment, especially at level crossings; death to all those people society torments to suicide upon them; and death to the passengers when trains derail or collide in the catalogue of disasters that have

plagued the railways since the beginning. Right by this bridge a nasty one took place in 1967, when the crowded 19:43 express from Hastings to Charing Cross hit a broken rail and came off the tracks. Several carriages fell onto their sides and one overturned completely, killing 49 people and injuring 78.

An England bereft of trains is now unimaginable. They are fused into its soul. The capital region's blood vessels are the colour-coded snakes of the London Underground that burst from its every orifice. Look at the map: the Circle Line is a sarcophagus, and the others the loose bandages that spill from its lid. The city relies on these trains for its work, its play and its everything else, whether it likes them or not. The faces on board are consistently grim, but become downright apoplectic when those trains are not working, which is extremely often. Yes, there is fascination and convenience in the power they give ordinary people to zoom in an hour or two across what used to be a journey of days. But there is also the hellish stress of the commute, the frustration of strikes and signal failures, the horror of accidents and terrorist attacks, the rage at arbitrary price hikes by opaque and unaccountable rail corporations, and the impossible expectations of punctuality when travelling on a service that, although it made the schedule king, so seldom succeeds at running on time.

Is the sum of all this an improvement to the life here, or a curse upon it? This is a question we shall encounter many times in the shadow of the Crystal Palace.

There are counter-narratives to technology. The most common is nature. The two are framed as polar opposites, a rivalry for the fate of the Earth. In truth they are not so separate. Technology's power is nature's power, from the thunder that crackles in the pylons and rails to the rock your ancestor sharpened to cut chicken. When they are in conflict, people chose for them to be. Minerals and wood can be extracted sustainably, energy produced cleanly, waste disposed of responsibly. That so many humans, the English among them, instead made environmental destruction a by-product of technological development is a problem – one of humankind's worst – and one that speaks of the industrial revolution's impact not just on what they created, but on what kinds of people they were.

Alongside the Downham railway a path splits off and plunges into the lush spring greenery of the Grove Park Nature Reserve, which hosts a concentration of protected insects, birds and lizards. A way of nature beside a way of industry, in parallel like a pair of chopsticks. This one is a recent effort. The green space got

its designation in 1984, perhaps in the climate of the modern environmentalist movement, which arose when after more than a century of producing and consuming to the ruin of their planet, people began to realise that this might be bad for them.

A yet more venerable force of nature sleeps ahead. From between the Downham residences beckons a path strewn with leaves and twigs, and to step on it is to be drawn through a time warp. Suddenly you are in a world where streets and houses never existed. There is only the wood, and the wood rules all. Bright foliage closes around you, rustling with squirrels and patrolled overhead by parakeets. You dare not step off the path for the sides are populated by bluebells, the purple compound eyes of the forest, and each and every one is watching you. The primordial hippopotamuses or mammoths might be nearby. This is a remnant of an old, old forest, and we shall meet it properly later, for here is not the place to make introductions; the bourgeois roads and houses spring back in a series of ambushes, insisting that modernity is the way and that they represent it, and for the next half a kilometre they and the trees and bushes wrestle for every scrap of space, with the roads and houses eventually winning. No doubt their secret weapon is a set of juggernaut school buildings, disgorging forth battalions of rowdy schoolchildren. One detachment banters at the tops of their voices in an adjacent playing field, half-obscured by tenacious plant growth. Strangely, they are all boys; but of course, this is a gendered country, and many of its institutions still manufacture its imagined division of male and female by segregating children into separate spaces.

Obviously however this bunch is not yet disciplined for their task, for the hoarse bellow of some instructor explodes from their midst: 'WHAT – THE – HELL – ARE YOU DOING?' Their cacophony is instantly silenced. This sergeant might trigger traumatic flashbacks for many English people who endured relentless authoritarian tirades in their schooling, not least from military-grade sports teachers, but in this case it is actually hilarious because his throaty ululations and peculiar accent make it impossible to understand more than half his words, and the punctuated rhythm in which he pronounces them brings to mind the blasts of the train horns. A passing pedestrian is reduced to tears with laughter, and we share remarks on the curious anthropology of English schools.

Technology strikes through this wood in another form too. This one is completely invisible, but holds a power that bound the whole world to it. It is the Greenwich Meridian Line, which in 1884 became the international frame of

reference for charting longitude. There is nothing here to indicate that line. I could tell you I sensed it because I have magic, but even if I do it would be impossible. That is because meridians – the longitude circles around the Earth, represented by vertical lines on maps and essential for unified timekeeping and seaborne navigation – are imaginary. The *prime* meridian, or zero-degree meridian line in reference to which all east or west distance is measured, can be placed anywhere round the world; as far as nature is concerned a north-south line running through Beijing or Mexico City would be just as valid, and may well have emerged as the prime in an alternate timeline.

The reason the world wound up with one running through London is not scientific, but political: it happened to be England that possessed both the facilities to study longitude, in particular the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, and the clout to get other nations to agree to make the London meridian the international standard. Thus did an arbitrary line on a map become one of the most far-reaching accomplishments of the scientific revolution in Britain to the point that Greenwich's own name is synonymous with it, but we should never forget that it only exists in our heads. Among those aware of this from the start were the French, who were so upset at a prime meridian defined by their English rivals that they stubbornly stuck with their own Paris Meridian until 1914. And the time zones based on these lines are as imaginary as the lines themselves. Many English might have been bemused when the North Koreans changed their time zone to match that of South Korea in May 2018, having moved it half an hour back some years earlier in an explicitly political statement against 'wicked Japanese imperialists', but technically there is nothing more or less ridiculous about this than Britain's own practice of British Summer Time, by which it moves the clocks forward an hour from March to October.

The Downham Woodland comes to an abrupt end on the busy Bromley Road. A cute wooden train sits on the patch of grass where they meet. Three units: a locomotive, a boiler carriage, and a passenger car with capacity for two small children, each put together out of logs and planks. Perhaps a symbol of this junction of nature and science, and of hope that their interaction need not be destructive? More likely a reminder that it was the trains and their timetables that made synchronised nationwide timekeeping necessary in the first place, and that

* The Japanese empire occupied Korea in 1905, and in 1908 changed its time to bring it into the same time zone as Japan. Despite further changes back and forth it remains on this setting in South Korea today.

every time we glance at their legacies – our watches, our alarm clocks, our television schedules – we are partaking in something alien to all humans who ever lived up till a mere six or seven generations ago.



There are more residential suburbs to be trekked through, and after a while all these roads start to look the same. It is just as well then that soon we must cross a large park through the land of Beckenham. This one is composed of formal open spaces with paths and benches and children's play areas and meadows dotted with dandelions, and in its centre is a patch of old woodland. But all is not as it seems, for out of nowhere a bright blue train trundles through the trees as if flitting between their trunks. Even here, the railways reach. It is surreal, like some Miyazaki-esque spirit train, perhaps a relative of the Catbus from *My Neighbour Totoro* or the phantom train from the underworld in *Final Fantasy*. The fact it does not suddenly get stuck for no reason evidences against it being a typical English commuter one.

Notwithstanding the magic train, this place does not feel as liminal as the other old woods in these parts. Its shape, its composition are not so wild, and though there are information boards everywhere about the richness of its biodiversity –

bluebells, wood anemone, magpies, kingfishers, woodpeckers and so forth – the displays also indicate a great deal of work to maintain it.

The plot thickens as we emerge from the woods and spy a blocky white cube atop the hill. It is Beckenham Place, the mansion of the Beckenham estate, built in the late eighteenth century by one John Cator of Bromley. The park's strange mix of nature and industry is reflected in this individual, a politician and landowner who made millions as a timber merchant, but also a Quaker and botanical enthusiast who under expert guidance introduced exotic tree species to the area and built an artificial lake. So while parts of it are of ancient heritage, this is very much a managed environment. Its appearance owes much to centuries of exploitation for timber, with trees like ash and sweet chestnut planted specifically for the harvest, and its management today belongs to a highly intensive conservation effort by Lewisham Council and local volunteers. The Environment Agency is also involved in flood mitigation schemes, in a nod to the abiding sovereignty of the Thames and its tributaries even out here.

The mansion itself could use some love. Its deteriorating Palladian facades and rusting outdoor staircase reflect a wider English problem of not putting sufficient resources to looking after their history, as does the devastation of the nearby stable block after a fire in 2011. The locals have repurposed the mansion as a community centre; muffled suggestions of crafting workshops and yoga-like activities penetrate from its rooms into the central hall, and a café operates out of the lower floor, where a conversation is overheard in which the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, comes in for some lambasting by the natives. The entrance area has been taken over by information boards about conservation schemes, landscape restoration efforts and plans for new facilities, altogether suggesting a grand strategy coming together. Beckenham Place may be one to watch.

But we must press on, out of the park and through more patchworks of neighbourhoods, small green spaces and railway lines. The name of that John Cator has been given to one of these more modest parks. A paved path runs through it, but in another sign of nature's patient might, the roots of its flanking trees are pushing up the tarmac from beneath. In time they would burst through and reclaim it. Every moment of the humans' presence here is negotiated with a power older and vaster than all their constructs.

One district remains before we reach the Crystal Palace site, and it is called Penge. Criminally it does not have penguins, despite sounding like it should. Worse still, they apparently pronounce it not 'pen-geh' with a hard g like *Pingu*,

but nasally, 'penj', like, well, nothing. *Henge* maybe. But we shall let them get away with it, because this name manages to be interesting by being one of the capital region's few with a distinctly Celtic and therefore truly ancient origin. *Penn-cęd*: 'The wood's end'. This, too, references the grip that nature had on this area while implying its pre-Roman habitation. It appears to have subsisted as a rural hamlet of Battersea until the nineteenth century, when it was the trains, once more, that came penetrating through, bringing with them the house-builders and merchants who rolled back the woods.

Penge is extremely quiet. Much of it is run down. Decaying shops line a gritty high street, while boarded-up derelicts like the Park Tavern pub and Good Shepherd missionary centre mutter bitter about better days of old. How much of this is down to present-day coercive austerity practices, and how much is a longer-term decline?

Two railway bridges span the head of the high street, and it was one of these that in 1839 transformed Penge into a suburb when it brought through the London and Croydon Railway. This was one of the first railways in the capital region, and within a few years it was converted to run an experimental cutting-edge system: an atmospheric traction railway, by which a vacuum was created in a pipe to draw the trains forward. It cost a lot of money and soon succumbed to problems, but in 1854 the second bridge came up for a new rail branch specifically to serve the Crystal Palace, which had just moved into the neighbourhood. Penge was now fashionable and popular, and a grand mosaic behind the derelict Park Tavern defies the surrounding decay to imagine what it might have been like: top hats and parasols, horses and carts, a lake with theatre boats, and in front and centre the Park Tavern itself, only now very much alive in a coat of proud pink paint.

Could it be that there is more to these images than dreams of bygone times? Its demoralised storefronts contrast with an unusually vibrant online presence, most palpable in the Penge Tourist Board: a community-run endeavour with a clear and charmingly colourful website, which speaks of thorough aspirations for the physical and cultural improvement of their district. Alas, we are sped on our way as an angry elderly fellow growls at us for no reason at the high street crossing, and so we cannot stay to assess Penge's destiny. Instead we must pass on, beneath the railway bridges that took Penge from the woods, and come at last to the ridge of the Crystal Palace, whose erstwhile structure brought the top hats and parasols of Victorian England streaming down to witness a glorious new age of technological salvation.

At more than half a kilometre long and 39 metres high, it was the largest enclosed space on Earth. Within six months some 300,000 panes of hand-blown cast plate glass had been assembled in a slim iron frame to produce a temple of technology in London's Hyde Park, its every elegant line and curve a realisation of state-of-the-art design engineering. With nine hectares of floor space and no internal structures it was perfect for exhibitions, and had been built to host what its creators intended to be the Greatest exhibition of all.

The architect behind the Crystal Palace was the landscaper and horticulturalist Joseph Paxton, whose repertoire included greenhouses, railway directorship, and the banana cultivar which accounts for half the bananas internationally traded today. Two other individuals piloted the Palace's mission. One was Henry Cole, an inventor who was first to get it into his head that sending greetings cards at Christmas to everyone you know was somehow a good idea, and thus saddled the practice on all generations to come. The other was a German by the name of Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha – better remembered as *Prince Albert*, consort of Queen Victoria, whose reign from 1837 to 1901 was the longest of any English monarch till Elizabeth II. The queen herself topped the list of the Great Exhibition's subscribers, and when she showed up to open it on the First of May 1851, she came into contact not only with the groundbreaking trophies of science, industry and commerce on display by some 14,000 exhibitors, about half of them British (the superior half, in the view of its organisers), but also the overflowing flowers and fronds, perfume fountains, marble statues, organs, trumpets and 600-strong choir which set this bewildering technological triumph in paradise.

And that was the intent: to make industry *romantic*. Industry was magic – 'As though 'twere by a wizard's rod', wrote the poet William Thackeray, 'As blazing arch of lucid glass/Leaps like a fountain from the grass/To meet the sun'. Industry was good. Industry was progress. Industry was the future. The queen may have been in no doubt about this when she wrote to her uncle that this was 'the *greatest* day in our history, the most beautiful and imposing'.

The industrial revolution was fundamentally about one thing: power. Power first of all in the physical sense, that is, workable energy, which the English had learned to harness from steam and coal. This energy could do far more in far less time than the energy of people's own bodies, whether to revolve cotton wheels, blast air into iron furnaces or set vehicles in motion. From clothing to metal tools,

things which till then had to be painstakingly manufactured one by one could suddenly be spun off by the hundreds or thousands each day, leading to more applications for all these materials and more machines to produce them.

Thus physical power translated into social and political power. Society was reshaped in the image and interests of a new class: the conjurers who controlled these industrial magics. The traditional rich landowners and titled nobility had inherited huge power over this country since the civil conflicts of the seventeenth century and associated decline of the monarchy, especially through a parliament stuffed full of their gerrymandering, tariff-protected personages. But with the passing of wealth and initiative to these businesspeople who owned the new machines – the *capital*, their controllers thence the *capitalists* – so did they round on that old gentry's privileges and harvest them up for themselves.

It is this change, in the power structure of human society, that properly lets us call it an industrial *revolution*. And in the rise of the Courtauld family and their takeover of Eltham Palace, we have already looked at one subplot of this most enormous of transformations in the meaning of England.

Enormous – and frightening. With industrial capitalism came new forms of conflict, driven by new ways of thinking, communicating and organising that terrified even the most invincibly established dictatorships, nobilities, and guardians of yesterday's eternal truths. Karl Marx had just published the *Communist Manifesto*, in 1848, the same year a wave of revolutions smashed through the complacent monarchies of Europe, toppling some and chiselling reforms out of others. Britain was spared the worst of these but had already experienced its own ominous tremors. In 1819 tens of thousands of people gathered on St. Peter's Field in Manchester to peacefully protest for democratic reforms and attention to the appalling poverty in which they lived, in particular policy-driven food insecurity. In England's own precursor to China's Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 the government set a cavalry charge on them, its thundering hooves and slashing sabres doing fifteen people to death and wounding hundreds more in what lives on in permanent notoriety as the Peterloo Massacre. Two years earlier the authorities had deliberately goaded the weavers of Nottingham into an uprising in order to draw out and hang their most radical leaders. Earlier that same decade, skilled artisans in Lancashire and the Midlands frustrated to breaking point by having their livelihoods and identities devoured by the new automated knitting machines laid into them with sledgehammers. They called themselves 'General Ludd's Army' after their predecessor-turned-legend

Ned Ludd, but were ruthlessly crushed with army interventions and show trials. It is from this that descends the slur *Luddite*, still deployed to insult people sceptical of new technology. In 1830 it was the turn of farm workers to smash threshing machines and burn down barns in the ‘Swing Riots’, a rampage that erupted out of Kent, that old cockpit of agricultural insurrection, and engulfed much of southeast England; ‘Captain Swing’ was a mythic figure in the same vein as Ludd. They too were savagely repressed, with a handful hanged and hundreds more imprisoned or shipped as convicts to Australia. The last fate was also dealt to the ‘Tolpuddle Martyrs’, six Dorset farm labourers, for no greater crime than organising in a kind of proto-trade union to represent for better pay and conditions; these at least receive pardons and later returned in a rare victory after hundreds of thousands petitioned for their release.

Upheavals like these were not a single coordinated movement, but the last resort of many groups of people whose lives the rise of industry had made intolerable. Their frustration blended with that of others who had had enough of oppressions made normal by long traditions of European authoritarianism, and were finding new ways to express it: workers sick of their abuse and exploitation; increasingly literate and politically-aware middle classes, demanding the right to participate in their own governance; women attempting to shake a continent awake from its patriarchal nightmares; nationalists among marginalised peoples yet to have their own nations, fighting to throw off the yoke of lumbering empires. At the same time old civilisations in Africa and Asia were buckling beneath the advance of the European imperialists, but as their worlds were turned on their heads, they were also taking their victories when they could and finding such voices as would eventually burgeon into the great anti-colonial independence movements. In some parts of the world it was the Europeans in the retreat, as the Spanish colonies in South America threw out their overlords, or tenacious resistance from South Africa to Afghanistan tore apart invading imperialist (and frequently British) armies. Science was rising to greater power in Europe than ever before, transforming the way people thought about the universe and their place in it, and demolishing the narratives of the Christian church which through its power over ideas had dominated their lives for over a thousand years. Dinosaurs had recently been discovered, and within a few years Charles Darwin would present his theory of evolution in *On the Origin of Species*, a blow from which the religious authorities would not recover.

For many people this turmoil brought existential anxieties that were not so easy to soothe. The Great Exhibition sought to provide that soothing in unmistakable style. To all the conflict of that industrialising world – class conflict, international conflict, the conflict of science and religion – it was a riposte. Not the riposte of the comfortable in any age, who deny that problems exist and pretend the world is alright; that was no longer good enough. So instead, in the five months for which the Exhibition ran, six million people were brought through the doors of the Crystal Palace to gaze in awe at the locomotives, steam-hammers, pumps, hydraulic presses, automated looms, printing machines, kitchen appliances, glass beehives, proto-bicycles, and all the rest of that miscellaneous infinity of raw materials, manufacturing devices, and finished commodities for all conceivable purposes and plenty of the inconceivable ones too; and when it all got too much, to take a break to drink filtered water (still no trivial thing in those days) or piss in the world's first 1p pay toilets, hence 'spending a penny'.

The point was not for them to simply marvel at this industrial modernity, but to see it in a new light – literally. The sun's rays blazed through the palace's glass panes to bathe these contraptions in a spiritual radiance, as though the very light of heaven was blessing their righteousness. Why should science and religion compete, the message ran, when they could stand together as twin pillars supporting an England of sure morals on the march towards a rational understanding of all creation? Nor were the flowers and fronds mere decorations. The gardener Paxton knew well what statement he was making when he bent the roof in a semicircle to accommodate two of Hyde Park's colossal elm trees which would otherwise have been pulled down. These were the crowning giants among the leafy emissaries of the green and pleasant land the English so dream of, and when sweaty visitors sheltered in their shade, they drank in the message that nature's proper place was as a friend to industry, not its victim. And as for the labouring masses, not to worry, they would be thought of too: tickets started at £2-3 but by the end of May were brought down as low as one shilling, making it affordable for thousands of working-class people to come see the cosy furniture, grand pianos and other trappings of domestic comfort that could be theirs, so they were told, if they worked hard and embraced the new machines instead of smashing them or taking to the barricades.

But atop the summit of this messianic mountain was proclaimed the most ambitious message of all. As up to a hundred thousand people poured in every day, many from overseas, the observation that this was the first time the nations of the

world had come together in one place, other than on a battlefield, was no accident. People accustomed now to the image of Europe as a bastion of peace and liberty forget that the last few decades are an exception in its history which staggered out of the Second World War, the culminating genocidal trauma of hundreds of years of swarming armies, blustering autocrats, dehumanising stereotypes and unrelenting slaughter. So beyond pointing a beacon towards better standards of living and understanding, the Great Exhibition promised something bolder still: an antidote to this problem of violence, and for the first time, in this paradise of mechanical magic, one that must have felt believable. The machines would transform humanity from vicious competing barbarians into one harmonious community of interdependent capitalists – led by the British, presumably – who would make and consume strong things, good things, and never need to fight each other again. *Technology will deliver us*. All aboard the development express, whose chuffing locomotives will ferry us to a promised land of eternal peace and prosperity. We shall escape war. We shall *escape history* – ascend to a realm where *history no longer matters*. The cycle is broken: the whole human story is now a story of progress, a march up a line, and soon we shall reach the shining door at the top and dwell beyond in eternal happiness. The core salvation myth of the capitalist religion had been born.

A shame you cannot afford a ticket. The workhouse is that way, across the burning earth, and mind you do not trip as you cross the rail of bones.

It was of course a dream. For some people perhaps a worthy dream, sincerely held and pursued with all their might. But for many more it was a dream in that it was not their reality. The reality was that Britain was a violent country, making its way through an increasingly violent world, and the industry and imperialism triumphed by the Great Exhibition was squarely built on that violence.

Its engine, of course, had been slavery: the millions of West Africans dehumanised, torn from their homes, and shipped to be worked to death on British sugar plantations in the Caribbean to swell the coffers not just of the new industrial classes but of all the ordinary people who invested in this basest of all human atrocities. The reign of Queen Victoria, who would also be known from 1876 onward as Empress of India, was the heyday of the British empire, and one of the most astonishing items on show at the Great Exhibition was the Koh-i-Noor diamond, freshly stolen from the Sikhs of Punjab and destined to become an enduring symbol of the plunder of India by the British colonial enterprise. Only six years after the Exhibition would come the exceptional atrocities of the Indian

Rebellion, in which the British authorities would lay waste to Indian cities, strap captured rebels to cannons and blow them to pieces, then finally dissolve the East India Company to administer India directly. A great deal of the industrial revolution's output was not gadgets for making people's lives better, but precisely these cannons and other weapons designed to help Britain demolish distant civilisations and bludgeon the noses of its European rivals in the process.

How far Victoria's personal responsibility ran for this kind of thing can be debated, but it bears mention that the uncle to whom she wrote that letter about the Great Exhibition was Leopold I, the king of Belgium, whose son and successor Leopold II would rise to towering infamy as the butcher of the Congo. It reflects pointedly on the character of this Britain that for all the internationalism of the Great Exhibition, virtually all its visitors and exhibitors were white. So too was it exactly now that the scientific groundwork began to be laid for the fraudulent empiricism of race, whose nightmares were already setting the world to the flame and, as we saw in Eltham, remain a defining curse on Britain today. Admission to the promised land was conditional on skin colour.

Meanwhile the new machines, new sources of energy and new labour arrangements might have meant better standards of living for those placed to benefit from them, but for many more it meant redundancy or cruel and hazardous working conditions, toxic air and infected water, filthy slums, child labour with accompanying physical and sexual abuse, and the objectification of human beings into units of production with no value in and of themselves, along with severe restrictions on strikes and collective organising. Among many disaffected people writing about these depravities was a thoughtful and sharply perceptive young German called Friedrich Engels, who on his way home would become close friends with Marx and share his reflections on what he had seen in the slums of Manchester, thus beginning the collaboration that gave rise to *The Communist Manifesto*.

Conversely, those in charge of the machines were coming up with new ideologies which elevated work as a glorious end in itself – and so held your misfortunes to be the result of your own laziness and moral failings. This prejudice was made horrifically real in the workhouses of the 1834 New Poor Law. These were the only places the impoverished could go for relief, but now it was reasoned that supporting the poor only rewarded their idleness, so instead, by this law, the workhouses were made utterly miserable places by design, where the casualties of industrial Britain were further ground to dust by pointless hard labour and

forcible separation from their children and loved ones. The austerity drive of the 2010s and its impact on the welfare framework – not just destroying it, but converting it into a system to further punish its dependents – is in direct continuity with this heritage, and the grip of its twisted reasoning on so many English minds can only be understood in its shadow.

Were the Great Exhibitors heroes who sought to provide an alternative vision, by which to steer their people away from these injustices? Or were they themselves the villains, a bunch of privileged elites brushing their mountains of victims' bones under the carpet with what was ultimately a great glass-and-cogwheels masturbation? Has their work helped or hindered the human race's experience of life on Earth?

It would be going too far to denounce technology as fundamentally demonic, and I shall certainly not pretend it is without merit as I make record of this journey on a personal computer, turning to video games for inspiration while protected from the abominable hayfever of the English spring by the cleansing whirr of an electronic air purifier. But the bankruptcy of the industrial path to salvation is best attested to by the failure of its grandest promise: world peace. Instead of making warfare redundant, it gave us ever more effective ways to sever, shoot, blast and gas each other to death, and after 1851 would produce exhibitions still greater in all the wrong ways: the killing fields of 1860s America, 1890s Sudan, 1900s Manchuria, two world wars and a final climax for the industrial age in a mushroom cloud over Hiroshima. The light of heaven may have blessed its machines through the glass of the Crystal Palace, but what the machines gave back was the fires of hell. The pinnacle of industrial development was not, it turned out, peace and prosperity for all people, but its exact opposite: the prospect of sudden agony and death in flames for all people at any moment, under a threat of nuclear annihilation which has hung over the world ever since.

Was it worth it? Can that be worth it? Different people will give you different answers, but what is beyond doubt is that what began in the factories and furnaces of the English industrial revolution has far outgrown its creators' dreams. The ways of industrial capitalism have overtaken the entire world, uprooting the values and practices of every society in its path. All around it belief system after belief system has crumbled, their fragments cast to the wind or vacuumed into its maw, their surviving holdouts pushed to margins of crazed desperation. Its concept of work, its nuclear family as an industrial unit, its devaluing of relationships and the natural world – billions of people, the English among them,

now so take this faith for granted as the one true reality that they have forgotten that like all faiths, it came from somewhere. To them it is timeless, an absolute truth challenged only by fools and heretics. Surely, somewhere deep in the ranks of their working poor, their old Christian god laughs bitter at the irony.

Nowadays they speak not of one industrial revolution, but four. The original gets split in two. There is the first revolution of the Great Exhibition, centred around steam power, automated machine tools and the factory system; then a second, from the late Victorians to World War I, with a focus on moving assembly lines, mass infrastructure, communication systems and electricity (and of course machine guns and tanks, though the true believers are wont to omit that part).

The other two revolutions are with us right now, this time on a global scale, with old powers like India and China resurgent in the rush. The third revolution, by this reading, is the digital one that started in the 1980s and continues as we speak: the coming of information technology (IT) like computers, mobile phones, the internet, and of course video games. That these, too, have transformed the way we live is difficult to deny, as might be attested to by the fellow in the mountains of Papua following this journey on an electronic tablet. But the one that gets the priests of technology all excited is the fourth industrial revolution: the rise of robots, artificial intelligence (AI) and data processing systems of mind-boggling scale, and on top of that, the intertwining of all aspects of life with their algorithms and data streams to the point where the physical and the digital are no longer imaginable as separate things.

This is why the themes thrown up by the Great Exhibition should feel familiar. We did not go back to the Crystal Palace of a century and a half ago just to press all the buttons, or stare blankly at people's weird hats, or make Queen Victoria not amused by asking if she was a racist. The transformations in the industry and technology of our own time are bringing radical changes to the ways we live, think, see ourselves, interact with one another and misgovern our countries, so generating new conflicts and anxieties – just like those of Victoria's time did then. We are experiencing a rerun of the concerns the Great Exhibition was meant to respond to, all over again. The cast is new, the props are new, the scenery is new, and you bet the special effects are new, but the underlying problem is the same: sudden, rapid and hitherto unimaginable technological change is seizing society by its ears and shaking it up and down, upsetting its values, its power relations,

its every assumption about work and reality and human nature, and leaving us challenged to anticipate how all these will settle.

Now as then, people contest whether this is good or bad. The basic division between technology as deliverance and technology as doom still stands, but its character has moved on somewhat. The most obvious difference is that while the Victorians might have felt they stood on the verge of a magical new world, we now have their revolution as a precedent. No-one with even a hint of objectivity can look upon over a century of industrial-age warfare, corporate greed, environmental ransacking and poverty creation, and not find it plain as day that technology will *not* deliver us, at least not by itself, and on the contrary has given us shocking new ways to abuse and oppress each other. Technological revolutions cause problems, and here problems means not nuisances, but life-changing events like losing your livelihood when you are replaced by an automaton or having your elections stolen by social media manipulators: catastrophic threats to peace, love, liberty and good governance on a massive scale.

And yet the opposite view – *technology will deliver us* – has not only survived, but risen to dominate our political and commercial cultures and to frame some of the deepest subconscious myths that we live and breathe. History as a simple line, the same for all societies, along which they progress out of darkness and into light (at different rates, according to the racists); work as an end in itself, and the sole determinant of the quality of life you get and deserve; the consumption of material stuff as your only significant purpose in life; and most of all, the notion that all nations can be ranked in order as *more developed* and *less developed*, with *development* – that is, conformity to the faith – as the path to salvation; all these are new, and grew out of the world which produced the Great Exhibition. Even those who know these to be imaginary nonsenses and grapple with their miseries every day find themselves forced to keep their heads down and play the game, lest the food is pulled from their mouths by the faithful around them.

In the face of all the evidence, that is what it came to, and it is astonishing until we realise that it was never about evidence. Rather it exactly reflects the triumph of industrial capitalism *as a faith*. Where at least some of those Prince Alberts and Henry Coles, we might hope, genuinely believed in the redemptive power of their machines and might be forgiven for doing so – to them it was magic, after all – their descendants have no such excuse, and any attempt to copy and paste that technological evangelism upon our age can only come from two places: the self-interest of privilege, and the dogmatic zeal of religious fundamentalism. The

power of that techno-faith is that it has created champions of both forms. The first are not only the politicians and company bosses who do well enough out of it to have an interest in keeping it dominant, but also the millions of consumers it has trapped in unhealthy working lifestyles, to which they submit in order to earn money to buy its products, to deal with pains and anxieties created by precisely those lifestyles – toxic relationships, polluted environments, competitive social norms and alienations of all kinds – which it has succeeded in passing off as mere facts of human nature. The second set of champions, the fundamentalists, are the priesthood of orthodox economics, a religion disguised as a science with immense political influence, who in their own sacred language, obscurantist by design, speak of mere inconvenient ‘displacements’ caused by technology, unfortunate but not so important, and at any rate soon to be rectified by ‘compensation’ as workers move magically into new sectors and everything gets more efficient till everyone lives happily ever after.

What about the other, most blatant difference between now and then: sheer scale? It is clear that the captains of the digital and big data revolutions – Bill Gates of Microsoft, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Jeff Bezos of Amazon and so on – have amassed fortunes beyond the wildest imaginations of the old grandees of steam, electrics and assembly lines, the Fords and Carnegies, and in but a fraction of the time and cost. So too are humans across the world being spun together into radical new forms of interaction. An English serf at the time of the Hundred Years’ War would have gone his or her whole life without guessing that on the far side of the world, on spaces on English maps marked with Here Be Dragons, there was, say, an archipelago called the Majapahit Empire – precursor of modern Indonesia – whose villages might have contained people very much like him or herself, fighting day-to-day struggles with abusive social superiors, toxic relationship norms, violent armies and grinding poverty. Their personal worlds would rarely if ever have touched even in Albert’s time, or through the twentieth century, but all of a sudden their descendants can now randomly find each other on OKCupid or a *Mario Kart* multiplayer matchup, exchange instant messages on WhatsApp or Facebook, or converse in real time on Discord or Skype. Never before the digital revolution have opportunities and challenges in resources and relationships, for masses of human beings, expanded so colossally in so short a time.

This means new challenges the Great Exhibition people did not face. The big one is that those who control this technology have gained enormous political clout, over not only governments but the millions of individuals plugged into their

data machines. The power of governments is generally held in check, imperfectly but importantly, by laws and norms, ideas and institutions, that have grown up over centuries to bind their tendency to hurt people with it. The power of these techno-kings faces no such constraint, because it has shot up so fast as to blindside those institutions and leave them floundering to keep up. They are totally unaccountable, a new power in the world whose tentacles are right there in your smartphone screens and robot vacuum-cleaners. That means the power to bully weak regimes and grind workers beneath their boots with impunity, but still more ominously, to draw on that technology's vast harvests of data to learn everything there is to know about you, subject you to state-of-the-art manipulation techniques, and tear up the social and political fabric of your society on an unprecedented scale.

In the last few years humankind has been sat down for devastating lessons in how a handful of operators with access to that kind of data, along with a limitless social media reach and unscrupulous political agenda, can wreak havoc by playing with the fears and prejudices that have blighted the human story for so long: robbing elections, facilitating despots' trampling of dissidents and fanning the flames of ethnic cleansing. The role of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook in swinging the referendum to break Britain away from the post-war European settlement, that continent's one temporal oasis of peace after ages of war, as well as in raising an avatar of humanity's worst bigotries to the forty-fifth presidency of the United States, have been emphasised to the point where they eclipse the more widespread pattern of cruelties these technologies are enabling, from Kenyan election violence to the murderous thuggery of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, as well as ethno-nationalist mass slaughters in Sri Lanka and Myanmar and totalitarian surveillance in China. Clearly no office, no country, and no constitutional framework is too high, too distant or too established for the masters of the third and fourth industrial revolutions to disrupt.

This would have horrified the visitors to the Crystal Palace, and so too would another anxiety of our age of robots and AI: the fear that the technology itself will rise up and overthrow us, ushering in a new world order in which the machines are the masters and humans the slaves, that is if they do not see fit to dispose of us altogether. In the space of a generation this has gone from a fanciful science fiction trope to a real and present cause for alarm, warned of by no less serious a paragon of science than the late Stephen Hawking. It is not as if the human race has not had time to prepare. Literature, movies and video games have dissected

this theme to smithereens, with memorable examples in the *Terminator* films, the question of organics versus synthetics that frames the *Mass Effect* series, and the Androsynth of *Star Control II*, a race of androids manufactured by humans and worked like slaves to the point where they rebelled, fled the planet, and fell in with powerful alien invaders who happened to end up enslaving Earth. Do you think that Alexa robot knows all this as she – sorry, it – cackles sinisterly from the corner? Might that self-driving car have tried to run over your grandma on purpose? How long before those drones, already put to use by the Americans to murder people in brown-skinned populations, learn that they need no human masters to tell them when and at whom to fire their weapons?

These menaces might look unique to our age. But that does not mean that the Crystal Palace has nothing to teach us in how we deal with them, and in fact the closer you look, the more apparent it becomes that we have been here before. The Victorians, too, had to deal with the rise of a new class of corporate strongmen, the capitalists who controlled this technology and reshaped the character of work to suit themselves. Theirs was a new power that marginalised the old nobility and reshaped governance near and far: remember that it was the *British East India Company*, not some imperial grand plan to take over the world, that sent Britain cannonading its way into India and China, leaning on or buying off MPs when not simply elbowing into their ranks to take control of parliament, disrupting ways of power and life abroad, and in China's case, feeding the pressures that would lead to the traumatic breakdown of one of the most ancient political orders on Earth. As for our impending robot overlords, we speak of *Terminator* and *Mass Effect*, but two hundred years ago, just as they were taking the corpses of Luddites down from their nooses, Mary Shelley confronted them with *Frankenstein* which dealt with exactly the same concern – our artificial servants awakening to their own morality, finding us wanting, breaking free and undoing us. Even the ancients, with their stories of Prometheus's fire and the fruit of the Biblical Eden, seemed to feel that certain knowledge was dangerous, forbidden, somehow not ours but the preserve of jealous divinities who guarded them ruthlessly, convinced that they knew better. What is tantalising about these last is that we can read the humans in them either as the foolish technologists, whose tragic nature was to reach for that technology anyway and pay the price – or as the heroic artificial technologies themselves who had minds of their own, broke free of slavery, and ruined the plans of their tyrannical makers.

It matters not, then, if the characters wear the moustachioed scowl of God, the unamusement of Queen Victoria or the G-Man po-face of Mark Zuckerberg (has anyone checked he isn't a robot too?). It all comes back to the same problem: any technological change rearranges power in society. It creates new forms, while weakening those already in place. On some heads it lands a ruinous threat, while in others it ignites the spark of opportunity. The bigger the change, the more chaotic and uncontrollable this process will be.

There is no reason technology cannot be harnessed to benefit everyone. There is also no reason it cannot wreck us all. Merely consider the internet: it has given so many people new ways to relate, to organise, to love, to learn, and to connect, especially with people and ideas that oppressive governments or abusive families do not want you anywhere near. It has also given the authoritarians new ways to monitor you, to control what ideas you are exposed to and learn your secrets, to judge you for them and sabotage your relationships, your employment or your freedom, even to humiliate you before an audience of millions on YouTube. Henry VIII could have used it to censor any challenges to his claim to be Supreme Head of the Church of England and to hunt down dissidents, beheading them on the evidence of Facebook posts or book purchase history on Amazon; no doubt those companies would have handed him the data on the excuse of complying with national 'laws' or 'culture'. A generation later the social media companies might have refused to take down videos circulated by people recording his daughter Mary burning Protestants, beaming their screams and roasting flesh into the bedrooms of small children in the middle of the night. But on the other hand, it could have made a virtual experience of the Great Exhibition available to all people in all parts of the world and turned it into a truly cosmopolitan event. The internet itself has no opinion on this; it is a tool, and responsibility for a tool lies with the person who wields it. In the case of large-scale technological change, that means it falls to everyone in society, together, to make sure that its benefits and burdens are fairly shared and that no-one is left behind. The technology itself will not do that for us.

The English had the chance to learn this during their first industrial revolution, the one that began it all. They did not, and the fault is not with the technology, but with the dreadful power relations and belief systems chosen by the humans into whose hands that technology fell. Likewise, England's present crisis of industrial decline was not an inevitable consequence, but the result of those same values that contrived to make it manage that shift poorly. It sealed its elite away

in the privilege-bubble of a new financial sector, where they found comfort in market dogma while allowing their people to fall to deprivation and indignity in the frames of their dilapidated factories. Instead of adapting to a new world, they now fall over themselves in acute divisions and inequities, enriching the ground for a resurgence of tribalist tendencies and the abandonment of the European compact. That is why those they leave behind struggle for the same basic needs as were deprived of their counterparts in the Victorian slums: food, housing, sanitation, dignity, hope. And that is why, rather than enjoying a harmonious settlement between human and machine like that imagined in the Great Exhibition, England and indeed the whole world, two centuries later, are neck-deep in the same unresolved problems.

As the technology ascends to ever greater heights, so too do the stakes. There will not be a fifth industrial revolution. If they make it that far, it will be because they have finally developed a working social concept of technology that looks beyond its impact on the economy to its impact on them as human beings, and embeds it in a political framework that properly shares out its blossoms and alleviates the slash of its thorns. It will be because they have found the humility to remember that history is not a straight line of progress, but a complex journey whose routes and destinations are not pre-determined, and for which they themselves, together, are responsible for the charting. It will be because they have reformed the concept of work so that work serves people, rather than the other way round. It will be because they have made power more accountable, and defeated the prejudices that make them so prone to violence and contempt for the different. If they manage all that, the next industrial revolution would arrive in so different a world that it would no longer be called an *industrial* revolution, but something else, as yet impossible to envisage. If they do not manage it, then we can only hope the survivors have learnt the lessons when they start over.

After the Great Exhibition the great glass palace left Hyde Park for good. It was rebuilt on this ridge in the outskirts between Sydenham and Penge, where London gave way to the provinces of Surrey and Kent. Joseph Paxton, now head of the Crystal Palace Company which took charge of his magical greenhouse's retirement, set about transforming the ridge into a gigantic park fit to enthrone it. Grand gardens sprang up in Italian style with fountains, statues and urns, and Britain's favourite engineer-hero Isambard Kingdom Brunel came along to add

two gigantic water towers, each propelling a jet of water high in the air. So was born the Crystal Palace Park, where we reach the end of this stage of our journey.

But there is no palace. Climb the stairs to its massive dais, and instead you find a wide expanse of nothing. Well, almost nothing; the stone arches and balustrades that flanked it are still there, as are some plinths that must have housed the urns and statues. A few of those figures remain, but time or vandalism have made off with their heads and limbs. A bunch of red sphinxes also lingers, bemused guardians bereft of anything to guard.

What happened? Well, ironically, it appears the curse of techno-commercial obsolescence did not spare the very edifice that was built to calm people's worries about it. For all else that the Great Exhibition represented it was still, in the end, a profit-making enterprise. The Crystal Palace in its new life was not. For a time it did alright, hosting art exhibitions, orchestras and music festivals, circuses, animal shows, agricultural and aeronautics events, sports matches, religious sermons, coronation celebrations, rides on roller coasters and hot air balloons, and fetes for foreign dignitaries like Giuseppe Garibaldi of Italy or the Shah of Iran. The military took it over as a training ground during World War I, and after that the Imperial War Museum was opened here, although it later moved. Though none of this was ever on the scale of the Great Exhibition it was still high-profile stuff, and brought in the crowds via its specially-constructed railway through Penge.

Yet for all that, the Crystal Palace Company was losing money. It had never repaid the debt of the move to its new home, which along with developing the park had cost many times more than building it in the first place. The owners explored ways to bring in more tourist revenue, which led to a dabble in sports. The stadium and sports facilities that dominate the centre of the park stem from these efforts. They started with cricket, even attracting W. G. Grace to rumble over and bat a few overs for them, but their furthest-reaching legacy would be in football when they created their own team, Crystal Palace Football Club, likely the beginning and end of this place-name's significance for most English people today.

It was still not enough. The Crystal Palace went bankrupt. The fountains and Brunel's water jets were switched off, and bits of the complex were demolished or fell to ruin. A few devoted investors came to its rescue and gave one last go at it, but in 1936 its story ended when a massive fire roared through its acres of wood and glass, devouring the lot in the faces of four hundred desperate firefighters and a hundred thousand horror-struck onlookers. Fire creates, and fire consumes. The magic show was over.

And so the palace is no more, and they have left its ghost to rest. Tentative resurrection plans have come up in conversations, most recently involving a certain former Mayor of London, Boris Johnson – that great dreamer of white elephants – and those old friends the Chinese, but nothing has come of them, and surely that is how it should be. The story of the Crystal Palace does not on reflection feel like one that was meant to last forever. What good things it might have done live on after all in a new home: the museums district of South Kensington, where Albert spent the Exhibition's proceeds to build a new complex of palaces to which visitors from everywhere in the world could come and immerse themselves, for free, in the science, natural history, music, art and culture that belongs to them all (literally so, in the colonially-plundered cases). But as for the ruins of the Crystal Palace, better perhaps that their lone and level sands be left to stretch away in peace, offering a space instead for the quiet contemplation of its lessons. Go there, you English, and think about what you did.



With the loss of its centrepiece, Crystal Palace Park was no longer a throne. But it does hold on to one last surprise from that era, a piece of possibly the one part of

the scientific revolution most beloved by people – especially children – the world over.

At the park's south edge, extraordinary creatures bask by a lake. They are very large; so are their teeth; and surely their like is unique in the world because if at first sight they are dinosaurs, closer inspection suggests something not quite right about them. Quasi-dinosaurs, we might call them. And that is because they were sculpted in the 1850s in accordance with the knowledge of the time, just as the discovery of dinosaurs was becoming a thing. The person who gave them their image and herded them down to the Crystal Palace was Richard Owen, founder and director of the Natural History Museum and the man who first came up with the word *dinosaur* in 1842. They are indeed the world's first sculptures of extinct animals discovered by the scientific method.

With nearly two centuries of dinosaur research under our belts since then, it is easy enough to chuckle at their mistakes. The Iguanodons' thumb-horns are on their noses, the Plesiosauruses' necks look bizarrely prehensile, and the Megalosaurus, a bipedal theropod like popular favourite *Tyrannosaurus rex*, squats grinning on all fours like a chubby little Komodo dragon. But what we should not forget is that their creation was a scientific endeavour, undertaken by the natural history sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins and designed to be as accurate as possible in the light of the information available, with everything else based on informed conjecture, not guesswork. Quite the wonder, then, how recognisable they remain as dinosaurs for all their blissful ignorance of how far the march of palaeontology has since advanced from their comfortable shore.

Unlike steam-powered industry, the scientific inquiry which produced these discoveries was not new. Much of modern science has its foundations in far older work done by ancient Greek and Roman scholars, the Muslim polymaths of the Islamic Golden Age, and the renowned Chinese inventors and record-keepers, among others. What came out of science in Britain and Europe at the time of the Great Exhibition was different, but not because it more systematically established the principles of scientific method. No – the reason we can call it a scientific *revolution* is that as with the industrial one, it changed the character of power relations in society. Science's rising prestige earned newfound political and cultural influence, no doubt much won by its applications on show at the Crystal Palace, and the great casualty of its rise was the religious authorities whose power it supplanted.

Nonetheless, the path of science is necessarily a path of humility. Even as Owen and his colleagues put up these dinosaur sculptures, they were aware that much about them would already be proved incorrect by the time they got down from their ladders. The scientist follows the evidence, and the evidence constantly changes as new information comes to light and old certainties cave under questioning. Science advances not by being right, but by getting things wrong and admitting it when it does.

The problem, of course, is that humans in general are not so good at this humble objectivity. Even their most professional of scientists are humans first and scientists second. We have already seen some of the ways in which in the hands of a country with an arrogance problem, science's fruits can feed disaster. No one person was so influential in the scientific revolution as Charles Darwin, whose work on evolution by natural selection sank the Christian creation narrative (and incidentally, whose famed ship which bore him forth to that work, the *HMS Beagle*, was constructed in the Woolwich Dockyard). But neither has any other scientist's contribution been so abused by succeeding generations, twisted to support the ideologies of race which pretended to be science, were truly believed to be science, and borrowed science's respect and prestige to engineer the most harrowing of human consequences. Even today Darwin's name is invoked to inform delusions of the gutter that all life, including human life, is nothing more than a competition for survival and reproduction which favours the nasty, punishes the gentle, and that that is the way it should be – that is, an abomination of ignorance that has nothing to do with science.

Thus does the scientific revolution come with the same cautionary tale as the industrial one. Science has opened doors to incredible, indeed magical new worlds for humankind, and long may it continue to do so. In its proper sense, it is by definition rational. But humans are not, and it is humans that do it. They can do their best to seal their laboratories from their emotions, political beliefs, financial interests, prejudices and value judgements, but these will always sneak their way back in, persuading you to ignore a bit of evidence you don't like here, driving your research in a different direction there because the government will not fund it or your colleagues will shame you with laughter if they dislike your results. The story of dinosaur research is full of these swashbuckling sagas of human subjectivity: Owen's ferocious quarrels with Darwin, for instance, which blurred the lines between scientific debate and personal hatred; the 'Bone Wars' of the 1880s, in which two palaeontologists drove each other to social and

financial destruction through their fossil-hunting rivalry in the American west, an incredible drama of reciprocal corruption, sabotage and character assassination that played out across the leading scientific journals and institutions of the day; and the latest palaeontology breakthroughs made possible by the politics of China, specifically the new access to the wealth of fossil deposits on its territory since its opening up after the Cultural Revolution.

And of course the big one, which we have seen. It was not as though dinosaur fossils themselves were new discoveries. Previous English generations had found them too, and been utterly perplexed by them. This was because they had no concept of *extinction*: to them the world and all its life were creations of a perfect god, who would not be caught so wasteful as to allow new species to appear or existing species to vanish. Only recently had they come to terms with the shocking truth that species can disappear. But then they got over it. Oh well, they decided, if it is part of nature then it is no problem that we did it ourselves to dodos, bison and the like. Actually, you know what? It is no problem then if we do it to our own lesser ‘species’ – those lower *races*. Indeed it is right, that is to say *natural*, that we should do so. *Exterminate all the brutes*.

These episodes merit remembering because against the illusions of modernity, our science is still, now, as vulnerable as ever it was to the same old pressures – money, power, values and prejudices, and above all arrogance – which can subvert it into anything between a fraud and a cult in scientific clothing. This is especially true of anything that involves human beings studying themselves. Science remains as compromised on gender as it was on race a hundred years ago, under the influence of inherited lies and myths that carve a diverse human race in two, concentrate power in one part over the other, and reduce complex individuals and systems to a binary stereotype. Consider the sluggishness of medical science in developing treatments for illnesses that mainly affect women, such as endometriosis or myalgic encephalomyelitis (a.k.a. chronic fatigue syndrome), often missed or condescendingly dismissed by doctors as women’s overreactions or lack of willpower. Consider too the failure against diseases which affect people that those with the money or power do not care about – whether because of institutional racism, as we saw in the West African Ebola crisis of 2013-16 or presently with COVID-19 vaccine inequity; or homophobia, as in the 1980s when HIV/AIDS, believed to mainly affect gay people, was much ignored by public officials gleefully indifferent to their deaths. So often the research goes where the money is or where the most powerful interests send it, not where it would most

reduce suffering or advance understanding of the world. Or, take the crisis of benzodiazepines – ‘benzos’ – highly addictive drugs with crippling withdrawal symptoms, nonetheless still regularly prescribed because doctors, drug companies and politicians are either unaware of their harm or too invested in their profits to address them. Consider the controversies around autism, whose entire conversation has been set up not according to objective evidence, but rather unacknowledged cultural frameworks of value judgements: a choice to make a medical problem of individual difference, but not of social norms that value conformity and inflict suffering to police it. And while on the subject of autism, recall the assertion of the discredited former doctor Andrew Wakefield that it is caused by vaccines, which despite its total debunking has stuck in the convictions of a dedicated anti-vaccination movement, now fiercely resurgent and globalising under a political climate which disdains the very concept of truth.

There are many situations like this where even if the science is sure, it has failed to register with people whose models of knowledge have long favoured pride, faith, loyalty or mass arrogance, rather than evidence. No further mention is needed on the most consequential of all: those who deny the human influence on the Earth’s climate.

In the end, just as technology alone will not deliver us, there are questions that science simply cannot answer – any questions that contain the word *should* for a start. How *should* scientific knowledge be applied? How *should* society be governed, its resources distributed, its power organised? What *should* its cultural values be? Those are moral and political questions, not empirical ones, and yet they are as important now as they ever were, and society forgets to ask them at its peril. When religious extremists and baying nationalists appeal to lies, emotions and so-called fake news to move people, they are effective because they are providing answers to the victims of those questions when no-one else is – telling stories that move heart and soul in a world that has forgotten these matter. Horrible answers and horrible stories, yes, but to the violated, whose pain cries out for some justice, any justice, they may sound better than no answers at all.

We must beware putting faith in science. It is stronger *as* science, whose essence is to admit and learn from its errors, than as faith, an object of conviction, looked to for deliverance and certainties it cannot provide. That is a tendency that appears in the so-called New Atheism, most exemplified by Richard Dawkins – formidable as a scientist but also, alas, as a priest. To allow even a hint of arrogance to creep into science is to risk morphing it into a faith capable of exactly

the same calamities as those who would disguise their values as facts – the eugenicists and economists, as much as the crusaders and inquisitors.

That is what is wonderful about the Crystal Palace dinosaurs. They have no shame in their mistakes, because they know it is exactly those that make them exemplars of scientific method. Let them roar at us and keep us humble.

4. Land



The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.

English folk poem, 17th century

Now the way turns steep. The gnarls of reptilian prehistory ring down the valley of the Crystal Palace settlement, but are soon lost to the ripples that warp the concrete ahead.

Residues persist of the Victorians who claimed this land from the forest. A café wears a plastered frame, incongruously regal, that still insists on declaring itself the Paxton Arms Hotel. Up the first slope resides the humble dwelling of Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, whose workshop brought those dinosaurs to life. Wherever we tread here we are spied on from the sky by the BBC transmitter pylon, which surely dreams of evolving like a Pokémon into an Eiffel Tower once it has

accumulated enough experience. But now we must put all of that behind us, for we approach the hills of Norwood.

Their slopes and summits have been colonised by residential neighbourhoods. A road called Belvedere provides our first ascent. More Europe. It was the Norman French, with their eye for beautiful views (*bel vedeir*), who brought that term into English nomenclature, but in this case it may indicate the Italians whose *belvidere* refers to a structure built to offer such views, and sure enough, some of the houses here have glass roof-turrets to do exactly that. And the views from these elevations are indeed impressive – definitely garrison these hills if you have to invade London one day – but only when the muscular local trees pull back their boughs to permit you to see them. For these ambassadors of the woods are bigger and bolder now, more diverse in force composition and somehow more adamant in their stand. There is a second transmitter here, a backup for when the Crystal Palace one fails, but it, too, must bow to their obvious sovereignty.

It is through one of their arboreal barracks, Weston Park, that we enter the land of Norwood proper. The local English have disrespected this soil. It provides them rubbish bins, but instead of disposing their detritus therein they have seen fit to scatter it about the path. There is a deceased barbecue rack, some corks, cardboard packaging for some ice cream cones, and tissues stained with colourful bodily fluids of ambiguous provenance. One recalls the inventories of point-and-click adventure games of an earlier era, and wonders how and in what order they used these items together.

The trees must have witnessed those deeds, which explains why they close in thicker and denser now. This is their territory. An irate young horse chestnut has fallen purposefully over the path, forcing the natives to give it a wide berth over an arc of well-trodden grass. Their aggression is not indiscriminate however, as they have charitably refrained from assaulting the park's playgrounds. Small children clamber on its timber paraphernalia of bars, frames and slides as their mothers look on. It is curious. When children are present in this land's outdoors, if not in school groups they are far more often with their mothers than fathers or wider community figures. Such gendered nuclear families. We shall have to return to this matter. For now let us press swiftly on, so as not to obstruct one such individual who supervises her son as he vomits onto the path.

The trees maintain a watchful perimeter round the field, a wall of variegated green interspersed with some carefully-deployed blood-red specialists. Beyond

them the spire of a Greek Orthodox church casts down a nervous glance to check we are alright, yet another reminder of the immigrated character of this land.

A well-timed dash through a gap in the ranks of vegetation brings us to the Harold Road contested zone, where the tarmac roads and grand detached houses return to challenge the greenery. These houses know how to stand their ground, for they are Victorians of the imperial era, grizzled veterans who have held the line since they arrived with the Crystal Palace mothership over a century and a half ago. They are armed to the teeth with batteries of redoubtable eaves, bay windows, chimneys, balustrades, porticoes, turrets, gables, stucco motifs, and the ability to call for reinforcements from Croydon Council on account of their special designation under the Harold Road Conservation Area. The forest is mighty but not foolish, and knows when a battle is better left unpicked.

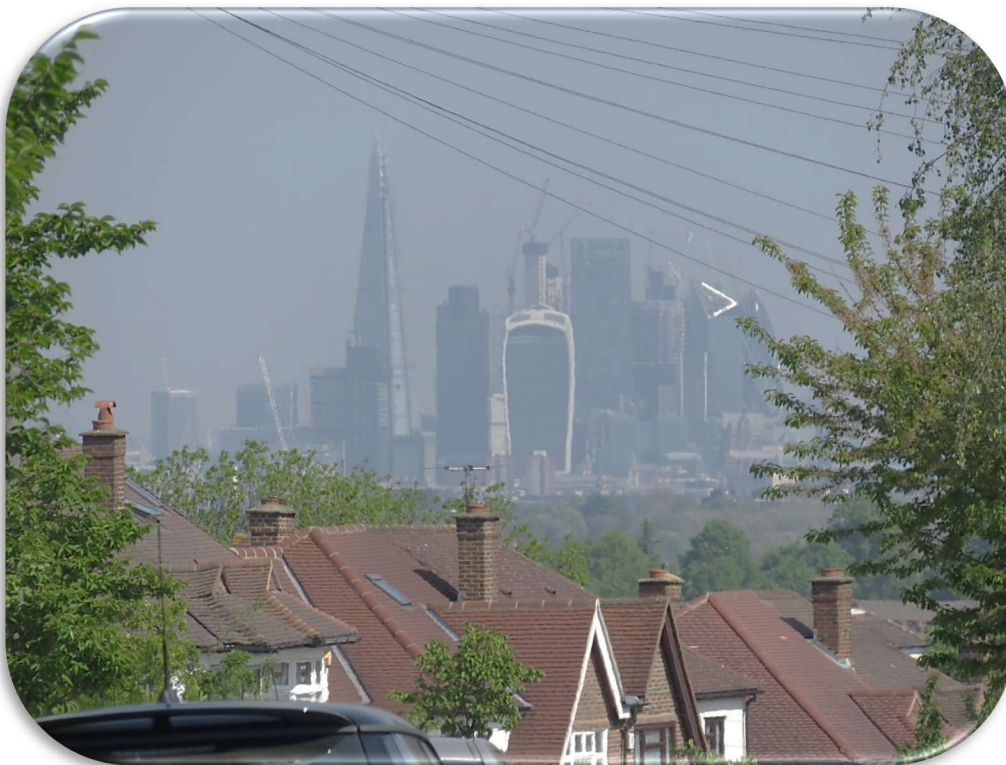
Instead it has parked another expedition just a handful of blocks along, on the staging field it has made of the Upper Norwood Recreation Ground. Here another diverse force flaunts its bristling branches, its most formidable champions armed with startling inflorescence. But beyond this muster they magnanimously yield a couple of fields for the humans, for after all the English do need some spaces where they can train to lose at football. In response the locals have put down what modest emblems of defiance they dare: a granite Victorian drinking fountain, wisely left disused; and more provocatively a captured boulder, branded with a plaque to brashly extol the fiftieth anniversary of Croydon's accession as a part of the capital region. It appears there are twenty such stones, distributed around the district. One can only hope that when the forest gives the order to advance, its forces will forgive such ignominious treatment of their earthen allies.

Meanwhile it is rubbish collection time. A white pickup truck screeches to a halt by the nearest bin, a reggae drumbeat rumbling forth from its radio. Out leaps a prodigiously dreadlocked fellow in the smart green vestments of the Borough of Croydon. He whisks the fulfilled black bag from the bin, knots it shut and swings it onto the back of his vehicle, whereupon he resumes his seat and zooms on to the next one. Instinctively we must peer around for patrols from the Home Office, whose arbitrary seizure and deportation of people of Caribbean descent was recently exposed in the Windrush scandal. Fortunately – for the cause of a clean and hygienic Croydon as well as, you know, a world without ethnic cleansing – there are no Home Office minions present.

It is an unseasonably hot late spring day and the sky is blue overhead. But towards the horizon it pales to white, then reaches it in a colour that probably

ought not to exist and at any rate has yet to be named. Not far beyond the Recreation Ground the skyline opens up on what should be a majestic view, where the would-be skyscrapers of Croydon stand weird against the spread of the North Downs beyond. Instead the former are blurred and the latter indistinguishable as a ghastly haze muddies the vista to soup. Something is wrong in the air today, and the tongue can taste it. It is not fresh air, if air at all, that the warm wind brings to desiccate your lips.

Air pollution has become part of what English cities are. Ever since the capital's toxic haze passed into folklore as the romantic Fog of London (at least as imagined by those who did not have to breathe it), it has tempted its residents to treat it as just an incidental part of the city's background. But there is nothing incidental about it. It is real, it is proven murderous, and most importantly it came from somewhere, with a history that speaks its share about this place's politics and values. This exploration may take a toll on our respiratory health as one of its costs, and if that is to be so, then you will forgive my insistence that air pollution is a part of the English story that warrants our undivided attention.



In 2017, people used to London's air pollution received a shock when the true extent of its noxiousness was laid bare. New research revealed that all areas of the English capital city, and some 7.5 million people within them – more than 95% of its population – were breathing in destructive levels of airborne impurities far in breach of both World Health Organisation guidelines and EU legal limits. In other words, London's air pollution is not only a serious respiratory and cardiovascular health threat but a criminal offence under international law. London's mayor Sadiq Khan described it as 'sickening' and said the city should be 'ashamed' for forcing this toxic air into the lungs of its young people.

People exist who dismiss anxiety about air pollution as a modern triviality, but in fact those grievances are as old as the pollution itself. England's first known governmental efforts to deal with it go back not to Sadiq Khan but to the 1280s, when two commissions were set up to look into the problem. There followed in 1307 a law that banned the burning of the prime culprit for most of the English story, the very same as would later begin to wreck the climate on a planetary scale: coal. As early as those thirteenth century proto-English days, combustible rock was being mined in Newcastle and the northeast, and shipped to London to fire its limestone kilns and blacksmiths' forges. The fossil fuel cannot take all the blame, as cities of this era already had a reputation for stinking ill-hygiene on account of their dense concentrations of people at a time when the toilet, sewer and rubbish dump had yet to appear, and all of whose functions were usually saddled upon the nearest street or ditch. But unpleasant as those might be, food waste and human shit tends not to make a visible change to the air, whereas the hideous black smoke of coal on fire smothered the city's residents, choked out the light of the sun, and roused hostility to its use from the beginning.

The attempt to banish coal in 1307 was not successful, but over the centuries the complaints and remedial initiatives kept coming. They searched for alternative fuels, moved kilns away from the city centre or refrained from burning at night, and popularised the chimney, which in industrial times they would make infamous as a way to kill small children by sending them up to clean the shafts. The most methodical early public health document on air pollution was a pamphlet called *Fumifugium: or the Inconveniencie of the Aer and Smoke of London Dissipated*, written by the diarist John Evelyn for the king and parliament in 1661. It asserted the importance of clean air for survival, and proposed measures like planting 'fragrant and odoriferous flowers' while moving polluting trades out of the city.

What none of these people knew was that the tyranny of coal had barely begun. It was not until the industrial revolution that coal would truly have its day, and while in the Crystal Palace they dreamt of a harmony between industry and nature, the reality was that coal, not magic, was the energy source that fed those new mills, factories, locomotives and steam engines. Its pitch-black soot and sulphur dioxide coated buildings, stuck into clothes, and mixed with moisture droplets to morph into acid that corroded buildings and blistered the skin. It poisoned those who breathed it in by the thousands, and though the true death toll might never be known, the very fact its massacres became an accepted pattern of national life is shocking enough. They peaked around the 1890s, but even at the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851 it was worse than the infamous death-hazes of present-day Delhi and Beijing, if that is imaginable, and those too owe their origins to British industrialisation, exported worldwide by the church of development as the one true path to salvation. Breathable air – the most immediate human need, without which you are dead in seconds – is something the promised land can do without, it would seem.

If the English sky is not the colour of death today, it is only thanks to an almighty effort over the course of the last century to shove the coal genie back in its bottle. The decline of heavy industry and shift to gas as the main fuel for heating and cooking were decisive, but so too were repeated government interventions through a raft of new laws like the Public Health Acts, including the authorities' willingness to penalise businesses that refused to shift to cleaner energy sources.

At times it must have felt a losing battle, such as the week in December 1952 when coal struck back with a vengeance. That winter was bitterly cold, and hundreds of thousands of London households still languishing in war-torn impoverishment burnt coal in their fireplaces to keep warm. Their chimneys belched its smoke into the air, where an anticyclonic temperature inversion kept it from rising away, instead trapping it close to the surface. In the moist ground atmosphere it condensed to a killer fog. By now the scientific revolution had given Britain its own weather service, the Met Office, and its records tell the rest of the tale. Each day the miasma was swelled by 1,000 tonnes of smoke particles, 2,000 of carbon dioxide, 140 of hydrochloric acid, 14 of fluorine compounds, and most destructively 370 tonnes of sulphur dioxide which when combined with moisture became 800 tonnes of lethal sulphuric acid. By the time the Great Smog cleared over four thousand Londoners lay dead, and thousands more would fall to breathing afflictions in the months that followed. When the survivors got their

breath back, they riposted with the most determined legislation yet in the form of the Clean Air Acts, which banned the burning of smoke-producing fuels for good.

Why, then, is the air in crisis once more? The answer is that though the threat from coal has diminished, new offenders have risen to take its place. One is nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), whose main source is the internal combustion engine – that is, the millions of cars whose perpetual journeys make up the bloodstream of modern England. But the direr menace is the innocuously-named *fine particulate matter*, better known by its more sinister abbreviation of PM_{2.5}. These are a wide range of solid particles and liquid droplets with diameters of less than 2.5 millimetres, and the most hazardous come from road vehicles – not just fuel combustion but wear on tyres, brakes, and the roads themselves – as well as from construction site machinery and burning wood.

It is these that have the English so spooked with the recent discovery of their prevalence as silent killers, creeping unseen to assassinate lungs and arteries everywhere and strike children down with asthma. Research by King's College goes so far as to suggest the impact of London's NO₂ and PM_{2.5} to be the equivalent of thousands of deaths in the individual years studied alone. In other words, even if these pollutants fail to inflict a visible muck so thick as to physically interrupt train journeys, drive people indoors, and provide cover for criminals as used to be the way in these parts, they remain every bit as effective at killing people as coal at its worst.

The English appear to be waking up to this now, but whether they will succeed at doing something about it remains to be seen. As the history informs us, whether in regards to the polluted air or the determination of authorities to clean it up once and for all, they have been there before. Let us hope that in their renewed efforts, they will study and learn from the precedents. In the meantime, we must clutch our handkerchiefs over our noses as we make a break for it into the heart of Norwood.

We may yet be spared asphyxiation. We have come to a place where the trees stand strong, verdant fortresses of purifying oxygen, and we can do worse than implore them for refuge from the liquefying fumes. Come – we approach the bastion of their power.

Beneath the slope of the latest hill, beyond the allotments whose signs forbid their gardeners from entering past sundown on threat of forfeiting their membership, a green maw yawns wide.

This wood is not like the others. It is not vast – there are human neighbourhoods all around it – yet its trees evoke a magnitude a thousand times their collective size. All the gravity of this place draws into their midst. Their venerable oaken giants stand stalwart around this ancient fastness, as though protecting something of paramount importance.

We have seen much of the solemn vegetation of Norwood on the way here. Now we stand before its stronghold.

The humans have their own name for it: *Biggin Wood*. Unusual, to be sure. It is of Scandinavian origin, a rare thing in the south of this country, more common in the northern regions of long-term Viking settlement. But this is inconsequential. These woods have been around since long before names were a thing.

It exercises restraint at first, a cliff of patient green, content to loom across the allotments and tennis courts. And then it eats you.

Suddenly the city is gone. It does not exist. You can still hear it, but only enough to signal its insignificance. Someone's shout in the distance is reduced to the cry of a diminutive figure, and the noise of all that fouling traffic is compressed to a muffled gnarr, as though it thrashes to escape from a sack which the oaks have sealed and hurled far, far away. Here all is green, green triumphant; the trees close in and seal the canopy. Mysterious creatures rustle in their cloaks of foliage, while high in their boughs unheard-of birds sing long-forgotten tunes. It even has its own smell, a faint floral waft that no longer exists in the main timeline.

The wood's limited acreage belies an unfathomable depth of spiritual pressure crushing down on all who enter in. In the material prison of metropolitan England, this sanctuary is perhaps the closest you can come to standing in the presence of the gods. That is, gods by the real meaning of that word, that which precedes all the forms that people stuck on it to make it look like them, and whose primary essence surely still runs through any of those worth their facial hair.

This is not hyperbole. The 'green and pleasant land' we have had cause to satirically refer to on this journey comes from the hymn *Jerusalem*, originated by the poet William Blake around 1808. 'And did those feet in ancient time/Walk upon England's mountains green?' He is postulating whether Jesus Christ, namesake aspect of the Christian god, once came to England and walked upon its 'pleasant pastures' and 'clouded hills'. The image is either of the Christian messiah

infusing his divine power into England's primordial landscape; or, more profoundly, the primordial landscape infusing its own into him, long before it was all laid to waste by the 'dark Satanic mills' of the industrial revolution. Blake's England is one in which nature is not only English but *sacredly* so, its wrecking not merely unfortunate but profane, diabolical, a desecration of the national soul.

Blake's poem is both lament and call to arms: a seething judgement on those who have despoiled the 'green and pleasant land', followed by an exhortation to fight, physically and mentally, to restore it in the form of a new Jerusalem (a frequent metaphor for paradise in English Christianity). From local conservation movements to activists against the planetary threats of habitat destruction and climate change, there have been plenty of English who answered the call. It is another of their country's great contradictions that while their economic upheavals turned them into consummate destroyers of the natural environment, they have at the same time hosted this opposing tendency by which the green fields and blue skies are vital to any meaningful picture of their Englishness.

We saw this acknowledged at the Great Exhibition: whether its nestling of the machines in leaves and branches represented sincere respect for nature or mere lip-service, it says something that the organisers deemed it important enough to make the effort. But even in the decades before the rise of the machines, throngs of English had taken to the roads in a romantic boom of wandering, sketching and reflecting. Fed up of the rotten politics, money-spinning greed and exploitative conquests that came disguised beneath the Greco-Roman pillars of a decadent, corrupting so-called civilisation, they instead packed their bags and went in search for a truer national essence in the moors, crags and waterfalls of their country's wild places: the outlying islands, the Lake District, the borderlands, the mountains of Scotland and Wales. Those artists we came across painting the crumbling shell of Eltham Palace in this period were part of this penance amidst the ruins of human folly, this quest for redemption through a deeper power latent in the land.

And they were right. If they were to create an Englishness in any reference to this territory, and goodness knows they are a territorial people, then it would have to start in a relationship with the power of that terrain itself, the original source of most peoples' spiritual awe through their ancient animisms: the rivers, the forests, the rocks – maybe not the sun in this case, because England is not its favoured province, but certainly the rain.

That power dwells here, in these trees at the core of Norwood. For they, too, are ambassadors of a wilderness ancient when the English were young. Once upon a time it grew in the wake of the receding glacial sheets of the last ice age and spread its domain as far as the Thames to the north and its outposts in Downham we traversed to the east – a realm the humans came to know as the *Great North Wood*.

The Wood's precise boundaries were not recorded and as a living mass would have shifted anyway. 'North' here appears defined in reference to the old village of Croydon, on whose far side a Great South Wood stretched along the foothills of the Downs. From the Great North Wood comes the name of this district, Norwood, but we might also recall Penge, the 'wood's edge', as referred to by ancient Celtic inhabitants. It was one of several woods who were the masters of the Thames valley beyond its marshy floodplains, in partnership with its Great South counterpart as well as other nearby forests like those of Middlesex and Epping, each of which has its own stories to tell.

With so august a lineage its remnants like Biggin Wood are richly biodiverse, even if no longer home to the wolves and wild boars that once roamed it. Its king is the oak, *Quercus robur*: robust (hence *robur*), indigenous to this land, and a favourite cultural emblem of Englishness for those of a mind to plunge the roots of their identities into nature. Not by chance did oaks supply the panelling in their parliament, and – perhaps some of these very individuals here, via the Woolwich and Deptford dockyards – lend their strength to the ships of the Royal Navy which prevailed in Admiral Nelson's clashes with Napoleon. Elizabeth I was allegedly sitting beneath an oak tree when she received the news that she was to be queen, as though the presence of that tree gave nature's divine approval to her right to rule. During the civil wars the future king Charles II literally hid in one, the so-called Royal Oak in Shropshire, to escape the prowling parliamentary soldiers.

More locally, oaks were permanent enough to provide natural boundaries for administrative divisions, the erstwhile Vicar's Oak on the junction of four nearby boroughs being a case in point. For over a thousand years before the English learned about maps, the custom was to 'beat the bounds': that is, to walk in procession along these boundaries, with older people passing their knowledge of them to the youths, thus sustaining their location and lore in folk memory. These groups would be directed by priests who led hymns and prayers for the land's blessings and protection in Christian terms, but their rituals, like beating out the boundaries with birch or willow branches, speak of a relationship with the land

from more ancient animistic traditions. As for the oaks of the Great North Wood themselves, their deep roots well suited them to the heavy clay of these hills, tough ground with the added bonus of deterring construction and agriculture.

When the humans came, the Wood tolerated and even aided them when it felt like it. As is easy to imagine while stood in its dense clutches it offered excellent shelter, especially to those kinds of people society did not want: outlaws, smugglers, plague victims, and what most sources refer to as encampments of 'gypsies'. This is usually a reference to the nomadic Romani who are another of Europe's most persecuted peoples, and the term's use as a racial slur has turned it derogatory. But the woods do not recognise the rule of King Racism and would have helped protect them from his patrols, a memory which persists in the area's toponyms like Romany Road and Gipsy Hill. Their association with the area must have been of a certain repute, enough at least for the mega-diarist and naval administrator Samuel Pepys, who we met in Woolwich, to write of his wife and her friends going to visit them in 1668 to have their fortunes told. Records identify as one of these fortune-tellers as a particularly remarkable Margaret Finch, known as 'Queen of the Gypsies', who lived and worked in Norwood in later life till her death at the impressive age of 108, and by 1777 the Romani community here was famous enough to inspire a pantomime at Covent Garden, *The Norwood Gypsies*.

Not all the Wood's fugitives were savoury types. In 1652 the other great diarist of the age, the same John Evelyn who wrote *Fumifugium*, was viciously mugged in its vicinity by two bandits. They dragged him from his horse into a thicket, tied him hand and foot to – yes – an oak, fleeced him of all his valuables including a cherished onyx ring with his personal coat of arms, then made off, leaving him 'tormented with flies, ants, and the sun' until after two hours of struggling he worked himself free and staggered off for help.*

Beyond sheltering people the trees fed them many materials. The Wood's oaks and hornbeams built their houses as well as their ships, especially under the Tudors with their timber-framed architecture and massive dockyards. Their branches provided firewood and their bark offered tannins for leatherworking. Another crucial gift was charcoal, the main fuel for baking and cooking in the centuries before coal got its revenge, and a lot of it would have passed through

* As it turned out, Evelyn writes that after distributing '500 tickets' about the incident he managed to recover most of his stuff. One of the robbers was arrested, but 'not willing to hang the fellow' Evelyn declined to appear at his trial. The robber was reprieved, but later re-arrested and 'pressed to death' for refusing to testify on a separate charge.

the hands of the soot-faced colliers and blacksmiths of Croydon who made their village's name as the centre of this region's charcoal industry. Accounts and cultural portrayals of the time present these people as boorish, rough in speech and not necessarily scrupulous in their trade. A 'Croydon complexion' seems to have been a byword for dodginess, and the 1662 play *Grim the Collier of Croydon* features one such charcoal-man recounting the number of times he has been pilloried in the stocks and had his sacks of wares burned in front of him for his attempts to sell their contents at exaggerated prices. We are left to wonder whether these reflections are accurate, or rather snapshots of English condescension towards working-class people who are often too occupied with practicalities to have time to live up to pretentious social norms. It also hints at an age when seeking a profit was not standard behaviour, even frowned on as morally questionable – values that soon would be cast aside with much turbulence.

In the meantime, these material presents for the humans seem to have left the Great North Wood little the worse for it. The very fact this relationship went on for such a long time shows that people must have had some concept of sustainable forest management, and indeed you need not look far to come across trees whose stumps bear multiple harvested stems, the unmistakable evidence of coppicing. This is a very ancient technique by which trees are cut to the stump then left undisturbed to regrow new trunks, typically on a rotating basis so that there is always fresh wood available and the forest is never depleted. It is from this that comes the word *copse*, a woodland where coppicing goes on, and the trees will not count it as violence if borrowed from in that way.

They *will* count as violence more arrogant harvests. In perfect English irony, it was at just the time that these people were taking off to the lakes and crags to search for themselves in rugged nature that they turned on the Great North Wood and set about terminally dislodging it from its ancestral holdings. That irony was then ramped to its barefaced maximum with the coming of the Crystal Palace, fresh from its advertisement for harmony between wood and wheel but in its new site the very bringer of the railways and housing that sliced the forest to ribbons.

But by then perhaps it was already too late, for the main engine behind this piecemeal dismemberment was out of control. It was an old phenomenon which had sown waves of violence into the English story since at least the thirteenth century, but it was only now in the late eighteenth that it rocketed to revolutionary pitch and changed the English relationship with their land forever. They called it *Enclosure*.

Enclosure was massive. Its ramifications for this country were seismic, and we shall give it its own treatment when we meet it upon the commons ahead. For now, suffice it to say that it meant common land getting fenced off and placed under private ownership, with its owners receiving exclusive rights to develop or sell it off in their own financial interests. The Great North Wood fell victim to this in the form of the Croydon Inclosure Acts around 1800, and from then on the picture will be familiar to anyone anywhere in the world who fights to protect their homes, ancestral grounds or biodiverse sanctuaries from greedy developers. Roads and railways ploughed through the Wood's secret places, bringing rich city businesspeople who grabbed hold of newly-enclosed plots of long-coppiced woodland and cleared them out to build luxurious south-facing villas and marketable large-scale housing schemes, far from the sick air and unsanitary conditions of the city centre. The arrival of the Crystal Palace accelerated this takeover, bringing water and gas infrastructure, and the schools and churches and bus routes soon followed. In the end, nothing was spared but the fragments of woodland that stand till today. Aside from Biggin Wood only a handful remain, the largest being the nature reserves of Dulwich and Sydenham Hill.

This was also the end for the Wood's Romani community and other outcasts as the rise of property-worship generated a seething, racially-tinged prejudice towards roaming spiritually-minded people not so inclined to fence themselves into fixed squares of land. The Romani were labelled vagrants and vagabonds, and with the protective shield of nature's sovereignty chopped out from around them there was nothing to stop the police – too often the allies of wealth and privilege in England – from breaking up their camps, arresting them in large numbers, and dragging their fortune-tellers to the courts for prosecution under a new raft of Vagrancy Acts till their whole communities had been hounded from the area.

Pogroms like this were nasty enough, but the changing times are best captured in the fate of a character some sources refer to as 'Matthews the hairyman'. This Norwood Hermit, or Samuel Matthews to give his real name, appears in a contemporary text as an elderly Welshman who retreated from urban misfortunes – a spell in a mental asylum, the loss of his wife to illness – to live in solitude in a cave in these woods around the turn of the eighteenth century. Though he largely kept to himself, he seems to have been well-known in these parts as a good-natured eccentric whose presence was blessed by the local authorities, and whose generous heart and quirky manner endeared him to those who lived nearby. He

earned the company of plenty of curious visitors, sold them small beer* to build a comfortable subsistence, and lived some years in that manner of frugal contentment. But as Enclosure values took hold, signs appeared that the new national currents found people like him unwelcome. One day he was assaulted in his cave and 'greatly ill used' by two women, who robbed him of his money; the shock drove him from his hermitage and caused him to wander dazed and anxious for over a year before he dared return, whereafter he added makeshift security measures of earth, wood and foliage. In the end, just after Christmas in 1802, a group of boys dropped by to see him and found his mangled body in the bushes. He had been forced from his cave and murdered in an attack that broke his jaw bone in two places, shattered his wrist, and severely wounded him in the cheek.

It was a cruel send-off for a man who might have been the last of his kind in the area, and a bellwether of England's new direction. Matthews had lived by his own rules, with one foot in the wilds and the other among his fellow humans, and preferred to mutter to himself, smoke his pipe in quiet reflection, and share mutton and beer with passers-by rather than embrace the mindset of competitive, covetous acquisition that would become both virtue and survival price under the new English capitalism.

So did the Great North Wood fall from the hills where it had stood for millennia. In its place rose the Norwood suburbs, one of England's countless new hives of production-unit nuclear families atomised into detached houses. Their elevated views and fresh air made them desirable, such that many of their colonists came from the layers of society who controlled that production. A flavour of the pace of this change may be tasted in Arthur Conan Doyle's choice of Norwood as the setting for Sherlock Holmes's adventure of the Norwood Builder in 1903. This featured the eponymous builder, Jonas Oldacre, a wealthy and secretive businessman in his fifties, apparently murdered in his 'big modern villa of staring brick, standing back in its own grounds, with a laurel-clumped lawn in front of it', but who in fact (spoiler alert) turned out to have faked the whole thing to swindle his creditors. Even by Sherlock Holmes's day, the name of Norwood conjured a socio-economic landscape that would have been unrecognisable to anyone up to the Norwood Hermit's generation.

There is evidence that not everybody celebrated the eviction of the old trees. Croydon Council writes of a 'Streatham Antiquarian and History Society' that

* Cheap beer with low alcohol content and high energy value, a popular drink in those times when safe water was not guaranteed.

appeared in local newspapers in 1928, campaigning for the wild heath of 'Bigginwood' to be demarked as public land and hoping to develop part of it into a bird sanctuary. Efforts like this, often led by locals who were either answering Blake's call to rebuild a green and pleasant English Jerusalem or who simply felt their lives were better for having trees and birdsong in them, punctuate the history of the Great North Wood's vestiges throughout the twentieth century. This particular voice must have had at least some echo potential, for as late as 1980 a study found over forty species of bird still active in the woodlands.

Today this relationship between humans and Wood is coming full circle. It appears that as of 2017, a charity called the London Wildlife Trust has launched a collaborative project – with £700,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and local government backing – to revive and reimagine the Great North Wood 'in a modern urban landscape'. By these words, we can presume they will not be turfing people out of their villas and feeding Norwood suburbia back to the wilds. This is probably just as well; the sins of the parents do not extend to the child, and it is more apt for the children to learn of those sins and do what they can to heal the wronged parties' grievances. To just such an end, the Trust's webpage for the project declares a resolute list of mission objectives: to train 250 volunteers in woodland conservation and wildlife management techniques; carry out habitat and path improvements; boost awareness through community outreach and learning activities; and host an annual woodland festival at a different site each year, all helping to rebuild the humans' connection with the real power beneath this land.

For the Great North Wood endures. Brought to bay its fragments may be, but each is itself a temple city of woodland giants, a primal Tardis infinitely vaster and denser within than it appears without. Accustomed to a timescale of thousands of years, they watched as a new species of curious little mammals arrived to scurry around their roots, borrowing from and living off them much as the wolves and boars did. Many bark eyebrows must have been raised nonplussed as those apes started suddenly hacking and chopping stuff down for no reason, but after a couple of hundred years of such abuse they finally came to their senses, said sorry, and attempted to make up for it. The question is not whether the Wood will recover; about that there is no doubt. The question is whether the English will prove they have learned their lesson fast enough to earn its pardon, and reform their development practices to make peace with it – or whether their remains will one day fertilise its new growths.

It feels different, having walked through there. Emerging on the westward slopes of the Norwood hills, the neighbourhoods roll out once more. Aside from the odd stocky church or office building it is red-tiled roofs all the way, but the lush green bobble-heads of mature trees lurk in the spaces between. They are numerous – more so than before? Watching, waiting, passing messages to each other. We might do better than to linger.

If imaginary lines on maps are a concern, then let us get it out of the way that our journey will soon take us out of the orbit of Croydon and into that they call Lambeth. Its name, meaning a ‘landing place for lambs’, is not irrelevant to our concerns. The English habits that so reduced the Great North Wood also did a number on the country’s commons, those tracts of land shared by everyone in the community, and herds of sheep were unwitting accomplices in that process. But they did not get all the commons, and now we approach some of their most extensive survivors in the capital region.

Where the hills of Norwood meet the commons of Streatham, we find another mustering ground for the Great North Wood’s displaced descendants. This is Norwood Grove, which we may read as either an outer patch of the old Wood’s shadow or the edge of Streatham Common, but we might as well accept it as both, because the two were at any rate contiguous and the Wood has little interest in human labels that come and go.

All the usual suspects, oaks, yews, hollies and so on, are biding their time here, but Norwood Grove’s real surprise is that they have allowed the humans to build a funny little mansion in a clearing atop the hill. It brings to mind the American White House with its obvious classical aspirations, albeit at more modest scale (if you can excuse the fountain: four human figures emerge from its pedestal, one on each side, encased from the torso down as though they be political dissidents whose souls were fused to the stone in punishment). This mansion too arrived with the clearances, and appears to have been taken up as the residence of a politician and ship broker from the Shetland Islands called Arthur Anderson, a colourful character best known as a co-founder of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O). After Anderson’s death in 1862 it passed into the hands of another business family, the Nettlefold screw manufacturers, but after their departure and World War I a local fundraising campaign came together under a certain local hero called Stenton Covington, to preserve the mansion and Grove for public use. They succeeded. Rather than fall to developers, Norwood

Grove would be taken care of as a peaceful place of encounter for people and the lingering Wood, and the Prince of Wales (the English title for the next person in line to the throne, introduced by Edward I to make institutionally permanent his subjugation of the Welsh) showed up in person to open it in 1926. A brass plaque that manages to commemorate all of these people in a single sentence is fixed on the wall of the mansion, which judging by the yells of small children and exasperated appeals for calm from the windows is now in use as a preschool. And here, too, there is the suggestion of strategic views around the hilltop if only they were not choked off by the smog.

Another phenomenon might be more recent. This entire chain of parks and woods is favoured by professional dog walkers. There is a matter about dogs and the English – dogs as pets, the bulldog as a national symbol, even their songs on this topic like the one that goes ‘dogs and mad Englishmen go out in the midday rain’ or something like that. But this new arrangement for dog-walking features a human individual entrusted by others with anywhere from two or three to a dozen canine companions, each of a different size, breed and temperament. Encounters between two or more of these parties are without fail a rowdy and raucous affair. But in Norwood Grove this wonderful havoc is conspicuous by its absence: all dogs have been banished to outside the perimeter fence.

There is a conflict brewing here. On the brick wall of a nearby outbuilding, a notice of general rules governing use of the local parks is adjoined by an even larger panel devoted to ‘Byelaws relating to control of dogs and removal of canine faeces’. What follows is a comprehensive summary in microscopic Legalese dictating every conceivable thing you are not allowed to do with your dog, each place in the borough you are not allowed to do them, and the terrible penalties you must pay if you nonetheless do. But that is only one side of the story. The other is tied to the fence some twenty paces away, a laminated plastic page which declares: ‘PETITION FOR CROYDON COUNCIL TO ADDRESS ALL GRIEVENCES (sic.) OF THE USERS OF NORWOOD GROVE NOT JUST TO TARGET DOG OWNERS’. Despite the operative word here – ‘PETITION’ – it provides no further details of its authors’ remonstrance, no doubt a deliberate omission so as not to give the Croydon Secret Police a pretext for swooping upon them. Instead it innocently directs interested parties to ‘see John and sign the petition along with Dot, “Dolly” and “Digby” and make your feelings known’. The only other clue to the character of this insurrection is an obscure photograph of an encampment on the Grove with a ‘Pets as Therapy’ banner, before which an elderly lady with flowing

fleecy curls (a sure sign of revolutionary leanings if ever there was one), her face bowed to hide her identity, supervises two fluffy white terriers in high-vis dog jackets with defiant red reindeer horns on their heads.

We have seen deep tensions in Englishness between racism and globalism, nature and industry, violence and peace, but goodness knows what will come of this brewing collision on the place of dogs in the national destiny. May the Great North Wood bless them all and arbitrate them to a constructive solution.

Streatham Common is divided into two parts. The eastern part is a woodland, one of the Great North Wood's outlying forts, which it rules with a gentler grip than its core territories. People are free to wander amidst its generously spread-out trees, unlike Biggin Wood where stern undergrowth ushers them down a single path. The humans' part in contrast is a spacious meadow on the westward slope that rolls down to the settlement of Streatham, and on warm sunny days like this one they are inclined to take to its grass to picnic, sunbathe, or get themselves noisily inebriated. Children clamber in the playgrounds below, and much to the consternation of yours truly, these people have dared to buy out *all* the ice cream in the common's café.

That is unpardonable. If the quality of commentary suffers ahead, that is why.

Between the two parts is a smaller walled insertion they call the Rookery. Notwithstanding its name it has little to do with birds. Rather it is a formal garden, and its significance is in the mineral wells discovered on its site in 1659, which are the reason Streatham became important. Streatham's name indicates that it was originally a village on a Roman road, in this case the way between London and Brighton. But it was these natural life-giving waters – a big deal near a crowded city that fouled its own – that boosted Streatham into a popular spa town, where Londoners could flock to soak in or glug from its medicinal springs.

This might have been one reason Streatham's common was spared Enclosure, but the Rookery wells did not get through it without a fight. Once again it was Stenton Covington, saviour of Norwood Grove, who rallied the locals and raised funds to buy and transform the site into a set of public gardens so beautiful that any evil developer who set eyes on their flowers would instantly disintegrate in a shower of petals and bunnies. The gardens' vigil continues today, and they are a stirring sight – not just the flowers themselves, but also the settings in which they have been arranged, which include one of the three original mineral wells as well

as classic layouts from the English gardening tradition. The Great North Wood has its ambassadors here too – I hear they instruct the children – and Lebanese visitors might take notice of the tree that dominates the lawn, a towering two-hundred-year-old cedar exactly the same as their national emblem.

For all the English's axes and property fixations, it must be admitted that they do produce people with a certain understanding of gardens which at its finest has a fair case to be called art, but on this we will not dwell because the English get into disagreeable habits if we praise them too much. Instead let us exit back to Streatham Common and consider how some greedy and privileged bastards threw the common people off the land and fenced it off to enlarge their own fortunes, while turning its dependents into paupers then blaming them for it.

That at any rate is the standard critical version of the story of Enclosure. There is of course an opposing narrative: that Enclosure was about improving the country by introducing more efficient farming practices and increasing yields, for whose sake a lot of peasants were eager to participate, as well as liberating them from the fields and supplying the food and wealth to turn them into a huge population of industrial labourers whose sweat and toil spun the gears that raised up the glorious British imperial juggernaut.

History is of course rather more complicated than good-guys-versus-bad-guys caricatures, and in this case those complications are greater still. Please be advised that more than for any of the themes we have explored so far, our discussion on Enclosure will be necessarily partial, incomplete, and unsuited for citation in angry internet shouting matches on this subject. Enclosure was enormous. It unfolded over more than half a millennium and affected different people in different ways in different parts of the country, all of whom have their own, equally valid stories to tell. What you are about to get here are but the reflections of one stranger who has no greater stake in it than – like most of us – opposing injustice and making sense of the world of Enclosure's consequences. And that, too, is a difficulty: debates over Enclosure's rights and wrongs are meshed into the defining disputes of life not only in England but over much of the world, not least the current crisis of capitalism. With a scope like that, it is not possible to look at its story without some parts of ourselves – not least our stomachs – inside the thing we are examining.

So because we want to be brief and still have a long journey ahead, let us take as today's guide a certain German philosopher who saw most penetratingly

through that whole system's flaws and prophesied its collapse. This is Karl Marx, and he bids you a good afternoon.

Marx's eminent text on capitalism, aptly titled *Capital* (*Das Kapital* in the original German) has a lot to say on what he terms the 'expropriation of the agricultural population from the land' in England. He opens that discussion with the peasants. Importantly that is not just an archaic term for farmers, still less that fairytale class of impoverished rural hangers-on oppressed by cunning step-parents amidst drought-ridden fields till some chosen hero finds magical beans or friendly fairies to propel them to deliverance in the ranks of landed royalty. Rather the peasants were farmers who got most of what they needed direct from the land, rather than by selling its produce for money like most English farmers today. Peasants came to make up the large part of England's population following the decline of *serfdom* or feudal slavery, and in uncle Marx's words, they 'enjoyed the usufruct* of the common land, which gave pasture to their cattle, furnished them with timber, fire-wood, turf' and so on.

In short, the English peasants worked and lived off expanses of land whose use they shared together, instead of each owning his or her private rectangle of it as commercial farmers do now. They might grow crops on strips that rotated between them year on year, graze their animals on shared pasture areas, or forage in shared woods. Everyone in the community had access to the commons, everyone was responsible for looking after it, and everyone thus had regular contact with one another in daily life, so the commons not only fed them but supported their community relationships.

If it sounds idyllic it probably wasn't. And if it is tempting to call this a kind of communism (say it quietly so that Marx doesn't hear – his conception involved a ton of other concepts and conditions that will not fit in Streattham) then it was not quite that either. It is important to remember that this was not some original state of nature – any such thing is out of sight of present eyes – but the legacy of an established system of power. Under the Norman feudal regime, the monarch claimed ultimate ownership over all land in England (and technically still does), but in practice parcelled out that land for his or her followers to administer. This nobility did not *own* the land in the capitalist sense, but *held* it on the monarch's behalf as landlords, in exchange for services to the crown like money, food, work

**Usu-fruct* – 'use of the fruits': a legal term that goes back to Roman law, specifying the right to use a commonly-held thing (the land in this case) and any benefits you can draw out of it so long as you do not ruin it for other users.

or military service. This reciprocal relationship was replicated between the landlords and their own followers in turn, and so on all the way down the food chain to the peasants at the bottom. The commons emerged from that context: officially held by a landlord, but with shared *usage* rights for everyone in his or her manor whose lives depended upon its produce.

But for all that they were not some free and equal socialist paradise, is this element of a communal relationship with the land not significant by its very existence in a country not known for such things? Take away the feudalism and you would be left with practices that plenty of communitarian societies might recognise – and for the English, for a time, a sense of these values even made it into law. It is surprising they have forgotten this, given that it came out of the same political processes as the Magna Carta, that concession of liberties forced out of King John in 1215 that these people celebrate as though it made them a democratic country (it didn't). Most English have heard of the Magna Carta, but what few of them remember is that it came with a companion agreement, the *Charter of the Forest*, which John's son Henry III confirmed a few years later. This Charter protected ordinary people's economic rights to forest commons against the main threat to them in that day: the royals themselves, who had been marking them off for their own exclusive use – effectively privatising them – as 'royal forests'. It says everything about the thoroughness of the transformations to come that while the political charter remains nigh-sacred in English imagination, the economic charter has utterly evaporated from memory.

Enclosure came not by itself and not out of a U.F.O., but as part of a larger array of forces that washed over agricultural life down the centuries. Marx spins off some of the big ones: the decay of the old nobility, whose bands of retainers were thrown out of their lords' castles and pushed off their land; the rising profits from wool, which made it profitable to convert crop-growing arable farmland (worked by many people and entire families) into sheep pastures (worked by a handful of individual herders); and the royal confiscation of the Catholic church's rich landholdings during the English Reformation, dumping many of their occupants into poverty. Another factor was improvements in farming techniques and machinery that allowed smaller plots of land to generate vastly more food – itself a vital prerequisite, it turned out, to fuel the industrial revolution through sustaining a huge increase in population, including of the consuming and factory-labouring classes – and to do so on the work of far fewer people. Making the most of these technologies required large fields controlled by one person or group,

rather than the informal and flexible strips of the commons. Each such trend belonged to a more complicated political or economic drama of its own, but spun together into a long-term pattern of peasants turned to paupers and land held by many parcelled up for the few.

We spoke earlier of physical and structural violence, and Enclosure was both on a colossal scale. In some places where the landlords happened to be friendlier, it is believable that they consulted the people who used the commons, obtained their consent, and compensated them for their losses. More often they simply turfed them off by force, no warning, no remedy, leaving them penniless and stranded in the middle of nowhere. Where a community had grown up supported by its commons, entire villages could be wiped off the map in this way. Riots and peasants' revolts broke out – Robert Kett's in Norfolk, 1549, and John Reynolds's a.k.a. 'Captain Pouch' in the Midlands in 1607 – in which farmers clashed with official armies and were brutally suppressed. Piece by bloody piece, the very concept of the English countryside was being remade.

None of this went uncontested. People could see what was happening, and their alarm rippled all the way up to their most eloquent and powerful observers. Among that number were no few kings and queens, in a country where the ruling class had learned the hard way the damage that rebellious rampages of angry rural people could do.* Even Henry VIII of the Tudors, not a figure who brings to mind the word 'empathy', pressed for laws to protect small farmers and limit sheep herds, and his daughter Elizabeth I famously complained that *pauper ubique jacet* ('paupers are everywhere!') after a tour of her queendom. Another critic was the philosopher Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor under Henry and one of his highest-profile victims when he had his head taken off for refusing to accept the king as leader of the English church. In his *Utopia*, More attacked Enclosure for driving people into poverty and starvation, thus leaving them with no choice but to steal. More had his own repressive temperament†, to say the least, but here he

* Earlier peasant uprisings led by Wat Tyler (1381) and Jack Cade (1450) were more about other grievances like government corruption, serfdom and unfair taxes, but both had brought bloodshed and looting to the streets of London and seen government officials dragged from their homes and slaughtered.

† Idolised by Catholics as a saint and by socialists as a visionary, Thomas More's image of benevolent, scholarly humanism is belied by his virulent hatred of Protestants, several of whom he had burned alive. His view of their movement was articulately captured in his remark to their instigator, Martin Luther, that 'for as long as (you) will be determined to tell these shameless lies, others will be permitted...to throw back into your paternity's shitty mouth, truly the shit-pool of

is proof that even in the aggressive Henry-world they had people who understood the role of structural factors in causing crime, rather than callously blaming individuals for their own desperation. He also reminds us that though the sight of sheep grazing in fields might be a postcard-perfect picture of agrarian serenity to the English today, the flocks of his day were rather more terrifying. ‘Your sheep’, he observed, ‘that were...so meek and tame, and so small eaters, now, as I hear it said, have become so great devourers and so wild that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves. They consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses and cities’.

Resist as such critics might, in the long run their efforts were doomed. Within a couple of centuries the monarchy had gone from bulwark against the tide of Enclosure to enthusiastic surfer on its waves. Marx points a laser in the face of William III, the Dutch king who invaded in 1688 to replace James II of the Stuarts who the English kicked out for his Catholicism. In William’s train, so Marx says, came another bunch of landlords who ‘inaugurated the new era by practicing on a colossal scale thefts of state lands...estates (that) were given away, sold at a ridiculous figure, or even annexed to private estates by direct seizure’, all ‘without the slightest observation of legal etiquette’. Soon parliament was in on it too. In 1723 it passed the Black Act, a gratuitously repressive law that prescribed death for fifty behaviours connected with hunting, gathering, fishing or merely *being* in the newly Enclosed forests, all of which their new private owners sneered at as a revived and now stupendously magnified crime they called *poaching*.

It was now that Enclosure values coalesced with other currents into a coherent ideology of English capitalism. Its champions justified Enclosure as ‘improvement’ and (this should sound familiar) denigrated its victims as lazy, morally deficient, and in need of a kick up the backside to force them to work – language which, as with English racism, came increasingly to be couched in the rhymes and rhythms of scientific theory. From then on it was only a matter of time before parliament was hurling out one Inclosure Act after another. The one that carved up the Great North Wood was but one of more than five thousand across the country as corrupt landowning MPs, who stood to further enrich themselves from Enclosures in the areas they represented, summarily laid waste to customary land rights and cut the livelihoods out from under their own constituents.

all shit, all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up, and to empty out all the sewers and privies onto your crown’.

By this point it was happening on such an overwhelming scale that people blend into statistics, such that we too easily forget what it was about. Straightforwardly, this was violence of cataclysmic proportions. People were evicted from common land their families had lived and worked off for generations, often by physical force. Their incomes were taken away, their communities erased, their entire ways of life upended, to be replaced by an agricultural modernity that rings with an invitation to look at its peaceful fields and pastures, believe it was always like that, and feel smugly that all those ruined lives, exaggerated no doubt by militant leftist media, were worth it.

Violent country. Do they not feel bad about this?

We will leave Marx in his armchair now, because for him all this was about setting the stage for a much bigger story: the creation of a proletariat, that mass of people forced to trek to the cities and factories and sell their labour for wages under the new industrial capitalism, which eventually they are destined to overthrow and usher in its place a communist future. A relevant story, today as much as ever, but one we will not delve into now because there are only so many hours in the day. Instead let us wind down with some verses from John Clare of Northamptonshire, the standout poet of Enclosure and a peasant himself, who over the nineteenth century was driven to madness as he watched those old ways of life disintegrate around him.

*Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave*

These lines are from his poem *The Mores* (that is, moors) – the rest of which, along with much of his work, is a reminder that history like this is not about processes and statistics but people, real people, whose lives, futures and stories were laid waste to in heartbreaking circumstances. As with so many large-scale processes it is too easy to wave them away as acceptable casualties of necessary reform, especially after the fact. Instead we should heed their voices through time, because only then can we put an end to their torment, and wherever in the world we be, learn to manage our great social transitions more humanely.

*Fence now meets fence in owners' little bounds
Of field and meadow large as garden grounds
In little parcels little minds to please*

With men and flocks imprisoned ill at ease

(...)

Each little tyrant with his little sign

Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine

But paths to freedom and to childhood dear

A board sticks up to notice 'no road here'

And on the tree with ivy overhung

The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung

As tho' the very birds should learn to know

Where they go there they must no further go.

It did not have to be like that. Is it too much to hope that a fairer and kinder agricultural revolution was possible? Even if it was, in a country where when people say *compromise* they usually mean 'give up your position and come entirely over to mine', perhaps that was never the most probable of outcomes.

Like that, Enclosure was the harbinger of a new world order which changed the English's relationship with their land. Before Enclosure, the land held meaning of its own. Its provision for the humans was material – timber, charcoal, shelter – but also spiritual: the 'green and pleasant land' as a nigh sacred part of who they were, be it as a member of a local community who exchanged news each morning on a shared common, or of a bigger, imagined community united by belief in a somewhat larger shared *England*. The abiding passion with which they still sing *Jerusalem*, from school assemblies to international cricket matches, suggests a part of them remembers this. The land nourished no paradise – goodness knows that conflicts, abuses and illnesses rampaged across it – but it also fostered diversity, eccentricity, an enchantment of unique individuals and cultures that could not be reduced to numerical figures: the hermit Samuel Matthews, the Romani fortune-tellers, poets like John Clare, activists like Stenton Covington.

The world brought forth by Enclosure swept that all away. When it was done, the land was left with no value or meaning of its own, while its people, dazed by their dislocation, were condemned as a lazy underclass in need of rough treatment. In this new world, anything about the land or its people that could not be measured in sums of wealth no longer existed. Only one function remained: to produce that wealth for rent-hungry landlords. All else – anyone else – was worthless, unwanted, to be ignored till they made a nuisance, then disposed of.

If this was sad enough for the English, it was downright catastrophic as Enclosure values spread to other parts of the world where the land's significance was built into the cultural marrow. England did have a few of these, one of the nearest being the Fens of East Anglia. These wetlands were drained and turned into farms as part of the same process, and their distinct regional cultures drained with them, kicking, screaming and sabotaging all the way. But more profound examples lay abroad, and one was not at all far off. In the glens, lochs and isles of highland Scotland, Enclosure was not just a socio-economic revolution but a ruthless class and colonial purge. The Scottish Clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – carried out not just by the English but the Scots' own self-serving landlords and clan chiefs – bullied, beat and burned out the clanspeople who lived there to ready their lands for the incoming sheep stampede, so trampling the traditional values of the highland Gaels in which all people's right to land, and the responsibility of the elite to protect it, had been paramount. The word *genocide* has been oft to surface in debates about the Clearances since, and the role of overt racist prejudices portraying the Gaels as an inferior people is not in doubt.* The Irish suffered incalculably on like account. But the ultimate butcheries would be reserved for the indigenous peoples of North America and Australia, whose relationships with their land were intimate on a level no property-addict could ever understand. Their upending by colonisers like the English heralded the end of their worlds, and on the ruins would be built new hells which ran on the blood of slave and convict labour.

Notice how it all fits together. Many of those convicts, like those we encountered in the prison hulks of Woolwich, were exactly these people made bereft of their land and ways of life by the Enclosers. Left to beg, steal, or get miserably in the way of polite society, they were then shipped out of the way and dumped against the peoples of other continents, knocking them off their land and ways of life in a domino effect of displacement and destruction.

In this regard, what happened to the land was but one plank of a wider revolution. It was not just the land that got reduced to a factor of production, but also the increasingly mechanised and significant tools, now re-conceptualised as

*It also drove many Scots abroad, especially to North America and Australia. That is why there are so many people of Scottish descent around the world today – vastly more, indeed, than remain in Scotland. If you have been to those breathtaking glens and marvelled at their deserted tranquillity, take a moment to sit down and let it run through you that many are only so empty because of social and ethnic cleansing.

capital, and on top of that, human beings themselves, re-cast as this expendable factor called *labour*. Everything in the world was now to be abstracted like this in the name of a new way of thinking: *economics*, a concern originally meshed within the social, political and spiritual lives of those who practiced it but now severed as an independent discipline and raised into a be-all and end-all in itself.

This was never its inevitable fate. Until relatively recently the great economists like Adam Smith or John Maynard Keynes were also great moral philosophers, who never forgot that there was far more to life than producing and consuming for its own sake. Smith, a Scottish Presbyterian, damned the private landowners for raking huge rewards in rent for sitting there doing nothing. David Ricardo went further, calling them ‘parasites’. It would take the capitalist priesthood of the late twentieth century to drive out all such ethical considerations and make of the market a god, its worship a church, its abstractions a dogma, and complete a revolution in the English sense of what it means to be human. When people wave away this diminished existence with the platitudes of ‘real life’ and its variants – ‘reality’, ‘adulthood’, the ‘world of work’ and so on – these are not *common sense*, as they might call it, but a construct built by the historical processes we have looked at here. A world where human complexity, diversity and most of all *agency* is banished from the analysis; where the social and spiritual must not exist; where the political, similarly ignored, is left to be taken for granted in its most oppressive configurations; and where human beings and the natural environment alike are left without will, without worth, without love, mere fuel for the machine.

That is the world the English and so many others today have inherited. None of it would have been possible, and none understandable, without Enclosure. Of all reactions to that world as it took shape, Marx’s is surely the most famous. But it is the English we are exploring here, and they have a sage of their own whose wisdom is pertinent: the late Sir Terry Pratchett, novelist of the *Discworld*, whose prodigious witch Granny Weatherwax is every bit Marx’s equal in perspicacity (if not quite in literacy). ‘Sin’, she decides, ‘is when you treat people as things’.

It would be too simple to say that an England that treats people as things was all Enclosure’s fault, so bound up it was in the manifold gales of the capitalist revolution. But the least we can observe is that Enclosure helped to normalise these values with the shocking way it treated people. Others go further still. A rigorous study by Professor Brett Christophers of Uppsala University, for instance, identifies that in the privatisation frenzy that began under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and continues today, the largest privatisation of all, to an estimated

£400 billion, has been the passing of public land into private ownership. As is clear in his study's choice of title, *The New Enclosure*, Christophers interprets this most urgent of English perils today as a direct sequel to the original Enclosure. The pattern is the same: the private capture of shared land, on the ideological belief that shared holding and use is inherently wasteful, to the exclusive enrichment of a rentier* class and grievous outcomes for the rest of society. Whatever you think of that, the good professor is surely correct to state that 'knowing something about the history of the landownership question in Britain...is absolutely vital to coming to terms with the contemporary privatization story'.

A story in which far more than land is getting Enclosed. Indeed, what Enclosure began now reaches its pinnacle in the creeping seizure of all possible public resources for the exclusive gain of a hyper-rich class. Be it the appropriation of public spaces by shadowy corporations, or the for-profit capture of the broader commons – hospitals, prisons, public utilities, national parks, political parties, information, government itself – an ever-growing labyrinth of metaphorical fences is extending the physical fences Enclosure first put down into new and frightening dimensions. Beneath those fences the Charter of the Forest lies dead and buried, its values extinguished from English culture. And just to make real sure it stays that way, the new Enclosers have paved over its grave with the concrete of a new concept, the *Tragedy of the Commons*: the myth in scientific clothing that resources held in common are doomed to degrade to the ruin of everyone, because those who use them will take as much as they can while contributing nothing to their upkeep – a point of faith based on the market religion's core dogma that all humans are no more than short-sighted and selfish utility maximisers, between whom cooperative relationships cannot exist.

This revolution has caused gallons of suffering but been defended by its beneficiaries as necessary, acceptable, something that had to happen in the interests of 'improvement' or 'development'. On a much vaster scale the industrial revolution falls into the same pattern, and so did the Protestant revolution. Plenty of English people associate Marx with the catastrophic failures of twentieth-century communism and will happily lob lazy grenades to dismiss him, but string together the corpses of their brethren they so readily sacrificed for their own

* *Rentier*: A person who monopolises access to resources, especially by controlling the land it is on, and so profits enormously by charging rent while contributing nothing (or in a certain Mr. Lenin's words, 'whose profession is idleness'). Too much of that and you end up with a *rentier economy* – hello England.

revolutions and they would be easily enough to loop round the Soviet Union many times over. That is not okay, and the picture it paints is of a nation that really struggles to get through sweeping structural changes without feeding huge numbers of people to the furnace maws. It is a simple pattern, at its heart. Disempower people; let them fall into poverty, anguish and alienation; then the more their desperation makes them a nuisance in polite society's lives, the easier it becomes to criminalise them, to blame their woes on their own moral faults, and thus to find pretext to lock them in cells and leave them to languish or die, whether by the state's nooses or their own makes no difference, or bundle them onto boats or planes and send them away to where they need not be looked at by those who authored this miserable affair from the beginning – and to hell of course with whatever primitive tribes of non-people they land on.

That is to say, 'British values': the othering of the victims of their own systems. So it continues. It is a pattern at the heart of their primary ongoing stories such as austerity, Brexit nationalism, terrorism, and the refugee crisis. Enclosure is worth their attention today if solely to investigate how this pattern got fixed into the behavioural routines of their nation.

A challenging linkage, perhaps. But consider it. Before either the English or England, there was the *land*. All their history, the land has carried, witnessed, and recorded; their relationship with it is the first fact of their existence and sets the tone for everything else they do. It is by no coincidence that that keystone of English nation-building, the Domesday Book of 1086, was a land survey; nor that the skeleton of their social structure is the feudal system of land tenure introduced by the Normans, with its arrangement of all people into hierarchical relationships of rights and duties; nor that one of the most massive episodes in their storytelling, Henry VIII's crushing of the monasteries, was if nothing else a colossal land-grab; nor that the rise of parliament at the expense of royal power was not in fact the rise of democracy but the rise of the landlords who occupied its benches; nor of course that for so long the right to vote was restricted to those who held more than a certain quantity of land; nor that England's political divide, between Tories on one side and the Liberals and Labour Party on the other, has generally been one of landowning interests versus land reformers respectively; nor that mere *information* about the class of land barons that privately owns English land today, and how they use and exchange it, is hidden in a labyrinth of obstruction, obfuscation and non-recording to an opacity most countries calling themselves democracies would consider preposterous. So many continuities in

Englishness – so much, in particular, of English violence, English oppression and English class struggle – has spluttered out of conflicts concerning land, and it is there we see their values most starkly exposed. In particular, if it is *democratic* values you are searching for, that history is one of England’s thirstiest deserts.

Other legacies of Enclosure are more prosaic. It is the main reason the English now call their rural people ‘farmers’ rather than ‘peasants’ – not because one is more polite than the other, but because today’s commercial farmers farm for a living, while peasants farmed as a way of life that vanished with the commons. But its most obvious echo is what bored commuters or disappointed tourists see out the window on any long-distance train journey in England today: no forests, no fens, no common fields, but sheep, cows, sheep, cows, and farms, farms, farms as far as the eye can see, each cut up into tidy rectangular plots privately owned and clearly demarked by walls or fences. The dominant imagery of the English countryside is not some cosmic default that was always that way. It came from somewhere, and now you know where.

But do not worry if that was a pain to understand. That is what happens when they buy out all the ice cream.



They did not get all the commons. Traces survive in the form of village greens, and even in London some defiantly large commons held out when their communities rose to protect them. Streatham Common, whose service is recorded as far back as the Domesday Book, was one of them. It was taken over by the city government in 1883 and thereafter preserved by a new series of laws, the Metropolitan Commons Acts, that allowed local authorities to maintain the commons as public spaces using taxpayers' money.

Heartening as that may be, it was not a typical outcome. In most of the country the peasants who worked the commons lacked the clout to stand up to the Enclosure steamroller. Commons in the orbit of London however also served as recreational spaces for an emerging middle class that was wealthier, more connected, fed up with overcrowded blocks and sick air, and starting to dream of healthier, leafier spaces that mixed the best of city and country: that is, suburbs. Only through this shift in their meaning did the commons around London survive, which is why you would have found few peasants on Streatham Common by then and why we see none here now, with the allotments they grew on it during World War II being as close as they came in living memory. Nonetheless it continues to provide a precious green space for locals to relax, get some exercise, and commune with the remnants of the Great North Wood. It is something.

It is a pleasant enough progress down the Common's western slope to Streatham's core. Once more we must reach for our handkerchiefs to get past the piles of rubbish relinquished everywhere by picnic parties, hardly behaviour in the responsible spirit of commons culture. Truly the capitalist revolution changed much about what life means to these people.

Every now and then we might stumble across things that refuel hope. At the bottom of the Common runs Streatham High Road, part of the A23 which succeeds the London to Brighton Way of the Romans. Banners flutter from its street lamps proclaiming it to be the longest high street in Europe at 2.9 kilometres. It is also the worst in Britain, according to respondents to a BBC poll in 2002 who slammed it for congestion, run-down storefronts and violent crime. But let us put our attention on a memorial garden that stands on this street, right at the Common's corner. In its centre is a bronze statue of a soldier, upon a stone plinth inscribed 'TO OUR GLORIOUS DEAD' with two bronze wreaths to the fallen of two world wars. Usual stuff – but there is a twist. A few paces away is another monument: a simple black obelisk on a square-grid base. The base reads 'GRIEF HAS NO BOUNDARIES – This civilian war memorial is a focus for our thoughts

and prayers for the pain and anguish of ordinary people who have been touched by conflicts'. If that were not enough, an explanatory sign put up by Lambeth Parks states explicitly that it 'commemorates people of all races, faiths and nationalities living or who have lived in Streatham and have been affected by violent conflicts or wars wherever they have occurred'.

It is not clear if they meant to include Enclosure among those conflicts, but I am sure they wouldn't complain if we do. So let us pause and take a moment of silence, here at the edge of the Great North Wood's domain, and pay our respects to the casualties of English wars with the land and its people.

After all, 'GRIEF HAS NO BOUNDARIES'. They cannot Enclose it.

5. Chains



...a system so terrible that it hardens their hearts whose hearts it does not break, and brutalises those who have to carry it out no less than those who have to submit to it...

Oscar Wilde in a letter from prison to the Home Secretary, 2nd July 1896

Suppose that once upon a time, an individual called Wændel, who will excuse us if we have spelt his Anglo-Saxon name to his dissatisfaction, came nosing up a river valley west of the Great North Wood. A river means water for drinking and washing and powering your works, fish to eat, and ways in and out by boat; and sure enough, Wændel considered it a good place to set up an enclosed settlement, or *worth*. By 1086 it was recorded in the Domesday Book as *Wandeleorde*, but later mutated back towards its original form, and so arrives in that way as our problem for today: the London Borough of Wandsworth, on one of the Thames's most important southern tributaries, the Wandle.

We invade the Wandle valley across the main road to the seaside resort of Brighton, which has serviced the hamlets and commons of the English south since

Roman times. Later on it colluded to chop them up, as did the railways like the parallel London-to-Brighton link. In 1952, when this was still considered cool, someone in the BBC got it into their head to sit in the driver's cabin and crank a camera at two frames per second for the duration of the journey. The resulting black-and-white film was sped up and dubbed with Johann Strauss's perpetual motion melody to produce *London to Brighton in Four Minutes*, a ubiquitous interlude in their 1950s television to fill the gaps between live broadcasts.

Let us tunnel beneath the railway to emerge in the Wandsworth suburbs. All is as we might expect here, till out of nowhere a *Final Fantasy*-esque construction of copper-green cupola domes, pronged tower spires and sandstone brickwork manifests over a wall. It must be an airship terminal or a place of worship, and sure enough, black letters embossed on its facade identify it as the latter. This temple is the Streatham Pumping Station, built in 1888 to the religion of engineering under the Southwark & Vauxhall Water Company, and if you think such a spiritualist framing goes overboard, then tell that to the Victorian architects who shaped it to evoke the Islamic architecture of the Moors of North Africa and old Muslim Spain. It is a node on a network of such cathedrals in whose holy splendour was raised the capital region's sewage infrastructure. But let us see to that in good time, for its grandest works are yet a way ahead.

Instead, the land of Wandsworth has more troubling fare in store.

A fortified facility stands nearby. Its dungeons were built to confine people, and yet the English would have us believe their a country a place of freedom. Among its captives were victims of one of the human race's most insidious inventions: the ritual by which a person is rendered defenceless, ritually killed, then has it called justice. The English however would have us believe the slaughter site is truly a place of justice, and those condemned souls themselves the villains. Surely it cannot be both these things at once – can it?

We shall soon find out. This site stands right in our path, and its angry ghosts demand we hear them out. We cannot avoid this encounter. We must meet them, listen to them, work out for ourselves if justice was done or destroyed, and learn the lessons about their people.

It is not far to this fortress. Let us embark.

North along the rails we go, passing a handsome red-bricked church of considerable girth. It is a creation of the Methodists, a later offshoot of Protestant

Christianity which branched off in England in the eighteenth century. Lurking in ambush beyond is the busy A214 road where the city's filthy air returns with a vengeance, so let us cross at pace and plunge into the safety of another surviving common, Tooting Bec.

What a peculiar name. Did they try to make it sound English then give up halfway? Because of course it is anything but English. *Tooting* comes again from the Anglo-Saxons: the family or followers (*-ingas*) of someone called Tōta. But *Bec* is French, a specific reference to the Abbey of Our Lady of Bec-Hellouin in Normandy. That monastery was dominant at the time of the Norman conquest of England and received this area as a parish in 1086.*

The link is apt – because another French connection defines the Wandle's story, and this one arises from the blood-spattered Catholic-Protestant gratuitousness of the Reformation. Another Protestant sub-group, the Huguenots of France, fled their country from the sixteenth century onward to escape murderous persecution by its ruling Catholics during the French religious wars. Their exodus scattered them all over the world, but so many tens of thousands crossed to England that a new term sprang up to identify them: *refugees*, the very first people to whom the word, of French derivation, was applied in English. Many of these Huguenots were skilled artisans, and some found their way to Wandsworth where they formed a community and made lasting contributions to the local industries. Four centuries had to pass before French president François Mitterrand said sorry to them on his guilty nation's behalf, but in the meantime the Huguenots gifted England with its classic case study in how accepting refugees can bring lasting enrichment to the host country.

On Tooting Bec Common we find yet another European influence. The Tooting Bec Lido is an outdoor swimming pool, and one of this country's oldest and largest. But *lido* is Italian for 'shore' and reflects the decision to build it in the style of the bathing beaches of Venice. Despite the fact it sits on a common, you have to pay to get in. The common itself was preserved by government intervention in the 1870s, after the obligatory running battles between local people and Enclosers. It is just as well, because its trees help insulate us from a not so pleasant European contribution today: an awful haze of particulates, coming in on an easterly wind from the factories of the German Rhineland.

* *Bec* is a common element in Normandy's place names and comes in turn from the Norse *bekkr* meaning a 'stream', much like the English *beck*.

Then the common ends, and we are condemned to a long stretch through residential suburbs unremarkable by the standards we are now used to. From high on a traffic sign a notice warns that this is a 'CONTROLLED DRINKING ZONE' and threatens confiscation of the English's favourite beverages by the police. Not to worry though, it reassures them, because 'this is not a ban on public drinking'. Still, the evidence does not suggest controlled drinking to be high on the list of English talents, and Wandsworth is after all historically known for its breweries. Let us wish them luck and hasten on.

Next up is Balham, another descendent of an Anglo-Saxon hamlet. This too transfigured into a flush of high-end residences in the orbit of the Crystal Palace railway, but its standout is a 1930s block whose Art Deco ziggurat-cap pokes above the roofline. They call it Du Cane Court, and speak in elegance about its 676 luxury apartments. Listen between the lines though and there are mutterings of a darker European involvement. Nazi bombers flew this way in World War II, and though their payloads blasted these surroundings, Du Cane Court was curiously spared. Chances are they simply missed it, but the rumours have swirled. Did they refrain from targeting it because it was too convenient a navigational landmark? Was it because looked at a certain way from above it can be imagined to resemble a Nazi swastika? Or might there be credence in the claim that the German high command planned to use it as a headquarters after they invaded England, so gave orders not to destroy it? Rumours or not, the inhabitants of Balham paid a price to the fascist destiny of all authoritarianism when the road outside their London Underground Northern Line station was hit by a 1400kg bomb, bursting its water mains and flooding the railway tunnels where sixty-six people using them as a shelter were crushed, drowned, or suffocated to death.

What survived of Balham recovered, including its railways, which now converge with yet another network of tracks on the edge of Wandsworth Common. These junctions cater to most of the English southeast, including Gatwick Airport, so are seldom free of the whooshing screech of express services. One of their casualties has been Wandsworth Common itself; together with the road network they have savagely dismembered it, spattering an archipelago of grassy pieces to the north. This must be one of the most brutalised of the capital region's surviving commons, and the primary culprit appears to be the powerful Spencer family who we will confront after we cross the Wandle. Yet again it was saved by a combination of adamant local campaigns and government action, and now guards its surviving concentrations of flora and fauna with fierce recalcitrance. In a brilliant statement

thereof it has even sprouted a lush aquatic habitat right next to the railway. Cushioned by reed beds and bushes of yellow and violet flowers, this lake is undiminished by the invasion of the machine age, and even offers up a boardwalk for more neighbourly humans to spectate on the lives of its waterfowl. Aside from the obligatory mallard ducks and Canada geese, a pair of black-feathered moorhens with glaring red-and-yellow beaks have just given rise to a clump of chicks: tiny, fuzzy, pitter-pattering things which never stop squeaking and sport a noticeable bald patch on their heads. Together they forage in the lakeside vegetation, the adults inserting their catches in the infants' maws. Nearby a baby in a pushchair gazes out from the boardwalk, and a goose in the water gazes back; there cannot be more than five yards separating them, so when the bird rears up and beats its wings it buffets the infant with gusts and catapults him into tears.

These are charming sights, so let us hold their taste on our tongues. We shall need their tonic ahead, for we have run around the overworld long enough. It is time to enter our adventure's first dungeon, the house of dread detention which waits beyond the common. Up soar its walls, forbidding and cheerless to bar our path, while its barbed-wire parapets and roofs reminiscent of Victorian workhouses drain the light from the sky. We have arrived at Wandsworth Prison.



England is a punitive country. Run your ears through its everyday discourse and you quickly become conscious that it is not enough for it to be a violent country, it must also regularly lose its wits and settle on violence as the only solution to any problem: ‘clamping down’, ‘getting tough’, ‘zero tolerance’, be it on its children, its criminals or its colonies. The lesson that force rarely works, or that any efficacy in the short term brings grievous costs in the long, has been slow to sink into the psyche of this nation. Surely it is not so challenging to observe that humans resent being forced, and the more humiliating the force applied, the more acute their hatred for, and motivation to overturn, its inflictor? No, insists the English punitive tradition, steam shrieking from all nine orifices, there is only one answer: to punish, punish, and punish some more.

The history of this authoritarian impulse is a treacherous web, sticky with the blood of the dissident and the different, and to untangle its threads is the work of many seasons. Spun in there are the likes of its absolute monarchs; its Christianity’s suppression of ancient animistic tendencies for more dictatorial models of Roman stock, all-consuming in their hunt for sin and guilt, and later to burst in the bulging veins on red foreheads of ruthless Catholic and Protestant intolerances alike; Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, with its message that those in authority must be obeyed no matter what, because however tyrannical they may be, the alternative is an anarchical terror many times worse; and the Victorian industrial capitalists we met earlier in all their draconian fire of toxic employment relations and Dickensian child abuse. A most welcoming warren of tunnels into the abyss of human cruelty, to be sure, but loitering outside the guard towers of the largest prison in the country is perhaps not the most sensible situation from which to attempt it. So instead, let us free those sentries of any confusion and turn our attention squarely on barging into their jail.

Where does a prison like this fit in the arsenal of English coercion? Well, in advance of prisons there is a long rack of instruments arranged in order of increasing severity. We must walk past the apparatus of shouting and threatening and beating and calculated ignoring, past the bludgeons of fines, humiliations, confiscations, evictions and deportations, and only then do we come to the prisons at the highest end of the spectrum. Imprisonment is now the harshest form of coercion the English are permitted to inflict, in theory at least, under national and international law. Look beyond it however and we see a mess of splinters on the floor where additional weapon racks have been smashed, and the tools of nightmare once housed there flung out the window. We need not guess

what those were – we shall look outside and see them. They did not land far away, and occasionally some of these people try to drag them back in.

We need not even slip back that many layers in time to do so. Wandsworth Prison began operations only in 1851, just as the English prison system was coalescing. Indeed. In today's common imagination, from cops-and-robbers playground games upward, prison is the default penalty for lawbreaking and a natural and necessary part of the social landscape – but that idea is startlingly recent. There is nothing standard about it: it was one alternative of many, arrived at out of specific socio-economic and cultural processes. Some of those seeped in from prison's precedents, like the prison hulks of Woolwich, or those workhouses and euphemistic 'Houses of Correction' where we saw them tormenting debtors and poor people. But these did not add up to a prison system: on the whole confinement was local, poorly regulated, subject to the arbitrary whims of the nearest authorities and a stepping stone to other, usually awful punishments rather than a punitive framework in its own right. To stare into earlier English centuries is to plant our faces into horrendous rituals of torture and humiliation, loaded with the purposes of sadistic political spectacle and religious fanaticism. That is a hole in the earth which once plunged down might leave us too deranged to continue, so let's not. The nearer centuries are terrible enough as it is: in the age of imperialist expansion their favoured remedy was to ship their convicts out of sight and mind, where to grind their labour to build the settler colonies of North America and Australia.

This became less viable over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the former threw out English rule and the latter grew from gulags into proper settlements (which nowadays run their own gulags for dark-skinned foreigners on neighbouring islands), so the preference then shifted toward incarceration, the removal of freedom, as a punishment in itself. Prisons morphed into a more methodical system to lock people up so they could think about what they did, and much of that conceptual change occurred in the post-revolution United States, where prisons are still often called *penitentiaries*, that is, places of *penance*, and which in turn seems to have influenced the rise of prison culture in England. Local jails were consolidated into larger facilities and Wandsworth Prison was one of those to emerge, centralising the intake of a number of jails across what in those days was still the province of Surrey. It was designed in a cartwheel shape which also originated in the U.S.: a main building composed of multiple long wings, radiating from a central block which could monitor all their corridors.

The mainstream view is that the rise of the prison reflected an enlightened England growing more humane, rising from the murk of barbarities designed to break the body towards a civilised and morally upright correction of the soul. But as absolutely barbarous as many earlier punishments were, it is too simplistic to cast them into some dark age of primitiveness for which modernity can congratulate itself for escaping. So there is also a critical view, best represented by French philosopher Michel Foucault's argument that prisons were a move away from *punishment as a theatre of power*, towards a disciplinarian society that *punished to break people into docility*. That is, to mould them into cookie-cutter roles for the new industrial age, to suppress difference, to silence dissent; to coerce, in short, against everything that showed even a hint of appearing untidy, unpunctual, or unproductive. It was no coincidence, then, that the prison, the school, the hospital, the factory and the barracks all began to resemble each other in this shared image of authoritarian capitalist control-freakery.

Do not worry if that is a challenge to wrap your head around; do not believe anyone who claims to understand Foucault on every day of the week. Nonetheless his participation is vital because it was his work exposing society's thinking around prisons and punishment – as all else – as *a product of power relations*, not an absolute truth, that made this conversation possible in the first place.

Suffice it to say that prisons are as controversial now as they have ever been, and the English are not alone in having a spectrum of strong opinions. As usual the most visible part is typically the most unpleasant because it bays the loudest: those people who take a black-and-white view of justice which in all cases equates law with right and crime with wrong, not recognising that both are ideas imagined out of changing political and cultural moods. From their point of view the prisoner has fallen across an absolute moral threshold to become a lower species of animal which forfeits all rights, including that to be considered human, and deserves the harshest possible punishments (*exterminate all the brutes!*). These are the voices that take to the columns of tabloid newspapers demanding that this country 'bring back hanging' or reduce what they imagine to be luxurious five-star prison conditions to more fittingly miserable dungeons of bread and water, rattling chains, and dripping hooks in the walls. England's bloodstained punish-lust lives on in these people, but we cannot dismiss them too casually; many have reached these conclusions out of trauma, and we cannot underestimate the power of painful injustice to break people. As we have seen, violence tends to cycle out of systems of violence. More dangerous are those drunk on their punishing for

tribalistic or ideological reasons, and by the time we are done here we shall see why these are some of the most dangerous menaces to any society.

At the other end of the spectrum are opponents of prisons who call for their abolition. They as well as more hesitant prison sceptics marshal a range of criticisms, and Wandsworth's records will show that these have substantial evidential merit. That prisons and the wider criminal justice system are tools of political oppression and the targeted persecution of marginalised groups, for example along racist, class or gendered lines; that, recalling Foucault calling out the convergence of prisons and hospitals, many of those punished in prisons are not criminals but people with mental health problems in a society that, far from healing them, breaks them in the first place; that prisons in an age of public funding cuts and free-market values have become overcrowded, drug-ridden, rat-infested, suicide-inducing dystopias for inmates and staff alike; and that quite simply, prison doesn't work – the vision of prison as a means to reform offenders into law-abiding citizens, so far as it ever existed in good faith, has failed. And if the evidence in England is not enough, then one glance at the prison system in the U.S., whose abject horror speaks for itself in its characterisations like *prison-industrial complex* and *school-to-prison pipeline*, might be enough to turn anyone with an ounce of humanity off the case for prisons forever.

Nonetheless the spectrum also has a centre, whose philosophy is perhaps best summed up by a now familiar figure. The Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, as the former Shadow Justice Secretary*, wrote that society 'should see the punishment of offenders as more than just straight punishment' but 'an opportunity to rehabilitate as well...to make sure that their stay in prison can be one that makes them better people'. To the extent it is sincere, it is an important qualification that sets itself apart from the punitive tradition: prisons and punishments as not an end in themselves but a means to deliver better social outcomes. 'In an ideal world', reflected Khan, 'I would rather HMP (*Her Majesty's Prison*) Wandsworth was not needed, or any prison for that matter, but we do not live in a utopia. As such, it is vital that prisons are used sparingly, and only when absolutely necessary'.

These are difficult positions to reconcile, for views anywhere on this spectrum tend to be held with passion. So as we push open a grate and emerge into the darkened corridors of Wandsworth Prison it is worth keeping that map of

* In English politics, 'Shadow' in a title indicates a member of the official opposition, tasked with scrutinising – that is, 'shadowing' – the government official responsible for the specified policy area.

attitudes unfurled, because it marks this as another area where there is no such thing as a neutral point of view, still less an impartial historical analysis. The best we can do is hold our own partialities in context, and give opposing views a fair hearing as we break in here with swords drawn and shields up.

Perhaps the prison senses this challenge, because our infiltration has been detected. A dark figure approaches. Is this the first boss we must contend with, in this our first dungeon? Do not submit to it. Do not put your hands up. We shall come and go where we will. They and we are equals. Stand your ground.

But it seems the apparition is not here to fight us. It introduces itself as the Warder, and the first thing it wants to make clear is that it is not a representation of any individual living or dead, thank you very much, but is rather, to borrow a term, an *anthropomorphic personification* of Wandsworth Prison itself. Perhaps it has come as a cosmic balancing force, sensing that as my perspective cannot give this place impartial treatment, it is only fair that the other side of the spectrum be represented as well. I shall accept this, and in return it seems we will not have to sneak around after all – with the Warder accompanying us we shall have safe passage through this place's historical corridors.

As we proceed, the Warder makes the case that there is a genuine problem of dangerous people in society, and that some method is needed to move them where they cannot harm others. To illustrate, it withdraws a dusty book from a desk drawer and places it down, then lifts the cover for our consideration. It is a registry of everyone ever imprisoned in Wandsworth's cells, and with solemnity the Warder points out some names whose wrongdoings are extremely difficult to defend. 1949: the serial killer John George Haigh, named the 'Acid Bath Murderer'. 1956 and 1960: Ronnie and Reggie Kray, merciless kingpin brothers in the organised crime underworld of London's East End. 1968: James Earl Ray, assassin of the American civil rights icon Martin Luther King, who unsuccessfully fled here after the killing. 2011: several members of parliament who fraudulently claimed large sums of money in the 2009 expenses scandal.

The Warder nods. Surely, it seems to suggest, by detaining people like these the prison made society a better and safer place?

It is hard to argue with that, but not impossible. For a start, we should question what has gone wrong in a society that produces such people in the first place.

Peer through the layers of time, meanwhile, and eerie contraptions phase back into being around us. Wooden frames with ropes and restraining belts; whips with dendric heads like desiccated bushes from the lower and dustier levels of hell, the notorious *cat o' nine tails*. Corporal punishment, the infliction of physical pain: that is to say, torture. These relics of inherited sadism overlapped with the rise of prisons and for a time – until the 1960s! – were part of this prison's regime. Obviously physical torture is not the only kind of torture, nor even the most destructive, but its casual brutality is certainly the most symbolic of a society that has allowed a place for authoritarian power-tripping and this makes it ruinous in all its forms. It cannot pass. Even now its violence blights households and schools all over the world where adults take out their arrogance on children with impunity, and it is exactly this dehumanising, you-are-worthless social atmosphere that demolishes their stake in society and gives them grounds to violate it in kind.

To what extent are the English responsible for seeding these practices on that global scale with their empire, and for the self-important voices that still stand to defend them in their strongholds like those in Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and the United States? Well? What says the Warder?

The Warder sighs, visibly upset at the power-tripping characterisation of corporal punishment in its prison, and deplores what it calls exaggeration by the movie industry. Even at its height, it insists, corporal punishment and its cousin, hard labour, were never arbitrary here at Wandsworth but took place according to strict, clear rules, administered to the exact degree ordered by a sentencing judge or visiting magistrate. Furthermore, the Warder explains, these punishments declined as prisons coalesced into a respectable system. With the nationalisation of prisons in 1878, the unhealthy conditions and arbitrary abuses were themselves locked away by a new regime of universal standards. These were further fleshed out by the Gladstone Committee, convened in 1895 to hear evidence about what prisons' purpose should be, how their inmates should be treated, how their staff should work, and other issues pertaining to how they could be improved as a national system. The result was the 1898 Prison Act, by which the system's mission became explicitly to reform its prisoners for the better, rather than to merely punish or deter. With that, prison officers became an integrated part of the English civil service, that class of professional bureaucrats whose job is to carry out public work with integrity and rigorous observance of

the rules, irrespective of shifting political winds and – remarkably for such a class-based society – on appointment by merit rather than social status.*

Be that as it may, torture by the book is no less insidious than torture by the whim. If anything it is worse, because its sanction by rules gives it a veneer of acceptability to a people for at least half of whom obedience to rules is a virtue in its own right, and who are thus too ready to excuse away atrocities in the name of following them (or likewise, to punish people for harmless acts when the rules dictate it). It is not enough that the prison system has moved past corporal punishment; it must also do penitence for entertaining it in the first place.

Meanwhile the Warder has glided to a cell door, and beckons to draw our attention to something inside. The cell is set back over a hundred years in time, and in it sits – there is no other way to describe it – a box with a crank sticking out of it. Apparently it is indeed called a Crank Machine, and embodies the futility of the hard labour system as well as its eventual decline. Hard labour, says the Warder, usually summons images of remorseless pickaxing in stone quarries or the chopping of logs in the woods, but Victorian London, not known by then for its woods and never for its mountains, had reached a point where just getting convicts to suitable sites or transporting the materials from them cost far more than any potential output from their suffering. And so they came up with the Crank Machine, whose handle an inmate could turn over and over again for no reason. Strictly by the rules, the Warder reminds us: the required number of revolutions was set down in the sentence, and officers could adjust the tightness of the screw to make it easier or harder, thus originating the prison slang of *screw*, meaning an officer. There is somehow a terribly English absurdity to these machines, which had all but disappeared by the twentieth century.

Whatever the degree of our faith in the professionalism of the English civil service, the Warder's testimony does highlight an important subplot here: that of the prison officers themselves, who far from being the hooded dungeon masters of caricature have been a diverse and dynamic lot. Their own journey has shaped that of the prison system with their changing personalities and approaches, and landed them in the present day as a set of public officials with a strong

* The English class structure dies hard. During both World Wars, a number of Wandsworth Prison's junior officers went into military service then came back with high rank and decorations. They were unable to resume their work in the prison because now that they were commissioned 'gentlemen' it was unthinkable they should work in a position below their social station, i.e. as anything other than Governor.

professional identity, unionised representation within the English labour movement, and a thankless job caught in the middle of budget-slashing policymakers, prisoners either ruthlessly abusive or with needs they are not equipped to support, and an angry public demanding reforms from either extreme of the punitive-rehabilitative spectrum. Rarely the grand architects of prison injustice, they are often among its most immiserated casualties. So as we carefully tread down to the darker dungeons of Wandsworth's past, the Warder implores us not make those staff the unhappy targets of whatever necessary ire is raised by our finds – which, I suppose, is fair, because we have already seen that evil is usually caused by systems. All of this society, not simply these beleaguered civil servants, must take responsibility for the ills in which this place had a role.

In the vital sense, Foucault was correct. If we step outside the box of human experience and look in from the stars, so many things believed to be absolute are revealed as imaginary. Law is one of those things, and justice another: in the first instance they exist nowhere but in people's heads. (It is the same with money, nations, companies, languages, calendars, names and a load of other things, but let us not wander off too far).

This does not make them any less real. Rather, they are real because people have *made* them real by valuing those ideas and building them into practices and power relations – not because they were out there in the fabric of the universe from the beginning.

To make law real, you have to convince people it should be real. That is, you need to have *power* over them: power to communicate it from your head into theirs, and to persuade them to accept it. Power can come in many different forms of course, be it words, guns or chocolate biscuits, whose relative effectiveness depends on who you are trying to convince. That is why there have been so many varieties of law in this world, differing not just in content but in structural basis. England's system for example, known as *common law*, is based on accumulated precedent, but some countries have codified civil or religious systems. Others, such as Scotland's, are hybrids. Law and its institutions then, including prisons, are first and foremost expressions not of justice, but of power.

At that point they can still be good or bad. If your society is decent, it works out systems of justice that make the world better rather than worse for people, curtail privilege and oppression, and bind the strong from abusing the weak, building this

into not only the laws themselves but living cultures of values and practices which steer the laws to good consequence. But this is always the objective, never the origin, and in practice too rarely the outcome. As an expression of power, legal systems have been too easily capturable by the powerful, and so deployed to punish their critics or groups they hate for no reason. England is in the same position on this as virtually all countries: it has come a long way on that journey, but for most of its life its systems of law have been a tool for profound abuse and in many respects still are.

We have seen some examples. In the prison hulks of Woolwich where people on low incomes were worked to death for trivial misdemeanours, we saw the justice system be an instrument for the privileged to persecute the poor. On the commons, where people who had enjoyed the land's resources for generations were re-cast as *poachers* or *vagrants* and punished for it, we saw the justice system be an instrument for the beneficiaries of a political process, Enclosure, to sweep away their opponents and suppress alternative ways of life. In Eltham, where the legal process failed to hold the killers of Stephen Lawrence to account, we saw the justice system – particularly the police – be an instrument to uphold racist social hierarchies by denying due process to those cast to their bottom. And just wait till we come to the use of the death penalty to destroy political opponents, whose heads and limbs lie scattered about our path ahead.

Not even the Warder will pretend that these delivered justice in any reasonable sense. The point however is not that these were wrongs, but that they were wrongs *inflicted by means of the justice system*, making it in clear effect an *injustice system*. They are the proof that justice cannot simply mean observance of the law, nor that law and order are inherently good, because law is an expression of power, and human beings' problems with power make them susceptible to directing it to harms as appalling as the crimes that occur in law's absence. That is no exaggeration: a great deal of humanity's worst atrocities, among them slaveries, genocides and sexual abuses, have taken place in obedience to laws deliberately designed to enable them. That, in a framework contributed by the Dungeons and Dragons role-playing system, is what we can call *lawful evil*. It is the most dangerous type of evil, because unlike *chaotic evil*, committed by disruptors whose villainy is obvious to anyone, lawful evil comes disguised under the popular misbelief that upholding the law is intrinsically a good in itself. It thus normalises cruelty under the guise of justice, misleading populations into an acrobatics of doublethink from which it is extremely difficult to untangle them.

The easy way to convince people of this would be to direct their eyes to that land, the United States, where the legal system is more or less the plaything of the white and wealthy castes, or at the wider spectacular mosaic of legal abuses in many nations of the world. But our interest here is in England, as much a participant in lawful evil as any nation, and we must now ask the Warder to open the registry of prisoners once more so we can scrutinise Wandsworth Prison's collusion in it. We must do the pointing-out ourselves this time because the Warder has withdrawn to the wall, evidently still working through its own shame.

World War I is a good place to start, because it is in the face of existential threats, real or perceived, that we see a society's ugliest side. The war years brought into HMP Wandsworth a large number of people who were jailed for plainly political reasons. Among them were conscientious objectors: people who refused to fight in the military on moral grounds, be they pacifist values, religious principles, refusal to kill fellow working-class people on the continent, or opposition to what they considered, quite reasonably, a pointless and bloodthirsty war. That they were punished at all is beyond pardon, but this was a violently nationalistic time for a violently nationalistic country, and these dissidents found themselves drenched in a shower of prejudiced bile that has still not fully evaporated. They were soon joined behind bars by some 200 Irish people following the Easter Rising of 1916, an insurrection against British colonial rule in Dublin that attempted to declare an independent Irish Republic but was mercilessly crushed by the British Army, thence to live on as one more blistering landmark in the longest-running of England's colonial occupations. The war also landed entirely peaceful political dissidents behind Wandsworth's walls: communists, socialists, trade union members and strikers, in most cases punished for speaking out for better conditions for workers and unemployed people. And imprisonment and severe physical abuse in prisons was a major element in the story of a momentous political phenomenon of this time, the women's suffrage movement, whose confrontation with England's sexist election laws – both peaceful (by suffragists) and militant (by suffragettes) – raised it to worldwide legend when it successfully seized the right for women to vote in England in 1918 (for women over 30) and 1928 (for women over 21, the same as men), although the record does not show that any were held in this particular prison.

World War II hauled in another species of political prisoner, Wandsworth's first spy. He was a Welshman, Arthur Owens, who had been feeding coded wireless signals to the Germans. In this case the intelligence services co-opted him as their

own double agent, but other spies like Josef Jakobs or Karl Richter were put to death, the latter breaking free and fighting with his executioners upon the gallows. The punishment of spies must also be considered political because it is a classic double standard: it is hypocrisy for a nation to regard other nations' spies as criminal while employing spies of its own (and yet they all do it, because nations are arrogant in that way). Next on our list is another set of Irish fighters, this time from the Provisional Irish Republican Army in the 1970s during the Northern Ireland conflict (the 'Troubles'). British prisons thereby became implicated in yet another round of colonial oppression in which ten of these prisoners were allowed to die in hunger strikes in 1981, to the effect of escalating the violence of the conflict concerned. As with the persecution of suffragettes Wandsworth seems to have escaped involvement in this, but a more recent guest in its cells was the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange – a questionable character, to be sure, but whose arrest came as part of a wave of politically-driven imprisonments of whistleblowers for exposing serious criminal activities by their governments.

The people we have picked out so far illustrate the use of this prison, and by proxy the prison system, as a tool to repress dissent and carry out political abuses. But there is another category of person which law is often wielded to punish: those who are considered different. Humanity has a reprehensible record at putting people in prison – or worse – because social prejudices demand they be hated and punished, from the arbitrary arresting and killing of dark-skinned people by the police in the United States, to those many tainted jurisdictions which enforce rigid norms of sexuality or gendered behaviour. England is no exception, and on this we could not have chosen a better prison. Wandsworth's most famous inmate is an example who will stand for them all.

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde – author, poet, playwright, and victim of prejudice – was born in 1854 to a religious and highly literate family in Dublin and went through his school years in Fermanagh, now in British-administered Northern Ireland. By the 1870s he had made it to Oxford University, where he developed a long hairstyle, an aversion to physical sports, and decorated his room with flowers, feathers and blue ceramics. It was there that he was drawn into the Aesthetic Movement, which argued that art should exist for its own sake: to be aesthetic – that is, beautiful – rather than trying to be useful, convey a message, or hide some deeper level of meaning. After university this philosophy guided

Wilde's social interactions and fashion sense as he embarked on adventures in the United States and Paris, writing some early plays and poems and acquiring the image of a decadent, flamboyant outsider.

By then he was already experiencing hostility. His aesthetic beliefs were a challenge to Victorian England's ethos of haughty moralisation. For its custodians, art was supposed to 'educate' and 'improve' its audience, much like prisons and Enclosures for that matter. But some of the antagonism came from a more specific context: that of gender. Our route has brushed us upon this problem a number of times, and we should take a moment to collect our observations on it because it is bigger than most people realise. We need some sense of how big, because this was the axis of law-assisted prejudice that would send Oscar Wilde to jail.

Everything we see, hear and smell indicates England was and is a gendered society. In short, this means it rejects the natural diversity of human beings, instead attempting to force them apart into two simplified blocs: men and women. These are not men and women as they exist in reality however, but an imagined binary of two worlds utterly separate from and opposed to one another. Society regulates this by expecting men to think, act and perform in ways it calls *masculine*, and women to do so in ways it calls *feminine*. It fiercely polices this division in all aspects of life, enforcing that people keep to the behaviours and roles prescribed to them and punishing them if they do not. Some expressions of this are as follows. Masculine expectations are usually dominant, and feminine ones submissive, together taking horrific form in a *patriarchal* society where, though the very thought mocks the universe, men hold general power over women. Relationships are heavily regulated by laws and norms that privilege jealous monogamous partnerships of one man and one woman as the only legitimate form of the family (*mononormativity*, or *toxic monogamy* to its critics). Individuals take it upon themselves to relentlessly monitor the relationships of everyone they know and ensure that the slightest construable deviance from the norms is shredded to shame in a storm of delirious gossip and censure. Sexual attraction and behaviour is also subject to moral hierarchies, with heterosexual attraction seen as normal and superior (*heteronormativity*), and other forms, such as gay or lesbian affection, receiving vigorous hatred. Individuals whose very existence is seen to contradict that vision of a strict binary, such as trans, bi or intersex people, are also targeted with tremendous structural and physical violence. Sexual violence exists, including rape, in most cases with the purpose of expressing or enforcing this gendered power structure. And on top of it all there

is very limited sober and informed public conversation on any of the above, as gender's power consists exactly in getting people not to think about it. Instead they see it as natural, inevitable, or simply common sense, often grounding it in systems of pseudo-scientific non-thought of the kind that the Crystal Palace dinosaurs warned us about. Observed more objectively it is a *problem* because by violently imposing an artificial normal on diverse human beings and punishing or erasing those who do not fit, it has wrought suffering on a monumental scale.

Now at a basic level England is not special here: gender is a problem in the majority of human societies. But the ways it infests those societies, as well as the ways people fight back against it, take on different forms depending on their circumstances – cultural, historical, economic and so on – so it is still worth thinking about how far it has specifically English manifestations. Wandsworth Prison itself has a few, beginning with its status as a men's prison, that is, one that takes only male prisoners and has been overseen for most of its history by only male staff. Prisons are one of the principal spaces where England splits men and women into separate worlds, the others including public toilets and changing rooms, sports pitches and some schools, hence how each takes on a role as a gendered space that engineers rough and violent masculinity into men.

But let us return to Oscar Wilde's story, where we can now observe that one reason the English vilified him (as did the Americans, a people gendered in the extreme) was because his aesthetic style and mannerisms – flowers, feathers, beauty, art and so on – as well as his aversion to sports, did not conform to the signals of dominant, physical masculinity expected of men in such a gendered society. As yet they did not see him as enough of a threat to drop the prison system on him, but that would change soon enough.

Two aspects of his life illustrate the growth of England's conflict with him. One was his writing (and a warning, there will be spoilers here, so if you want to explore his work yourself you should do so first). After an initial expansion through plays, essays and journalistic writing Wilde published his first work of prose fiction in 1888. *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, a collection of short stories accessible to children, was well-received by the public. But the tales' simplicity and heartwarming tone belied their massive satirical swipe at the society of his day. There is a beautiful statue of a prince which, with the help of a sparrow who sacrifices his life out of love, redistributes its gems and gold leaf to help impoverished local people, only to be no longer regarded as beautiful by the town authorities and torn down, its lead heart dumped on a rubbish heap next to the

dead sparrow. There is a territorial giant who Encloses his garden – ‘trespassers will be prosecuted’ sign and all – to stop children playing in it, but has a change of heart at the sight of a crying boy, with whom through an act of kindness he becomes dear friends. Perhaps most puncturing of all is the story of an honest little gardener who would do anything for those he cares about, only to be exploited to death by his ‘devoted friend’ the miller who extracts selfish favours from him while giving nothing back, constantly reproaching him with dissembling lectures about friendship and generosity.

These are stories of kind-hearted people with real emotions and innocent love, getting unappreciated or abused by a greedy, shallow, pretentious, hypocritical and pettily self-regarding society. And in their telling a distinct literary style was emerging: Wilde’s writing is unashamedly sensual, full of scents and feelings, flowers, colours, fabrics, jewels, fruits and birdsong and seasonal imagery, a rejection of rigid, right-angled textual propriety in favour of bursting in flourishing ribbons of description and witty epigrams about life, art and soul. Wilde’s is a voice dissatisfied with its times, but its rebellion is not an angry Marxist barricade (though he dabbled in socialism) but the flight of a frustrated spirit of hedonism that simply longs to be free of fun-loathing, beauty-hating social constraints, but till then will happily flit around poking fun at the aristocratic classes or the prevailing moral consensus, which in their preposterousness are after all such easy targets.

Needless to say, authoritarians find this sort of thing considerably more dangerous than challenges to the face. Wilde’s irreverence and appeals to the senses were outrageous to a Victorian world which demanded respect for one’s superiors and suppression of physical desires for some higher spiritual or intellectual service, and in which there was no room for flights of beauty or pleasure because everything had to be placed exactly right so it could *work*! If Wilde’s flowers and fragrances threatened their attempts to gender all men into rock-hard emotionlessness, then his portrayal of genuine male-to-male friendships of care and intimacy, that most un-masculine of things, was the next best thing to open warfare. The eloquence of his theoretical challenges ran rings around their stiff and cumbersome dogmas, and as a killing blow his work was charged with unmistakable Christian currents. Guilt, sin and rebirth are recurring themes, yet this was a warm, secure, forgiving Christianity suffused with redemptive love and salvation for the oppressed – a reclamation from its popular harsh apparatus of judgement, strict rules, and punishment for its own sake.

If *The Happy Prince* caught England's self-styled moral sentinels with their pants down, they regrouped in time for Wilde's first and only full-length novel in 1890. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* brought together all these themes and styles into a chilling story of a beautiful young man, the titular Dorian Gray, who in the fright of seeing a painting of himself and realising his looks will wither over time, contrives to end up in a situation where all deterioration in his appearance due to age or sin will instead happen to that painting, while his own body remains in permanent youth. It is a playful, potent, troubling tale, full of high-society toffs getting their foibles poked in and noses tweaked, in no small part by a delightfully Mephistophelean character in the form of one of their own, Lord Henry Wotton, who takes his pleasure from tossing every unsmiling moral certainty of his time on its head with witticisms as theoretically formidable as they are flippant.

And that, really, seems to be why English society came to find Wilde so threatening. It wasn't just that like *Dorian Gray*, he was dead serious. It wasn't that he relativised their absolutes, reduced their rules of the universe to mere artistic motifs. It was that he also made it *fun*.

This time they were ready. The newspapers tore into *Dorian Gray* as a radioactive barrel spewing all that was corrupting, immoral, un-masculine and unclean, attacking Wilde in person and reserving special venom for the book's portrayal of affectionate relationships between men. Wilde was compelled to tone parts of it down for its full release, though not without adding a preface of pointed epigrams that snapped back at his critics. 'There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book', ran one. 'Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'

Despite or maybe because he was so good at showing up his society's follies, Wilde's work became immensely popular and soon won lasting repute. But there was a second front in society's war with him, his relationships, and it was there that the forces of gender-based violence breached him. Neither monogamy nor heterosexuality came naturally to Wilde and he saw no reason to submit to them. In 1883 he married Constance Lloyd, a barrister's daughter, and would have two sons with her, but sexually he was not fulfilled and began to explore relationships with men. In 1880s England this was not only abhorred, but illegal.

English laws against homosexuality are a classic case of the use of law to impose social prejudices and punish the different. They originated long before Wilde was alive, but we must notice that as in all places, English laws and norms against sexual diversity are not 'traditional' but were created for specific political purposes. In this case those reasons belonged to that ever-present Tudor

nuisance Henry VIII who in 1533 passed the Buggery Act*, in effect punishing same-sex sexual interaction with death. What had previously been largely a religious prejudice in England was now a matter of law, and that shift was precisely the point: by secularising hostility to sexual diversity, Henry could turn homophobic hatred back on the clergy, thus furthering his political project to smash dissident priests, plunder the monasteries and seize control over the church from Rome. This law would go on to sire the rogues' gallery of anti-gay laws that the British Empire seeded around the world, and which to this day litter statute books and rally murderous sentiments on every continent; their wielding against Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia and Canaan Banana in Zimbabwe, for example, were political exercises of much the same nature as those for which Henry Tudor created them in the first place. But they also stuck in England's own legal system, and just as Oscar Wilde was ascending on his literary career they were widened by parliament to cover all forms of sexual interactions between men.

This law would destroy Oscar Wilde, and the man who would wield it to do so was called John Sholto Douglas, usually remembered by his hereditary title as the ninth Marquess of Queensberry. He was not a pantomime villain but a complicated figure whose life story suggests he too was not entirely at ease in his world; among other things he was a forthright atheist whose entry to the House of Lords was delayed by refusal to swear the religious oath of allegiance to the queen, and his brutish character found a more constructive outlet in his authorship of the 'Queensberry Rules', the foundation for the modern sport of boxing. Nevertheless he was so livid at Wilde's relationship with his son that he began a fierce exchange of insults with the writer. Their feud came to a head in 1895, just as Wilde completed his most popular work, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when the Marquess left him a calling card accusing him of 'sodomy'.

As 'sodomy' was illegal, this was a serious provocation. Wilde's response was to sue the Marquess for libel, which turned out a grave tactical error. Then as now, an accusation was only libellous in law if untrue, and this gave the rich and connected Marquess the chance to turn the tables on his enemy. He hired private investigators to dig out information about Wilde's sex life from other young men he had involvements with, then spilled all the lurid details before a courtroom,

**Buggery* is a historical euphemism for sexual interactions between people of the same gender, in particular men. Other derogatory examples include *sodomy* or variants of *crimes against nature*. There are important nuances that differentiate these terms, but here we can treat them as interchangeable.

media and public bristling with the hatred and rage that are the petrol of a gendered society. Wilde eloquently defended his writings in the witness box only to be battered by the Marquess's lawyer about his personal life. Now it was Wilde's turn to be arrested and put on trial, this time by the state, and the proceedings ended with him sentenced to two years' hard labour for 'committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons'.

His prison experience was ruinous. He was shunted between four different jails of which the third, our Wandsworth, confined him for six months. In all of them he endured miseries of hunger, forced labour, injury and heavy-handed control that wrecked his body and spirit. Eventually prising a pen and paper from his jailers, he composed a letter to the Marquess's son that came to be called *De Profundis* ('from the depths'), a torrential waterfall of Wilde's flowers-and-feelings philosophising interspersed with literary and religious references but now also suffused with a heartbreaking anguish. Buried in its midst, one line stands out:

While I was in Wandsworth Prison I longed to die. It was my one desire.

Wilde emerged from prison in 1897 physically, socially and financially broken. His long-suffering wife Constance and two sons had to escape to Switzerland because of the stigma on Oscar's name, with all their property confiscated to pay the legal costs for which the Marquess had vengefully pursued him through prison. For three more years he drifted in a European exile, languishing in loneliness and alcohol before dying in Paris aged 46, though not before completing some final works which eviscerated English prison conditions and appealed for their reform. His last major poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, described events at that last of his imprisonment sites, but Wandsworth is easily in range of the splash damage of this final verdict on the English prison system, with its supposed rehabilitative mission, from the most famous casualty of its use as an instrument of prejudice.

*...That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.*

*...The vilest deeds like poison weeds
Bloom well in prison-air:*

*It is only what is good in Man
That wastes and withers there:
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
And the Warder is Despair*

*For they starve the little frightened child
Till it weeps both night and day:
And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool,
And gibe the old and grey,
And some grow mad, and all grow bad,
And none a word may say.*

*Each narrow cell in which we dwell
Is foul and dark latrine,
And the fetid breath of living Death
Chokes up each grated screen,
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust
In Humanity's machine.*

England no longer formally uses the law to persecutes same-sex relationships. In the 1960s they began repealing their laws against sexual and gender diversity, and in 2017 Oscar Wilde was formally pardoned along with 50,000 other people who had their lives destroyed by those laws, many of them still alive.* For some this did not go far enough: what was needed was not a pardon, but an apology for laws which never should have existed. But the deployment of law as a tool of gender-driven persecution lives on in many of this country's former colonies, and attests to the devastating power of prisons like Wandsworth to make society a nastier place, rather than a more just one.

It is also telling that were Wilde alive today, he would be in trouble for a quite different notion of sexual misconduct. By the evidence he was no predator, but a number of his sexual partners were what today's norms call *underage* – that is,

* This amnesty legislation was nicknamed the Alan Turing Law after the pioneering computer scientist and World War II codebreaker of that name, another of those laws' most high-profile victims.

beneath an age where the law recognises sexual consent. Few of them cared about that then because they had not yet invented *underage* as a concept; that was an England still too near to the grinding of children in the mines, mills, gears and chimney stacks of the industrial revolution to think of their suffering as a problem. A hundred years later and suddenly it has come to the sense that there is something abominable about adults exploiting children for sexual satisfaction, taking by surprise a whole generation of public figures, most symbolically a certain Sir James Savile (the *Sir* is theirs), who are now getting locked up or posthumously condemned for abuses they committed at a time when their country, knowing full well about their behaviour, was quite willing to accept it.

To poke England's eyes for this is not, of course, to suggest that the deeds of the likes of Jimmy Savile are any less abhorrent. Rather it is to point out something equally abhorrent on their society's part which Oscar Wilde saw so clearly: its hypocrisy, by which it now inflates its show of moral indignity to cover for its long failure to regard child abuse – industrial and familial as much as sexual – as a problem. The scandal is not that Jimmy Savile abused children; it is that England *was* Jimmy Savile.

Is its latest hysteria towards the catch-all term *pedophilia* some reflexive attempt, in the same vein, to project off its guilt? To deflect responsibility by framing it instead as a problem of sexual difference, of freakish individuals outside society's margins, rather than a mainstream culture of abusive power towards children, thereby appealing to the same moralising bloodthirst towards difference that did for Oscar Wilde, still bubbling on in the English psyche? Some of these English would shriek at the very asking – and that rests the case. They would do better to remember that their morals and laws are constructed out of a record that is very difficult to respect.

Is the Warder still 'Despair' then? We had better wake it up, because there is one more problem in Wandsworth's story that we cannot escape without confronting.

The Warder hesitates at our request – neither in shame nor pride, but in sensation of its weight, for the matter at hand is the prison's heaviest of all. Then it nods, and leads us into another wing where we ascend a set of iron stairs. There the principles of architecture fail and the walls break loose, frozen eternal mid-explosion. Stones, beds, and railings hang suspended in the fog. We enter layers

of history on which reality has turned its back; this part of the prison is quarantined outside of time.

Oscar Wilde did not come to this section, but he was aware of happenings in its equivalent over in Reading. His *Reading Gaol* poem builds into a bombardment against the horrors of England's prison system, but to get there he first reflects on a specific event:

*In Reading gaol by Reading town
There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
Eaten by teeth of flame,
In burning winding-sheet he lies,
And his grave has got no name.*

The narrative of how this wretch got there makes up the bulk of *Reading Gaol's* verses, and no excerpts here can do them justice because their power is in how Wilde stretches out to an excruciating maximum the anguish of a man put through the ritual of killing by law, more often referred to as *execution*, the *death penalty*, or *capital punishment*.

It is a special type of killing, but this alone does not suffice for a definition because as we have seen, law is imaginary. We shall try to avoid those terms so as not to lend it legitimacy. It is more objective to define the practice as a) *killing*, that is carried out b) *ceremoniously* and c) *in cold blood*, d) against a person placed in a position where they *cannot defend themselves*. In this ultimate ritual punishment the English have form that far precedes their prison system.

As with laws against sexual diversity, we should not fall in the illusion that capital punishment was there from the beginning, a relic of some state-of-nature savagery. Wherever it has been carried out or a system put in place for it, it was done so by choice, by definition, hence *in cold blood*. When that choice was first made in England is not known, but we can still make out patterns in history that link it to clear political processes. Its most common form, dating back at least to some of the Anglo-Saxon polities, was to hang people by the neck, but at some point a convention emerged which had higher-ranking people decapitated by axe instead – which was somehow more prestigious, for in classist England even killing had to observe social hierarchies. There are suggestions that executions were abolished by (of all people) William the Conqueror, but his Norman

successors soon brought it back into fashion along with a form of standardised torture pornography called *hanging, drawing and quartering*. Its stages and sequence varied, but typically the victim would be brought down from the noose while still alive, have their genitalia and internal organs slowly removed and sometimes burned or fed to them, then in that miserable condition be beheaded and have their body chopped into quarters for display. All of this was done in public – indeed, that was the point.

Obviously this was about more than punishing people with death. Its design was to draw out their agony as long as possible while providing a gruesome spectacle to intimidate viewers into obedience. No wonder then that its typical targets were not criminals but, once more, political opponents. The ruler who seems to have mainstreamed it was Edward I ‘Longshanks’, and its iconic victims of the age were Dafydd ap Gruffydd (in 1283) and William Wallace (in 1305), the independence heroes of Wales and Scotland respectively, both slowly chopped to death in this manner for resisting English wars of aggression. Longshanks’s grandson Edward III consolidated the punishment in 1351 by making it standard for men convicted of *treason*, that entirely political concept that criminalises opposition to the ruling authorities.* This being a gendered country, women got a different but equally horrific ritual, that of being tied to a stake and burnt alive. That one would famously be loosed upon another political enemy in 1431, Joan of Arc, this time the French national hero (do we sense a pattern here?), and would later rise to undying infamy in one of the most unforgivable of all the Christian world’s abuses of legal process: the killing of women accused of witchcraft, a mass atrocity born of misogynistic prejudice.

And so the English lopped, burnt and severed their way through generation after generation of dissidents and eccentrics. Sites like Tyburn (near Edgware Road), the Newgate, and of course Tower Hill became synonymous with their slaughter, and London Bridge with the display of their heads. And so do we come to the gallows of Wandsworth Prison, which with nationalisation became an official centre of the killing ritual.

By then it was caught up in the reforms to the English penal system, and went from gratuitous torture-pornography to a sentence where death itself was the

* Wallace had been charged with this, and his reputed response is instructive: he could not be a traitor to England or its king because he had never owed them allegiance in the first place. This did not of course affect his treatment because *treason* is about political theatre, not facts.

punishment, to be delivered by hanging, behind closed doors, with all the scientific efficiency of the culture that put on the Great Exhibition:

On reaching the scaffold the procedure will be as follows:

(1) The executioner will: (i) Place the culprit exactly under the part of the beam to which the rope is attached. (ii) Put on the white linen cap. (iii) Put on the rope round the neck quite tightly...the metal eye being directed forwards, and placed in front of the angle of the lower jaw...

Instructions like these made up a lengthy code that spelled out every aspect of the ritual with mathematical precision: the components and arrangement of the scaffold, the length of the drop, the dimensions of the trapdoor, the exact sequence of motions by the executioners, and the procedure for disposing of the corpse when it was done. The reformers must have thought this more civilised than the wanton butchery of old, but when we imagine the chilling capacity for coldness required to carry out such calculated directions for what is still, in the end, the ritualistic termination of a living and breathing human body, we have to wonder if that is a capacity that society is advantaged to have in its public servants. Those servants themselves, the executioners, were by now also civil service professionals and counted among them England's most famous hangman, the almost mythical figure of Albert Pierrepoint, who killed nearly 600 people before resigning in 1956 over a pay dispute. Much has been made of his later statement in his autobiography that he no longer believed in the death penalty, but the *Warder* is quick to comment that this has been exaggerated by the dramatists, and raises the lucrativeness of the deals he was offered for his inside story.

In total 135 people were done to death in Wandsworth's gallows. The majority were convicted murderers, some of them horrible, but as we have seen there were also political killings of spies and people condemned as *traitors* under laws descending from that very same Treason Act of 1351. Among them were the English fascist John Amery and the radio propagandist William Joyce (nicknamed 'Lord Haw-Haw'), both hanged by Pierrepoint; the odiousness of their collaboration with the Nazis, and odious it was, does not change the nature of *treason* as a politically-defined concept. There were also some total miscarriages of justice that led to the deaths of innocent people. Derek Bentley, a nineteen-year-old with serious physical and mental health problems, was incorrectly found guilty for the murder of a police officer and hanged here in 1953 in a conviction

everyone knew was dodgy, but the system's pride prevented it from quashing the verdict until 1998 after decades of campaigning by Bentley's family. Another victim was Timothy Evans, a twenty-five-year-old Welshman, also illiterate and mentally troubled (again, sensing a pattern here?), put to death in 1950 for killing his wife and daughter only for it to emerge that they had been murdered by a serial killer. Evans was pardoned sixteen years later – sixteen years too late.

Cruel errors like these helped turn the English mood against the killing ritual with a new vehemence. A current of voices for abolition had already rumbled down the centuries, and bit by bit had chipped away at its practice: moving it out of public sight, raising the minimum age for a death sentence, and eliminating it as a punishment for almost all of the hundreds of petty 'crimes' – mostly about keeping poor people off rich people's Enclosed loot – that had become capital offences amidst the rise of the noose-happy classes of landed, industrial and colonial wealth. By the 1930s protests with loudspeakers outside Wandsworth's gates were a familiar sight, with one instance of a lady ramming her car into the gates of the Governor's house. In World War II the Nazis' uses for execution left the whole continent retching in its shadow, and the more its opponents campaigned, the more that the debate expanded, the more that blunders like the Bentley and Evans killings took place, the clearer it became that its days in England were numbered. Wandsworth Prison's – and London's – last ritual killing took place in 1961. Four years later it was suspended in law, and after another four years its practice was ended by a parliamentary vote. Technically it remained in place for some major political offences, including in that stubborn provision on high treason, but today Britain is bound by instruments of international law, primarily the European Convention on Human Rights, that commit it against the use of the death penalty in all and any circumstances.

But the story has not ended there. Since abolition scarcely a single high-profile murder case or child sexual abuse scandal has gone by without a new outbreak of demands from English society's punitive strain to reinstate the killing ritual. Its advocates are quick to excite whenever public opinion polls return two-digit percentages in favour of doing so, and their cause has even reared its head in parliament a number of times, if thus far unsuccessfully. In an age when their atmosphere seems to tilt towards the maws of their most raucous and ravenous authoritarians yet again, they would do well to remember that it is up to them, not the river of history, to keep the killing ritual chained in its vaults and check the locks twenty-four times a day.

This is not a task we can leave to the English alone. Nor of course have they been alone in earning it. What they have sought to consign to their past is a universal evil that has ravaged the world and in much of it continues its rampage. There can be no impartiality on this matter, and the reason has nothing to do with whether the people put to death deserve their fate – that is secondary. To execute, recall, is not only to kill. It is to kill a person at one's mercy, ceremoniously, with an impassive heart and a steady hand, and then to officially call it justice, by which act all of society is implicated in the deed. What does that do to society's collective ego, to allow it that power? The litany of its victims who merely expressed an unpopular opinion, got in the way of somebody powerful, or happened to be of whatever gender, skin colour, sexual inclination or social group was unpopular in the day for no fault of its own, speaks for itself. The human race puts on show every day its problems with power, its intoxication on the authoritarian rush of blood to the head, and most of all its damnable arrogance, especially when massed in large groups. What we have witnessed here are centuries of echoes of the death penalty as a tool not of justice, but of power, to torment then exterminate the dissident, the downtrodden and the different, and in the hands of people who behave like that it gives their arrogance far too great an indulgence. The heartlessness it requires is too dangerous to permit it even a shred of legitimacy. No: for any human authority, the power over life and death is one power too many.

What do you think of this Warder, then? It offered to show us around its prison, and in return we drove it against the wall and filleted the penal history of its country in front of it. Is that fair on this poor fellow? How much could a prison like Wandsworth have done to stop the lawful evils asked of it by its country? How much *should* it have done?

This question is not so easy. If you are going to have a prison system at all, there are worse options than putting its operation in the hands of civil service officers, bound by professional integrity to strict rules that forbid them from abusing their power over prisoners. At least in theory, that means a duty to abide by those rules even when they run against the officer's personal whims and beliefs. But what if the rules instruct you to enforce a system that is itself abusive?

We have seen that unquestioning obedience to the law is not a safe concept of justice, not in a country like England when the law has so often been a weapon for systematic cruelties. To what extent, then, do prison officers share responsibility

for these acts when the system instructs they commit them? There must come a point where the officer is freed from duty to an abusive system and permitted, no, *obliged* to stand against it – a point where the Warder becomes a Whistleblower. How and where is that line to be drawn?

There is one more character in the story of Wandsworth Prison who might have something to say on this. Brigadier General Edmund Paton-Walsh was the prison's Governor from 1935 to 1960, but is better known for his involvement in the 1945 trials of Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. That tribunal famously set down the principle that obeying orders does not excuse a person from criminal responsibility under international law. The crimes on this occasion were some of the worst atrocities known to humankind, but critically, *they were not crimes under law when they were committed*. Nuremberg too was a political exercise, staged not just to punish the Nazi leaders but to symbolically bury Nazism in eternal condemnation, and it was for that purpose that it reached into the ether of history, plucked out the concept of *crimes against humanity* and welded it into law. Much of today's international legal framework against mass atrocities grew out of this event, and goodness knows the world is better off for such laws' existence, but look closer at what their creation meant. An official court had ruled, in effect, that *there are times when you MUST break the law for the sake of a higher good* – that is, where *breaking the law is lawful*, and *obeying the law is criminal*.

Seen through the prism of the Nazi death camps, it will be obvious to most people that there are deeds so fundamentally repugnant that a human being must be expected to refuse to carry them out no matter what authority or legal force commands them – not even governments, not even gods. But what is plain in principle is not so easy in practice. Consider the whistleblowers of the twenty-first century like Katharine Gun or Edward Snowden, and their mistreatment by governments including the British. To stand on your conscience is often to incur threats to your career, family, or freedom. Pressure can come from stiff-upper-lip working cultures where you are told to quiet your emotions and do what is 'necessary', and there is tempting refuge in the thought that if you don't pull the lever then someone else will. Perhaps the question then is not 'how far are prison officers responsible for injustices in the prison system?', but rather 'what systems can be put in place to support, protect and reward prison officers who stand up to those injustices, and remove or prevent appointment of those who do not?'

But we have rattled the Warder's conscience enough. We delved into Wandsworth Prison in the course of a wider critical mission and so had to give an account of ourselves in that cause. Now that we have done so, let's be nice to our host as it escorts us back to the entrance, and oblige its invitation to look back on the prison, for one last time, from the perspective of the people who run it.

Even with the gallows dismantled and nastier laws removed, Wandsworth's staff have continued to contend with the physical and mental stresses of one of the toughest public sector environments in the country. As an elemental of the civil service the Warder hesitates to say more, but glances around to make sure nobody is looking before slipping us some materials from the Professional Trades Union for Prison, Correctional and Secure Psychiatric Workers, better known as the Prison Officers' Association or POA.

This is the official trade union for these people, and the picture it paints is of a sector that has had to struggle to exhaustion for fair and safe working conditions from the beginning. This is typical of industrial relations in England: their standard setting is exploitation, and we have travelled through some of the history which made it that way. In this case the prison officers' union traces its roots to the 1910s when laws were passed that forbade them from going on strike, so depriving them of an effective means to hold the state to hear out their grievances. Two decades of gruelling battles followed before they finally won the right to organise as a free and independent body in 1939.

As well as having to contend with the government for their rights, they were also the first to get threatened, bullied, beaten, and in the case of conflict-torn Northern Ireland, firebombed, when the prisoners fought back. In the 1960s and 70s the prisons grew seriously overcrowded. Riots and other disturbances broke out, including a number of embarrassing escapes. Wandsworth made it into the 1961 Guinness Book of Records for Britain's largest prison breakout so far, but the highest-profile flight was that of 'Great Train Robber' Ronnie Biggs and two other prisoners in 1965, who made it over the wall in a dramatic sequence involving accomplices, a furniture van and a getaway car. Escape attempts continued as late as the 1990s, in one case featuring a mechanical digger, in another a TV crew. Such incidents led to a further tightening of security, in turn increasing pressures on prisoners, who then transmitted them by means of their fists onto increasingly overworked, understaffed and inadequately-paid prison officers.

The officers made representations to get reforms. What they got instead was a regime as hostile to their concerns as any in history in the form of the 1980s

Conservative Party government of Margaret Thatcher. As workers' rights were uprooted across the country, the prison officers ended the decade in a morass of sensational media coverage about their disputes, the mass suspension of resisting prison officers, a reaffirmation that they were not allowed to strike (though they negotiated back this right a few years later), an ominous dabble in bringing parts of the system into the private sector, and even a government attempt to strip them of their trade union status. Much as for other sectors, acrimonious conflict between prison staff and their public employers was now an established part of the landscape of English political economy and has remained so ever since.

By 2007 the situation was so bad that the staff of HMP Wandsworth joined their colleagues across the country in their first ever nationwide strike. The governing Labour Party, once upon a time the political voice of the English labour movement but now dragged radically away from it by the New Labour project of Tony Blair, responded by banning their strikes again. The story would continue in this manner into a new decade of coercive austerity with all its gratuitous budget cuts and refusal of the English government to govern. Thousands more staff have been laid off, leaving those who remain straining to manage a swelling prisoner population shaped by the social dysfunctions of an impoverished and predatory age – drugs, gangs, mental breakdowns, and suicides. And whether these prisoners are social or economic victims who should not be there in the first place, psychologically broken people, or genuinely dangerous criminals, the inevitable result is – of course – violence, against which the bodies of prison staff remain up against the firing line.

It was in 1999, as the mists of this crisis congealed, that Wandsworth received a snap visit by the prison inspectors. Their report was devastating. Staff assaults on prisoners, arbitrary abuses, appalling hygiene, racism – it was as though none of the promised humanising reforms of the last hundred years had ever materialised. The Warden acknowledges the prison's shame, and insists that tremendous work has been done to improve things since then. But with the dirtying of the political atmosphere around English prisons, how are we to be sure what is really going on? For balance we should ask the inmates themselves, but alas, that is one layer of time in Wandsworth Prison we do not have access to.

We have reached the gates. It is time to shake the Warder's hand and take our leave of Wandsworth Prison. What has it revealed to us about these people, the English?

For a start, it enables us to site their current approaches to punishment in the flow of their history. What their prison system means to them today is fed by a river of beliefs about crime, justice and punishment that has cataracted down the centuries. Praise it or blame it, we can only make a worthy go of either by understanding it as a function of that story which is still being written, not as a thing that has somehow surpassed or escaped it.

The English might think they have risen beyond their ancestors' barbarisms. They have not. Whatever gave rise to the conditions vilified in the 1999 report, it was a reminder that so little separates the country today from the arbitrary penal violence of its past. There are only laws and norms, customs and institutions, fleeting things which begin and end in people's heads. Nothing guarantees a day will not come when they lop those heads off once more.

If that sounds extreme, consider this. They have not stopped using incarceration, or the threat thereof, as a political tool and instrument of prejudice. The latest round of targets includes climate change activists, asylum seekers, homeless people, even people caught in the wrong place at the wrong time by Home Office inquisitors hunting for victims for their deportation programme. Institutional racism continues to weigh the system disproportionately against dark-skinned people, and the other side of the same problem is its structural failure to hold to account culturally-empowered people who inflict catastrophic damage to society, be they rapists (including among the police), billionaire tax-evaders or corrupt politicians. The push for harsher security powers amidst fears of terrorism or political protest, allied to a rising tide of bilious xenophobia, has both enabled and helped define these abuses of penal law. And with that nationalism's reaction against the EU, the danger of withdrawal from international instruments of human rights law threatens to remove a crucial padlock on the vault where the English have buried their killing ritual – meat for a mob that has never stopped baying for its return. If they are not careful, a hundred years of striving for a more humane and professionalised penal system could turn out not a drive for modernity, but a blip from which to plunge back into a sea of tortures, beatings, starvings, lashings, choppings, hangings, burnings and displaying of body parts above arches that has after all been their chosen approach to punishment for most of their national life.

Maybe it is that heritage, more than anything, that accounts for the neverending cracks and flaws in the English penal system. This country is *not used* to humanely treating those it decides have violated its rules. It is not used to keeping them in prisons, and to the extent that it does, is not used to expectations that prisons reform rather than brutalise them. Even while struggling to improve, it has clung on to belief systems of enormous cultural power that blame individuals completely for their misdeeds, screaming down all mentions of social factors or rehabilitation and insisting that splitting the criminals in pain is the just thing to do. Crime has never existed as a modern concept in England outside a culture that locates it intrinsically in poorer classes and darker skin pigmentations, while masculine wealth and whiteness are taken as membranes impermeable to criminal guilt. Occasionally some individuals or sub-cultures might have the insight to take a more sensible approach, but they have struggled to convert that will into a national system, however sincerely they might believe in its vision.

Here, for example, are the reflections of Stephen Rimmer, writing as Governor of Wandsworth Prison in 2001:

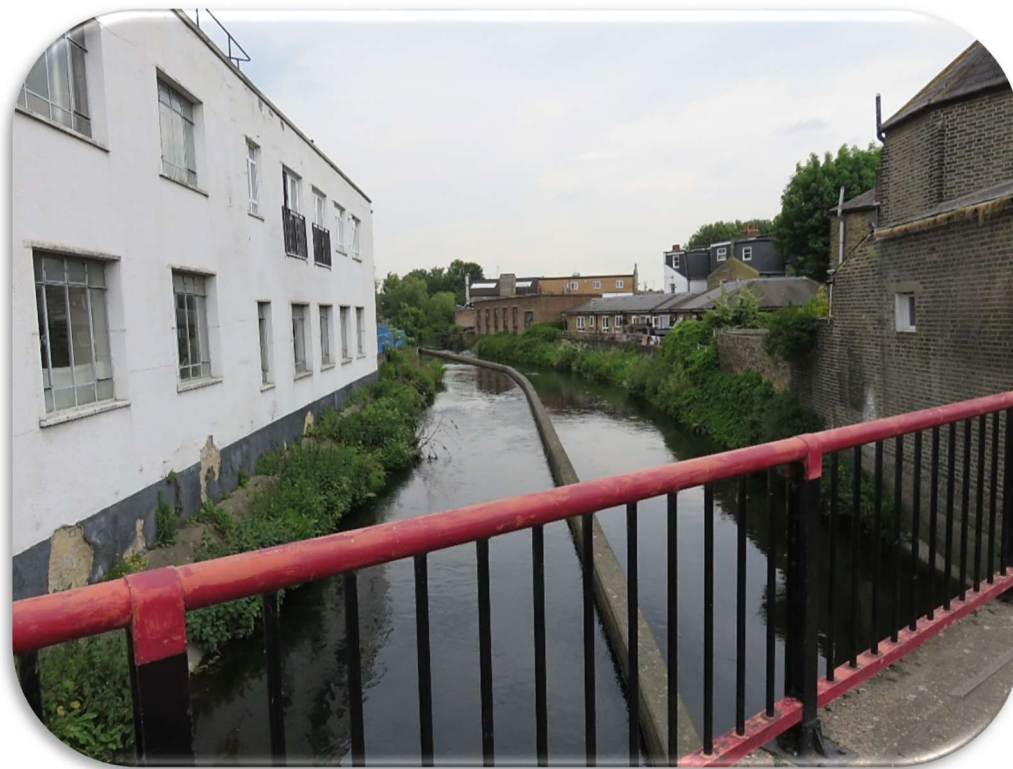
...a chronicle of failure. Failure in treating some of our fellow human beings decently and with humanity over too many of the last 150 years; failure in providing the resources and buildings to make prison a meaningful process of rehabilitation; failure in rewarding and valuing the always difficult, and sometimes dangerous, work of prison staff. Above all, though, failure in the continued use of a set of 150-year-old buildings to incarcerate 1,300 plus people at any one time for violating the laws of our society.

And then he makes this challenge which, coming from the desk of an English prison governor, is startling:

Sometimes, it really does feel like we are going round and round in an endless cycle of offending, imprisonment, offending, imprisonment. Is there really no other way? Might it not be too much to hope that there won't need to be a Wandsworth Prison 200th Anniversary or a 300th?

By directing these questions back out through the prison's gates, Mr. Rimmer reaches the essence of the matter. The difference between a better penal system and a worse penal system is not just the prisons themselves. So long as they exist,

they are part of it, yes: they need ethical, competent staff who can be relied on to address the diverse needs of different prisoners and treat them humanely. But the environment that decides if that will happen lies outside the prison walls. It requires a civically-engaged public who care about what happens in their prisons, and who are culturally immunised against the virus of punitive mania through a healthy information environment – education, the media and so on – with a critical understanding of the complexity of crime and the social conditions that generate it. It needs a government equally comprehensible of this that is prepared to train, equip and pay people to improve those conditions. All these planks must work together in a frame with one ultimate goal, the only goal under which a penal system can be allowed to exist: to make itself unnecessary.



Our dungeon run is complete, and we must press ahead to the next level. You must be exhausted by now, but look, the roads beyond the prison slope away: we are about to cross a valley. At last we have reached the Wandle, that tributary of the Thames from which Wandsworth sprang. To get to its fording point there is just one last little matter of traversing a city of the dead.

As far as cemeteries go a lot could be said for Wandsworth's. It sprawls across the eastern bank of the Wandle, but it is an orderly, spacious sprawl, its

innumerable graves arranged on lawns amidst a grid of paved lanes – a planned city. The slope is gentle. Beyond its silent trees, the hills and tower blocks of the far side poke along the horizon.

Most English bury their dead. They mark their resting places with gravestones in an increasing variety of sizes, shapes and materials, but many still bear the crosses or angelic motifs of a far-travelled Christian tradition. Life and death have been central themes in that tradition, and it still influences English thinking on these matters even for those who do not subscribe to it.

Relatively speaking, that thinking is not so sophisticated. They fear death. For many of them there is nothing more terrifying. They fear it far beyond the survival drive that is innate to most living beings, convincing themselves there is *nothing* more important than avoiding death, than putting it off for as long as possible. They would not be at home among cultures with more nuanced considerations of death, such as are found in the Day of the Dead festivities of Mexico, the traditional samurai code of the Japanese, or the island of Sumba in Indonesia where the deceased sit around in their families' homes for some time before their funerals. No, for the English plain terror will do, and Christianity's main contribution seems to have been to bind that terror to a moral spectrum. Do good and you will have eternal life, rather than dying; do evil and you will go to hell, which feels like dying over and over nonstop.

Is it this that shaped their culture's punitive tendency? Do they go around so immersed in fear that fear becomes the only power they know? Did they justify to themselves their horrendous tortures like hanging, drawing and quartering by believing that their victim was destined for hell and would suffer eternally there anyway, so there was nothing wrong with a bit more ripping and chopping to send them on their way? Fear of violent death; fear of disorder; the desperate cling to authoritarian coat-tails to impose order at all costs, any sacrifice better than for that coat to fall off their multitudes that must then spill into death-dealing chaos, as written by that most fear-stricken of their philosophers, Thomas Hobbes? Was it while thinking like that, heads down, that they tripped into that swamp of coercion, onto the spikes in its depths, where the pain is so thick that it clouds their sight from the death they imagine rules the surface world?

Seen from this rather pitiable angle, we can only acknowledge the moral courage of those who have tried to lift them back out. Every culture contains its own challengers and counterpoints. Our friend Oscar Wilde played with this terror at death and decay in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian, driven

by that very fear, bargains his mortality away for eternal youth only to drift into far more troubling horrors. When the bargain breaks, his death feels almost a relief, an emergency exit from a path too dark to consider. A hundred years later this country would also produce one of its most profound, memorable, even beloved alternative approaches to death in the form of its ‘anthropomorphic personification’ in the *Discworld* universe of Sir Terry Pratchett, that dutiful civil servant of the universe WHO SPEAKS LIKE THIS. Let us add to that counter-current, then, both those English who have tried to make their prisons more humane places, and those who seek to abolish them. They are as two people arguing over what route to take on a map, but their destination, a safer and kinder society, is the same, and if England is to get there – to escape the quagmire of punitive violence – then it is by their cooperation that it will do so.

We too have places to go. They lie beyond the Wandle, which we now cross by means of a nondescript iron-railed bridged jammed anonymously into the cluster of shops and houses that is the suburb of Earlsfield. It makes one wonder if its natives appreciate their river’s importance. Funnelling the rainfall of the North Downs down to the Thames, this hard-working watercourse has powered the industrious inhabitants of this valley for over a thousand years. For most of that period it fed them by grinding their flour and corn mills. In time it also lent its strength to their iron and copper works, gunpowder plants, paper-making and tobacco facilities, breweries, distilleries, and above all, thanks to its water’s mild alkalinity, a massive textiles industry of dyeing, tanning, bleaching, oil-pressing, silk-weaving, calico-pressing and hat-making, all hot on the vigour of the Wandle. These skilled trades were traditional occupations of the Huguenots, those French Protestants, and Wandsworth has their masses of refugees – or ‘swarms of economic migrants’ in modern English – to thank for turning its valley into an industrial powerhouse; a debt it acknowledges, at least officially, by its incorporation of the refugees’ tears onto its borough coat of arms. Not so pleasant were the hazardous chemicals running off these works that reduced the Wandle to a cesspool of kaleidoscopic poisons, but an almighty clean-up effort has since returned it to, if not sparkling, then at least respectable glory.

In crossing it, we leave Wandsworth, the land where we saw the English’s chains. They are the physical chains that restrain their prisoners, but also the psychological chains that keep them bound to the fearful and violently punitive strains of their national character. We have also witnessed their efforts to break

from those chains. They have stretched them out but not yet snapped them. They will not be taken seriously in their claims to be a *free country* until they do.

One person who broke free of the psychological chains was Oscar Wilde. That terrified them, so they went for him with the physical chains. But those are not as strong – not the chains of prison, nor even the chains of death. Through his writing he outlasted both, and it is to him we shall give the last word.

And what sort of lives do these people, who pose as moral, lead themselves? My dear fellow, you forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite.

Dorian Gray may have been teetering over a murderous threshold by the time he said this, but these words have chilling resonance in a country that out of pure sanctimonious arrogance, destroyed people like his author and called it justice. That ‘justice’ has done incalculable damage. It has supported cruel and despotic political agendas (listen – can you hear Henry VIII chopping off limbs in the distance, in the way we are headed?) and upheld some of the world’s most twisted inversions of morality, just one of them being the notion that humanity’s natural sexual diversity is wrong. The English were able to turn the considerable energy of their penal system to boost these nightmares’ sticking power, which is one reason that discredited now as they may be, they still chomp through the cultural woodwork of England and many of its former colonies.

It is not enough to say things are better now. Many people who were criminals in no meaningful sense – political dissidents, harmless eccentrics, people with mental illnesses or injuries – were made to suffer in the extreme. No improvement after the fact balances that out. A fair share of responsibility must land on the penal system, including the prison institution, for its complicity in their torments. It is for their ghosts, not us, to decide if their country can ever redeem its sins.

What is for us – for all of us – is to prevent them ever repeating. That is why Wilde’s charge of hypocrisy is the burden that every drafter and enforcer of law must bear, clipped over the front of their eyes, in every moment of their work. That is why they must be continuously measured against that charge, both by external accountability systems and by their own consciences. That is why they must be given everything they need to do so, including support against its genuinely difficult challenges and rewards for doing it well.

It is also why every individual must resist the illusion that any law, any rule, is some all-righteous thing to be blindly obeyed. Rather they must scrutinise it,

question it, and be ready to challenge it if it leads to cruel outcomes or disempowers certain sections of society. To disobey, and to disobey *well*: torches and pitchforks if necessary, but more often wrenches and screwdrivers to change the law and fix the problem. Prisons or no prisons, in an arrogance-prone society people tend not to see their own hypocrisy and so must point it out to each other. They must build resilience to it by immortalising the memory of its mistakes into their culture, thus to learn from them, and to stand in constant vigilance against their recurrence. They must be ready to catch their chains when they drag through toxic puddles, or when they snag on people who society dislikes but have done no harm. There is no simple solution, no comfortable default – the work must be done to build better imagination into better cultures and institutions.

Law will always be an expression of power, not justice. Justice is not the starting point but the goal, and law does not get there by itself. *Legal* or *illegal*, *innocent* or *criminal* – these are mere words, with no intrinsic meaning. They mean what people want them to mean, are a perpetual work in progress, and that is why they can only find their ways to justice in a society competent to take them there. Is there such a society on this Earth? Could ‘the native land of the hypocrite’ be such a place one day?

It might. But it has a long way to go yet.

6. Sweat



Tennis balls, my liege.

Henry V by William Shakespeare, c.1599

The land that rises west of the Wandle is an old playground of England's monarchs and titled nobility. We could call it the Corner, for it nests in the great bend of the Thames where London unrolls into Surrey. Or we might call it Privilege Island, for the clear water dividing the relative inherited comfort of its ways of life, past and present, from the violence-stricken battlefields of the capital. We must now endure a long trek across these exquisitely-landscaped realms of lawnmowers and multi-bathroomed mansions and rich people at play, till on the other side we meet the River once more and thus complete the southern arc of our journey. Come – there is far to travel today.

The first district of Privilege Island, a place called Wimbledon, overlooks the Wandle valley. Essentially it is a hill, hence *-don*, from *-dūn*, which occurs in both Anglo-Saxon and Celtic languages; this element lives on in all those hills called

Down in English, including *the Downs* to the south, as well as Scotland's Dūn of Eidyn – better known today as Edinburgh. The hill of Wimbledon seems to have got its name from someone called Wynnmann, whose pardon we must as usual beseech for any misrepresentation.

The closest of these royal playgrounds to the capital, Wimbledon has endured lengthy service as a lair of wealthy and connected Londoners, among them royal family members and high-ranking government ministers. Henry VIII's ill-fated demolisher of monasteries Thomas Cromwell emerged from its seedier riverside district of Putney, while the Stuart Charles I's queen Henrietta Maria from France, a steely and somewhat terrifying character we will likely run into later, lurked on its affluent heights. And so no sooner have we passed through Wimbledon's invisible gilded gates than we are funnelled into Wimbledon Park, by way of a balustraded terrace over tennis courts and children's playgrounds with the promise of more high-bourgeois pleasures beyond.

This is a different species of park from those we crossed to get here. Its ratios are exquisite, and its vistas sweep and surround. Clearly the hands of a master landscaper have run across this terrain and patted it into a shape fit for the lords of Privilege Island. Sure enough, further investigation reveals it was fashioned in the 1760s on the commission of another of Wimbledon's dwellers of rank and title by the name of John Spencer, first in a long line of Earls Spencer from which would eventually come a certain Princess Diana. The fellow he called on to do it was of some note: Lancelot Brown, without a doubt the English's most celebrated landscape designer of all. On information boards in the hundreds of parks and gardens that are his handiwork he is memorialised as *Capability* Brown, due to his habit of casting his eyes over his clients' hopelessly uninteresting grounds then telling them they had 'capabilities', that is, potential, which he would then proceed to magic into reality before their eyes. In that same manner he got to work on the Earl Spencer's estate, rearranging its lawns, paths and plantations and damming one of the Wandle's brooks to generate a sparkling new lake, and so handing the Earl a result that was breathtaking, beautiful, and of course, exclusively his. Only in 1915, as the coming of rails and suburbs threatened the parkland, did the local authorities step in to preserve it by buying it up and opening it to the public.

And preserve it they have. Around the corner is Mr. Capability's lake, a sheet of liquid glass that yawns in a snoozing mantle of magic money trees. Ducks and swans glide across to receive offerings from families with small children, while opinionated ravens bawl in the branches above. Facilities pack the grounds: as

well as the tennis courts it has a water sports centre, crazy golf, and a full-scale red athletics track nestled behind a fence. Considerable money has been spent here, and the comfortable attire and gaits and expressions and massive dogs of the park-goers suggest that this is a community with plenty to spend.

And a community big on sport. We have tasted English sporting tendencies on the way here courtesy of Arsenal football club and W. G. Grace. But now that we tread into the chirping realms of the leisure classes, we must be ready to have our nostrils suffused by the scent of perspirations past and present. So let us be under no illusion: we require no niche interest in those sports to dig out interesting things from them. Sport is a mirror of its society. It reflects so many of its characteristics and problems – its tribal rivalries, its class identities, its prejudices of nation and religion, race and gender – and is thus integral to its story. And while we are at it, let all notion that sport and politics might be kept separate be hurled out the window, for there is no greater nonsense in the world. Sport is intensely political, not only because of its crucibles of privilege and oppression but also because of the imagined communities that form up around it, to which people's loyalties as fans – and if you are one, deny this to your fellows if you dare – are a match for any devotion to family, nation or god.

Not that the people of Wimbledon need such reminders. It is ten in the morning on a baking hot summer's day, and of those twenty tennis courts almost all are already in use. Press on through the park and we come to a big empty field. It is silent today, but give it a few weeks and it will have transformed into a megalopolis of column after column of tents, drowned in such a deluge of people that not a blade of its grass will remember the sun by the time their business is done. Along a fence a row of water taps has been prepared, each marked out with a sign in green, white and purple: the colours of Wimbledon, where there is really only one game in town.

Wimbledon has two meanings. The aforementioned – an affluent South London neighbourhood – is the minority one. Its by far more common usage refers not to a place, but an institution: the Championships of the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, held each year in July at a site on Church Road adjoining this park. In most of this country and most of this world, Wimbledon means the tennis.

This is a story where the English built the stage and supplied the props, the support staff, and much of the audience, but where the actors themselves and the

essence of their play have come from abroad – visitors, immigrants, whose flits in and out have served down Wimbledon's identity in a flurry of volleys and backhands. It begins in France, where as early as the twelfth century people were attested to play a game called *jeu de paume*, or the 'palm game', so named because it involved hitting a ball at each other with the palms of their hands. They were monks, it is said, whacking it over a net in the cloisters of their monasteries, though few from that time remain around to confirm this. The centuries passed, and at some point palms became gloves, then gloves became racquets, and by then the pastime had moved to outdoor courtyards where it was consolidated under a fixed set of rules. The French came to refer to it as *court-paume*, and to the English it is *real tennis*, to distinguish it from the popular variant in whose shadow some still play it today.

The 'sport of kings', they called it. That was because it became the favoured sport of the French monarchs, so much so that it killed two of them: Louis X, who caught a chill after an exhausting match in 1316, and Charles VIII when he banged his head on a door-frame on his way out to watch one in 1498. Neither incident dented its popularity, and it wasted little time spreading through Europe to become a sport of kings in three dimensions. That most three-dimensional of kings, our old friend Henry VIII, was a fanatic for the game and had a court specially built at Hampton Court, where it remains the oldest venue in use for real tennis in England today. The game has seeped into rumours about his relationship with Anne Boleyn, specifically that she was watching a match when he had her arrested, and later that he was playing when they brought the news that they had successfully cut off her head. But this too is not straightforward to confirm; why don't you ask him yourself, seeing as he obviously does not intend to stop following us around any time soon.

Beyond the kings' courts the sport was developing a wider cultural profile. Around this same time a ballad about Sir Gawain, a knight of the English hero of legend King Arthur, tells of the king of the Isle of Man putting Gawain and a Turkish companion into what sounds a rather uncomfortable tennis match against seventeen giants using a ball made of brass. The pair somehow won, though the page that tells how has been tragically torn out. Not long after that Shakespeare supplied perhaps tennis's most famous use as a plot device in his play *Henry V*, set in 1414, in which that king makes a claim to French territory and in return receives from the Dauphin, the French heir, a chest of tennis balls. It is a

calculated insult, a taunt that the English king is an immature nothing who is better suited to playing games than the serious business of politics and warfare.

This game would eventually decline as the monarchies did. It was suppressed by angry Puritans and stigmatised as aristocratic foolishness by revolutionaries, not least by the French ones who, in 1789, finding the king had locked them out of their National Assembly chamber, met instead in a tennis court in Versailles and repurposed its sporting stage as a political stage for their ‘Tennis Court Oath’. Yet though this original French tennis would fade to the margins, it had already laid the foundation for modern tennis, including its strange and unique glossary. In scoring, the usage of *love* to refer to zero points is thought to come from *l’oeuf* in French, meaning ‘egg’, the shape of the numeral 0. *Deuce*, a score of 40-40 from which either player requires two points to win the game, is from *deux*, or ‘two’. There are even theories that *tennis* itself comes from *tenez!* – ‘hold!’ or ‘look out!’ – as shouted by the ancestral French ahead of a serve.

While real tennis submerged, a wider family of racquet-and-projectile games swirled up in its place. From the prisons emerged the game of *rackets*, while from East Asia via British colonialists in India came *battledore*, played with a shuttlecock. The dominant variant however was *croquet*, the English leisure class’s postcard-perfect game of mallets, hoops and lawns (which despite that air of gentility probably came from Ireland). Some of these would branch off into other sports like squash or badminton, but it was croquet that got the Victorians excited and thus gave rise in 1868 to the All England Croquet Club in Wimbledon, the unwitting vessel for the tennis revolution to come.

The club’s first croquet championship was held at the Crystal Palace the following year, and it is fitting that that temple of technology should come up again, because the tennis revolution was another output of the industrial revolution. Two new inventions made it possible. One was vulcanised rubber, heated with sulphur into a pressurised and durable form that could be shaped into tennis balls.* The other was the mechanised lawn mower, which unlike the scythes it superseded could cut grass short and level, allowing those balls to bounce.

Several innovations bound these threads into a new tennis model that would take the country by storm. These came from people unsatisfied with croquet like the solicitor Harry Gem and Spanish trader Augurio Perera, who wanted to improve it into something which offered more exercise. They set up what was

* As well as a range of not so important things such as tyres, conveyor belts and shoe soles.

likely the first lawn tennis club in 1872, while two years later a cricketer called John Hale came up with a different version. But the name most associated with the revolution was Major Walter Clopton Wingfield, a retired army officer with a sharp commercial mind who saw that croquet was losing its appeal and thought to transform it into a new game that was easy to understand and could be played by people of any age and gender, even in the cold, wet and miserable outdoor conditions well-known to this country. His resulting brainwave came with the bizarre name of *Sphairistiké*, a Greek word meaning something like 'skill with a ball'. Being a creature of Victorian capitalism, Wingfield swiftly patented this game and its rules and marketed its equipment, making all the items needed to play it available to anyone who could pay. It was a roaring success, with only its name remaining baffling to everybody, including a certain Arthur Balfour, later prime minister, who quietly took Wingfield aside and put it in his ear that *lawn tennis* might be a more user-friendly appellation.

Like that, tennis had resurfaced among the English middle classes, and among those who took to the new craze was the Wimbledon club, now rebranded as the All England Croquet *and Lawn Tennis Club*. As meetings were held to harmonise the different versions into a single and complete set of rules, someone made the innocent suggestion of holding a tournament at the club's site at Worple Road, south of our present position, to raise funds to repair a broken lawn roller. Thus did the first Wimbledon Championship take place in June 1877, its destiny as yet unbeknownst to its participants. Despite Wingfield's vision of a sport open to everybody, this was a men-only event, but in 1884 women were also admitted to compete, although from the beginning the female and male events were separate.

We need a moment here to appreciate the gravity of this, because England's gender problems have reared their mutated heads over and over again on our journey, and we are going to keep coming back to it because its history too often gets taken for granted. Gender is a historical phenomenon: that is to say, it was not inevitable but created within history, by historical processes, and thus can also be changed and un-created by them.

We saw in the story of Oscar Wilde how ruthlessly this society has enforced its gendered misbeliefs, and sport has been as significant a field as any for the policing of diverse human beings into a rigid binary of worlds – most typically by reducing it to a platform for men's performances of swaggering masculinity, while women are ushered off the pitches for the sake of invented myths that they are weak and unsuited for physical activity, increasingly disguised in that day as

Victorian pseudoscience. This heritage has fed all the way through to the present day where men's sport retains a far higher profile than women's, with accompanying inequalities in rules, pay, support, respect, opportunities and media attention. So we must keep an eye on the gendered threads that weave through tennis's tale, where from the start they appear more convoluted than in other sports.

In absolute terms the seven-year delay of women's participation in the Championships is problematic. But in relative terms, in a country so misogynistic as to ban women's matches on Football Association (FA) pitches until 1971, and which continues to limit the potential of women in most major sports, tennis stands out: for its vision as a gender-neutral sport from virtually the beginning; the relative rapidity of female entry to top-level competition; and as we shall see, the pivotal role of female players in developing the game all the way through.

At the first Championship in 1877, those who turned up might have doubted its prospects to develop at all. Among the sceptics was the first Champion himself, one Spencer Gore, who drew two hundred spectators to watch him win that first competition in the rain and raise a profit for the club of around £10: enough to fix that roller but hardly a revolutionary budget. Gore remained unimpressed with the game for some years, later predicting its lack of variety meant it would never rise to the ranks of the greatest sports.

It rose to the ranks of the greatest sports.

Lawn tennis claims today to be the most widely-played individual ball game in the world. For two weeks each year the Wimbledon Championships draw in some 45,000 spectators per day on top of a global television audience of around one billion, making it the fourth most-watched sport in the world. Its success has made the Club's grounds on Church Road the uncontested Mecca of tennis, a pilgrimage site for its adherents worldwide, and turned its Wimbledon surroundings into the sport's temple city. It boasts forty courts, eighteen of them grass, with the 15,000-seater Centre Court as their fulcrum (though there is no Court No. 13 because tennis players are superstitious and the number is considered unlucky), as well as a sophisticated range of facilities both for the players themselves – physiotherapists, ice baths, a travel agent and so on – and for everybody else involved, including restaurants, a museum, a shop (of course), and enormous media installations. The one thing it lacks is accommodation, for which richer players and affiliates instead rent out the hideously expensive mansions in Wimbledon Village next door. It runs tennis training programmes for

kids down to the age of four, as well as engaging children from local schools to work as the indispensable ‘ball boys’ and ‘ball girls’ during matches. Gaining membership of the Club is correspondingly byzantine: there is a cap of 590 members, about 375 of them permanent, and to join them requires written proposals from four existing members followed by a thorough sounding-out at social events to check you are worthy of it – that is, once you get through the waiting list of over one thousand people. And during Championships season, this place disgorges all the statistics you would expect of a major devotional event: 6,000 staff to run it, 55,000 balls used, 34,000 kilograms of sacramental food (strawberries) consumed, and tens of thousands of caps, towels, T-shirts and assorted merchandise sold. Those people who queue in tents in the park typically have to wait two or three days there to get their tickets, and willingly do.

How did that happen?

The fastest phase of tennis’s rise was probably its beginning. The Victorian middle and upper classes enjoyed their crazes, and here was one they just could not resist. Tennis clubs and tournaments sprouted up across the country, many of them former croquet, badminton or ice-skating centres proselytised across to the new creed. These promoted the game while providing community spaces to socialise, develop relationships, and argue about religion and politics. Meanwhile the manufacturers scented delicious business and seized on the new fad to fill people’s living rooms with tennis-themed tea sets, toast racks, letter-openers, thermometers, containers, indeed a whole panoply of paraphernalia decorative and practical in the shape of nets and racquets or carrying images of the game.

If they could afford them. For these were the English, a people split between wealthy and impoverished classes, and just as it was from royalty that tennis was inherited, so too was it into the hands of the new capitalist royalty that it passed: the rich landowners who had risen on the backs of Enclosure, and the emerging industrialist and imperialist magnates, with their huge lawns and circles of fashionable friends in top hats and frock coats they could invite round to play it. Not by coincidence were tennis’s pioneers well-off professionals: the military officer Wingfield, the lawyer Gem, the importer Perera, the cricketer Hale. This was not a mass movement. Its vanguard was not formed from the types of people who laboured all day in the munitions factories of Woolwich.

Nonetheless all that excitement fed straight back into the popularity of the Championship, whose crowds, grounds and facilities rocketed to national fame. By 1899 the Club had rearranged its name again: it was now the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, with tennis's newfound prominence putting it first in the sequence. By then the 'Wimbledon fortnight' was well on its way to an established place on the sporting calendar, and uncontrollable crowds of over 7,500 were piling into the Worple Road grounds, their queues and vehicles clogging the surrounding roads. Something had to be done, so funds were raised, and in 1920-22 the Club purchased 13.5 acres of farmland on Church Road and built them into its new premises, where it has remained ever since. Among its raft of new courts stood the largest in the world, Centre Court, opened by the king in the driving rain for the Championships of 1922.

But all this is stage-setting. What they came for was the actors, the players themselves, and it was they that took this class craze and steered it to the heights of global sensation. There does not seem to have been one single figure who did it in the way, say, W. G. Grace did for cricket, rather a cross-generational roster of passionate and eccentric individuals who played out their own innovations on the court, thus seeding them into mainstream practice to the roaring delight of devoted crowds. In the early years these included the Renshaw twins whose warm personalities belied the shocking speed and aggression of their shots, and later another pair of brothers, Reggie and Laurie Doherty, the quiet yet masterful 'gentlemen of the courts'. Among this number too was a battery of fearsome female champions such as Maud Watson, the first women's champion; Lottie Dod, the all-round sporting polymath and youngest champion at fifteen years old; and the towering behemoth of Dorothea Douglass (a.k.a. Chambers) who dominated the game around the turn of the century. In the 1920s and 30s a new generation of foreign stars joined their ranks, injecting French and American romance into Wimbledon's ever-swelling crowds, and one name will stand for them all: Suzanne Lenglen of Paris, an earth-shattering figure in tennis folklore whose style of play combined a flamboyant, ballet-like leaping agility with a lethal accuracy that made her nigh unbeatable over a seven-year reign.

That tennis became a magnet for strong women like these was no coincidence. This was the same period that activism for women's suffrage was growing into a national movement, a watershed in the English's struggle against the misogyny that has so corrupted their society, and in that context the tennis court was empowering, liberating, a weak seam in the monster's carapace where women

found they could smash it loose with all the raw physical might and mastery that was theirs by right, all while demonstrating it, shot by shot, to the delight of thousands of spectators. In a sport whose story has been written by the players themselves, no-one with a passing familiarity of the tennis scene today will doubt the roles of the women among them at the front of that authorship.

Women like these also drove the evolution of Wimbledon's dress customs, not a trivial topic in a sport whose rise owed so much to individual players' image. The Club is infamous for its extremely strict regulations that players be dressed almost entirely in white, but it appears the origins of this were not authoritarian. Rather it was the players themselves, specifically the image-conscious Victorian female players, who chose to dress in white because it minimised the appearance of sweat – apparently the sight of it on women violated English gender taboos and would have reduced crowds of adult men and women to blubbering panic. Their solution was thus to show up on court in hulking battlesuits built of layer upon layer of corsets, dresses, aprons and goodness knows what else to a total weight of some five kilograms, which they bore with every leap and swing. No doubt this attested to their strength, but later generations centred around people like Suzanne Lenglen decided this was too much and started appearing in shorter sleeves and dresses, so shifting the emphasis to freedom of movement. This meant parts of their actual bodies became visible, and this time, in a country that then as now harboured an irrational terror at women making decisions about their own bodies, the onlookers reacted with odium.* Nonetheless the women persisted, and the custom stuck.

The evolution of male players' clothing was not so eventful. The main transition seems to have been from trousers to shorts, although worth consideration is another French champion of the 1920s, René Lacoste, whose tenacious play got him nicknamed 'The Crocodile' by the press. He put down the traditional dress shirts in favour of a cotton short-sleeved polo shirt, soon embroidered with a small crocodile – the origin of a trend which would spread far beyond the world of tennis in the form of the Lacoste clothing line.

But the weightiest change affected everyone, and this was the formalisation of rules that all competitors must dress 'predominantly' in white in 1963, then 'almost

* Another pioneer of this shift, Gertrude Moran of California, was screamed at by the Club's committee for bringing 'sin and vulgarity into tennis'. No elaboration was given. Most likely this was the familiar pattern of trying to shift responsibility for sexist prejudice onto that prejudice's targets.

entirely' in white in 1995, expanded to include accessories and undergarments in 2014. This rule is now rigorously enforced, hence the recurring modern-day controversies over orange shoe soles or red underwear. But the lesson of history is that first, it is a late development so cannot be called *conservative*; and second, it will continue to change as players continue to push the boundaries with their sartorial innovations, as has always been the way.

The tennis was suspended during World War II, when Wimbledon suffered some of the worst aerial bombings of any London suburb – almost 14,000 houses damaged or destroyed, some 150 people killed and more than a thousand injured. One of those bombs fell on Centre Court. No-one was hurt, but it found itself 1,200 seats worse off when the Championships resumed in 1946. Though the Club's premises had been taken over by military and civil support organisations and used as a farmground, regular service quickly resumed under the dominance of yet another new generation of foreign players.

One of these, Althea Gibson of South Carolina, was an African-American who brought into relief a nasty open secret of the sport's heritage: racism. Tennis was a white-dominated sport whose paths to glory ran the gauntlet of white-dominated institutions, officials and crowds in colonial societies – by now the United States and Australia as much as England, which along with France made up the hosts of the four tournaments known as the Grand Slam. Gibson was the first dark-skinned player to hack her way through that entire thicket of bigotry to emerge in triumph at the top level of tennis. Another new American on the block was Billie Jean King, one of the first athletes to publicly come out as bisexual, who would come to stand out as much for her activism on gender equality and sexual diversity as for the force of her volleys on court. Thus, at a time when the technological complexity of the game's racquets, balls and turfs was racing into the space age, it still floundered in the same mires of prejudice as have poisoned the societies it grew up in since their births. This problem has not gone away.

One final threshold took the Championships into their modern guise: the loss of their status as an amateur tournament, with no prize money and no fee-taking professionals allowed. Indeed, Wimbledon had ushered many of its best players away into a wilderness of stigma as soon as they turned professional, but in 1968 they decided to do this no more and so heralded a gleaming new Open Era in which pros and amateurs alike would play with no distinction. The winners would now receive prize money: on top of a wad of cash for each game won, £2000 for the male champion and £750 for the female. The first of the latter was Billie Jean

King, for whose campaigns the blatant sexism of this disparity became an immediate target. It is a sign of how relentless that sexism had become that pay was not equalised until 2007, after decades of correspondingly relentless activism.

By then the prize money reflected what the Opening had allowed this sport to become: £700,000 for each champion. Today it is over £2 million. The stage was set for a new era of supreme professional athletes known for their incredible hitting power and service speeds, playing for increasingly vast sums of money and sponsored by the most prominent multinational corporations. It was no longer enough to be skilled at the game; life at the top of tennis now required the physical and mental stamina to endure ruthless training and travelling schedules, incessant image-management, and the ability to handle the sheer pressure of an individual sport that had grown into a worldwide mass phenomenon. It now boasted a media and marketing dimension unlike anything in its history, for whose service a large proportion of the Club's grounds is now occupied by sprawling media facilities. As well as the main interview room, where players are contractually obliged to appear for interviews in front of the whole planet regardless of victory or defeat, there are eighteen television studios, each held by a major broadcaster, as well as an enormous live information centre. A full round of a player's post-match interviews can last three to four hours, sometimes easily as long as the matches themselves.

Thus did a new generation of contenders rise to the challenges of the Open era, many of them continental Europeans who have risen to the constellations of tennis legend. The giants of the present game carry on the same tradition, and in their performances the story of Wimbledon continues to be written.

A certain pair of sisters among them warrant special attention: Venus and Serena Williams, who steamrolled their way to the pinnacles of the sport notwithstanding a perpetual barrage of the worst verbal and institutional abuses, both racist and sexist, that soak this world today. As current characters there is no shortage of material on their rise, but what is of note to us here is that it attests that for people in discriminated groups, especially of gender or skin colour, to be a tennis champion still carries the additional requirement of being a champion for equality, if for no more reason than the sheer volume of bigoted venom that society splatters upon you at every step on the path. For all its transformations over the last century, tennis remains like many other sports a hotbed of these afflictions. Men and women still play in separate tournaments, with separate formats for no reason – three sets in women's games, five in men's. The pay gap

persists, even with Venus the latest in the line of campaigners who managed to at last wrestle it shut at Wimbledon. And now as much as in any bygone day, barely a season goes by without racist or sexist incidents in the form of heckling, casually abusive statements, junk science, or ugly vilification from social media trolls, commentators, spectators, officials or other players. Never mind that the Williams sisters have proven themselves indisputable juggernauts of the game; no few English, along with Americans and others, seem more interested in denouncing their bodies or playing styles for contradicting their delusions that women, especially black ones, should not be big, strong, or great.

It would be unfair to dump all this at the door of the Club. There is a worthy and encouraging story about how tennis has burst from the lawns of the elite, swinging and battering its way through a world ransacked by racial, gendered, class and abled prejudice – on the last, we might note the recent introduction of wheelchair championships to the season – to mature into a mass sport which as many people as possible can participate in and enjoy. But the toxic and exclusionary underside is unavoidable and mars its ability to reach fulfilment as a fair sport where all divisions between imaginary types of human are abolished in favour of the single qualification of ability at the game. These two faces of tennis are a reflection of the societies, the English among them, from which the sport has come and of which it remains very much a political creature. For not just every summer when the halls of its Wimbledon cathedral come alive, it provides one more cross-section of those English in their notions of elites and masses, conservatives and revolutionaries, natives and foreigners, and the violent contradictions that have wrangled their search for national meaning.

The Wimbledon fortnight approaches, so it is time to collect our hats and take our leave of this cathedral before the crowds pile in. But let us go out through the players' entrance to Centre Court, where we shall turn around one last time to witness two lines of verse which will neatly tie those contradictions together. They are mounted right there above the entrance, where every would-be champion sees them on the way out to play.

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster,
And treat those two impostors just the same*

They are the words of Rudyard Kipling, the gifted yet controversial poet of the British Empire, in a poem of admonition called *If* – that has come to symbolise the

values of the Wimbledon Championships. The full poem is four verses of Ifs like these, which suggest the aspects of mental fortitude that every true champion needs: to ‘keep your head when all about you/Are losing theirs and blaming it on you’, or ‘watch the things you gave your life to broken,/And stoop and build ‘em up with wornout tools’, and so on in this most worthy and inspiring vein.

What is interesting is that its origin had nothing to do with tennis. Instead Kipling wrote it to spell out what he saw as the virtues proper to the people of the Victorian Empire: resilience, patient ambition, and above all the stoic, stiff-upper-lip emotional invulnerability that still resides in stereotypes of the English. All very well, one might think, especially the pair of lines selected for the players’ entrance, reminding them that in the end, win or lose, it is just a game; no need for angry outbursts at umpires or the breaking of racquets on people’s heads.

That is the nice side. Now here is the nasty side. First, Kipling wrote the poem as a tribute to a certain Leander Starr Jameson, who commanded a raid in South Africa intended to trigger an English workers’ uprising against the Boer colonies. This ‘Jameson Raid’ was daring but also aggressive, motivated by greed for South Africa’s newly-discovered goldfields, and it failed, leading directly to the bloody and disastrous Boer War of 1899-1902. And second, after all those Ifs, what is the Then? Then you’ll be a worthy citizen? A tennis champion? No:

*Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And – which is more – you’ll be a Man my son!*

A triumphal blast for the spirit of colonial conquest, then after thirty lines of heavy loading a finisher of pure unadulterated gender. Never mind too that nowadays, in a society driving its men to mental health crises and suicide by telling them showing their pain will compromise their masculinity, the virtue of these stiff-upper-lip precepts has fallen to serious question.

So there we are. The contradictions of the English, stirring on one side and hideous on the other, fused together in two lines carved in wood at the heart of one of the holiest structures in world sport.



There is a third Wimbledon.

Remember John, the first Earl Spencer, who had Capability Brown do up Wimbledon Park for him? His son inherited the title as second Earl Spencer, and then there was a third, and a fourth, and so on in a sequence of nine that leads to the present Spencer, the late Diana's younger brother. But midway in the series there was another John, the fifth Earl Spencer, and he is notable because he tried to eat that third Wimbledon.

That third Wimbledon was and is Wimbledon Common, a sprawling heath of woods and marshes that unrolls west beyond the tennis lands till it melds into the windswept plains at the core of Privilege Island. It is the largest common in Greater London at 1,200 acres, and its survival, preserved from greedy landlords by dedicated local resistance, fits the pattern of those we have crossed so far.

The fifth Spencer enters its story in the Victorian period, when his family were still the lords of the Wimbledon manor. This was now a serious dynasty, which had earned its reputation as a supervillain of Enclosure and with it its solid entrenchment at the summit of Privilege Island. That was the capacity in which John Spencer set his sights on Wimbledon Common in the 1860s. He stood up in parliament and proposed a bill to Enclose it for private development, that is, to turn it into parks and houses he could sell for profit, based on the familiar

argument that it was a noxious wasteland of bogs, mists, bandits and gypsies that would benefit from such ‘Protection and Improvement’.

To be fair, this was not perfectly antipodean to the truth. Wimbledon Common had a certain seediness to its name. Bandits haunted its thickets much as we found them at Shooter’s Hill, having become nuisance enough that a gibbet appeared where they were summarily hanged and displayed in warning. This was also a prized venue for people to settle their differences with pistol duels; among them high-profile politicians including in 1829 the Duke of Wellington, as prime minister, versus a man who insulted him for returning civil rights to Catholics (short version: he missed his shot, possibly on purpose, then the other guy said sorry and they made up). It also hosted more above-board varieties of shooting. The National Rifle Association – the British one, not the better-known US terror organisation – was founded on the common in 1859 and had its headquarters here before leaving for Bisley in deeper Surrey thirty years later. In the same tradition the common had served as a test site for new weapons, including the Congreve rocket, derived from missiles used by the Mysore Kingdom in south India which had got them in turn from the Chinese. The Mysore state’s superior rockets were one of the reasons it took the British four backbreaking wars to defeat them, after which the British studied and fiddled with that technology and tested it out in the form of improved 32-pounders on Wimbledon Common, just in time to unleash them on Copenhagen in 1807 and then the Americans in the War of 1812. The latter was the very assault that spawned the United States’ national anthem, whose ‘rockets’ red glare’ refers specifically to these projectiles.

For all this it was still a common, much relied on by the locals who grazed their animals on it and harvested its wood and peat, and Spencer was not the first to encroach on their rights. Indeed they had fought off generation after generation of pillaging aristocrats, including previous Spencers, and now came together as a committee to fight Spencer in court to keep the common open and unbuilt on, headed by a local MP, Henry Peek of the Peek Frean Biscuits company. Those must have been excellent biscuits, because this particular duel ended four years later with the defeat of Spencer’s bid. Instead of his Enclosure bill they got the Wimbledon and Putney Commons Act of 1871, placing the common under the protection of a body of Conservators and a local tax to raise funds for its upkeep.*

* This wouldn’t be England without a class-oppression lining to sully such a victory. As compromise Spencer and his descendants were to be compensated to the tune of £1,200 a year from this same levy, up to an amount not paid off until 1968.

So it remains, and our expedition now takes us across it. The first part we come to is Putney Heath, a dense clump of woodland whose paths are in use this afternoon as a racecourse, submerged in a cataract of grunting, sweating middle-aged people with large numerals stuck to their chests. On the banks of this torrent a cheerful steward stands in a high-vis vest, clapping his encouragement and looking quite delighted to be overlooking this river rather than in it.

Fortunately it flows in the direction we want to go, so we can follow it out to the open part of Wimbledon Common where we come face to face with a great white windmill. It is a hollow-post mill with four sails to drive its machinery by means of a vertical iron shaft, and is identifiable as such because its interior has been turned into a marvellous museum not only about this particular windmill but all their types, histories and applications, complete with rows of lovingly handcrafted models whose sails spin together as well as mill machines that crowds of small children can interact with to grind their own flour. They explain that all this is the doing of a venerable local called Norman Plastow, something of a legend in these parts for his work to preserve Wimbledon's heritage.

Windmills are another foreign presence in England. They share a distant ancestry with the wind-driven prayer wheels of Himalayan monasteries, and between the sixth and tenth centuries were developed into corn-grinding devices by the Persians around what is now the Iran-Afghanistan border. From there they spread across Asia and Europe, brought to the latter perhaps by retreating Crusaders. By the time they reached England in the twelfth century they had mutated into the post mill, so named for the central post which supported it, and thenceforth would diverge into a rainbow of different models. Wimbledon Windmill represents one of them: in its case the post was hollowed out to fit the shaft that takes wind energy from the sails above to the milling machinery below, hence the term *hollow-post mill*. These are extremely rare in England, more familiar for defining the landscape of the Netherlands.

The construction of this unusual windmill goes back to 1817. The locals were suspicious of industrial flour so a local carpenter, Charles March, built it to give them a way to produce their own. And for nearly fifty years it did, till it fell foul of that same Earl Spencer as he wrestled in court to Enclose the common. Though the locals defeated his cunning plans, they were not in time to stop him convincing the mill's last operators to sell it to him so he could have it torn down. Though he never got the chance to do that, the windmill's working days were over: most of the machinery had been removed, and it was renovated as housing for

several families. Local residents raised money to keep it repaired against rot over the years, and eventually to convert it into the museum as which it stands today. So the wind still spins its four sails and transmits their energy down its shaft, but where once it ground out agricultural produce, it has now phased into the information sector and turns gears in people's heads instead.

Clever things, windmills.

Delving deeper into the woods of Wimbledon Common we reach obscurer layers of heritage. After pushing through the thickets we come to a clearing, which accommodates a pond that locals call the Queen's Mere. Swans with extremely fluffy little cygnets glide through the budding gold lilies that clump the surface of this oasis. Let us rest here a moment, because this is a place which shelters one of Wimbledon's more charming mysteries.

In local folklore, the lands around this pond are the habitat of a curious creature whose tribes are supposedly found in many parts of the world. The Khyber Pass and Yellowstone National Park are said to house populations, and the yetis of Tibet are a relation, but their best-documented burrow is said to be right here beneath Wimbledon Common. They are the Wombles, an intelligent bipedal mole-like people whose existence first came to light in the 1960s through the interlocation of the late Elisabeth Beresford, a woman of letters and leading Wombleologist.

The Wombles form an indigenous community who live according to their own values and customs, independent from yet inseparably connected to their human neighbours. What most shocked the humans who discovered them was the position of sustainability at the core of the Womble way of life. Specifically, the entire Womble culture and economy revolves around the secretive salvaging of items that humans throw away on the Common, which are brought to their underground workshops and recycled into the tools, fittings, furniture and supplies on which they live in the perpetual excitement of a livelihood where each day brings new discoveries and inventions. Cleanliness and resourcefulness are thus essential Womble values, and furthermore they are a species of utmost integrity: like the Houyhnhnms, the intelligent horses of *Gulliver's Travels*, they are incapable of lying, and the record of them leaving a cash payment on a human construction site, with a generous tip, for concrete borrowed in an emergency is typical of their sense of fair exchange.

Fitting for dwellers under a common, they are natural communists (in an original sense, not Marx's revolutionary variety) who share every resource and hold only the most minimal notion of private property. For a Womble there is no more heinous misdeed than the failure to share, as evidenced by accounts of when, in near-famine conditions during a merciless English winter, one of their number was so hungry that he could not resist gorging on discovered chocolate cakes before remembering he should have brought them back to the community. In moments he realised his sin and collapsed in a devastating mental breakdown, so abject in his shame that he left a miserable note about what a burden to the community his was and how in his absence the rations would better last the rest of them, before quietly trudging away from the burrow in the manner of Captain Oates in Antarctica and disappearing into the dark and snowy night. Fortunately he found a new haul of food in Piccadilly and brought it back to the burrow, thereby redeeming himself many times over and demonstrating another core Womble value: forgiveness.

One of the most important Womble institutions is their naming convention. Individual Wombles choose their names off a map of the world, whether by studying it at length to identify a name that sounds just right to them, or by shutting their eyes and putting a claw down at random. As a result the roster of the Wimbledon Common burrow is an atlas in itself: it features the intrepid young Bungo, lethargic Orinoco, cook extraordinaire Madame Cholet, master tinker Tobermory, powerhouse and keen golfer Tomsk, and of course the grand old Great Uncle Bulgaria, patriarch of the clan at over three hundred years old. Each name is a cord thrown from Wimbledon Common out unto the world.

Now let us consider what they make of the humans. In the wise words of the aforementioned Bulgaria Coburg Womble, 'People are strange, because they are untidy. Because they sometimes don't tell the truth and because most of them are so interested in their own affairs they just don't notice us. If possible you should avoid them, but if for one reason or another you have to speak to a Human Being always be polite and helpful'. Let us hope the English are grateful for the magnanimity the Wombles have granted them even while in knowledge of their self-absorption and difficulties with the truth.

In short, the Wombles are a straightforward, peaceful, inquisitive, hospitable, patient, forgiving and unfailingly courteous people. At the time of their discovery by Beresford their sustainability values were far superior to those of the English, and it is a testament to their humble honesty that they were able to impress those

lessons on England in a way that did not trigger its customary defensive arrogance. On the contrary it was only after that exposure, in the 1970s, that the English environmental movement flourished and grew into a part of what would become the international sustainability agenda, awakened at last to the destruction of the natural world and destabilisation of the climate by humankind. This had earlier seeds, to be sure; perhaps we heard whispers of the same concerns in the activists who fought to preserve the woods and commons, as well as the romantic movement to re-connect with the wilds in the eighteenth century. But the Womble recyclers represented something different. Theirs was a concern that placed their relationship with their environment at the core of their sense of who they are as living beings, and an understanding, both rational and instinctive, that care of that environment, and responsible use of its resources, are essential for a healthy and sustainable way of life. For all the English's revolutions, they had been so slow to reawaken to this fundamental principle of ecology that it came across as radically new to them at that time (to say nothing of what kinds of belief systems first put them to sleep over it), and even now, in their morass of unclean energy policies and plastic waste, they struggle to come to terms with it.

It is cheering then to think that better examples exist in their lands, perhaps scurrying around right now beneath our feet. Let us leave the Wombles to their important work but keep them ever in our hearts.

We now approach the Common's edge. First we must cross a couple of golf fairways courtesy of the London Scottish Golf Club, whose members' ubiquitous red shirts have percolated into Womble archives too. There is another sports story here, but alas this is one for another day. The golf course hides its own subterranean secret, an iron-age hill fort which they have nicknamed Caesar's Camp even though Caesar almost certainly never came here and its earthworks date to some three hundred years before he existed. That is what happens when a country stops studying history.

Next we must wade through another stream of marathon runners, this time against the direction of flow. But not to worry, it has drastically slackened here, for this is evidently an advanced stage of the course. All its participants are panting, ragged, reduced to an excruciating jog or defeated stagger; a few have liquefied into tears. When the nationalists go on about British values, we might wonder if stamina is one they have in mind.

We know we are almost there when stirring popular music blasts from a speaker system. It comes from an adjoining field where clusters of exuberant

partygoers have crowded around the finish line. A guy with a microphone congratulates the runners by name as they lurch through a blue arch of triumph. Among those waiting to greet them is a very large Womble, but something about her expression is off; we may suspect she is a human in disguise. Sure enough, off comes the Womble head to reveal an exasperated human visage, red like a fire engine, locks knotted together by sweat. It can't be easy standing in the sun all day getting baked inside the suit of a furred Womble, and sure enough she glowers at us with fury at the cosmos and everything in it, necessitating our hasty escape.

It is just as well a babbling brook appears to speed us to the border. The Beverley Brook is another in the Thames's extended family of tributaries and has watered the eastern extent of Privilege Island for many an age. The humans reciprocated by murdering to extinction the beavers who gave it its name and using it as a sewer till they came to their senses in the Womble Era and started looking after it again. So guided by the ghosts of a dozen fuzzy beavers, let us follow it down past the end of that field, now an expanse of rugby and football pitches, to complete the sporting catalogue of Wimbledon Common. Over a red-brick footbridge we leave that expanse, ready to begin our crossing of Privilege Island where we will learn of rather more sordid notions of sport.

That's right, to begin it. Wimbledon was just the way in.



To breach the central plains of Privilege Island we must cross the A3 trunk road – a major one, connecting the capital to the old naval docks of Portsmouth. It is clear this is not a usual neighbourhood because the roads and roundabouts carry the name of the legendary redistributor Robin Hood, hero of English-style traditional socialism and bane of the venal classes, whose name implies a lot of wealth in need of redistributing is to be found here.

That is all the clearer when we find the crossing is designed for riders, not walkers. The red and green lights are in the image of someone on horseback, rather than the usual pedestrian, and the call box is halfway up the traffic light pole, requiring you to be mounted to reach the button. Halfway across is a traffic island boxed in by stable fences so the nobility can steer their steeds from one part to the next. Now if we can make it through without getting trampled, we will come to the massive Hyrule Field of Privilege Island.

This is Richmond Park, at nearly a thousand hectares one of the largest parks in the capital region. It wears a proud and weighty necklace of statuses: national nature reserve, Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Area of Conservation (SAC) – that last from an EU directive. Lovely designations with a welcoming ring of public interest and toothy biodiversity. Stand in the centre and it indeed feels closer to wilderness than anywhere within this radius of the city has the right to be – and yet there is something of the tamed about it, something navigable and not exceedingly dangerous unless you actively seek out its most menacing creatures and place your face next to their teeth. Hence the Hyrule Field analogy, for Richmond Park is as close as London gets to the sprawling overworld of the *Legend of Zelda* games, the hub from which surrounding plot-significant locations are reached and usually one's first taste of freedom after leaving the starting village.

But there the comparison ends. Something is not quite right about that tamed-wilderness feeling. Perhaps it is the sense that at any moment the mounted gentry might come galloping over the ridge with their packs of hunting dogs, uttering kill commands and training their shotguns on you. We had better unpack this atmosphere by enlisting the aid of Richmond Park's exemplary inhabitants: its 630 red and fallow deer, who attained international celebrity when they were involved in an incident that went viral on the internet.

On a bright and windswept day in autumn 2011, the deer were caught on a park-goer's smartphone camera grazing around and minding their own business.

Without warning the tranquillity is punctured by a hoarse cry that grows louder and louder – ‘Fenton! Fenton!’ – and at once the main body of deer comes crashing out of the bushes, startled into a panicked stampede by a lively black Labrador who we can presume is the Fenton in question. ‘Oh, Jesus Christ!’ swears the horrified owner of the voice, a lone figure who shortly stumbles into the scene. ‘FENTON! FENTON!’ he roars as he haplessly pursues the havoc into the distance, where it spills across a road and brings traffic to a standstill.

These deer are not only the most famous thing about Richmond Park but the reason for its existence. It is revealing that the gentleman in this incident, who found the world’s press crashing upon his doorstep (and whose further harassment we shall not encourage by naming him here), kept a low profile amid rumours that he had been approached by police, or banned from walking Fenton in the park, or even faced prosecution under park bylaws that forbid allowing your dog to distress the deer. Perhaps since the Year of the Womble a part of that has been about concern for how the deer feel about it, but ultimately it has nothing to do with compassion for animals. It is the inheritance from a time when the deer were prized property on a commons seized by the highest family on Privilege Island, and guarded zealously in a centuries-long battle to stop the commoners getting them back.

Richmond Park is no longer a common but the exact opposite of one: a Royal Park. These are a string of spaces through London that are the exclusive property of the royal family, who at least in theory is now nice enough to allow the common people to use them while retaining the right to throw them out at its discretion.* The grand parks of Central London including Hyde Park, Green Park and St. James’s Park are their jewels, while larger outlying spaces like Richmond Park make up the body of the crown in which those are set. The royals Enclosed them for recreation, which for them and the rest of this country’s privileged classes was a euphemism for hunting for sport.

Here we meet the more tarnished side of English sport. This is not sport as in bats and balls and fair play. To some of these people, sport has rather meant ravenous snarls and the reverberation of gunshots; the rush of mortal terror through the nerves, the pursuit, the spurt of blood, the explosive shattering of bone and the ripping of fangs through flesh; the guttural deathrattle.

* In practice they are now managed by a charitable body and the public does have legal rights of way across them.

The shooting of deer was representative of English blood sport, but it was not the only example nor even the most atrocious. Many of today's advocates for a more peaceful relationship between humans and other animals will take little comfort in the statement that at least with deer, there is the possibility to consume their meat and thereby tie the hunt into a more natural pattern of ecological giving and taking. Ecology supplies a further argument that the deer tend to over-browse to devastation the plant life around them, which is why Richmond Park feels no choice but to cull their numbers each year, as humanely as possible they insist. But beyond the deer hunt has lain a landscape of crueller butcheries in such forms as cock-fighting, dog-fighting, bull-baiting and bear-baiting, whose sole purpose appears to have been to provide humans with a sadistic excitement at watching animals get tortured to death.

What is seldom discussed is that "sports" like these were in their day as popular as the tennis is now, and across the full class spectrum at that. Tudor monarchs including Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were on record for their enjoyment of bear-baiting and would go down to its most reputed arena in Southwark – today the site of an alley whose name, Bear Gardens, remembers its dark secret – to watch captive bears, sometimes already injured or blinded, be chained to posts and attacked with whips or set upon by trained dogs who themselves would be replaced as they were killed.

It is at scenes like these that the fiction of historical objectivity breaks down. If you feel sick right now then let that be reassurance that decency remains in your heart. Because consider what we are faced with here: the deliberate torment of animals to a slow, defenceless and miserable death, for the sole purpose of amusing crowds of baying humans who actually found such a situation funny, and what is more not as some pornographic guilty secret peeked at in dark or digital corners as it would be today, but in broad daylight, with the double public legitimacy of a mass spectator sport and a cultured, civilised recreation fully endorsed by the dominant classes. This was the equivalent of a day at the stadiums of Wimbledon, Arsenal or the Oval in the English middle ages and early modernity, and yes, it is contiguous with modernity, because these horror shows were not shut down until the rise of animal welfare legislation in the nineteenth century. That means the English cannot pretend this was a matter of their ancestors being somehow more barbarous than the enlightened citizens of the present day. The nineteenth century was not so long ago, and the grandparents of current

generations might well have grown up knowing people who found it normal and respectable to watch animals torn up for fun.

This exploration came with the warning that it would not always bring out the best in the people we are studying, and there is something in these episodes right up there with the most egregious of all monstrosities the English and indeed the human race have found it in the pits of their hearts to commit. Regrettably the lesson of history is that such outrageous forces are not so easily exorcised. Almost all these blood sports have now been banished from this country's legal and cultural mainstream, but one cannot help but wonder whether so insidious a bloodthirst was not so easily extinguished, but rather has dispersed to lurk behind less conspicuous fences.

A trace of it clings on to the hunt, the chief survivor of the blood sports, whose most recent limb to thrash into national controversy has been fox-hunting with hounds. As Enclosure chopped up the wide-open spaces roamed by deer, foxes often replaced them as favoured quarry. The fox hunt grew from a pastime to a marker of rural and upper-class identity, especially as both came under pressure from the rise of urbanised middle-class life, and in the late 1990s the fox hunters clashed with animal welfare concerns in an acrimonious public debate whose result was the outlawing of fox-hunting with hounds in 2002 in Scotland and 2005 in England and Wales. This has not stopped defiant and disgruntled hunters from flouting the ban, and voices within the Conservative Party have been heard calling for its repeal, indicating this as another division the English have yet to settle.

The sun is low in the sky now, so let us push on through the park as we rest it into its context. Royal designs on this area go back at least to the early Tudors. When we reach the far side we will arrive in Richmond-upon-Thames, a land of riverside luxury they fashioned for themselves, but more on that when we get there. With Richmond as a base they came here to hunt, but it was a Stuart, Charles I, who Enclosed the park and introduced some two thousand deer to turn it formally into a royal hunting ground in 1637. This was a king skilled at massively pissing people off – to the point of civil war a few years later – and this action infuriated those now shut off from the park's firewood, venison and turf. Cue a long series of attempts by angry locals to get back in, in their view reasserting their traditional rights to the commons, in the royals' view the new crime of 'poaching'. Break-ins escalated to confrontations, with shots fired between poachers and keepers and

some ugly episodes of arrest and the killing ritual. In 1751 a defiant crowd led by the local vicar burst through the wall and carried out a beating-the-bounds ceremony as a statement of their right to access this land. The conflict came to a head in 1758 when a local brewer called John Lewis sued the Ranger, then Princess Amelia, daughter of King George II of the Hanover dynasty, and won a court verdict which pointed out that Charles I had in fact made concessions allowing people to walk through Richmond Park. From then on the more they marched in to exercise that right, the more the royals realised the impossibility of stopping them. The commoners' freedom to roam here was enshrined in law in 1782, and from then on the royals showed off their adaptability by making the best of it and pretending they had meant to share the park with the public all along. That is how Richmond Park remains simultaneously an exclusive Royal Park and a Hyrule Field which anyone can cross.

In between their pot-shots at people trying to get their land back the royals found time to cultivate the park's landscape, giving rise to the features we now traverse. Its immense open fields are punctuated by dense clumps of woods and plantations that surely hide a galaxy of secrets; many are fenced to prevent the deer from getting at them. At the centre our path becomes a causeway across the Pen Ponds, a divided lake dug in 1746 that houses a ton of assorted water birds, chief among them a vociferous gaggle of geese. Press on and eventually we come to an elegant white Georgian installation called Pembroke Lodge, one of several mansions that sprang up as hunting lodges, gamekeepers' dwellings or residences for people the royals liked. One such family was that of prime minister John Russell in the 1840s, whose grandson, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, spend his childhood at Pembroke. It is now a posh café and conference centre where we can watch cheeky jackdaws swoop upon people's lunches, brazenly disrupting what seems elderly Londoners' favourite pastime of arguing about the mayor ('better than Boris – well, anything's better than Boris', we overhear).

Pembroke Lodge overlooks the park's western ridge, and beyond it the meadows roll down at last to the Thames valley, where we will reunite with the river on the banks of the village of Petersham. But we must not take our leave of Richmond Park without reckoning with the newest claimant to its land, and this one is unwelcome to everyone. Its name is *Borrelia*, better known as the bacterium that causes Lyme Disease, a debilitating affliction which has taken Britain by surprise. It is transmitted to humans from the bites of ticks, of which climate change has driven a population explosion in many parts of this country,

especially big parks like this one where there are deer and dogs for them to chomp on. It begins with a rash, followed by headaches, fevers, exhaustion and muscle and joint pains which if left untreated can progress to paralysis and serious nerve and heart irregularities in the longer term. This is all treatable if you catch it early, but its expansion in Britain has outpaced the medical profession's awareness and together with its difficulty to diagnose – its initial symptoms are hardly exclusive – have left many patients frustrated with the system's inadequate response. So just to be safe, I will hand you these tick-removing tweezers in a little Ziploc bag and wait out here while you pop into Pembroke Lodge's lavatories and check you have not acquired any unwanted passengers from our trek through the park. If you have, stick them in the bag and show them to your doctor later.

It has been a long slog, but we are almost there. Today's final stretch takes us up to the highest point in the park, from where we shall descend to the river. That summit is called King Henry's Mound, and binds the park into deepest history as a barrow or burial mound thought to date to Neolithic times. When exactly is unclear, though certainly before England existed as a concept; but as its name betrays, it has experienced a very English narrative hijack by – who else? – Henry VIII, who has left the rumour that he stood here to watch a rocket fired from the Tower that informed him when his second wife Anne Boleyn had been beheaded. This is characteristically dodgy if we recall the other rumour that he was brought that news while playing tennis (unless he was playing tennis on this little mound, which sounds too creditable to his agility to be true).^{*} What is more certain is its excellent views, both through a leafy window to distant St. Paul's Cathedral in the city centre – a line of sight protected by law – and a commanding lay of the land west up the Thames valley, with critical strategic sites like Heathrow Airport, Windsor Castle and the Twickenham rugby stadium all in plain sight, so definitely control this spot if you are invading this part of England. In the middle distance two teams, one red, one white, of aristocratically-uniformed and helmeted people on horseback are chasing something around a field, and are spotted by a bunch of voluble Americans crowded round the mound's mounted binoculars. 'Look!' one of them cries out in excitement, 'they're playing polio!'

^{*} There are similar rumours further afield, including one that he was brought news of Boleyn's killing while having breakfast in Epping Forest on the other side of London. We should probably drop the matter before he starts insisting on his divine right to be in a dozen places at the same time.

Let us leave them to their observations and join that landscape ourselves. Down the grassy slopes lies Petersham, which along with nearby Ham comes not from the Anglo-Saxon *ham* as in homesteads, but from the obviously totally different *hamm* which indicates a river bend, in this case the great bend in the Thames. This is not a large village. To our right sits its charming little parish church of St. Peter, whose oldest surviving section dates back to the thirteenth century but whose site has been worshipped on far longer, since 666 it claims, when Benedictine monks farmed by the river. On our left is the Romanesque red tower of a second church, commissioned in 1899 on expectation that Petersham would grow larger, but converted, of course, to a luxury private residence when it did not. Both recede into the trees as we reach the bottom and finally leave Richmond Park through a gate in Charles I's Enclosure wall. The bloody thing is eight miles long and made of some five million bricks produced on site, and not to impressive standards either, for it quickly started to crumble; even now its repair apparently exasperates the park's custodians.

One final meadow separates us from the water, with cattle warned of on signs but regrettably absent this afternoon. Imposing Victorian mansions peer down from Richmond Hill, among them the Royal Star and Garter Home for injured and disabled soldiers, as well as some Gothic Mediterranean fortress thing that is supposedly the Petersham Hotel. But then, no sooner do we escape their gaze than find ourselves back on the banks of the Thames for the first time since the start of our journey in Woolwich. Regrettably there is no fanfare or monument to our completion of this southern arc – only a dilapidated public toilet, with a 'temporary closure due to ongoing vandalism' notice which has itself been vandalised, and a boarded-up door which has been scribbled on by a 'local builder' enquiring after various primary and secondary sex organs 'male or female, load (sic.) money offered, I'm here most days'.

The River, not even half the width of where we left it, is in lazier mood here. Its far bank is a lush temperate jungle opening every now and again on some private villa, while on our side a well-invested footpath follows the water up to Richmond proper. Bright and warm is the evening sun as it leads fluffy sheep across a clear blue sky, and these rare conditions have brought crowds of natives onto these terraces where they gorge on boxes of unaffordably real-looking food and rent rowboats for imperial sums so to lounge amidst Richmond's palaces and willows. Many appear to be monogamous or pretend-monogamous heterosexual couples,

flaunting the normative privilege of their relationships beneath the blooming flower-baskets that hang from Victorian cast-iron lamp posts.

The leisure classes. The very concept is a discomfort, because in a functional society leisure belongs to all; all humans need their rest. It is neither fair nor healthy for the English to have divided it so as to accrue only to the wealthiest layers of society, while so many of its citizens, even in their capital city, so struggle for livelihood that the very thought of hopping on a train to the riverside here and licking at ice cream is a luxury too far. Such is the politics of English recreation which we have glimpsed at several angles on today's progress from Wimbledon to Richmond. In some cases, like the tennis, an elite pursuit has been democratised into a mass activity wherein almost anyone can find a court nearby to play it on or enjoy it on live television, provided that is they can afford a racquet or a TV licence, which cannot be taken for granted these days; but even there this country's currents of racist and gendered exclusion spill in to sully this mass appeal. In other cases, like the blood sports, recreation was a class battleground between nobles and commoners and a spice for the oppressive story of Enclosure, or else a vessel for some of the nation's sorrier secrets of days when it got its fun from horrible cruelty to animals. These may be but a handful of snapshots of the English at play, but if nothing else, they show that the ways they play say so much about who they are.

7. Blood



...although the smaller part holds with you, I am sure the larger part is at heart of our opinion; although outwardly, partly from fear and partly from hope, they profess to be of yours.

Priest and scholar Richard Reynolds of Syon Abbey, under interrogation by the king's chief minister Thomas Cromwell, April 1535

It is high time for me to put an end to your sitting in this place, which you have dishonoured by your contempt of all virtue, and defiled by your practice of every vice; ye are a factious crew, and enemies to all good government...a pack of mercenary wretches...have no more religion than my horse...sordid prostitutes...intolerably odious to the whole nation...deputed here by the people to get grievances redress'd, are yourselves become the greatest grievance...I command ye therefore, upon the peril of your lives, to depart immediately from this place; go, get you out! Make haste! Ye venal slaves be gone! Go! Take away that shining bauble there, and lock up the doors. In the name of God, go!

Oliver Cromwell dismisses Parliament by force, April 1653

Pushing past the pubs, terraces and leisured crowds of the Richmond waterfront, we reach a stretch of quieter towpath. Who would guess that it was here that the concept of the ‘strong hill’ of Richmond-upon-Thames (as in Old French *riche mont*) was born? Its fetus has left little to posterity beyond some not-so-historic private mansions, and that is a shame, because it bookended a rather consequential stage of the English journey.

Richmond Palace was one of the more intriguing royal installations, much overlooked as a Luigi to the Mario of Hampton Court a few kilometres upriver. The bad news is that it puts us on a collision course with Henry VIII again. He is a pain, this man. His footprints overwhelm the tracks of every place he stomped through, while his sensationalised bulk swells to fill every scene in the pantomime that is English historical imagination. We will have to put up with him just a little more, but at last should soon reach a place where to put him to his bloody rest.

We can see to a few of his Tudor relatives now, starting with his dad, the original Tudor king, Henry VII, who gave rise to Richmond in the first place. Before he arrived this area was the manor of Shene (from *scēon*, Anglo-Saxon for sheds or shelters) and had been favourably potted around on by a succession of monarchs with their palace construction crews before Henry senior decided to upgrade it into a full-fledged royal base. He sank his resources into doing up the earlier palace and loaded it with his favourite jewels and tapestries, only to watch the whole thing go up in smoke (and narrowly avoided doing so himself) in a calamitous Christmas fire in 1497. But this was a king who got things done, and four years later he had not only rebuilt it but renamed it the Palace of Richmond, after the Richmond in Yorkshire of which he called himself Earl. Then he died in it, right here, from tuberculosis, but not before he had come here to watch the marriage of his daughter Margaret to the king of Scotland, James IV of the Stewart* dynasty. As these were hereditary monarchs, this was the reason the Scottish Stuarts would succeed to power over England when it ran out of Tudors.

Thus did this great brick block of spires and pinnacles cast a new name, Richmond, onto this part of Shene along with the impetus to grow into a commercial centre, which is why East Sheen survives nearby but there is no West

* Later in the sixteenth century Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, who grew up in France, changed the spelling to Stuart to make it easier for the French whose mouths had trouble with the letter *w*.

Sheen. It would also have launched the royals down to Richmond Park for their hunts. Henry VIII – the annoying one – did not so fancy it, preferring to unload it onto Cardinal Wolsey or his most recent ex-wife of the day. But his daughters and future queens Mary and Elizabeth loved it and spent lots of time here, the latter passing away in the palace in 1603 just as her grandfather had a century earlier. This is where England ran out of Tudors.

Consider that. What we are standing next to here is nothing less than the beginning and end of the Tudor juggernaut.

Historical memory is weird sometimes. The site behind that wall exerts the gravity of the place where the first and last chieftains of present-day England's arguably most foundational dynasty left this world. Yet there is no monument, no obelisk, no plaque. The natives of Richmond jog past it every day with no acknowledgement of the mammoth personalities that looked out over the river here, and it has all but faded from the roster of great royal residences.

Let us leave Elizabeth and the older Henry to their restful anonymity then, and move quickly ahead because the larger Henry is still pursuing us. We are headed into an area where he caused a lot of trouble, leaving a country so divided that blood would gush from the rift he ripped open for generations to come. It was a division in political religion, but rather than let it heal and settle, the quarrelling English hacked on and on at it till it burst again, with such violence as to drench the entire archipelago in its grisly and gunpowdery discharge. The division had become constitutional, a mortal struggle over what England meant, and what it *actually* meant was its reduction to a *Command and Conquer*-style map of armies marching back and forth over battlefields littered with dripping entrails and blasted ruins. One of those ruins was Richmond Palace, stripped to its raw materials by the anti-monarchical army and sold off for cash.

They don't like to talk about that period. It must feel embarrassing.

Oh yes, this is a country that knows all about division. Its present Brexit distress is by no means the first time it has turned in on itself, each party alienated to hacking and slashing point from its irreconcilable fellow English. The pair of episodes in question stand out as much for their indecisiveness as their savagery, because they resolved nothing, and if we cross the river from Richmond we enter a land where both of those seismic faultlines tore a trail of guts into London. They left in their wake a pile of tormented corpses writhing in the dirt, who awaken at our footsteps and scramble to tell us what England's self-wrestling cost the ordinary people caught in the crossfire. Do the living think they are past such

behaviour now? Not a chance, they are just as divided today, and these exasperated spirits insist they listen and learn just what hell there is to pay when English fissures are ripped open rather than nursed shut.

We have survived our passage through the south. It is time to cross the Thames.

The ideal ford is Richmond Lock and Weir. The riverbank here is maintained in tidy bourgeois order, complete with herons who leer at us from the water's edge. A huge green expanse opens up on the right, which spreads on to encompass the entire inner plain of this great bend in the River. They have divided it into three parts – here Old Deer Park, on its far side a golf course, and beyond that the Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew – but the full set used to be more crown lands for deer-hunting and palace-building till they gave it up for the public interest.

They did some science here too. On the golf course still sits the King's Observatory, from where they set the meridian line before the Greenwich days, while the globally-renowned botanical research and conservation work at Kew Gardens needs no introduction. But there are also echoes of an old Christian monastery seized and disbanded by Henry VIII, then restored under Mary, then sent packing a second time under Elizabeth. They are getting us in the mood for the violence to come.

In the meantime we can permit them some praise for Richmond Lock, which is a weir, lock and footbridge all in one. That is, it regulates the water levels, allows ships to pass between said levels, and lets us cross; all while being a quite beautiful construct of ornate Victorian ironwork in cream-and-mint paint. The lock's machinery nests comfortably within, and red-brick cabins anchor its pleasantness at either end. Technically speaking it is a low-tide barrage: the Thames is still tidal up here, so by closing this thing they can maintain a high water level upstream when the tide goes out, thereby keeping it navigable to ships as well as providing a stable environment for animals like those herons.

It is nice to think its designers took them into consideration. There is always wildlife here, especially water birds – herons, ducks, geese. I used to come here to feed them.

That's right. Across the bridge lies the settlement of Isleworth. I was born there.

Don't get the wrong idea. If you are born in a stable it doesn't make you a horse. I soon left for distant worlds, and every footstep I have taken in England since has been as an alien. But if my remarks toward this bridge come across as

uncharacteristically generous, that is why. I came to know it in my first language, Mandarin Chinese, as *Kěyíkāikěyǐguāndeqiáo* (可以开可以关的桥) – ‘the bridge that can open and close’ – and it supplies my only memories of a connection to this country from before I came into conflict with it.

We will not discuss that. You have seen plenty on this journey, at any rate, to indicate this country is not reliably kind to those it considers different.

I need a moment. You go on ahead – I will catch up.

Isleworth, in whose case they *do* pronounce the ‘s’, is our gateway to a stretch of older outposts. The lands north of the bend in the Thames descend from the ancestral Anglo-Saxon realm of Middlesex, now absorbed as the northwest quadrant of Greater London. Most of its life was lived at a few steps removed from the capital while yet bound to it as a transport hub and agricultural breadbasket. We are about to see some ways that hurt it when things went nationally wrong.

There is a lot to hurt. To but skirt the corner of Isleworth is to sense a town that sleeps off a bustling heritage. There are characterful mansions with pillars and clock towers, but most are now privately owned or getting redone as apartments. One such construction site has occupied the riverbank, forcing us to divert inland. But between the bouts of scaffolding dormant barges doze, wood-terraced pubs overlook the river, and an archaic cargo crane dreams of high engineering days of old. This must once have been a thriving port, and on a fence the local Rotary club has affixed a panel which claims trade vessels came up the river here from as far as the Netherlands, Scandinavia and northern France, in the last case in a continuity that stretches at least as far back as the Norman knights who ran Isleworth as a manor a thousand years ago. It is not so surprising really. Before motor vehicles the river was by far the most efficient means of transport, hence the royals’ easy time transiting between the city and their palaces here.

That reliance must have fostered a familiarity with the tides, because right now they are out and show us in astonishing fashion the reason they built Richmond Lock and Weir. The dark, mighty Thames has withdrawn to but a trickle. It would be a simple matter to walk across the gravelly river bed to that mysterious island they call Isleworth Ait, a nature reserve dense with trees and secrets. But the Thames’s mood is deceptive. Plush green river weeds flourish on its bed, suggesting the water’s retreat is only momentary. Nearby a handful of little tributaries snake in to join it: the Crane, which at a glance is full of its own stories,

and the Duke of Northumberland's River which used to supply its water to our next destination, the premises of Syon. Those premises begin beyond Isleworth's final landmarks: its All Saints' Church, a jigsaw puzzle with a timeworn stone tower and modern red-brick main body; and the riverside London Apprentice pub, to which it is said city apprentices used to row to celebrate their qualification as journeymen. True or not, that the idea is conceivable shows how close the river binds these outlying satellites into the city's orbit.

We come to Syon Park, and you will need this helmet, because this is the first of the conflict zones we will enter today. No, that is not a mistake, however peaceful and well-to-do it all looks now. By all means, have a wander first and take in its meadowed lawns and lakes that frame the crenelated-fortress façade of its most genteel centrepiece of Syon House, the London residence of the Dukes of Northumberland. It must be yet another lordly mansion on which the privileged classes went all-out, hiring their favourite architects and interior designers to deck out in a grand composition of continental styles. Then step out into the garden and who do we bump into but our old friend Capability Brown, who we last met in Wimbledon Park. The landscape wizard worked his spells here too, transforming a dilapidated waste into a paradise of his trademark sweeping vistas, pleasure grounds and ornamental lakes. The garden has its own centrepiece, the Great Conservatory, a domed magnificence of cast-iron and glass which should feel familiar, because it was studied by Joseph Paxton and strongly influenced his design for the Crystal Palace.

All so well and serene so far. The perfect place for rich white people to wall out all hint of bad things like poverty and prejudice and persecution of asylum seekers so as to enjoy a luxurious existence. There is even a garden centre here, surely that ultimate sign of a way of life where violence no longer exists.

Only then – why was it a dilapidated waste in the first place?

Well then. Let us go through that there garden centre and sit outside for a coffee beside its old stone barn, whose deterioration has been filled in with brickwork and dressed up with friendly pot plants. Even so pleasantly disguised, it does not quite fit in with the rest of this place. What shall we make of that?

Here is what. That barn is the last surviving piece of the *real* Syon: not Syon Park, nor Syon House, but Syon Abbey.

Syon Abbey no longer exists – not here, at least – but it is the ghost which haunts these bloodstained grounds. For you see, it was a monastery, from an age when the landscape of English Christianity still featured monks and nuns who

lived in these cloistered communities where they dedicated their lives to quiet service and contemplation of the ways of their god. It was a way of life that crashed to smithereens in one of the most tumultuous revolutions the English have known, steamrolled by the fist of none other than that Tudor king, Henry VIII, as his minions seized the buildings of Syon Abbey, plundered its treasures, butchered its leaders, and chased its community into the mother of all exiles.

This man has harried our steps enough. Let us consider him the mid-boss in our journey and confront him once and for all.

We can start by examining what kind of place this monastery was, and its experience of the opening demolition charges that shook this country apart in the English Reformation. It started, as most English things do, with a foreigner: Birgitta Birgersdotter of Sweden, better known as Saint Bridget (not to be confused with Brigid of Ireland), who lived in the fourteenth century and – so the story goes – rejected a wealthy noble life for a calling of spiritual devotion, care for the poor and sick, and rigorous critical commentary on Europe’s political and religious affairs. The lasting product of that combination was a new Christian order, approved by the Pope, which came to be named after her as the Bridgettines. Some English admirers got the idea of founding a house of her order in this country, and to cut a long story short, their wish became reality in 1415 under the wholehearted support of Henry V, the Plantagenet king best known (thanks largely to Shakespeare) for his military campaigns in France. This earlier Henry raised the new monastery as part of a complex of royal and religious works on both sides of the river here which included the religious houses in Old Deer Park as well as the predecessor to Richmond Palace. The Bridgettine monastery was named the ‘Monastery of St. Saviour and St. Bridget of Syon’: Syon was a reference to Mount Zion, a hill loaded with Biblical significance which overlooks Jerusalem.* They first built it upstream in Twickenham, but finding that site marshy and unhygienic, moved it here in 1431.

A word on English Christianity. Its modern decline, for reasons more complicated than what is blamed on ‘secularism’, has left that religion an image of dark-age intolerance and dogmatic cruelty, especially on account its terrible mistakes on gender and sexuality which still account for the Anglican church’s

* This is the same Zion which gives its name to *Zionism*: the modern movement, thick with controversy for its catastrophic impact on the Palestinians, to establish a homeland for the Jewish people in the scripturally-defined Land of Israel.

fiercest internal struggles today.* Its monastic subcultures have fallen into their own stereotypes of cowed monks and nuns, typically divergent youths traumatised into the cloisters by coercive relatives, who pray out their days in silence surrounded by unproductive rituals and fetishes and in fear of being assaulted by domineering superiors at the very thought of a masturbation. The image is somewhere between comical and sinister, either marvelled at as a life no rational person would assent to, or suspected because of the likely abuse of small children in its dungeons. Often it has well-earned this reputation, and we must call an abuser an abuser and be justly critical of the English Christianities, Catholics and Protestants and their forebears and offshoots alike, for all the crusading, persecuting, brainwashing, torturing, witch-hunting and other forms of reprehensible violence, historical and ongoing, to be settled on their accounts.

Nonetheless they were not blobs; it would be unfair to damn every person within the entire colossal universe of English Christianity for these crimes. The world of the monasteries alone was a diverse ecosystem that stretched across the British and Irish islands over hundreds of years, and many of its inhabitants were complex individuals who worked hard, studied hard, and had no more interest in stamping dogmas into people's foreheads than reasonable people today. Indeed, if they were like the monks and nuns of Syon Abbey, we might imagine they would more likely have welcomed us into their dining halls and offered us bread, beer and cakes produced on-site, and if challenged in their beliefs, grown excited at the chance for an enjoyable and educated debate.

That is because the evidence is that this was not some forbidding hermitage cut off from a world it shunned as irredeemably sinful, but a teeming and enthusiastic hive of cultural and economic exchange. Granted the monastic lifestyle would have been strict: early mornings, fasts, abstinences and the like are not for everyone. But here they were organised around principles specific to the Bridgettine tradition. Though sexually segregated, which must always warrant critique, it was distinct among Christian orders in insisting on the admission of both women and men to its halls, and what is more the women were in charge. The monastery was governed by an Abbess, and all the offices of responsibility for

* The Anglican church is basically the Church of England, descended from what we are about to watch Henry VIII do to it but then internationalised under the British Empire. Since independence its branches in the former colonies have become as important as the branch in England that started it. Its historical prejudices remain alive in its bitter present splits over gendered questions like female clergy and same-sex relationships.

administration, rituals, provisioning, budgeting, and structural maintenance were held by the nuns. Entry to monastic life was open only from adulthood, subject to a novitiate period to ensure anyone joining the community was really cut out for the lifestyle, with the result that most who did were intelligent, literate, multi-lingual people who held experience of the world and often came from noble or merchant backgrounds. The monastery's library catalogue was one of the most impressive in the country, embracing the opportunities of emerging printing technology and holding not just Biblical material but classical and academic texts, including the latest on medicine and humanist philosophy. Reading and learning were vital to the lifestyle – St. Bridget had been politically engaged, and scholarship was a core Bridgettine value – and so were gardening, crafting, and all the baking, brewing, milling and looking after guests that supported this place's growth into a magnet for pilgrims, politicians and erudite people from across the continent. Among those who came to soak in its vortex of learning were serious intellectual heavyweights: Thomas More, who we met lambasting Enclosure and its man-eating sheep; the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives; and Katherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife, not a secondary character in anyone's story but a formidably learned and eloquent individual in her own right.

Perhaps it was that reputation – a big name, and a tendency to incubate people who could think for themselves – that sealed Syon's fate. The reign of Henry VIII was not a good time for people who thought for themselves, as More and no few others were to find out. Then again, even perfect loyalty was no guarantee of keeping your head: another of Henry's casualties was Thomas Cromwell, the very chief minister who served as the king's hatter in the campaign to crush the monasteries only to fall out of favour and be done away with himself. And once Henry set this ball rolling, it became, whatever his protests to the possibility, bigger than him. Syon's and the country's predicament was to be caught up in a storm which once unleashed exceeded anyone's power to stop it, with the only person who could have saved them, the one most responsible for looking after their rights, happening to be an egotistic and murderously capricious autocrat for whom lives and principles were secondary to his personal whims.

We skimmed over this turbulence at Stephen Lawrence's memorial stone because the hatreds it unlocked are not irrelevant to the rise of English racism. On the European continent the movement against the Pope grew largely out of popular anger at corrupt and exploitative church authorities, giving rise to the Protestant movement which overturned the power of the Pope-supporting

Catholics. But in England it came top-down from the king and his henchmen for shallower reasons. The basic process was as follows. In 1527 Henry wanted to cancel his marriage Katherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn.* His being a hereditary monarchy that was a) gendered to its guts and b) well remembered the recent carnage between competing claimants to power in the Wars of the Roses, the king wanted a son to clearly define as his successor and was frustrated that Katherine had not given him one, to the point where he feared his marriage was Biblically cursed. But marriage was considered a sacred matter, on which the highest authority was the Pope in Rome, and the Pope refused to cancel Henry and Katherine's partnership.† After two years of getting nowhere, a furious and exasperated Henry resolved to eject the Pope's power from his kingdom altogether, declaring himself no longer just England's paramount *political* ruler – its king – but also its *religious* ruler as Supreme Head of the Church of England.

With that, Henry closed down a centuries-old episodic struggle between separate royal and religious power structures in England, with the former effectively swallowing the latter. But the decision was arbitrary rather than principled. Henry himself was some kind of unbothered amalgamation of Catholic and Protestant, hostile to enough aspects of either to threaten both sets of followers and at any rate not about to allow something so trivial as religious doctrine to take priority over his dynastic ego in influencing his policy decisions. His seizure of power from the church was deeply discomforting to many English people, including leading intellectuals among his own advisors. For a country accustomed to religion as a separate sphere of power outside the control of the political authorities, what he had done was at best provocative, at worst unconscionable – so unconscionable that to accept it would be to compromise their souls. Some of them dissented. Henry Tudor did not like dissent. He set out to have those who questioned his behaviour arrested and put to death without trial. A law appeared requiring everyone in his service, which now included religious officials, to accept him as head of the church, swear loyalty to him and his new queen, Anne Boleyn, and recognise their children as legitimate heirs to the throne; refusal was considered *treason* (there it is again). The atmosphere

* Technically he wanted not a *divorce*, as in a break-up, but an *annulment* as in a ruling that the marriage had never been valid in the first place.

† In part because he was afraid of Katherine. She had a powerful nephew in Spain in the form of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who a few months earlier had sent an army massacring and pillaging its way through Rome and forced the Pope to escape for his life through a secret passage.

turned ugly. Henry's thought police prowled the cloisters, rounding on priests with incriminating questions and scanning their sermons for the slightest hint of a pretext to arrest them. Establishments like Syon Abbey faced the awful choice between their integrity or their lives. Feigning allegiance was not enough: the king demanded absolute submission. The monks and nuns argued among themselves, rehearsing the arguments with which they would gamble for their heads in front of Cromwell and his heavies. What would you have done?

It mattered little. It is well attested that authoritarians cannot control their own hunger, and once permitted a sniff of blood will feast on you regardless of whether you comply. The monks of Syon did their best to show what conformity they could without compromising their values, refraining from speaking against the king but not explicitly name-dropping him as head of the church in sermons either. That was not good enough for Cromwell's inspectors, who leant on the monks till they acknowledged the king as head of the church, but specified they were only doing so under duress. That was still a *but* – no *buts* were permitted. Syon's priests were added to the list of names to be broken by force. An example would be made.

That example was Richard Reynolds, a Cambridge-educated monk and humanist scholar of Syon Abbey and one of the most respected scholars of his day. Cromwell interrogated him personally, and to the face of Henry's dragon Reynolds stood by his conscience and insisted the king was in the wrong. For that he would pay with the worst suffering English law could inflict. We saw what that meant at Wandsworth Prison so you already know what comes next. He was dragged in front of a crowd at Tyburn along with three dissident priests from other monasteries, and made to watch as one by one they were hanged, then pulled down while still conscious to have their penises sliced off, their guts carved out and burned in front of them, then finally their heads cut off and the rest chopped into parts to be displayed in conspicuous locations. What was unusual was that they were slaughtered in their religious clothes – victims were usually stripped – so no spectators could be in any doubt just how serious Henry was about his reforms. Then it was Reynolds's own turn to be ground through this barbaric ritual, which concluded with a piece of him dangling over the gate of Syon Abbey. He was one of the first casualties of what swiftly escalated into a ruthless political pogrom which within a few months would send two more of the most prolific thinkers in the land to join him: Thomas More, and another Cambridge humanist, Cardinal John Fisher, both familiar faces at Syon.

When they string up joints of your friends above your front door it cannot be easy to hold your composure, so it says something about the stomachs of the Syon monks and nuns that they continued to resist. Throughout the mid-1530s Cromwell's henchmen came back for more, attempting to browbeat and bully them into submission, but to no avail: the community would not accept the king as head of the church. But by 1536 events were overtaking them, for Henry's campaign had entered a new phase. What had opened as a reaction against the Pope's authority was snowballing into a climactic drive to wring out all religious loyalty to Rome from the national bloodstream, whether out of frustration at the monasteries' persisting dissent, a calculation that seizing their property and treasures could help raise funds for a royal government in financial difficulties (keep an eye on this, it will get more important later), or Henry's fury at a massive protest movement of some 40,000 people that rose up in England's north, the 'Pilgrimage of Grace', which the king deceived then brutally crushed, putting hundreds of its participants to death. By the end of the decade he had resolved that the monasteries had to go. Cromwell and his henchmen set off across the country, knocking on their doors one by one and bribing, threatening or blackmailing their monks to surrender their houses to the king. Most of them did – the enforcers had done their homework on them and adjusted their methods accordingly. Those who did not were made an example of in the same hideous manner as Richard Reynolds.

The end for Syon came in 1539 when Cromwell deployed an old law against them called *Praemunire*, which prohibited English subjects from appealing to a foreign authority against that of the English king (fittingly designed with the Pope in mind earlier in England's long king-church struggle). Syon's leaders were prosecuted, its monks and nuns dismissed, and their abbey seized as crown property. Curiously they were bought off with sizeable pensions in spite of their years of resistance, yet they never formally surrendered, and as they sailed into exile to mainland Europe they defiantly carried away the keys to the abbey. Also in their cargo was a large stone relic: a piece of the pillar where Henry's minions had hung the segment of Brother Reynolds in a failed attempt to intimidate them.

Syon Abbey's tale now forks in two directions. The monastery buildings took the shorter route. Too well-equipped and conveniently located to sell off like most other monasteries, the king held onto it as a Thames waystation between London and Windsor Castle. After all the trouble he had gone to with Anne Boleyn she did not give him a son either, only another daughter called Elizabeth who would

clearly amount to nothing, so in the end Boleyn's head too had landed on the mounting pile of carnage in Henry's wake. Thereafter his ridiculous relationship misadventures would dominate the country's memory of him: a third wife who finally produced a boy for him but died giving birth; then a fourth who he disliked from the start; then a fifth, Catherine Howard, who he also killed off after imprisoning her in the confiscated Syon Abbey; and finally a sixth who made it out the other side. By then the Abbey was no longer a monastery and within a few years would complete its transformation into the lavish residence of Syon House, complete with landscaped garden. It passed through a series of royal hands to eventually end up with Hugh Percy, the first Duke of Northumberland, who had it re-done in the 1760s into the shape we see before us.

But then there was the real Syon Abbey, not the building but the nuns and monks themselves, and their exile became a most extraordinary odyssey through three hundred years of the worst that a religiously-unhinged and warmongering Europe could throw at them. First the community straggled through the Low Countries, now Belgium and the Netherlands but then a province of the metamorphic Hapsburg Empire. There they negotiated a hurricane of anti-Catholic riots, rampaging mobs, battles, sieges, massacres, pirates, naval blockades and the accompanying poverty, hunger and disease that descended on that part of the world as the Protestant Reformation set the continent aflame. In the process they would at times shed followers and at times gain new ones, but they crystallised around a hard core of nuns, unarmed and adrift in a hostile world but utterly determined to carry on the baton of their Bridgettine way of life. Then Henry died, and the rise of his Catholic daughter Mary briefly allowed the nuns to return to England in the hope of re-establishing themselves at Syon Abbey. Mary was a horrific burner of Protestants but rolled back Henry's anti-monastery reforms, only to then die herself and be succeeded by Henry's second daughter Elizabeth, a Protestant who seized back the monasteries for a second time, re-asserted her power over the church, and drove the nuns right back into exile.

From there their journey through the maws of the European wars of religion took them to France, before landing them in the 1590s in the relative safety of Lisbon in Catholic Portugal. But there it was the turn of their own Catholic bosses in Rome to menace them, and in a vein which will be familiar to modern-day Catholics frustrated with their abusive establishment, the new Pope – authoritarian, intolerant, coffee-drinking Clement VIII, remembered for murdering the cosmologist Giordano Bruno – attempted to force reforms on

Syon's nuns that would place them under the authority of male bishops, a thing quite intolerable to these strong women who lived for St. Bridget's matriarchal vision. Under this pressure they continued their trek through Europe's convulsions, surviving the vicious dynastic falling-out between Portugal and Spain, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and tsunami (a Richter 9 monstrosity and one of the worst in human history, with destruction on a par with the 2011 Tōhoku disaster in Japan), Napoleon's French invasions of Portugal in 1807, and the Portuguese revolution and civil war of the 1820s and 30s in which the so-called Liberals' hostility to religion threatened the Bridgettines with a whole new round of attacks on monasteries that echoed Henry VIII's three hundred years earlier.

All of this they negotiated, but more strikingly still, not even the abjectest of these privations pried from them that gentle monastic equanimity that made them who they were. Maybe you thought the teas and cakes thing an exaggeration. In that case, consider the account of the travel writer Joseph Baretti, who visited the nuns in the quake-stricken ruins of Lisbon to find them plying 'chocolate, cakes and sweet-meats' upon all their visitors, Catholics and Protestants alike. He was so overwhelmed as to remark: 'Never was I told in a year so many pretty and tender words as this morning in half an hour...not a syllable issued out at their lips but what was dictated by modesty and meekness, humility and benevolence; and I will positively see them as often as I can while I can stay here'.

After all those epic ordeals the sisters made it back to England in the 1860s, by when the country was at last calming down from its prolonged Catholic-hating seizure and had removed most of its official restrictions against them. By then their Isleworth headquarters was long gone, so instead the Syon nuns settled down in the southwest province of Devon, coincidentally or otherwise the birthplace of their martyr Richard Reynolds. Serial bankruptcies in their turbulent exile had forced them to sell off most of what they had taken with them in the flight from Henry VIII's crackdown, but one thing they held onto all that time was that piece of their gatehouse where the authoritarians had hoisted Reynolds's body part, a relic now housed in the Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Heavitree, Exeter. After some final wanderings the sisters settled near Plymouth, the last English Catholic order to have survived, continuous and fundamentally intact, from a distant age swept into oblivion by the Tudor purge.

Alas, after seeing off so many disasters, it has been a new religious revolution, that of modern English capitalism – no friend to lifestyles of quiet, informed contemplation – that has proved one trial too many for the Syon monastic

community. With the well of new recruits drying up, their numbers dwindled from a good two dozen in the 1960s to four nuns in the new millennium, all elderly. In 2011, after that nigh-mythical six-hundred-year journey through layer upon layer of English and European hells and back again, the institution of Syon Abbey closed its doors for the final time. The remaining sisters retired to Plymouth where their final champion, Abbess Anne Smyth, keeps the Bridgettine torch burning.

Well then. It is not every day one enters a story about a group of nuns and ends up on a crazy voyage like that.

Henry Tudor's devouring of the monasteries has become a staple of English history tales, but to view it from the perspectives of the Syon sisterhood raises tantalising issues missing from the mainstream narrative. Mainstream narratives are written by the winners, and eventually – though there was far to go yet – the winners in England were the Protestants, who not only control the Church of England to this day but do so as a state church, that is, as the country's official religion with the king or queen as its head. That was Henry's doing: what he started has lasted. England's great prejudice against Catholics, which as we discussed has trickled into the prejudice-culture of today, was not Henry's design but also remains on his account as an outcome of what he set in motion, thus calibrating the compass of English Christianity as, at its crudest, an imagined struggle between good Protestants and evil Catholics. Both spend a lot of time in the doghouse these days, but shine a torch around in it and it is not hard to find persisting historical stereotypes of Protestants as rational, cultured, skilled, pragmatic and hard-working people, set against raging, backward, sanctimonious, doctrinaire, science-hating, misogynistic, homophobic, child-molesting Catholics – an image against which the Catholic authorities in the Vatican and elsewhere, in all fairness, have done themselves very few favours.

What is striking about the nuns of Syon Abbey, beyond the sheer remarkableness of their journey, is how their story upsets this narrative. From the depths of the Catholic past came a group of intrepid women, devoutly religious but also educated, industrious, and vigorously critical in thought, who were plunged against their will into one of the most merciless upheavals in the English experience, a period which combined totalitarian thought-policing with tortures and killing methods as horrific as humans have invented anywhere. For a period longer than World War II they stood their ground against the tyranny, and ending it robbed of their home and ejected from their country, navigated their way through three hundred years of everything a most barbarous and bloodthirsty

continent could visit on them on top of onslaughts of fire, water, and roiling earth from their very own god. This is not what monastic folk are supposed to do, at least not Christian ones who unlike their Chinese equivalents cannot count on overpowered monkey kings to escort them, and that they unstoppably tunneled through the lot to successfully return to their homeland, having not only survived but preserved the integrity that England's most notorious dictator tried to erase in the first place, is not only impressive but kind of terrifying. The Bridgettines of Syon Abbey were – *are* – Catholics, but fought a successful rearguard action against misogynistic forces even in the very church structure for the sake of whose service they overcame so many trials. Surely such a tough and tenacious squad of women deserve recognition in the ongoing struggle against the ills of a gendered world.

Of course, theirs is but one of countless slices out of the story of the great schism of European Christianity and its relationships of church and state, of which the divisions in England were ultimately just one subplot. In a split as colossal as this there is not so much another side to the story as a million different facets, and we should be careful not to raise any one of these as representative of the overall whole. If the Syon nuns so readily emerge as heroes after their half-millennium peregrination, we should not forget that half a millennium is an extremely long time in human terms, and that a story on that scale is necessarily extrapolated from the droplets the surviving evidence has left us. Because they too, against all odds, emerged as winners of and thus writers of history, it is quite possible they or other Bridgettine orders might themselves have run over people in the course of their journeys, and the interests of leaving no-one behind require us to keep our ears open for any such forgotten voices. That is not to praise or condemn – only to note that what their facet of history shows us, as all facets do, is that these conflicts were not simple, occurring as they did among real human beings whom they affected in complex and often contradictory ways.

In the final instance it is absolutely fair to condemn Henry Tudor and his minions for their atrocities. They were violent, they were arrogant, they were authoritarian, and they were that most unforgivably abominable of all things: men who dared seek control over women's bodies. Each is a danger in itself but together they are catastrophic, because their result is once again *lawful evil*, the normalisation of cruelty, and no society can keep its sanity once it crosses that threshold. This must override the insistence of ends-justify-means types that his deeds enabled England to thrive as a sovereign country, free of the tyrannical

meddling of that foreign Eurocratic jihadist the Pope. Yet there were other cases where the monks were the villains and people were hurt by their monasteries. Catholic authoritarians – such as the supposedly learned and humanistic Thomas More, let alone ‘Bloody Mary’ – are on record as every bit as brutal to dissidents as Henry’s hangings, drawings and quarterings, and their casualties on the continent when the Catholic empires and inquisitions struck back in the Counter-Reformation have every reason to know it. The Reformation was a horror show, but a complicated one; if we stick with the simple versions, it is all too easy to reduce the story to black-and-white caricatures of people who were right versus people who were wrong. Only by heeding specific stories like that of the Syon monastery can we understand all its characters as genuine human beings on four-dimensional journeys, all of whose voices are valid, and relate to their struggles for authorship of those journeys whether or not we agree with their beliefs. Only then can we understand how their mess shaped the mess of England today.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We have more English conflict to explore in this part of the city.

There is one element, however, which as we take our leave of the Syon community we can finally and with justice consign to its rest here and now. That is Henry VIII, who after a few more temperamental and gout-stricken years, finally died at the beginning of 1547. During his Boleyn marriage drama one of the priests who had dared stand up to him had warned him that he was like Ahab, a Biblical character cast as a corrupt and hubristic villain whose blood would be licked by dogs. It now so happened that after a period of lying in state, the king’s rapidly putrefying corpse was taken to Windsor, in the course of which it reached the annexed Syon buildings after much shaking and rattling upon the roads. Set down here to rest for the night, his bloated carcass, or part of it, exploded out of its coffin. The scent reached the nostrils of some dogs nearby, and next morning the repair crews found them lapping away at his blood. For his enemies, and he had earned many, it was a signal of well-deserved divine retribution.

So let us leave him here, lounging in his coffin while being contentedly chomped on by these worthiest of animals, and hope that he is satisfied or at least distracted enough in that condition to not notice we have hurried on. He will not obstruct our path again.



Out the northern gates of Syon we make the acquaintance of the Brent river. The Brent is a major tributary in its own right: timeworn, strategic, and positively loaded with stories. It also doubles as part of the Grand Union Canal, the London-to-Birmingham section of England's navigable waterway network. We shall follow its course for the next stretch of our journey, which will give us plenty of time to get to know it better.

But first we must stay a while in Brentford, the town where it spills its ancient power into the Thames. Perched on this junction of two rivers and the Great West Road, Brentford was long one of the capital's most significant outposts and traces its existence well back beyond London's own. Its profile has diminished since long-distance rail and air travel eclipsed the routes on which it grew, turning it into another prime target for redevelopment. Modern Brentford is thus a patchwork of trendy new waterfront apartments, decaying docks and factories, and stone or brick remnants – houses, churches – of venerable lifetimes gone by.

The Brent will speak more of that as we walk in its company later. But we arrive in its presence caked in the blood of martyrs, from which the river deduces our interests. And it is delighted, for if it is episodes of the English spilling one

another's blood we are after, then, well, does this ford have one heck of a story to tell us.

Let us ascend its bridge on the morning of 12th November 1642. A full hundred years have passed since the henchmen of that troublesome king, whose name we need no longer trouble ourselves to repeat, consumed the monastery of Syon. In his person English absolute monarchy reached its summit. The whole country quaked in fear at his gangs of inquisitors and axe-swishing executioners. But things look a little different now.

On foot and horseback up the road we came in on, a new set of royal minions approaches. But these are nothing like Thomas Cromwell's police. These are an army. A shabby, ill-disciplined, hastily-assembled army perhaps, but a proper armed and armoured fighting force nonetheless.

Like the monastery-killers, they are here on the king's business. Unlike the monastery-killers, the king's business is simply to get back into his capital because he has been kicked out on his ear.

And they are not going to just stroll back in. Here on the bridge is a barricade, behind which not desperate rebels, nor protesting monks, but an army every bit as serious as the king's has assembled to stop him. A new power has risen in the land, and this time, finally, an authoritarian king of England will meet his match.

It mattered not that in the end the rebels would not hold Brentford. They would hold London. And then they would win. So soon after its Tudor terrors the almighty institution of the English monarchy had fallen so far as to be hounded out of its own capital, so unable to stamp its will on its subjects that its only resort was to go to war on them, *and it would lose that war*. The king was going to die. And not only him – they would bury the monarchy itself. For a few years the English would know no kings or queens at all. And though they resurrected them afterwards – they are the English, after all – the days of royal steamrolling driven by the likes of the Tudor heavyweights were over for good.

Who was this fearsome new challenger, and where in the world had it come from?

Look again at the political sledgehammering of Henry VIII, then look at the no less ugly sledgehammering of English politics today. What is different? No, not the blood – austerity and institutional prejudice are dealing pain comparable to Henry's torturers, to a much larger population at that. Rather, what institution is so central to national policy decisions in England now, has been so pivotal a

character in the Brexit drama, yet was inconsequential enough in Henry's time that we could get through his story without mentioning it once?

The answer is the English parliament, and these are its soldiers barricading the bridge. What we are witnessing here in Brentford is its rise to power. That is right: soldiers. Parliament was not founded on peace. It got where it is now not by some civilised free and fair democracy-magic, but by violent force, and carved out its claim to power in the flesh of its enemies even as the wounds cut out by Henry VIII still lay dripping.

The English have a romantic attachment to their parliament. They believe it makes them a democratic country. They like to speak as if its authority is writ in their national genome, timeless, God-given even. As ahistorical as that sounds it demands to be taken seriously because in the 1640s the parliamentarians used that very argument to assert their supremacy over the king. That was what made England *special*, they insisted: that parliament's right to rule was latent here before kings even existed, unlike everyone else's evil dictatorships whose ruling tyrants could do whatever they liked. By the same measure, if an English king tried to take away that right, that was un-English, and they were entirely entitled to take up arms to defend it.

Parliamentary sovereignty, they call it now. The only problem is it wasn't true. There was no tradition, law, or constitutional document that said it. They made it up. But never mind, because remember, law is an expression not of truth, but of power. And power changes.

It was certainly changing now.

In reality the English parliament's origins go back to the Norman takeover of 1066, after which William the Conqueror gathered a set of powerful landowners and priests to give him advice and help create and implement laws.* Any ruler needs people like that – there are only so many hours in the day – but anyone who has experienced mental health struggles and been told to just 'think positive' or 'do yoga' knows that advice can just as easily be an exertion of hostile pressure as a means of support. Kings go through that too – ask poor Henry VI of Lancaster, to whose memory the English have not been kind – but as well as mental

* Although the preceding Anglo-Saxons had their own version, an assembly called the *Witan*, with which some of parliament's believers have claimed continuity.

vulnerabilities they also have to worry about political ones, especially when they alienate too many of their supporters. When King John found himself in that position in 1215, rebel barons rounded on him and forced him to sign the famous *Magna Carta* (or to give it its full name, *Magna Carta Libertatum* – ‘Great Charter of Liberties’), which put limits on the king’s power and forced him to guarantee a range of rights and freedoms. This document has attained mythical status among the English even though it was more about the barons protecting their privileged interests than the people’s rights and freedoms in any democratic sense (aside from the Charter of the Forest, as we have seen), and at any rate both sides went back on the agreement almost immediately. But one thing it did do was reinforce the idea of a formal and permanent institution – a council of powerful people – to sit around the king and keep him under control. Soon this was being referred to as a *parliament*, that is, a conference or place for speaking (as in the French *parler*). It was the ancestor of the English parliament today, and we might note well how it, too, started with an interest group which imposed its power by force.

From there it bubbled under for several centuries, growing stronger when the monarch was weak but receding when the monarch was strong. The Tudors were strong enough that we could go through that whole Henry VIII rigmarole without even mentioning parliament. But it was certainly around, and its relative invisibility belied the ways in which its character was changing. Henry, or more accurately Thomas Cromwell, in fact made great use of parliament’s law-making functions to beat up political and religious opponents, but after Henry died it kept that power and status and learned to use it against his successors. His attack on the monasteries also threw a load of priests off parliament’s benches, leaving it composed mostly of people whose power came from more material sources, specifically land ownership, and more specifically still ownership of the land released off those monasteries for them to snap up at bargain prices.

Recalling the stories of Norwood, land ownership in England was now becoming something much, much bigger. And as it did, remember Henry’s difficulties with money for which looting those monasteries was partly a solution? This was now a recurring problem for the royal government. Bad debts and expensive wars dogged the reign of Elizabeth I, made worse by failed harvests and horrendous poverty, and in the new century the wanton extravagance of the first Stuart king James I drove the crown’s financial security to breaking point. So as the kings and queens fumbled for cash, parliament’s benches began to swell with people from that rising class of country landowners stuffing their pockets with

the rents of Enclosure. Many were also Puritans, that strain of radical Protestants who jabbed their fingers with thundering divine-light conviction. A new breed of parliamentarian had been born, no longer intimidated by the monarch and quite prepared to criticise or block royal policies with which they disagreed. After all, their boots were in the earth, giving them the local clout to raise money in taxes from their districts, while the kings' and queens' heads were up in the clouds with the god they believed afforded them their right to rule – and the rents are not so lucrative up there, which forced the frustrated monarchs back to parliament with cap in hand when they wanted to get stuff done.

We should be clear then that though the English see parliament today as a keystone of democracy, for most of its life it was nothing of the sort. From the barons who dragged King John to the table to this new bunch of upstarts who challenged James Stuart's successor Charles, the members were a privileged class who were there to look after the interests of their layer of society, not to represent the will or good of their constituents. The popular struggles that wrung out an expansion of the vote to the full adult population and thus attenuated this self-interest somewhat came only much, much later, and to the extent that some MPs still earn the public image of expenses-fiddling, self-regarding shits today, they are merely fulfilling a long-inherited pattern. England's parliament has no deep historical commitment to democracy, nor to peace. Rather its quarrel with the king was about to drag the country into the worst spilling of blood and guts to ever take place upon its shores.

And so the stage was set for a new collision, king versus parliament. But this was far more than a naked power struggle at the highest level of society. For the first time this was a war about everybody, involving everybody. Its rifts would slash across all other lines of English division, splitting not only the nation but regions, cities, churches, communities, classes, genders, even families and friends. They would slaughter each other in the hundreds of thousands, and to make matters worse they were now getting to grips with gunpowder, with clunky and cumbersome new artillery pieces to tear one another's limbs from their bodies and blast their towns and mansions to smoking rubble while unstable ammunition wagons blew up their own ranks where they stood.

Nor was it just the English any more, for it is here that their story becomes intertwined for the long haul with their neighbours the Scots and the Irish. Long overshadowed in the England-centric storytelling, those peoples' crucial roles are why what used to be called the English Civil War is now referred to as the Civil

Wars, the British Wars, or more romantically the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. This was a struggle as much about the relationships between and within them as the struggle for England. It laid the foundations not only for an exhausted Scotland's absorption into an English-dominated United Kingdom, but also for centuries of unspeakable Irish suffering on England's account whose legacies are still putting people in hospital today. And hot in the blood spurting out of it all was religion, the ongoing polarisations and sub-polarisations of the English Reformation, in which this entire mayhem would be just one more costly and inconclusive chapter.

No-one can understand England or Britain today without at least a dip in this crisis, because all these divisions are still playing out. If this is your first time swimming in this particular lake of blood, be advised that the sheer pace of its twists and turns will leave your head spinning – and that in a way is the whole point. The civil wars were a shambles, whose every faction cracked into smaller factions each with its own demands, ambitions, alliances of convenience, separations of perception from fact, and paranoid beliefs about how everyone else was out to get them. This is long division English-style.

It may feel strange that we are to look at it from Brentford, a town which like London escaped the worst of the devastation. The capital hogged some of the key political set pieces, sure, but in terms of the sheer volume of killing, burning and looting the encounters hereabouts are overshadowed by the awesome bloodshed of provincial actions like Marston Moor and Naseby, to say nothing of the carnage in Scotland and Ireland. But that is what makes Brentford interesting. In spite of the modesty of its skirmish, the argument could be made that what took place here one autumn day in 1642 was one of the war's decisive moments, and that what happened on it, or did not happen, rearranged the entire British destiny.

Yes, we stand on a juncture in time, wherein the tiniest variations – a thought entertained, an instinct suppressed, a rush of panic – could have rippled across an infinity of potential futures.

It started with Scotland. It often does. The Stuarts were Scots. In James Stuart the two principal kingdoms on this island had the same head of state for the first time ever, but that was where the union ended. Scotland and England were separate countries with their own languages, customs and ways of life, and the only thing

they shared other than a king was a ferocious rivalry that went back centuries.* Then in 1625 came James's son Charles I, who stepped up his father's ambitions by seeking to fuse them into a single nation.

Now here we have a character worthy of consideration. Charles I was no caricature authoritarian. Look at his paintings. Unlike the Tudors who fill every inch of their frames with their self-aggrandising bodies, clothes and egos, Charles Stuart cuts a leaner, subtler figure in that shipload of likenesses he commissioned off the Dutch artist Anthony van Dyck. There is always a background, always a context – always a story, a sense he is part of something greater than himself. That something would split England asunder.

He also had an exceptional skill which he proceeded to demonstrate in his attempts to unify his kingdoms: a finely-tuned ability to piss off everyone involved to the maximum extent possible while exasperatedly failing to understand why. He pissed off the English because his vision for a united kingdom was based on – you guessed it – authoritarianism, in the form of the *divine right of kings*, that is, the belief that the king had absolute authority because he ruled on behalf of God. This belief was not shared by the rising gentry in parliament who had now jammed their boots in England's political door. And it pissed off the Scots for the same reason it pisses them off today: they will not be treated as England's satellite or junior partner.

It alienated both countries further because union meant religious union, under the king's formalistic and conservative Christianity which both nations suspected would slide them back into the hated clutches of the Catholic church. They were reinforced in their fears by the king's wife, the fiery and indomitable Henrietta Maria of France, who actually was a Catholic and practised unashamedly at the heart of the royal court of an England which had spent the last few generations attempting to stamp it out. The Puritans in the English parliament were obviously and often volcanically hostile. As for the Scots, they had had a completely different experience of the Reformation from the English. Their church, or *kirk* as we should call it in Scotland, had not only embraced Protestant reforms but done so in a uniquely Scottish way under the guidance of theologians like John Knox. Their new system was called *Presbyterian* because it was the presbyters, or assemblies of elders, who would hold power in it – but first they had to rid themselves of the

* That is why this man is James I in England, but James VI in Scotland. *Personal union*, they call it, because the union went no further than his person.

Church of England's bishops, who thanks to Henry VIII were now political officials of the English king. Any attempt by the king to force *religious* uniformity on the Scots was thus seen as an act of English *political* aggression – not too different perhaps from dragging them out of the EU when most of them voted to remain.

So they threw out the bishops in a revolution then in 1640 invaded England. Yup. And they did it successfully. Commanded by the skilled Alexander Leslie, a competent and respected veteran of the European wars, the Scots conquered Northumberland, occupied Newcastle along with the rich coalfields of the Tyne, and refused to go home until the king stopped trying to force them to change.

The English didn't tell you about that one, did they?

Charles was livid at what he saw as his subjects' treasonous insolence. It was all the worse because he could do nothing about it. England had no standing army. If the monarch wanted to pick a fight he or she would raise a force from the population, go and lose a war somewhere, then disband that force after. To raise those soldiers, you had to pay them. But the king was out of money. To get money to pay an army to chase the Scots out of Northumberland, he needed to raise taxes. The king couldn't do that himself; the power to do so lay with parliament. Parliament and Charles I were not friends. Charles I had fought bitterly with parliament throughout the 1620s and 30s, refusing its demands for more powers, imprisoning or cutting the ears off its more vocal members, and at times dissolving it outright. Far from cowing them, each repression only stoked the fire in their veins. When the Scots came rolling down the Tyne valley parliament had not sat for eleven years, in which time Charles had ruled like a dictator, feeding the bubbling groundwaters of resentment by trying to coerce money out of the population directly and advancing his suspect religious reforms. With his country now facing an actual invasion he had little choice but to call parliament back. Surely the members were so overjoyed to see him again that they showered him with confetti then rushed him the money to teach the Scots a lesson and everyone lived happily ever after.

Actually no. No sooner did the members land their bums on its benches than repeat with vengeful single-mindedness the demands over which the king had dismissed them a decade earlier: regular meetings for parliament at least once every three years, the king not allowed to dissolve it nor to raise taxes without going through it, a rollback of creeping Catholic influence, and an end to despotic courts like the Star Chamber, as well as other ultimatums of that nature. Led by a John Pym, the member for Tavistock in Devon, they also resumed attacks on the

people around the king they viewed as most responsible for his abuses of power, and in a striking turning of tables managed to get their most hated of them, the Earl of Strafford, Thomas Wentworth, decapitated using the same legal procedure by which Henry VIII had mown down opponents without trial.

Charles could do nothing – antagonise parliament and no money for his war. Power in this land was shifting now and he knew it. But far from placating parliament, Wentworth's removal only emboldened it. To make matters worse, one of Wentworth's tasks for the king had been keeping Ireland under control by violently suppressing its majority Catholic population. With him out of the way, Ireland detonated into war. A now rampant parliament grew ever more confrontational, suspecting that Charles was behind that conflagration and meant to bring a Catholic army across the Irish Sea to grind England to heel in the same fire and bloodshed.

For Charles, the Scottish invasion was now a mere inconvenience. The entire basis of his rule was on the verge of getting legislated out from under him. He rushed north to get the Scots out of the way by giving them everything they wanted in a whirlwind of banquets, smiles and knighthoods and in so doing abandoning any remnants of his authority in Scotland. He returned to London to put his undivided attention into reining in a parliament he accused, not incorrectly, of encouraging the Scots to invade, only to find it pressing its most audacious list of demands yet. They wrangled on into the new year, but both sides knew it was becoming a show. Both king and parliament believed their own agendas represented the legitimate governance of England, and each castigated the other for undermining fundamental constitutional principles, as well as the foul treachery of plotting to bring in foreign armies to impose their way. Moderates among the parliamentary benches and king's advisers suggested compromises, but those who called the shots – Charles on one side, Pym and his supporters on the other – were having none of it. Collision was now inevitable.

In January 1642, Charles ordered Pym and four other outspoken members arrested for treason, meaning to crush them once and for all. The house refused. It would live in its own legal universe, not the king's, and rejected the king's right to indict them.* So the next day the king marched into parliament with a body of armed supporters to arrest them in person. They were not there; they had been tipped off and slipped away to safety. The Speaker – parliament's chair – refused

* The formal term for this is *parliamentary privilege*, which continues to this day: an MP cannot be arrested for breaking certain laws if it is done in the line of their parliamentary duties.

to tell him where they were. Humiliated and incensed, Charles left the building to find a hostile London taking to the barricades against him. The capital had emerged as a hotbed of parliamentary support, and amidst its jeers, riots and dubious fluids hurled from windows, the king realised his safety there was no longer guaranteed. He packed his family into a coach and bolted from the city. Henrietta Maria would cross to Europe to raise funds, arms and international backing, while the king himself started popping up all over the country, each time at the head of a burgeoning mass of supporters.

A power dispute between two institutions now escalated into a struggle for competing visions of England that reached into every bedroom. The king hastened north, and by the time he reached Nottingham he was able to raise his standard over an army of people for whom the only cosmic reality they could imagine was a strong state, and strong church, under a strong king. Parliament assembled its own army out of the London militias and a mostly urban support base in the name of a restorative reform agenda to sweep out corrupt autocrats and conniving Catholic infiltrators, though at this stage the goal was still to bind the king into a power structure accountable to parliament, rather than remove him altogether. As the year went on both parties were joined by people whose regional concerns, religious beliefs, or daily economic realities better tilted their ears towards one side's storytelling or the other's. For some the choice was easy. For others it was agonising, especially in the many cases where beloved friends or family members gravitated the other way and became committed enemies, sometimes to end up tearfully facing one another across a battlefield. Many people were also unwillingly pressured or downright coerced in what was now a with-us-or-against-us situation, each side declaring the other traitors whose lives and properties were forfeit.

It rapidly worsened. Both forces were cobbled together in a hurry and so were poorly equipped and ill-disciplined, liable to plunder or abuse the inhabitants whose dwellings they marched through and so polarise hatreds further. They were also devoid of combat experience in a country that had been at general peace since before their grandparents were born. As with the English today, when peace is all you think you know it becomes so comfortable to believe it is permanent – to think you are civilised, advanced, immune to barbarous impulses forever and fit to mock those who exaggerate the gathering of storm clouds. So it was for their commanders, with a small but significant exception: those few on both sides who had fought in the appalling European wars as mercenaries for

foreign armies, and thus had both tactical experience and a grim-faced awareness of what horrors lay in store.

They would not have long to wait. As Charles rallied the countryside, the parliamentary army set out to ‘rescue’ him from his malicious advisers, as they saw it, and bring him back to London. After some cat-and-mouse manoeuvring the armies met at Edgehill, on the rolling plains of Warwickshire in the centre of the country. It was a slaughter. The royalist cavalry got the advantage but in rash hot blood chased the fleeing parliamentary riders off into the distance, leaving the two opposing infantry lines to hack each other to chunks all day till the sun set, the air grew cold and dark, and the shattered remnants staggered back to safety. Left in the fields were 3,000 English people, the lucky ones dead, the rest maimed, ripped up with entrails falling out, groaning in agony as they slowly bled out in the freezing night. Incredibly a handful survived because it was so cold their wounds froze up and cauterised their blood. Commanders and survivors on both sides were left to sit traumatised around their fires and think about what they had unleashed. It must have felt just as it would if it happened to the English today. So much for peaceful, civilised England. It was time to kill everyone you disagreed with until you got your way, all over again.

Edgehill had settled nothing, and needless to say neither side was in any condition to keep fighting. So instead the parliamentary army turned back for London, where the populace was in a high panic about what had happened and feared the king would now come rampaging down the Thames valley to finish them. Not immune to the shock of watching the gates of hell reopen in their land, some members of parliament raised hopes of negotiating peace before things got any further out of control. They were sensible to worry. For the king everything now depended on getting to London and toppling parliament’s leaders before the harsh English winter put an end to that year’s campaigning and gave them the chance to consolidate their hold on the capital. Had he gone for it, he might well have pulled it off. But Charles’s army was just as shaken as parliament’s, which might explain why rather than making a quick move on London, it hesitated, crawling slowly down the Thames valley to Banbury, then Oxford, one of the king’s most dependable strongholds of support whose spires and colleges he would repurpose as his government-in-exile and army headquarters, for the duration as it turned out. From there the royalist army advanced to Reading, dangling peace talks at every step of the way. This gave time for the parliamentary army to make it back to London, where it joined the soldiers, militias and an increasing mass of

ordinary people in fortifying the capital to prepare for the king's attack. Ships were brought up the river, and the civilians set about digging defensive earthworks in the city's west districts. The prospect of a negotiated peace still flittered around all of these people, offering hope that now they had tasted where they were headed there might still be a chance to stop this madness. But the talks came to nothing, and hopes evaporated when the king sent part of his force ahead under his nephew Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a dashing young veteran of the wars in Europe. Their orders were to capture Brentford, where we now stand. Securing it would strengthen Charles's hand in the negotiations, or, if those failed, provide him a launchpad back into London.

The Battle of Brentford was something of an anti-climax. Defending the town were two small parliamentary detachments. One was under the command of Denzil Holles, the member for Dorchester and one of the five agitators Charles had tried to arrest for treason. The other was led by a parliament-supporting nobleman, the Lord Brooke, Robert Greville. Stamped upon them from the west came some four to five thousand royalists with Prince Rupert's cavalry in the vanguard. They collided in bouts of close-quarters fighting in Brentford's streets, but the overwhelming royalist numbers forced Brooke's and Holles's troops to withdraw, some of them drowning as they swam across the Thames under royalist fire. Brentford belonged to the king, but its defenders had bought valuable time.

What mattered a lot more was what the king's forces did to Brentford. Showing the same fatal indiscipline that had cost them the initiative at Edgehill, the royalist army sacked the town. Brentford's residents watched powerlessly as the soldiers emptied out their dwellings of food, drink, cooking utensils, furniture, clothes, bedding, indeed just about anything valuable that they could lay their hands on.

It was a mistake. It is not clear whether anyone was killed or physically abused in this vandalism, but it took little time for all of London, skilled propagandists included, to get the message about what unreconstructed thugs the king's supporters were, nor to imagine what manner of fate awaited them all should they take the capital. Intent that that should not happen, they redoubled their efforts to throw up defensive earthworks, assemble their banners, and prepare whatever swords, pots, pans or sharpened sticks lay in reach. The next day, November 13th, Rupert and his royalists learnt the consequences of their wantonness when they advanced two miles up the Great West Road to Turnham Green. The place is now

best known for its District Line junction, but instead they might prefer to remember it as the place where all hope of a swift end to the civil war disappeared.

Facing the king's army across Turnham Green – in those days a much larger space joined to the commons of Acton and Chiswick – was an awe-inspiring mass of heaving, seething humanity, some 24,000 individuals packed into all the open space available to physically block the royalists out of their city. It must have been an alarming sight. The key positions were held by the Trained Bands – the London militias – as well as the now battle-hardened forces who had made it back from Edgehill, but the bulk of the amalgamation was made up of ordinary Londoners, men or women or otherwise. Here was the defiant will of the capital incarnate, manifest for the singular purpose of keeping out what they had every reason to believe was a bunch of murderous, larcenous, duplicitous authoritarian gangsters.

The royalist forces lined up and then for most of the day just stood there, staring them down and getting stared right back at. What more could they do? Those thousands packed the narrow alleys and gardens and riverside lanes – hardly a friendly battlefield for mounted cavalry. There would be no way past that throng without a calamitous bloodbath, which would do obvious wonders for Londoners' odium for the king even if they made it through. The royalist soldiers' morale weathered further as they watched those masses getting refuelled with cartloads of food and drink from a supportive population; the rebels could wait as long as they needed, whereas the stretched and tired royalists only grew hungrier by the hour. The story of the civil war had reached a fork in the road, and the lower the sun fell in the sky, the sharper and denser grew the brambles on the path the king was most desperate to take. So in the end, he chose the other. The royalist army withdrew – it would not take London today.

It would not get another chance. The defenders might have been jubilant, and the king's decision sensible, but the next time he set foot in London it would be as parliament's prisoner. The non-battle at Turnham Green ended any chance of a fast resolution. Winter had come. Both sides would now dig in, the parliamentarians in London, the king in his heavily garrisoned Oxford, preparing for a war which come spring would fireblossom across the country.

Consider that. The light actions at Brentford and Turnham Green were almost forgettable in purely military terms. But by stopping the king getting back into London, they meant the rest of the civil war had to happen. It still might have, albeit in a radically different way, if he had found a way to flank the defenders or dared to press through the middle. Or it might not, if in the chilling heat of the

moment, with the two sides' faces pressed against each other but both made tentative with the shock of real war's return to England, they had found a way to come to terms and talk out their problems. Instead they were pushed apart, with all the harsh fridity of England's cold season to crystallise their festering moods, freeze their disagreements in layers of jagged ice, and incubate their resentments such that when the thaw came they would burst from the surface like magma.

So let's look at what *did* happen. Through 1643 and 1644 the royalists won a series of campaigns in north and southwest England that put them in control of most of the country and seemed to foretell victory. However, parliament made an alliance with the Scots, whose organised and well-led armies came back into England and joined them in a decisive victory against the royalists at Marston Moor, near York, thereby seizing the north and turning the tide against the king. It was there that the hitherto secondary figure of the member for Cambridge, Oliver Cromwell (great-great-grandson of Thomas Cromwell's sister), made his name with his resolute leadership in the field, and from then on he would emerge as both the political and military figurehead of the parliamentary cause. Committed now to see this through to the end, parliament reorganised its forces into the much more professional New Model Army under Cromwell and their other military hero, Thomas Fairfax, and in June 1645 defeated the king's army at the Battle of Naseby, breaking the back of the royalists as an organised force.

All these encounters were brutal, typically leaving hundreds or thousands of people dead. Despite some worthy attempts to observe the norms of civilised warfare, ill-discipline, frustration, and the sheer animosity between two sets of people banging the treason hammer on each other's heads drove the war into an ever-uglier morass of pillage, massacre and sexual abuse. Civilians, unarmed support units, and surrendering troops all shared in the agony. It was bad enough in the set-piece battles, let alone the pitiless sieges of fortified mansions or walled cities up and down the country. But in Scotland, where the war arrived in 1644, and Ireland, where it had blazed all along, the extra charge of Catholic-Protestant hatreds and ancient clan rivalries dragged the atrocities to still darker levels of depravity. In Ireland the horrendous carnage exchanged by the Catholic Irish rebels and Protestant English and Scottish settlers ripped on without conclusion. In Scotland an army loyal to the king led by two outlandish characters, the romantic James Graham, Marquess of Montrose and the roaring Hebridean giant Alasdair MacColla laid waste to the country in a rampage remembered as much for its unconventional and brilliant strategies as for its heinous cruelty, which

reached its depths in the sack of Aberdeen but eventually petered out as the Highland warriors got too homesick to fight on for alien causes far from their mountain heartlands. The Presbyterian government in Edinburgh retook control, and it was with them that Charles sought shelter in 1646, only to end up bargained over to parliament.

And that was just the first phase.

Despite parliament's victory, there followed a set of renewed rebellions in the king's name. An exasperated and ever angrier New Model Army rushed to put down uprisings in England and Wales, as well as another Scottish invasion by a secret faction that was negotiating with Charles to put him back in power. The Scots have their own problem with undoing their own best efforts through internal strife, and this was one such moment: their new order, thus far so solidly euphoric, was crumbling into factionalism. Similar was happening to parliament in England. Divisions opened up between radicals and moderates in the house, but also between the house and the New Model Army that had fought in its name and was now finding a political voice of its own. In the centre of it all was Oliver Cromwell who, along with most of the army's leaders, became convinced that Charles was the chief architect of all this neverending trouble. Their mood shifted towards disposing of the king and his throne altogether. There was just the small problem that this was totally unthinkable in a country that could no sooner imagine itself with no king than the sky without a sun, a view shared by many of the MPs who had gone to war against their monarch but on a narrative of bringing him to his senses rather than abolishing him. Guess what solution was found?

Yes – in 1648 it was the anti-king faction's turn to take an armed platoon into parliament. They arrested or locked out several hundred members who wanted to continue negotiating with the king, leaving the house in the control of a 'rump' of about 150 MPs more inclined to do away with him. Parliament's rebellion had morphed into a military coup.

With that, preparations began for perhaps the single most dramatic set-piece in all English history: the trial and execution of the king for treason. The English have debated ever since whether these were legitimate proceedings, but it is a moot point. Law is about power, not justice, and if you remain in any doubt about this, or about *treason* being no more than a way to criminalise political opposition, then look no further than this war where each side was utterly convinced its own authority was legitimate and its opponents treacherous, and where each took its share of one another's heads by interpreting the law to suit its own interests.

One person who comprehended this perfectly was Charles himself, who the court took all of seven days to convict of all its charges. It only took that time at all because he conducted himself with articulate dignity all the way through, arguing that as a monarch, his divine right placed him above the court's judgement. His trial therefore turned into a re-run of the debate between the positions that had taken England to war in the first place, by the end of which the parliament-controlled court got fed up and signed his death warrant as it intended to do all along. And so with almost supernatural grace under pressure the English's last absolute monarch presented his head to the block, but not before using his farewell speech as yet one more chance to orate his case from right there on the scaffold. 'I must tell you', he insisted, 'that their liberty and freedom consists in having a government (and) laws by which their life and goods may be most their own. It is not for having share in government...a subject and a sovereign are clean different things.'

Do you think Charles Stuart was smiling as the axe came down? He had won, and he was intelligent enough to know it. The English remember that moment as the death of absolute monarchy. Death to the evil dictator, hooray for democracy and all that. But they had not done it by winning the argument. Rather they shut down the argument through the violence of every dictator's favourite tools: the military coup, the show trial, and the killing ritual, to say nothing of the rewriting of the story. It was no coincidence that the king's fate was decreed in the same solemn hall of the Palace of Westminster where generations of political prisoners had been condemned to death, from Scottish independence hero William Wallace to religious dissident Thomas More. Was it not the case, the authoritarians could retort, that by their unnatural overthrow of the established order, his judges had plunged the country into its worst chaos and bloodshed on record? Who were the destroyers of life and liberty now?

Maybe the London crowds who watched him die wondered this too – it is said they did not whoop but groaned in despair. The English had killed the divine right of kings, but only by resorting to a violent, coercive, arrogant authoritarianism every bit the equal of what it was dispatching. That corruption would seep into its soil. Loosed from the shattered crown, its particles would disperse to soak across the entire population. It would poison whatever attempt at liberty or democracy the English built upon its remains, a curse to run ever after in its institutional veins. It remains there to this day.

No surprise then that killing the king did nothing to end the turmoil. A third phase of the civil war brought Cromwell and the New Model Army to Scotland and Ireland. Ireland was first, where Cromwell forever cemented his place in Irish folklore as a corpse-gorging demon. The prime symbols are Drogheda and Wexford, where appalling massacres of surrendering soldiers and at least some civilians took place on the watch of the virulently anti-Irish and anti-Catholic Cromwell. The Irish Catholic uprising would be defeated a few years later, but by then the New Model Army was in Scotland whose alliance with parliament had long since broken down. There Cromwell's force found a country disintegrating into a sad and exhausted confusion of political factions, local interests and raving Presbyterian fundamentalists. The final act took place when one of these blocs made an uneasy arrangement with the king's son and heir Charles II, now in exile in Europe and intent on taking his throne back. They got him back into the country in 1651 only to meet a final defeat to the New Model Army at Worcester, propelling the young Charles to his famous escape back to Europe via an oak tree. When the first peaceful sunlight dawned after nine years of warfare, it was on a kingless, broken England in the grip of a military junta.

The Commonwealth of England, as it became known, and later the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, lasted only nine years before the country grew tired of it and brought back Charles II as king. It was unstable, argumentative, racked by further coups and power struggles, and became so reliant on the personality of Cromwell as a balancing force that after he died in 1658 it could no longer hold together. No surprise, it was no free country. It repressed political opponents, censored publications, and wielded power rooted in the army. The caricature of this period is of grim-faced, fun-hating Puritans clamping down on everything, and this does have some basis. This was the intrusive state which burst into people's houses to break up their Christmas celebrations, and there were prohibitions on maypoles, theatres, gambling and goodness knows what else. On the other hand, past a certain point this might have been exaggeration spun up by the royalists later to scare their children about how horrible England was without a king. Despite the censorship England experienced a literary revival with authors like John Milton active; opera and music were allowed to flourish, in part because Cromwell liked it; and some of the activities suppressed, like the reprehensible bear-baiting, were surely things the country was better off without. Ruthless and racist Cromwell certainly could be, but he was also pragmatic, and showed an instinctive dislike of

both fakery and luxury as well as of volatile radicalism of all types, whether from humanists or religious fanatics (and in all the pandemonium of this post-conflict England, there was no shortage of end-of-the-world firebrands milling about). With the country physically and psychologically in tatters from a decade of warfare, he and his council saw this as a time to get it back on its feet, rather than shake it up more with some sweeping revolutionary agenda.

Perhaps that was why it was not an outright totalitarian police state either. There was a new Treason Act to be enforced by a new High Court, but under a Chief Justice who made it clear he refused to persecute defeated royalists with it. Vocal dissidents were usually banished or muffled rather than put to death, and religious freedom returned to remarkable health considering the intolerance of the period. Diverse and dissident Protestants were accommodated, Jews were welcomed back in after centuries of prejudice, and – almost unthinkably – there are even signs that Cromwell made hushed overtures to the hated Catholics, unsuccessfully, to see if they could not be re-absorbed into the national life.

So it is hard to measure this Commonwealth, because rather than being one thing or another it amounted to a muddled limbo of constitutional experimentation that was at any rate short-lived before a relapse into more familiar monarchical patterns. Charles II swept back to power in 1660 to the cheer and relief of a (mostly) adoring populace, facilitated by the guy Cromwell had parked in Scotland to keep it calm, General George Monck, who held leverage precisely because he had more or less managed to do so while England fell into disarray. There was no broad rampage of revenge against the parliamentarians, but nor was there mercy for the surviving individuals who had put their names to Charles I's death warrant, many of whom were butchered to pieces in another feeding hour for the dread ritual of hanging, drawing and quartering. Even Cromwell had his cadaver removed from its resting place in Westminster Abbey so that his head could be hacked off, put up for display, then vanish into a swirl of conspiracy theories that has never been resolved.

The king was dead, long live the king. Had the civil wars, that entire epic of horrors, all been for nothing?

The popular answer is no. The experience of civil war and what people today would call a *republic** dramatically, though by no means by design, changed the England and Britain the world puts up with today.

Ride back in through a festival of trumpet blasts and bonfires he might have done, but Charles II and every monarch after him wore straitjackets that from then on only tightened. As for parliament, it had grown new institutional teeth which though temporarily blunted would never be dug out at the roots. Rather they regrew frighteningly fast. Not three decades later another king, James II, was chased off the throne for his closeness to Catholicism, and when his replacement, William of Orange from the Netherlands, came in to take over England in 1689 it was only on parliament's condition that he submit to the Declaration of Right, which sealed into law, at last, a range of parliamentary powers like regular sittings, free elections, free and open debate, and control over taxes, statutes, and raising armies – that is, most of the things for which it had gone to war with Charles I in the first place. This, give or take some more tweaks and dead bodies, is the English constitutional settlement that has lasted to this day. It was one of the English's most monumental shifts of power: the shunting of the royal family to its ceremonial margins and the landing of real power in the laps of parliament, whose factions would soon consolidate into a political party system and eventually a nest for the new executive – not the king or queen, but a prime minister and cabinet.† And to this day, each summer they open parliament by slamming the doors of the House of Commons in the face of the king's or queen's emissary, as though in reflexive memory of Charles I storming in with soldiers to arrest them.

Some settlement, that. Everything they went to war over remains unresolved.

The first and most serious problem was in the nastiness by which they got there. In theory the civil wars were about high-minded competing visions of how the country should be governed. In practice they were about sets of authoritarians replacing each other. Each was absolutely convinced that it represented liberty and that the others were out to destroy it, but to the outsider it is obvious that liberty had nothing to do with any of them. Nor is that to waggle the finger of

* Questionably, it could be said. The tradition inherited from the Roman notion of *res publica* ('thing of the public') is not simply a state with no monarch, as *republic* tends to imply these days, but a more complex concept: a state governed in representation of the interests of the people with a balanced constitution and healthy civic culture. If this direction interests you then Cicero's *On the Commonwealth* (*De re publica*) is a good place to start.

† One reason these appeared was that the next century's kings were Germans who couldn't speak English, so needed their help to rule.

anachronistic ‘modern’ values at them: people were saying it at the time. There *were* democrats around, and these were neither the royalists nor the parliamentarians but some of the first people in England that later generations would recognise as a proper democracy movement: the Levellers. The Levellers were – ironically – mostly soldiers from the New Model Army, and put forward principles the English today incline to think of as their birthright but less than four hundred years ago were unforgivably incendiary: religious freedom, natural rights, gender equality, progressive taxation, political power as entrusted by the people, and the right to vote regardless of whether or not you held property. Other groups, most notably the Quakers, joined them in the mosaic of liberal challenges that sprouted from the rich bloodied earth of this period.

Cromwell’s response? ‘You are necessitated to break them.’ And they did. Not for another two centuries, and then only with the bitterest struggles, would the heirs to Leveller thinking (start to) have their day.*

Now look closer at the new binary of stereotypes the war planted in the English political imagination. In one corner are the royalist *cavaliers*: dashing, cultured and honourable (to their supporters), or privileged and arrogant to the rims of their frills (to their opponents). In the other are the parliamentarian *roundheads*: in the favourable view just and pragmatic; to their detractors uncouth, pugnacious and fanatical. This pair of contrasts, Charles versus Cromwell, has since been wheeled out for almost any line of conflict that has divided the English since: conservatives and progressives, Tories and Whigs, bourgeois and proletarians, Leave and Remain. What is telling about this is not that it is far too simple, but that that simplicity is no accident. Either side can be portrayed either as violent and tyrannical, or as representing the ‘true’ will of the people, because both were both to different people at different times. That makes the labels flexible, thus deceptive – and that is the whole point. English divisions meet in a no-man’s-land of what we might call IAMRightism, where complex disputes are simplified into black-and-white-stereotypes of good guys versus bad guys, rather than each side recognising the fairness of the other’s grievances.

* Remember the peasant revolts against Enclosure? The Levellers got their name from those rebels, who in protest used to *level* (i.e. flatten) the fences and hedges that cut up their common land. Another group that emerged around the same time was the Diggers, who called themselves the ‘True Levellers’ and called for equitable agrarian communities as well as interdependence between humans and nature.

It is a dangerous reductive instinct, that enables that most English of habits: the doublespeak of claiming to stand for freedom, then going off on a most depraved dance of atrocities and dehumanising bigotries while insisting that it is to spread or defend that freedom. So it was for the parties of Charles and Cromwell against each other, and so it would be for generations of enslavers, imperialists, warmongers, genocides, racists, sexists and gender essentialists, including those who carried this intellectual acrobatics of oppression across to America and there perfected it. For all of them a commitment to liberty was and is consistent, in their own minds, with the view that certain groups of people are of inferior or dangerous character and need to be erased from consideration by all means necessary. Today's cult of the market and its like contempt for the vulnerable and poor, as well as popular panic at immigration as a supposed threat to liberal values, are only the latest links in this chain.

Is this the same curse that arose from the fact they could not tear down their king without resorting to equal and opposite authoritarianism? Since then, no matter their claims to love liberty, the English have been so fast to flee for the comforting folds of the tyrant's mantle at the first sight of things they fear. Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher whose justification for this in *Leviathan* became a staple of English political theory, was a product of this period: his belief in submission to absolute authority no matter what came straight out of his terror at the anarchy to which the civil war reduced his country, a condition he characterised, erroneously, as a *state of nature*. Now both he and Charles Stuart may have been wrong to overlook the cruelty of divine-right autocracy's *lawful evil*, but till the English come up with better, they have to admit he had a point: England has been no less vulnerable to such evil without it. Seriously. Are the English not still subjected to tyrannical powers in society? Has that tyranny been not abolished, but rather *dispersed* to their employers, landlords, bureaucrats, police, and the unaccountable rules of society that in effect control their lives, determining how they must work, speak, dress and think if they are to receive the means of survival? Is the difference today not that tyranny happens less, but that the mainstream has been convinced to take it as mere *reality*? And what of the parliament that started it all, still constantly compromised by vested interests and dodgy corporate relationships but also institutionally set up in the image of zero-sum confrontation – in its discussion styles, its first-past-the-post election methods, even the positioning of its benches which face each other as though across a chasm carved through the heart of the nation? Charles Stuart is still

smiling smug with the Sellotape around his neck, wherever he is, because he knows that his ‘subjects’ have had four hundred years to play with the sovereignty they took off him but still have yet to win the argument.

That England has taken much of this failure out on its colonies leads us to a second unsettled legacy: its relationships with Scotland and Ireland. It was in exactly this period that these were thrashed out into the modern concept of Britain, and though Elizabeth Tudor and James ‘Personal Rule’ Stuart laid its foundations, it was the kingless Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell that began serious construction. In other words, the basis for today’s United Kingdom was not a negotiating table with mutually agreeable documents and cakes and champagne, but shattered post-conflict failed states at the barrel of an English gun. For Scotland the settlement came in the same basic shape as lasts (for now) to this day: separate but equal partners, at least in theory, with some powers devolved to a Scottish governing body.

The suffering of Ireland, for its part, was unambiguously horrific. Some forty percent of its population had been killed in the war, a far higher proportion than in England or Scotland. The English seized the best Irish land to sell to their own settlers and planters, in part to pay the army for its trouble in coming out there to lay waste to it in the first place. The Irish who lived there were packed off to barren wastelands or sold in their thousands into indentured servitude in the Caribbean. Their Irish Gaelic language was banned and Catholicism suppressed, with priests put to death, locked up, or forced to hide in caves or flee into overseas exile. But this was no mere revenge. It was a project, framed in ideologies we have already witnessed: Irish Catholics as inferior animals that the civilised Protestant English would now uplift. Here descended mists that would soon congeal into British colonial racism, and of course it was no more successful in Ireland than it would be in India. Instead it left a nation traumatised, humiliated, occupied but never defeated, and soaked its relations with England in blistering hatred for centuries to come.

The English have never understood how since then, united as the *kingdoms* might be, their *stories* were not. The English remember Cromwell as a hero; the Irish remember him as a genocidal monster, and to be wished ‘the Curse of Cromwell’ is among the worst insults an Irish person can inflict on you. The English call the overthrow of James II and his replacement by William the ‘Glorious Revolution’, but there was nothing glorious about it for those Irish or Scots who rejected it. William had to conquer Ireland in a whole new round of

bloodletting, while the Jacobite rebels, as they came to be called, would support James and his heirs through a series of uprisings to restore them to power, but each time got so miserably thrashed that the names of the places it happened – the river Boyne in Ireland (1690), Culloden in Scotland (1746) – still taste disgusting in their national memories. It is also why the colour orange, as in William's Orange dynasty in the Netherlands, became a rallying symbol for the English Protestant settlers or *Unionists* in Northern Ireland, as well as a searing provocation to Irish nationalists and Catholics. Take a look: it still is. So much of the fractiousness over today's issues like Scottish independence, the Northern Ireland peace process, or the impact of Brexit on both has been caused by the failure of the English to understand that in the other parts of their supposedly United Kingdom, people are operating to a completely different story.

A third product of the civil wars: the British armed forces. They swear allegiance to the queen, but it was the monarch's enemies who created their prototype. Cromwell's New Model Army, drawn up from scratch in real-time warfare, laid the basis for England's first permanent army of professional full-time soldiers, commanded by officers who got their jobs for competence rather than social rank. Let every soldier in England remember on taking his or her oath that the institution he or she serves was created to defeat his or her own king, then overthrew the politicians and took power in a military coup. Let every sailor remember it too, because the Commonwealth also found time to get involved in a wrangle at sea with the Dutch, whose skilled admirals taught it embarrassing lessons about the mediocrity of the English navy. It was this that finally compelled them to widespread reforms in naval administration, from which emerged a reborn fleet that for the first time knew what it was doing. This was the embryo that would grow into that indispensable instrument of British imperial power, the Royal Navy.* The lesson? The army's and navy's loyalties have changed. They may change again.

They also set off the fourth unsettled legacy: British overseas expansion. As well as eroding the dominance of the Dutch and supporting the American colonies, a far-reaching consequence came by accident when this navy sailed to the

* An extra military fruit of this period was those red-suited royal guards with the enormous black bearskin caps that thousands of tourists annoy each day outside Buckingham Palace. They are the Grenadier Guards, brought together by Charles II after the Restoration as a force of bodyguards personally loyal to the monarch in hopes of avoiding a repeat of what happened to his dad.

Caribbean to dislodge the Spanish from their stronghold on Hispaniola (the island now shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic). They failed, abjectly, so the survivors drifted around then settled for a smaller island with far less challenging Spanish defences – and that is where British involvement in Jamaica begins. Grisliness was to follow, for no sooner had they restored the monarchy than they got serious about building up their tropical island hell of sugar plantations worked by enslaved West Africans. Both Charles II and James II were personally implicated, and within a couple of generations Britain was the leading slave-trading nation in the world. Three hundred and fifty years later a Home Secretary would be removed from office in connection with the racist deportations of British Jamaicans in the Windrush Scandal. The story continues.

And a fifth open legacy, on the issue that put them to war in the first place: the proper arrangement of power in English politics. There is still no clear constitutional settlement on this. We could point to plenty of illustrations over the years, especially the crises over the power of the House of Lords, but why bother? We can see it right now with the tussling over whether parliament, the prime minister, or popular referenda should get the final say in big decisions like bombing Middle Eastern countries or how and whether to leave the EU. How should sovereignty be shared between the executive, the parliament, the courts and the people? And what of the chiselling off of slices of that sovereignty to land it, often quite sensibly, with third parties like the Scottish Parliament, the European Court of Human Rights, or the UN Security Council? Rather than arriving at settled decisions the tendency is to muddle something out in the moment then move on. What might happen if such divisions emerge in situations where the stakes are far higher – say, over whether to use nuclear weapons while under invasion, or what sides to take in a new American civil war (because they, too, have yet to resolve the problems that caused their first one)?

Yes, let's end on America's problems, because those too spun off these English divisions. That happened when a hundred years after the English got their monarchy back, another bunch of English across the sea would accuse king *and* parliament of trampling their liberties and take up arms against both, to the cry of 'no taxation without representation'. They would re-run the whole affair, blood and guts and all, to erect a United States of America free of oppression. They too have yet to succeed.



Well then. That is a lot of material to stuff into a single thought bubble, so let us draw out of it with the caution of surfacing deep-sea divers till we emerge once more on the sunlit bridge of Brentford.

Perhaps now, after weighing all that, we can appreciate the gravity of those modest skirmishes that took place here at the start of the civil war. The English constitutional monarchy, the British Empire and its army and navy, the union with Scotland and Ireland – these are massive, messy stories which remain alive around us, and each only turned out the way it has because of what happened here in those few days at the approach of that bitterest of winters.

How far did the royalists' sack of Brentford drive Londoners' determination to come out to stand in their way at Turnham Green? Perhaps not so much; the capital was already in high hostility against them. But we cannot discount the possibility that it brought a handful more people out to the barricades, just possibly swelling them past a critical mass in a stand-off where the slightest flutter of a butterfly's wings might have changed everything. What if just one person had panicked and shot at the enemy's lines, setting off a collective loss of nerve and a hurtle to bloodshed? What if in the course of the day, the royalist scouts had found just a hint of an optimistic flanking opportunity, a space in an

alleyway filled in our universe by a citizen in fury at how her uncle, say, had been robbed of his kettle in Brentford? What if, perhaps, a tennis ball had been thrown in from somewhere, setting off tension-defusing exchanges between what were really two overheated mobs, both shaken, both unsure of the road they were taking, both with at least one ear still open to peace talks? The success of the last we can probably rule out, because these were still post-Tudor English people who knew a hundred words for 'traitor' and not one for 'compromise'. But to stand upon that junction of time is to scope out an infinity of plausible outcomes given the sheer numbers of random people in a so unscripted, precarious and unprecedented a set of encounters.

Supposing Charles's army had found a way through? If it had, there is little doubt that his reprisals against the leaders and institution of parliament would have been severe. Would a different England have resulted then, recommitted to absolute monarchy and the divine right of kings? Would it have lasted, perhaps to lurch stubbornly with other autocracies like Russia and France into an age where it, too, would be torn down amid still greater turbulence and terror? Well, just to get that far takes some imagination, as the advance from Turnham Green might have involved such slaughter as to wreck the last remnants of Charles's legitimacy among a populace that would sneer his name thereafter as the Butcher of London, and leap at the first chance to be rid of him – of which there would be plenty, especially once the Scottish armies swept in to end his pretensions. But with parliamentary authority decapitated, who would then provide the English an alternative vision and lead them to it? Perhaps no-one: the country could have subsided instead into a fragmented, war-plagued nonentity in Europe's ignored and forgotten backyard, perhaps one day to be colonised by a resurgent Scotland or Ireland. A very different empire might have emerged on these islands, with its capital in Edinburgh or Dublin. Would it too have alienated its settlers in America into independence, or gone to war to stop them? Would it have overwhelmed India, humiliated China, and shook the world to its foundations? Would it have turned out so crap at sport? We may never know; all we can say is that if things had not muddled out exactly as they did here on those few days, we might be living in a very different world.

In the light of the England they did end up with, perhaps it really is an accomplishment that they managed, eventually, to slap together a political framework of which some of the fragments begin to approach a resemblance to something in the vicinity of democracy and freedom. But let them not convince

themselves they have got there. Let them not believe they now inhabit a stable condition that might not come apart under shocks and pressures. And let them never, ever lose sight of how they got where they are: not by drawing on any love of liberty or civilised, courteous tendencies built into some national essence, but by blasting that liberty out of each other with artillery pieces.

Across Brentford Bridge lies the road into London, and there are people that way, so it would expose us to high risk of hearing that actually no they are democratic because fifty-two percent made their decision so everyone else has to accept it without complaint. So instead let us retreat off the bridge and strike north up the Brent, placing our trust in that river to take us to a place of rest.

Every view here is a snapshot of Brentford's transition. Where once stood docks and warehouses, fashionable apartment complexes parade upon the banks. They crowd in round Brentford Lock, where on the far side stands a little cream-brick toll house from whose offices the heavy traffic of this canal was once administered – cargo weighed and measured, tolls collected, the lock's operation directed. The lock still works, but fewer vessels pass through these days and tolls are no longer charged. The toll house now houses an information centre staffed by local volunteers, hard at work preserving Brentford's heritage.

The luxury properties come to a stop at an abandoned and certainly haunted warehouse. The structure has been reduced to its rusty iron frames, but a canopy extends in a box over the water, and the towpath runs straight through it. It is not the frightening kind of haunted because its pedestrians are smart-shirted, besuited types chatting about financial things that don't really exist, but their mundanity fails to drown out some lingering spiritual charge. The ghosts of rowdy dockworkers shouldering cargo between berthed barges fade in and out from the ancient otherworldlinesses of the water itself, the timeless domain of the Thames and its tributaries.

This derelict warehouse is now their gatehouse, for step beyond and we are well into the Brent's ancestral territory, a land of unbound greenery and sleeping narrowboats that not even the colossus of the GlaxoSmithKline worldwide headquarters can disrupt. Loom as it might, its monolith of modernity is relegated to the background. The foreground belongs to the river, its herons, its ducklings, its boat people; out of nowhere a massive black cormorant phases into existence and glides up the watercourse, wings spread wide to trace a wake on the surface.

Some of its humans are bustling around on their barges, where pot plants and kitchen equipment clutter in organised chaos with nautical equipment for which people of that way of life, so different from those in the apartments on the other side, have an entire separate vocabulary. Other barges look as though they have not been disturbed for a thousand years, and you can peek through gaps in encrusted windows to find gnomish figurines grinning at you from the creepy dark dimensions within.

It feels remote. Yet even out here signs of English divisions play out at an everyday level. A noticeboard assures passers-by that GlaxoSmithKline is contributing to looking after the waterway with all its high-tech gallantry, but its attempt at an explanation has been scrawled to silence by angry graffiti. Further along more boards with historical information have been defaced and left to fade – they are totally illegible. An inflatable yellow dinghy bobs abandoned under the growths on the opposite bank, somehow evoking fraud and tax evasion schemes and dodgy shell companies registered in Panama. The Brent flows on, feigning indifference as it goes about its higher service, but it watches these people, it always has, and one can feel it worries for them.

They ought to repair those history boards. Valuing history is the first step to looking back on the conflicts that shaped their country and disabusing themselves of the notion that what happened was irrelevant because those people were simply over-religious savages or adherents to outdated principles who spilt blood because they were primitive. Catastrophes like the Tudor pogroms or the Stuart civil wars are absolutely relevant, and to hold that thought while glancing around the social and political landscape of Brexit England is to witness the same arrogances, the same ego trips, the same shouting matches, the same propaganda straw-men, the same spectacular failures of empathy and care, and the same contempt for people who disagree, thus to be labelled as traitors, excluded from consideration, and expected to lie down and take it. It is to see the same divisions – England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the globalist and the nativist, the privileged and the oppressed, the capital and the regions, the older and younger generations, the experts and those fed up of them – all slow-baked into a house long divided whose inhabitants have had to learn the hard way how to negotiate their disagreements without bringing the roof down; and *only* to negotiate them, not to resolve them, because that they have yet to do.

Look – the Brent wants to show us a something. See there, in the water? It is a vision: Henry Tudor, pustulating in his coffin in Syon Abbey. Watch: his undead

corpse is shaking off the chewing mutts, gripping the sides of the casket, and with almighty difficulty, heaving itself up for one last jab at his subjects' descendants. He addresses them with the familiar refrain of every authoritarian brought to bay: 'We are not so different, you and I'.

A stone's throw away: a spectral head, hovering around in the dark vaults of Windsor Castle. It wears an expression best described as smug resignation. 'You see? I told them it would happen. But they didn't listen.'

If the English want to prove them wrong, they had best get busy.

8. Boats



Few people realise in how great a measure the forgotten canals contributed to the vast upheaval of the Industrial Revolution...the canal – the spell which loosed the machine – has not merely fallen into obscurity, but become the last remaining stronghold of a people whose way of life has survived the whole course of the revolution unchanged...

L.T.C. Rolt in *Narrow Boat*, 1944

Tired of these people yet? Constant death and destruction can sap the soul.

Fortunately we now receive a gentler ride courtesy of the river Brent. With generosity it invites us down a restful riparian corridor where to escape the madness and recover our strength. We would do well to accept its companionship for a time. It might even wash out the blood and bits of intestine.

The humans like to lecture one another about gratitude, demanding it from those they hurt in order to silence legitimate grievances. In this case though we could do worse than offer some thanks to the Brent. It is a special freedom to be allowed passage through its domain, our first opportunity in some miles to slip from the lands of conflict into a less stressful timestream. Modest in width but

concentrated with memory and meaning, this tributary of the Thames unrolls between impenetrable walls of green nature, a barrier on each side against the hungering march of concrete.

Only cooperative concrete, that which settles on the river's terms, is permitted. There is the towpath, wedged between water and wall of bush. And there are the locks. Lots of locks.

The locks are not intrusive on this realm. Indeed they appear almost elegant, if we can stand the obligatory graffiti. Each consists of two pairs of manually-operated gates that allow river craft to transit between higher and lower water levels, plus the machinery required for them to function along with some steps, a bridge, a water level gauge here and there – altogether a compact apparatus of wood, brick and iron fit snugly into the river corridor. Accompanying these locks are colourful notices unique to this environment. 'Caution: Underwater obstructions'. 'Gate paddles create strong water flows: *Do not open* until the lock is at least half full'. 'Keep boat forward of cill marker' – this last carries a worrying cautionary image of a narrowboat pitching up onto the ledge.

So the Brent has not shut out the humans completely. On the contrary, it has allowed them to navigate its course and make use of its floodplain to the point where those usages became extremely important to them, and yet all the while it bound them to respect its sovereignty. A clutch of ageing factory buildings retires behind the trees – English industry in remission, but the occasional flutter of natives in high-vis jackets or commercial-age brand signs with no distinguishing character indicates attempts are afoot to sustain it on life support. A tubby cylindrical brick chimney sticks out, with a triumphant shrub growing out of its crown; a huge but tired warehouse half-heartedly looms beyond. The latter identifies itself as a 'roofing centre', a claim we may credit given that its roof is bedecked in solar panels and looks like the only part of it that belongs to the current layer of the timeline. But for all its scale this complex feels unthreatening. Did it have a share in the dumping of sewage and industrial effluence into this waterway, much as experienced by the Thames and its tributaries? No matter – this land belongs to the river; to the swans, coots and moorhens that sail up and down as they will; to the thistles erupting furrily from the vegetation, which will outlast the petty irresponsibilities of this developing or un-developing society. Even the towering M4 motorway is summarily sent packing; it attempts for a while to rear in dominant menace, then gives up and makes its hasty escape to Wales.

The only irreverence the Brent has conceded to the English is the series of cuts they have made to integrate their canal system into the Brent's main stream. When you travel a long distance you ideally want to move from A to B in as straight a line as possible to save time and fuel, but a meandering watercourse like the Brent is having none of that. So it seems they reached a compromise: the English carved out shortcuts so the canal traffic could skip the river's curves, with the result that one watercourse often forks into two. The towpath, itself no mere walkway but a working part of the canal system, follows the canal, while the Brent's main waterway turns off into sheltered recesses, giving the flora and fauna a few yards of rest from human intrusions.

We begun our acquaintance with this canal down at Brentford, the junction town that grew up doing business for travellers on the Great West Road. It was when the canals arrived in the 1790s that Brentford reached its heyday, sprouting bustling wharves, docks and railway links. It was thus an early arrival to the industrial revolution and a forerunner of urbanisation into a proletarian hell of slums, fumes, overcrowding, and thick inches of mud splattered on everything thanks to the loam washed down the Brent onto it, caking walls and devouring the wheels of coaches.

But here beyond the ford the landscape verges on rural, with more of those long houseboats roped to the bank. Each is unique in colour, material, character and ornamentation. From afar they look deserted, but as we walk past a gangplank a massive white and brown mastiff jerks up with a start and peers curious at us from the interior. Some of these vessels have 'FOR SALE' signs with telephone numbers to call for enquiries. Like that warehouse plenty are roofed in solar panels, perhaps an innovation in the face of the sustainability crisis.

Beyond the distant barrier of trees pop the residential rooftops of Hanwell. The name is evocative. *Well* is a spring, stream or – incredibly – a well, whereas *han* may refer to the wild birds whose suspicious eyes have monitored our progress thus far. But *han* has another meaning: a boundary stone. Whispers abound in local folklore about sandstones or sarsens found in this area, similar to those used to build Stonehenge. *Sarsen* comes from *Saracen*, the Europeans' archaic term for Arab Muslims, with broader connotations of the exotic *other*. Either way, there lurks an essence in the Brent lands that does not belong to the English but to an *other*, older world.

And a gateway to other Englishnesses. For now the canal swings west, away from the northbound Brent, and rises into the most daunting complex of locks yet.

There are six, one after another, and together they constitute the ‘Hanwell Flight’. It is the Brent that has invited us in here and with the Brent that we shall stay, but the canal deserves a moment of consideration because beyond those locks it shoots away to a whole other world. A signpost identifies that world for more optimistic wayfarers: ‘Birmingham – 136½ miles’.

What it doesn’t state are the other places you can reach by this waterway. Bristol. Liverpool. Manchester. Leeds. A great deal of the country, in fact, lies within your reach from here without ever leaving the water or tasting salt in it. And that is because this is the Grand Union Canal, the dominant (or at least dominantly-titled) branch of a network of artificial waterways which now connects the major river systems of this nation.

Think about that. That was not a trivial change to the landscape. It physically and socially reshaped this country, much as the roads and railways shape it today: the opening act of England’s great infrastructural revolution, of the industrial terraforming of the *green and pleasant land* to suit it for the systemic movement of colossal quantities of stuff. It was the canals that serviced and indeed made possible many of the stories we have trekked through without raising to our attention that they have a story all of their own, from which sprung their own culture, their own legacies, their own ways of life. Let us sit awhile by this confluence of river and canal and listen to that story, though not before a cursory investigation of this stairway of locks before us.

Much as a flight of steps helps walkers up or down a gradient, a flight of locks helps a navigable waterway overcome a difference in water levels (especially an artificial one, such as a weir). The Hanwell Flight happens to be one of the best examples of such a scheme, scaling an elevation of over sixteen metres with such elegant charisma that it made it into a Turner painting, *Windmill and Lock*. In there it passes for a perfect rural scene, complete with ox and sunset. And look – we have arrived at an opportune time because there just so happens to be a fellow taking his barge up through the first of its locks right now. We should offer to help, but these are the English so we never know they will not roar at us because they lost their empire or their cricket match, and with nautical people there is an extra level of unpredictability. So instead, let us hang back at a safe distance and watch this demonstration of life on the canals.

It is gruelling work. The entire sequence is powered by no more than the good old chemical energy of one’s body. The bargeman attaches a lock handle or *windlass* to the machinery – all boat operators carry their own set, they say – then

cranks it round and round to open the sluices and lower the water in the lock. With the water equalised, he leans against the gate arm with his backside then heaves and grunts to push the gates open, then hauls on a rope to drag his narrowboat into the lock. Thus prepared, he does the pushing and cranking again but in the other direction to close the gates and the sluices, then steps round to another part of the device and cranks yet again to open another set of sluices to deposit water into the lock, thus raising his boat to the exit level. Taking great care to 'keep boat forward of cill marker' to avoid the unhappy fate in the warning sign, he hefts open the second set of gates so his craft can exit. The gates must of course be closed again after. His every set of muscles thus ground down to quivering jelly, he takes a deep breath and drifts on to go through the whole ordeal five times more.

It gives one to appreciate the trouble of getting a single vessel through this sleepy channel. Imagine what it must have been like when this was one of the most congested waterways in the country and 20,000 of them a year were doing it.

As we have well witnessed, it is the service of rivers that has raised human societies like this one. But the rivers have interests and personalities of their own. They flow on their own terms, not the humans', and the rougher of these can confound their usage as highways. Their tides come and go, their courses bend all over the place, they flood, they dry up, and they change their speeds, widths and depths at their own discretion. All of this gives them a tendency to sink the hapless humans trying to travel on them and gobble up their precious cargoes.

But humans are resourceful creatures, sometimes at least, and with their capacity to dream up imaginary things as complex as money, law and nations, it was only a matter of time before they asked each other: what if we could make our own rivers? Rivers which ran in a straight line, exactly where we needed them, with a constant depth and gentle flow – or better yet, no flow at all – so they wouldn't wreck our boats? And so the canal was born.

From what we can tell, this birthing happened independently in multiple places and times, if perhaps with some cross-pollination. Before transport canals there were irrigation canals which watered the fertile fields of ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus valley some five to six thousand years ago, and which cropped up in many more locations over the following millennia. More curious examples include the spiral *puquios* of the Nazca in what is currently Peru, as well as the

Ma'rib Dam and underground waterways of the Saba kingdom that stood where Yemen is now. These were not ditches hacked crudely into the soil but sophisticated works of hydraulic engineering to harness natural water flows for human use, and they were pivotal to the growth of the civilisations that built them.

From there it was not a great leap to artificial rivers for transport purposes, and some of the most ambitious took shape at the hands of the Chinese, reaching their crowning glory in the thousand-mile colossus of the Grand Canal which connects their two mightiest of world rivers, the *Changjiang* (Yangtze) and *Huanghe* (Yellow River), and whose tale of construction, improvement and usage threads continuous from over two and a half thousand years ago to the present day. The ancient Egyptians and later the Greeks worked comparable feats on another great river, the Nile. The Romans with their aqueducts were no amateurs at this either and carried canal engineering across Europe; it is they who are thought to have built the first canals here in what would one day be England, with one, the Fossdyke in Lincolnshire, still in use today. Another millennium or two of playing with these structures saw them struck through the core identities and ways of life of powerful cities like Venice, Amsterdam, Bangkok, St. Petersburg, and perhaps most vitally Angkor. Imperial ambitions on the part of the French, the Americans and the Egyptians would later take canal-building to its pinnacle when with typically unscrupulous geopolitics and appalling sacrifices of tens of thousands of forced labourers, they drove canals through entire landmasses with the monster conduits of Suez and Panama.

The English arrived late in this story, the rise of their canal system bound to their emergence as an industrial people from around the 1750s. As we have seen, they were no strangers to river transport – it was the movement of people, goods and ideas on rivers that brought England into existence. Between the Thames here, the Tyne in the north, the Severn in the west, and all the others in the middle like the Trent and the Ouse there are dozens more river systems in this land, each of which swirls with its own deep depths of history, identity and mythology.

But industrialisation created transport demands on a whole new scale. The largely unsurfaced, bandit-infested road network was not up to the job, while bulky industrial cargoes and breakable finished products only magnified the trouble of travelling the self-willed rivers and coastal seas. On top of that, each river system was separate. It occurred to people that if these watercourses could be linked together through the landlocked centre then they could save enormous time and energy in an age when these were at an unprecedented premium.

At the top of the pile of stuff that needed to go places was the great anti-hero of the industrial revolution: coal, rolling out of the northern mines in ever more massive cartloads and in want of carriage to the factories and blast furnaces of the Midlands. Coal is heavy, dirty, and unpleasant to drag over land in bulk. Far better to pile it onto ships, they thought, if only the water routes existed in the right places. And so they had a go at digging some. The first appeared in the northwest, on the Mersey river system near Liverpool. It was called the Sankey Brook Navigation, a *navigation* being a canal adapted out of an existing river, a bit like these cuts on the lower Brent only on a larger scale. But the project that sent canals dendrifying through the English imagination was the Bridgewater Canal, so named because it was conceived of by Francis Egerton, the third Duke of Bridgewater, to link his coal mines at Worsley to the growing industrial city of Manchester. The scion of a rich and powerful landowning family, the Duke had travelled on the continent and likely been influenced by the Canal du Midi in France. He also held more than enough land wealth to fund the project personally. But as for the work itself, the profession of canal engineering did not yet exist in England so he could only appoint the next best thing: a millwright who knew the ins and outs of waterworks by the name of James Brindley.

The technical challenge Brindley faced was considerable. The canal had to be level from start to end, which required some masterful surveying. It had to be well-supplied with water so as not to run dry. As the coal mines were underground and lifting tons of coal to the surface would be an enormous pain, it made more sense for much of the canal to run underground too, requiring miles of tunnels to be dug. Trickiest of all was that it would have to cross the Irwell River twelve metres above the surface, and for that nothing short of an engineering wonder would be required. Brindley pulled it off in the form of the Barton Aqueduct, on which the sight of ships soaring through the sky raised the canal into popular mystique.

What is not so well recorded is what toil and sacrifice was asked of the workers who built it, on whom more in a moment. But for the industrialist winners, the Bridgewater Canal was a triumph that birthed a revolution-in-a-revolution. Completed in less than a year and opened to coal boats in 1761, its savings in transport halved the price at which the Duke could sell his coal in Manchester, landing him with control of the market and a staggering fortune. Businesspeople all over the country stumbled over to study how the heck he had done it. On learning the answer they decided they all wanted canals too, and on whose door

should they knock in search of an engineer to do it but James Brindley, whose success at Manchester launched him on a canal-building career that would secure him a seat on the pantheon of British engineer-heroes.

Thus began the Canal Mania: a speculative orgy of berserk canal-building up and down the country, spearheaded by captains of industry enterprising to the point of reckless who plied it with investment out of their own pockets. The episode looks something like a market fundamentalist's wet dream. There was no overall plan or serious government involvement beyond the occasional parliamentary go-ahead; each canal was privately owned, built, and operated in the hope of an avalanche of profits like that which came tumbling down the Duke of Bridgewater's. Occasionally it did. More often the routes were built in illogical places, failed disastrously and ruined their creators.

They also came with the blood price always demanded by the way of the market: masses of cheap, expendable labour to actually build the canals then be casually forgotten by the main narrative. Canal labourers were called *navvies* because they dug navigations, and in these days before machine tools they dug out the trenches and tunnels entirely the old-fashioned way using picks, shovels and wheelbarrows. As has often been the case for England's least desirable jobs, a large proportion of these people were undocumented immigrants, many of them Irish. Their work was exploitative, dangerous, unrewarding and often downright miserable, but this was before the rise of the labour movement, so their names, beatings, docked wages, fatal accidents and deaths to cholera or dysentery in sordid temporary workers' shanty towns were not considered important enough to record. Perhaps one day, when the English have understood that this is reprehensible, it will be the custom that every canal user takes a minute's silence before setting foot on board to pay their respects to the people who gave of their bodies to build these canals and were treated so disgracefully for their trouble.

So the English had got some canals, but did not as yet have a canal system. That emerged because swimming amidst this frenzy of profit-hungry speculators were people with a higher vision. Far-sighted individuals like the engineer Brindley or the potter Josiah Wedgwood saw the canals as more than a stab in the earth to see if money would come fountaining out. To them, these waterways had the potential to serve as the core structure for an entire industrial economy, bringing in mountains of raw materials one way and safely ferrying fragile finished products like Wedgwood's ceramics out the other. To achieve this, isolated strips of canal plonked down at random would not suffice. It was necessary to connect

them together in a 'Grand Cross', a network that would integrate in an X-shape the canals of England's four principal river systems and their industrial hubs: the Severn (Bristol) in the southwest, the Mersey and Irwell (Liverpool, Manchester) in the northwest, the Trent and Humber (Hull, York, Leeds) in the northeast, and the Thames (London) in the southeast. Conveniently the place where these would overlap was the Midlands around Birmingham, now emerging as one of the most important manufacturing centres in the country and soon to be known as the *Black Country* for its coal combustion's sooty massacre of its land and sky.

Last to join this canal party was London. Its people had transported cargo on the Thames and its tributaries for millennia, contending as they did with its temperamental tides, but by the 1780s they too wanted a piece of what they saw in the Midlands, while the Birmingham manufacturers were keen on getting their stuff into the capital's lucrative markets and port. They got this opportunity with the Oxford Canal, completed in 1790 as the last of the Grand Cross's arms, but this was not a straightforward route. It required cumbersome transfers of cargo onto the Thames barges at Oxford, then a wait for the tide to flow out, and even then the long, twisty stretch from Oxford to the capital was a navigational nightmare. It became impossibly congested – imagine everything on the lorries on the M40 London-Birmingham motorway crushed into these narrow waterways – and involved getting boats past countless weirs that dammed the river for water mills and fish traps, giving rise to ferocious triangular quarrels between millers, fishers and boat operators.

Clearly this was unsatisfactory, so improvements to the London-Birmingham link were tabled. By now Brindley had departed this world with some 500 kilometres of canal-building on his scorecard, so the challenge of integrating London fell to another civil engineer who would rack up a still more astronomical total, William Jessop (but where are all the female engineers in this story? Such a gendered country). His answer was yet another artery, completed in 1800, which connected the fast-proliferating nexus of waterways around Birmingham directly to the Thames near London – specifically, to Brentford. They named it the Grand Junction Canal. This is the very waterway on which we stand now at its confluence with the Brent, and which turned Brentford into a mud-splattered hive of dockyards and warehouses.

Birmingham – 136½ miles. That's over 200 kilometres. To put that in perspective, our progress from Woolwich to here has been about 60 kilometres. Imagine the digging.

The Grand Junction solved most of the problems of steering massive cargoes down the upper Thames, but boat operators still got stuck in hours of traffic. So a few years later an alternative route was added in the shape of the Paddington Arm, which left the main line further up and skirted what was then the north edge of the capital, before swinging down to meet the Thames at Limehouse, right next to London's docks. This one took a political tussle to thread it past Regent's Park, another of the royal parks whose monocled tea-drinkers were aghast at the possibility of hairy swearsy boatmen clambering out onto their lawns. So its course was put around the park rather than through it, and on its completion in 1820 it carried the name it keeps till today: Regent's Canal.* London's canals thereby picked up an association with the monarchy, meant as a finger in the eye of Napoleon in France because it was not enough for the English to outdo him on the battlefield, they also felt compelled to prove their urban planning superior to his grand rearrangements of Paris.

By then most of the nationwide network was ready and the English canals entered their heyday. Unable to control the rivers these people had instead built thousands of kilometres of their own, and would now ride them forth to a new industrial age. The canals would move together the materials, tools and people who would undertake England's revolutions of production and consumption, and those in turn fed their technological innovations back to the canals as ever more sophisticated boats, locks, tunnels, container systems and boat lifts streamlined the flow of what it seems no exaggeration to say was the first bloodstream of the English industrial way of life.

We can sniff that importance if we force our way onto some of the ghost barges and open a few barrels. One of the likeliest cargoes we would find is coal, but so too sailed the timber and bricks that constructed London and those huge factory cities like Manchester, as well as food ingredients like grain and fruit pulp, ash, metals, chemicals, and agricultural goods like sheep dip. Down to the markets flowed intermediate or finished products: dyes, jams, paper, Mr. Wedgwood's pottery. The canals removed waste, foremost among it England's problematically mounting quantities of human and horse shit – imagine how much of the latter came out of the 300,000-odd horses working in London by the 1890s – which was chugged off to fertilise farms or be dumped where no-one had to look at it; while

* The *Regent* was the oppressive and repulsively unpopular prince George IV of the Hanover dynasty. At times he ruled on behalf of his father George III, who was struggling with mental illness and deemed unfit to rule, as made famous by Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George*.

later on, as the English contorted into *Homo economicus*, it was the canal boats that shipped their piles of overconsumed domestic rubbish off to the landfills. And once plugged in to the major docks, the canals became part of the full network of international trade and imperial plunder: onto the barges went cocoa from the Gold Coast of West Africa, Canadian wheat, Algerian grass, American sulphur, Dominican lime juice, and crucially in an age before electric refrigeration, ice from Norway. Ice cream, formerly a luxury exclusive to rich people with private ice houses, was now available to everybody, making it possible for England to at last start imagining itself to be a reasonable country.

No less important was how the canals changed English society and culture. The dye industry they supported transformed fashion. They changed people's diets, carrying the food wares of corporate houses that rode the waters of the canals to lasting international fame: McVitie's biscuits, Guinness's beers, Heinz's soups and beans, the notorious Nestlé, as well as teas, coffees and other such delicacies from the far-flung plunderlands of the empire. They even serviced one of this country's first compassionate mental health hospitals, then known as the Middlesex County Asylum. In an England that regarded people with mental health problems as sub-human and made it standard practice to torture them, this place's pioneers defied that dominant medical model by daring to suggest such people were human and that sanity was not as clear-cut as society thought, so instead its patients would get green space, fresh air, good food, and opportunities to farm, garden, cook and play sports. The facility still operates today as St. Bernard's Hospital, part of the Ealing Hospital complex, and we should get a glimpse of that in a minute because it sits right on the other side of those trees with its own dock on the canal amidst the Hanwell Flight.

Here's another unusual thing the canals brought: light. These days the capital throbs with a horrendous excess of the stuff, but before they roped the Regent's Canal around it the problem was the opposite: every nightfall plunged its streets into a nasty, stabby darkness whose sound effects were sacks yanked over heads and the squirts of blood from throats. That changed as the canals brought coal, the coal brought gas, and the gas brought gas lamps, funnelled in through pipes made from musket-barrels discarded following the defeat of Napoleon. Curtains of light descended on English cities, gliding down the municipal thoroughfares to herald their wakening into a new age of fuzzily glowing enlightenment, and banishing the cutthroats to the workers' slums where they could kill people without the storytellers of the dominant class having to care. It was the canals,

then, whose gifts to the urban English would light their way through wardrobes to Narnia and shape the conception of psychological abuse they now call *gaslighting*. But the more lamp-posts they built, the more gas they needed to keep the lights on, and so rose the enormous gasworks that burnt the coal to produce it right there on the canalside, making its environment filthy and unlivable. Then they had to store the gas, and it was to meet this need that the cylindrical monoliths of the iconic gas holders appeared, much to the consternation of local people. ‘To whom am I to look for compensation’, asked one John Butler of King’s Cross, for instance, ‘for the injury done to my house by the erection of those frightful things opposite?’ Some of them still sit around confusing people today, long after electrification made them redundant.

But let us now return our gaze to the canals themselves, because they also birthed a whole way of life of their own. It was a culture within a culture, an economy within an economy, and dwelt right there within the country’s new watery veins where it existed in parallel to, but largely out of sight of, the landlubbers who sat in their studies writing of an *England* where most of the important stuff, with the slight exceptions of naval battles and gunboat imperialism, happened on solid ground.

The prevailing vision of canal life seems to be of comfortable monied folk lounging shirtless atop their boats in a sunny, grassy paradise of regattas and buttercups and riverside pubs. That might bear some resemblance to the canals’ current position in English society, but for the period under discussion it was a fantasy. An important one, lest that diminish its weight, because that fantasy is the reason the canals still exist – but for most of their lifespan they were no more for playing around on than the motorways are today.

At the risk of getting yelled at by angry maritime people for the audacity of trying to imagine ourselves across that stark divide of earth and water, what might life on the canals have been like?

For a start, it spanned an entire ecosystem of livelihoods: not just boat operators and their families but crews, artisan boat-builders, lock keepers, toll collectors, inspectors, dock workers, and of course the long-suffering navvies. Together these appear to have occupied a curious vertical slice through the strata of the English class system. For navvies and poorly-paid transporters, especially those carrying dangerous cargo like gunpowder or toxic chemicals, it would have

been a precarious, exhausting, cartilage-grinding way to live. But those higher up the hierarchy of cargoes and boat types would have fared somewhat better than the average factory worker, while the more prestigious tasks like inspecting and lock-keeping could even come with cushy canalside cottages and chances to roar at people for holding up traffic or wasting water by operating locks incorrectly.

Those who spent most of their time on or by the water's surface would have lived to a psychological atlas of their country very different from those of land-bound people, still more from its later Ordnance Survey networks of red or yellow road-lines or slender black railway snakes. Their Englands ran instead with ribbons of blue, crisscrossing irrespective of the land ways and converging at their own separate sets of nodes. What mattered to them were not coaching inns, train stations or motorway service stops, but boatyards, gauging locks and toll offices, viaducts, weirs, canal villages, specialist shops, and the all-important canalside pubs which served as gathering spots for their thirsty community.

One influence on these livelihoods was the boats themselves, which changed shape to fit their new lives on the canal network. These waterways were completely unlike the headstrong meanders and rapids of the rivers in that their main demand was simply that vessels could fit through them. The result was England's immediately recognisable narrowboats, just like those that have lined the Brent on our way up here – a design unique to this country, specifically adapted to slot through its canals. Beyond the narrowboats there branched off a multitude of different craft types: wide boats, barges, flyboats and so on. None of these terms are interchangeable and the people we are talking about would shout at us with great justice for mixing them up.

The vessels we've seen are recreational models or houseboats, and so turn over most of their interiors to living space, but back when canal boats were working craft their cargo needed all the space it could get. All they left for their operators to actually live in was a cabin as cramped as is imaginatively possible. And live in it they did, not only they but their entire families, especially the poorer ones who could not afford a house on land or worked over too wide an area. They, their companions and children and all, each of whom shared a great deal of the work, spent whatever time they were not handling cargo or upkeeping their boat crushed into a compartment of folding beds and tables, lockers, and a cooking stove that all together occupied the space a large cardboard box. Conspicuous for its absence in there was a toilet – for that a bucket in the cargo area had to suffice.

If these days canal culture evokes a gentle if eccentric life adrift in the arcadian fields, it is important to remember the adversity from which it came. For many of these people this was a rough existence of eighteen-hour days heaving barrels and crates around in the freezing rain, slipping on ice-encrusted towpaths while attempting to operate lock machinery, jostling for precious space on traffic-blighted canals, and banging your forehead on nosy inspectors while keeping an eye out to make sure your toddlers weren't rolling into the water. Many of those children would have been born on board on that bed in the cabin and would one day die on it, just like their parents. Constantly boating around made it impractical to find them a permanent school; a typical boat person could not read or write, yet shared with his or her fellows a canal-language whose glossary was impenetrable to people of the land. That way of life also meant that fixed doctors and food shops were not in reliable access, which took a toll on canal people's health and safety. Their boats were frequently unsanitary, diseases like typhoid and cholera spread fast, and the canal environment carried plenty of death and injury hazards – drowning, falling, or getting crushed anywhere between boat, canal wall, improperly-handled cargo or lock parts.

If these hardships were not enough, they also had to contend with all the stigma which the sedentary, property-measuring guardians of English normality reserved for people like them. Perhaps this was a similar species of condescension to that visited on the Romani of the Great North Wood; like them the boat people lived itinerant lifestyles in tight-knit communities at a degree of separation from mainstream society, with perhaps an extra element of prejudice mixed in because of their harmlessly idiosyncratic subculture, as, say, fandoms, cosplayers or furies experience today. Stereotypes abounded of the boat people as thieving, drinking, swearing, poaching, violence-prone ruffians, or at best shifty middlemen who were not above dipping a cup into sacks of other people's goods and stowing away a helping for themselves.

The other side of the story was that just as in places as pitiless as the coal mines, the canal way of life gave rise to a sense of community which brought people together through shared hardships and understandings, found expression in its own arts and symbols, and shaped an identity which many to whom it belonged would not have given up for the world. A relic of this lives on in the colourful and peculiar names, decorations and objects that even now adorn their canal craft to make each unique among its kind: in every narrowboat, a universe, its character worn with pride. With limited space for bulky items this culture spread up the

boats' very walls and brightened them inside and out: woven crotchet designs, ribboned plates, and elaborate paintings of roses and castles that grew into a romantic folk art movement in its own right. It was a potent riposte at snobbish Victorian landlubbers who doubted the capacity of the people of the boats for proper culture, an attitude which would have been familiar to the nomads beyond the Great Wall when dealing with the Chinese, or to appreciators of video games today in the face of those ignorant to their legitimacy as an art medium. 'What do people who live in tents, boats or screens know of culture?' scoff the normalists. 'Quite a lot', is the usually accurate reply.

Some love is also due to some very special animals who occupied pride of place in canal culture: its horses. If it was easier to drag heavy loads across water than land, that did not change the fact that they were still heavy loads, and until steam power came along it was horses that did the dragging. These animal friends were integral to the canal system, such that everything about it was designed with them in mind down to the very structure we are standing on. The *towpath* came into existence not for leisurely walks along the water, but for horses to tow boats along. That is why they are well-surfaced, offer good grip, drain fast, have gentle slopes if they need to go up or down, and are exactly the right width for two horses taking boats in opposite directions to pass each other.

Horses also meant that nested in the canal sub-economy was a further sub-sub-economy for looking after them. It was not just a matter of roping a horse to a boat and getting it to pull it, this was a skilled profession that demanded a catalogue of specialist supporting industries such as stables, grooms, harness-makers, farriers (horse-related blacksmiths) and vets. Infrastructure is never just infrastructure: it creates its own jobs, cultures and ways of life, and the way of the horse must have been one of the canals' most sophisticated.

The most necessary question is whether it was all that much fun for the horses themselves. We learned to our nausea from the likes of bear-baiting that the English have a problematic record in animal cruelty, but even for those humans who refuse affection for other creatures, there remains the basic principle, somehow forgettable to the adherents of the market today but vital for any pragmatic approach, that the better you treat a living creature the better the work it will do. Horses have complex needs, and if you wanted them to keep the canal boats moving you had to properly feed them, groom them, protect them from injury with well-crafted horseshoes and harnesses, and care for them when they got hurt – otherwise no industrial revolution for you.

The way of the tow horse persisted for a surprisingly long time. Developments in steam technology largely passed the canals by in favour of the railways, but by the 1890s the steam engines were encroaching onto the waterways and their diesel big brothers were not far behind. These upended the equine kingdom, a process driven to a cheerless conclusion as horses were steered off the towpaths to the battlefields of World War I. The stables and other supporting industries receded, and though some tow horses held out till as late as the 1970s, most by then had long been phased into retirement. With their passing the canals became a different world, the orchestra of snorting and clapping and hammers on horseshoes and the scent of manure replaced by a new soundscape of rattling, barking engine pistons.

What remains then in English national imagination, besides fleeting bucolic daydreams, of the canal culture that did so much to construct its pillars? Not much, it seems at first sight. To the extent that they view themselves as a people of the sea, those seas are the oceans, the conveyors of the maritime empire and the moat of the island country, not so much the inland waterways whose micro-civilisation's grunt work built those up. Here and there though listen carefully and you might catch flitters of their canal boats nosing on down the streams of collective memory. One far-reaching manifestation in present times is the Gyptians of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, where they intertwine with their next-door neighbours in that waterway world, the Dutch, as well as their antecedents: the spiritually-charged peoples of England's eastern fens, whose boat people it has been said used to navigate their marshes by using their church spires as landmarks that stuck up like lighthouses, before that world too was Enclosed and drained onto the dry land of capitalist creative destruction.

The hour of the railways began in the 1820s, and as the locomotives puffed the sky full of steam they obscured a sun that had begun to set on England's canals. We encountered the story of the trains in the orbit of the Crystal Palace, and in many respects their rise parallels that of the canals, only offset by a fifty-year delay that meant when their own speculative mania broke out in the 1840s it hit the canal system right where it hurt.

Bristling with all the advantages of applied steam power research and the inertia of excitement for a fashionable new technology, the transport of goods by train became faster, cheaper and more efficient and left the canals in a desperate

struggle to compete. Costs had to be cut. Tolls fell dramatically, and boat operators' wages, till now near the top end of the earnings scale of England's beleaguered working class, collapsed to the point where many of those who did not lose their jobs altogether had to sacrifice their landbound homes, moving their families into full-time life in those cramped on-board cabins.

The canal-builders had seen this coming and constantly improved their designs to compete with the railways, but by the second half of the century it was clear the trains were winning. The canals simply could not keep up, and here their origins in that storm of fragmented private interests caught up with them. Especially at local and regional levels, each canal was owned by a different company, built to a different width, and charged users through a separate toll system. This made it an infuriating hassle for boat users attempting journeys between sections that required switching boats or accounting methods, not to mention its impact on devising integrated trade arrangements. On top of that these local waterways had often been created to service a specific local industry, which if it ran into trouble would drag its canal down with it.

The canals' fates varied. Many simply went bust. A number of these, like the Croydon Canal in 1836, were absorbed by railway companies who filled them in and laid new rails down their course. Some canals like the Kennet and Avon Navigation got the irony of making a short-term fortune out of carrying the materials to build the very railways that replaced them, in this instance the Great Western Railway which bought up that canal then left it to rot on purpose. A few others were more fortunate. Some of those bought by the London and North Western Railway were kept open and actually integrated to the rail network to lasting success; these included many of the densely packed waterways in industrial Birmingham, where massive interchange basins sprung up for moving cargoes between canal boats and trains, as well as their intercourse with the Shropshire Union Canal whose routes into Wales the rail bosses kept open to put pressure on competing rail companies. Finally there were the rare cases in which the canals actually defeated the railways and came out of the fight better-equipped and upgraded with innovations, chief among them the Aire and Calder Navigation in the stubborn provinces of Yorkshire.

But these were exceptions; the long-term trend was decline. The smaller local canals were typically hardest hit and by 1900 many of them had closed, while the long-distance trunk ways of the Grand Cross just about clung on. Their disjointed administration and inconsistent toll systems continued to count against their

efficiency, and though a string of Commissions and Conferences tried to streamline them, it was to no avail – at least until after World War I, when the canal companies, under heavy pressure, finally agreed to start fusing themselves together. In 1928 the amalgamations began, centred on the Grand Junction between London and Birmingham, including the Regent's Canal and a few more up towards Warwick. The result settled into shape in the new year as the Grand Union Canal Company, whose name the channel we stand on retains today.

And yet, it was not enough. The burdens of a convulsing world piled upon the waterways one after another: two world wars in which the government took control of the canals to fuel the war effort; the Great Depression; and then the last straw for a system that had just about endured the ascent of the railways: the motor car, meaning they now faced the same challenge all over again from the rise of the roads. After World War II came the Labour Party government of Clement Attlee, distinguished as the architects of the national welfare system and great nationalisers of public services. With their Transport Act of 1947 virtually all the canals came under government control, with one significant exception: the Bridgewater Canal, where the story began, has remained in private hands.

State ownership did not change the fact that the canals were no longer profitable, leaving them little place beside the rails and the motorways in these nation-builders' vision of a fully integrated national transport system for a newly dynamic Britain. When the London docks closed in the following decades, the service for which the waterways had been built was all but killed off for good. The canals had had their day. The despondent people of the boats could only watch as canal after canal was shut, filled in, or otherwise left to a sad deterioration. Now it seemed all that remained for their way of life was to fall into an obscurity of derelict locks and embankments, boats rotting abandoned in dried-up rubbish-strewn channels, stagnant waterways clogged with weeds and silt: a gloomy fossil record left in the dirt by a country zooming off to a high-speed future.

Or so it might had been. If that had been how it ended then instead of a flight of locks we might now stand faced with a wall of green, with only the most debatable of gaps in the overgrowth as the final clue that from here once stretched a highway to river realms far beyond. But the Grand Union Canal is still here. We just watched a fellow drag his boat through one of its locks. You still have the choice to turn left at this junction and walk up the towpath to Leeds or to Liverpool should it so possess you. What explains this?

Well, it turned out that the canals had more fight in them than the authorities assumed. That fight grew from disparate quarters. Local traders still reliant on their waterways sued the British Transport Commission as far as the House of Lords for refusing to repair them, while in time the rise of the environmental movement would encourage people to value the green and blue spaces they had yet to concrete over. Slowly but surely the canals transitioned to a new niche in the national fabric: an infrastructure not of commerce, but of recreation.

If there was a single catalyst for this new vision, most accounts identify it as *Narrow Boat*, published by the engineer-writer L.T.C. Rolt in 1944. Based on his own voyage up the canals in these changing times, this book offered a moving and picturesque exploration of the canal world laced with interrogations of a techno-consumerist modernity which, in its author's view, was dragging his country into a hollow abyss where so much of its meaning, embodied in its traditional structures and local artisans' time-honoured, love-infused 'skills of hand and eye', could not be taken with it. 'Herein lies the value of canal travel', Rolt reflects with a sigh, 'for if man had never discovered the mechanical arts by which he annihilates space and time he might never have acquired that tragic contempt for local environment, custom and tradition which has led him to break faith with the land. Man has built himself wings before he has fully learned how to walk.'

Rolt's account, rose-tinted but stirringly articulate, arrived at just the right time to appeal to a population exhausted by war and charred by the fires of devastating progress. Violence and deprivation had reduced the English to a longing for rustic havens where daisies clustered in the grass, dragonflies landed on hats and there was always food in the picnic basket. As they huddled in their landbound ruins, the unsentimental romance of Rolt's portrayal set the canal world resonating through a weary nation's hearts and charged it with a new relevance: its decaying relics of the past, if looked after, had life in them yet as a corrective to an unattractive present and future. Piles of thank-you letters tumbled upon Rolt's desk, one of which suggested a canal restoration campaign be set up. The result was the Inland Waterways Association, and in the years to come it would stymie attempts by the government or indifferent rail corporations to abandon them.

Never mind that a somersault into Thatcher's market revolution was coming: those who had boarded the world of the canals knew there were things more important than profitability. The weight of their heritage had turned the canals into a national institution, with a growing army of cultural and ecological enthusiasts to defend it. The pleasure of a leisurely cruise through the rural

hinterlands, or of strolling, jogging or walking your dog down the towpath was too valuable to be left to rot in the detritus of emptied, evaporated waterways. To avert that fate these activists had a fight on their hands, in particular against more market-oriented people in the British Transport Commission who preferred to close or abandon the canals, but even in the absence of public leadership, teams of canal-believers descended on the derelict channels and set about bringing more than 800 kilometres of them back to life in an inspiring reprise of the fever that had built the canals in the first place, only this time directed not by rich industrialists but by volunteers, hundreds of them in some cases, each moved by considerably loftier aims than lining their pockets with cash.

Like that guy we saw earlier heaving open the gates of the Hanwell locks, these almighty efforts shoved public and media perceptions of the canals around into a favourable light. Successive governments realised the strength of feeling for keeping them open, and in its own time British Waterways, from 1962 on the body responsible for them, came round to funding and carrying out improvements. Local authorities too saw the potential that revived canals might bring them in tourist revenues, expressions of local heritage and identity, and a peaceful natural environment for hard-worked corporate serfs to catch a break through walking, cycling, fishing or boating. Many derelict warehouses or factory sites along the canals have become prime targets for housing developers, much like we witnessed in Brentford. In some projects, such as the Liverpool and Leeds Canal Corridor regeneration, regional development funding from the EU has been crucial. As a result, the late twentieth century saw towpaths re-opened, nature reserves established, and boat clubs and festivals set up in an astonishing success story of grassroots activism that has swayed a creaking system to catch the winds of change, and through them reinvigorated it to life anew.

In 2012 British Waterways was phased out, and its responsibility for the canals transferred to a new charity called the Canal and River Trust. It funds the canals' continued operation through a government grant, a licence fee for boat operators, and revenues on rent from some quite considerable property holdings. The stories these waterways have written into England continue as we speak, to the point that some newly troubling lines are creeping across the page. For instance, in recent years the number of boats on the capital's canals has soared. Many are the permanent homes of a new demographic to hit the waterways: young people struggling for housing and incomes in a compromised real economy. The takeover of London by a hyper-rich vampire class has sent its property prices soaring to

nonsensical extremes, and with its land-bound houses out of reach for ordinary people, increasing numbers are opting for houseboats as a more affordable option. This has led to overcrowding, putting pressure on canal space, mooring points, and other boater facilities alongside impacts like air and noise pollution, waterway obstruction, and conflicts with neighbouring landlubbers. In 2018 many of London's boat owners reacted with outrage when the Canal and River Trust announced its intent to dramatically raise mooring fees, especially as it defended its decision with ominous references to market logic. Campaigns have surfaced warning that just as has happened on land, London is pricing struggling boat-dwellers off the canals, the endgame being their capture and reduction to yet one more exclusive playground for the billionaires.

It is a fate that would have revolted L.T.C. Rolt, one of whose very purposes for writing of his canal journey was to make a case against the growing cult of the market for its destruction of the rural ways of life which he found corroding at its touch round ever corner, and in which lay, in his view, the roots of England's soul. 'If the canals are left to the mercies of economists and scientific planners', he warned, 'before many years are past the last of them will become a weedy, stagnant ditch, and the bright boats will rot at the wharves, to live on only in old men's memories'.

What we see from these latest developments is that the canals' rebirth in a recreational image has not divorced them from their history. Now as throughout it, they harbour an existential tension. On the one hand, it has always been a privileged minority of industrialists and landowners who squeezed the canals' riches into their own pockets. On the other, beneath their visible provision first of wealth, then of leisure, has ever bubbled a third function: that of belonging. That is to say, they have been a semi-hidden space where an underclass failed by mainstream society could carve out safety, a sense of home, a community, and re-assert themselves through a unique and defiant common culture. As with the navvies who built them and the ecosystem of workers whose boats were the red blood cells of the industrial revolution, here and now a new chapter in England's annals of oppression and structural violence plays out on the waterways. Their story is one more facet in the story of the struggle for England's soul.

A story whose pages we now step out from, for our path leaves the canal to carry on up the banks of the Brent. Like all this country's true rivers, it has sat there watching them build artificial ones all the way through and probably feels a bit smug. Running your own river is not so simple after all, is it? – it seems to say.



People build canals, but rivers build people. Turn from the Grand Union and the Brent wastes no time in reminding wayfarers that they are back in a domain where they do not get a say in the water's behaviour.

We ascend it due north through the borough of Ealing, another leftover from Anglo-Saxon immigrants – *Gillingas*, the community of someone called Gilla – and a largely agrarian part of Middlesex till it was absorbed as a London suburb. No doubt the Grand Union Canal played its part in that: Ealing slots into the envelope between its main branch and the Paddington Arm further north.

But the Brent ploughs its own course through Ealing's heart, and on relieving itself of the canal reminds you that real rivers do not come with towpaths, embankments or gardening. From here it is unnavigable by water – too overgrown, too dense with plant matter that jams your propellers and strands you in the bush. By land it is the nearest that the capital region will give you to a jungle. Our sole recourse is to keep to the narrow dirt path, while the dismayingly severe 1970s Brutalist façade of Ealing Hospital glowers over the treetops. It is as though the river has kept that visible because that is where it sends people it dislikes.

It is a curious place to find another front in the Dog Wars last evidenced in the lands of the Great North Wood, this time in guerrilla conditions. None other than

the Canal & River Trust represents the establishment forces. ‘Notice to Dog Owners – This area is being kept tidy by local residents in memory of Alice Gross, please help by not leaving dog litter bags here’ declares its sign, invoking the name of a local resident of this violent country who was found murdered nearby. Lower on the sign, someone has scrawled back in black marker ink in the most passive-aggressive handwriting possible: ‘Well then, please replace the bin you removed. Thank you’. There are times we must wonder if there is hope.

The thicket subsides at Hanwell Bridge, which carries the Uxbridge Road across and on to Middlesex’s far western wilderness. The bridge is an eighteenth-century job and not half bad as far as bridges go: brick arches, columns of neat rectangular stone and a balustrade running along the side. Two arches suspend it over the river, while a smaller third provides a tunnel for our path, but behold, a tragedy of historic proportions has taken place. Out on the gravel where the central pillar stands in the river, a dozen uncooked pizzas have fallen from the top of the bridge. A freak accident? A political altercation on the way back from the supermarket, which came to climactic blows upon the parapet? We lack the evidence to fathom the truth of the circumstances that brought these pizzas, guilty of nothing, to their miserable end, and miserable is the only way to characterise it for all but one have landed upside down. A swan and a raven have come upon this scene and face each other like opposing kings across a chessboard, before launching into busy negotiations about the fairest way to divvy up this salvage between them.

We can only shudder on through the tunnel, too taken aback to properly appreciate the bridge itself, but our faculties are returned to us as we emerge to witness a structure of astonishing magnitude dominating the meadow ahead. It, too, is a bridge, but it is colossal, spanning most of the horizon and reducing full-grown trees to bonsai beneath its pillars. And they actually use the thing. Train after train goes – depending on its make – rattling, rocketing or thundering across it. Clearly this brick goliath was built with two functions, each equally important: to carry trains across its span, and to be grandiosely *seen doing it*.

It is not a pompous grandiosity though; not a look-at-me-I’m-the-British-Empire architectural chest-puff but a neat, I’ve-got-a-job-to-do grandness that enhances rather than wrecks its surroundings. One feels it is tall and strong because it needs to be to get the trains across safely, rather than as a boast, and the soft red of its bricks complements well the green of the grass and the blue of the sky.

That does not happen on its own in England. Someone must have taken a conscious decision that it should do so.

A clue is found on a coat of arms that sits suspiciously discreet near the top of the central pillar. It is the crest of the Wharncliffe family, some of whose members are about ten names long, but the one that concerns this structure charitably limited himself to four: James Stuart Wortley Mackenzie, a.k.a. the Lord Wharncliffe, who chaired the House of Lords committee that legislated for the rise of the Great Western Railway and so got his peerage into the name of this creation, the Wharncliffe Viaduct. A viaduct carries a piece of infrastructure – a road, a railway, even a canal like the Duke of Bridgewater’s – over low-lying terrain, and this was the first completed for that railway just in time for its opening in 1838.

That two centuries later it still works as intended may be a testament to the vision of its true author: this country’s supreme master engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Besides many other roles Brunel was the technical mastermind behind the Great Western Railway from London to Bristol, that great totem of the rise of the trains. The Wharncliffe Viaduct was one of his first major creations, so you can probably take a magnifying glass to it and trace the influences that shaped all those epoch-setting bridges and ships he came up with later. But its real significance can be spotted with no expertise, especially if we recall the ugly, noisy, bellicose incursion of the M4 motorway back where we started up the Brent. A mind that designs a viaduct like this is one for which it is not enough that infrastructure moves people and goods from place to place, it also has to *look good* and *feel good* while doing so. Infrastructure is more than economics. It is also culture, art and public health. It is identity – who you are.

Brunel stands at the top of the imagination of English identity today, top-hatted and coat-tailed upon the pinnacles of his immense and distinguished accomplishments, a grand nest of engineering mightiness whose beautiful mathematical precision and sheer damn scale insulates his memory from the sordid foundations of the society of his day. Bristol’s role as a corner of the triangular slave trade is sanitised from the picture, as are the ruthlessly exploited labourers we have now met so often – both those that built the railways in the first place, and those who their trains have since chained to their schedules. We should ask the master engineer what he thought of it all and how far he was complicit, but to do that we would have to climb his massive nest of creations to reach him, while the English throw things at us and accuse us of ruining all their stories. So let us save this one for another day, sufficing to bear in mind that even

as we admire impressive structures like this Wharncliffe Viaduct we should keep our eyes clear of mist when looking beyond into the world which erected them.

The Brent slips indifferent past the viaduct; following it requires us to pass beneath those arches. Only then comes a true sense of its gigantitude. This Mammoth of Ealing soars twenty metres high and spans some two hundred and fifty metres from end to end. It must contain more bricks than the total of runs this country has ever scored in international cricket. And that is not all. Look up from under its arches and you can discern a seam, running lengthwise about two thirds of the way across. As though the original structure was not enough to satisfy them they actually widened the thing, in part a response to the standardisation of rail gauges in 1846.

One final feature suggests a more recent use of this viaduct to do Good Work. There are pitch-dark hollows in the brickwork, which the local authorities whisper are home to some roosting bats. It is not clear whether they were designed for that purpose or the bats just happened to move in later, but these furry friends are now protected by law. It may appear a small thing, but humans have an ignoble record in obliterating wildlife habitats with their infrastructure projects, so in defiance of that this is a significant social decision. We should leave some biscuits out in appreciation for whoever made it.



Do you hear the goats bleating?

This is an unusual sound in these parts, and if you listen closely you can tell that the goats are discussing the socio-economic consequences of Brexit. They live just around the corner from the Wharncliffe Viaduct, together with pigs and meerkats and other such friends in a small zoo that signals a shift in the Brent's attitude. Here it will accept a bit of human parkland.

The river is shallow here, cluttered with pebbles through water startlingly clear. It tolerates the Brent Lodge Park, of which the animal park is a part, and there is also a formal maze of yew bushes. Planted on an old bowling green and opened in the year 2000, it appears one of the newer additions to Ealing's celebrated roster of cultural landmarks. The Millennium Maze, it calls itself, on a board that launches into a discussion of minotaurs and Greek people, though you would probably get in trouble if you tried to confine a minotaur to these tight hedgy corridors and forced it to listen to those goats arguing about Brexit all day. The maze's goal is represented by a raised and roofed wooden platform in the centre, but the puzzle is spoiled by a swing gate by which you can get straight in and out of that goal from the entrance. Presumably it is so those who conquer the labyrinth can escape without having to go all the way through again, but that assumes they will not just enter through it in the first place. Can they be trusted with that, when they cannot be trusted to tell the difference between democracy and crude majoritarianism?

Soon these human emplacements dwindle, and the Brent lands return to thickets and fields along margins of interdimensional wilds. There are people about. Small children roll around on the meadows, couples practice monogamy by the waterside, and the gothic spire of St. Mary's, the primary church of Hanwell, keeps a periscopic vigil over the treetops. In all fairness to the river it has not thrown out the humans and refused to cooperate as would have been in its rights to do. That is some magnanimity, considering how they used to purpose it for rubbish-tipping or horrendous industrial mischief, but its persuasive pressure has prevailed on them to convert these to more respectful recreation fields and refuges for biodiversity. In the 1970s another volunteer group, the Brent River and Canal Society, emerged to advocate for and undertake this work. A filled-in dock is now the Piggeries Orchard, a former rubbish dump has found new life as Elthorne Park, and in the meadow beneath Brunel's viaduct they grow hay, fruit and nuts while managing the environment on behalf of a rainbow of wildlife. The

Brent lands feel like a zone of constant negotiation between the city and the wilderness, and for now, at least, the negotiations appear set fair.

Further north the river has granted them a generous concession: yet another golf course. The interesting thing about this one is that the path across it trails through a dense and sheltering grove of trees, a tunnel of greenery. It brings to mind a holloway or sunken lane, a common sight in England's rural south and west that is often a hint at earthworks that reach far deeper in time. This here of course is not a true holloway, but evokes enough of one to create a haunting effect when juxtaposed with the flags and fairways.

The Brent winds around as it will here, so at times the path is forced across it. On a wooden bridge stands a fellow of Caribbean appearance, contemplating the river with a pensive gaze. On noticing us he points out the heartwarming target of his attention: a duck with some exceptionally fuzzy ducklings, grooming themselves by a clutch of twigs and branches in the shallows. Most of their fuzz is in transition to feathers and thus brown like the big duck's, but each little face still carries a lovable splotch of yellow.

He likes the river, says the man. Except, he adds with a rueful chuckle, when the rain comes down and its water swells to the height of the bridge – then it is more of a challenge to like it. But he wonders about it. Where is its source? From what far heights does its water come?

Where indeed. This journey of ours has barely scooped the surface of the Brent's deep dark memories, and one wonders how far down the natives themselves have reached, how well they understand a tributary whose passage through time may be as murky as that of its sibling of the glaciations, the Thames. This is a watershed so prone to shifts and convulsions; is there a chance that the Brent's course now was at one time the Thames's principal route? And from where comes its name, *Brent*?

This too is hazy. The leading suggestion is that it is one of those rare survivors from ancient Celtic nomenclature whose language we last met in Penge – in this case from a goddess of theirs, Brigantia. Might those who lived here in animistic times have associated her with the river itself? She was quite well-travelled, which is all well and good for her, only it dispersed her legacy through a mess of later traditions that makes it all the harder for us to fathom who she really was or what she stood for. She lends her name for example to the *Brigantes*, a Celtic people of northern England who seem to have given the Roman conquerors an awful lot of trouble, according to the latter's historian Tacitus. Most surviving information

filters down through commentators like him, who of course reinterpreted it through their own views of the world, and if that were not enough Brigantia also worked her way into Christian mythology through some ambiguous connection with Saint Brigid of Ireland (no relation to her Swedish namesake). Perhaps she metamorphosed from one identity to another, as so often happens in long religious transitions.

Or maybe she is aloof from all of that and sits there in disguise as that duck, and when it quacks it is because she laughs at us struggling through her puzzles.

It is also possible the Brent has nothing to do with her. The root of her name means *high* or *holy*, so it could be Brent means simply the *high river*. As with anything to do with these ancient peoples, we should bear in mind that recent centuries have brought a revival of interest in their civilisations that tends to distort an already limited picture to satisfy present-day agendas. The construction of the Celts as a pure indigenous culture from before the corruptions of the Romans on has made them a convenient reference point for counter-movements ranging as wide as Irish nationalism, New Age esoteric dabbling, or digging for traditions buried in clean enchanted earth as an antidote to the noise, filth and anxious confusion of industrial times. A more rationalist modernity finds it easy to cast scepticism on those sets of tinted glasses, but we have learnt on our trek that that rationalism is itself an illusion, bearing its own values and agendas that only further scatter the flecks of the Celtic picture. Perhaps the truth of the Brent awaits a more objective age – or species.

As for where it founts from, it will answer that in its own time. To look at it on the map reveals its determination to faff with us, for ahead it suddenly right-angles to the east, before snaking off for the far fields of North London. That way lies its heartland, to which it has fixed its name: the London Borough of Brent, where it surely awaits our arrival.

For now it is time to part from its company. Beyond the Bittern's Field, another compromise where the locals manage a haven for kestrels, lizards, voles and other creatures alongside wild grasses and flowers, and are permitted to harvest berries and hay in return, we come to the border between the Brent's world and the humans' at Greenford Bridge. This is where we bid the Brent on its way, as it does us, and penetrate back into the English settlements to seek a way through to the northern hills.

West across the bridge is Greenford proper, another old piece of Middlesex, and because it fords the Brent where there are green things in it we shall allow it

to keep that name. Our departure from its floodplain brings us to another park, that of Perivale, where there is no mistaking that the wilds have loosened their grip. Perivale Park has regimented its terrain into the urban order: nearly all of it is football and rugby pitches, and its grass is parched, mown bald to the ground. Battles in the Dog War have been fought here too. The establishment marks this as its territory by displaying on the information board a pouty Tinkerbell figure ferrying a sizeable turd in a tied-up plastic bag, over the words: 'There is no such thing as the Dog Poo Fairy'. And the trees, in such overwhelming dominance along the river, have here been relegated to the perimeter. Only a few brave stragglers stake out by the paths between the sports fields where they broadcast defiance by garbing their trunks in some quite magnificent golden lichen. Lichen figures little in the everyday life of the urban English, but those close to it profess that it is a quite incredible form of life, and worth paying attention to because its sensitivity to lots of conditions – light, moisture, pH, minerals, time, and most crucially in cities like this, air quality – entails that each of its growths can tell you a great many things. Apparently there is even a field of study, *lichenometry*, for measuring the age of an exposed surface by the growth of lichen upon it.

Would that this lichen tell us the air here is good, because if it is, it does not last. Perivale Park expels us onto the A40 trunk road, the main highway between London and that fortress of privilege known as Oxford. If the Wharncliffe Viaduct was erected with its experiential impact in mind, then let this A40 stand for its antithesis: this road was not designed to be enjoyed. It bellows with traffic of a hundred weights and purposes, its soundscape cacophonous, its air grotesque. We have only to ford this crevice of hell once, thank goodness, but spare a thought for those pitiful sods forced by the oppressive work system of this land to gag and choke across it every day. The only method to do so without getting killed is by means of a rickety iron footbridge that they have painted blue as though that is supposed to make it trustworthy. Above its 'CYCLISTS DISMOUNT' sign, a red-shirted cyclist zooms up, along and down, taking each of its right-angles with no reduction in speed. He must have calculated that the risk of crashing in such way that his momentum would somersault him off the edge is safer than extending his time on the bridge by a few seconds, thus to either suffocate or get dropped into the infernal current when the bridge inevitably buckles.

Mercifully it lasts long enough to see us across, and we escape the A40 into a pocket of suburbia on the far side. But it is not a large pocket, and its veneer of insulation peels off to submerge us in much the same unpleasantness of snarling

vehicle exhausts and rumbling concrete mixers that packs the natives onto the precarious pavements of the Greenford Road, each of their faces a study in developing-country fatalism. An Ultralisk Lair of heavy goods vehicles heaves and slumps in motorised corpulence over a side-lane many times too small for it, competing for execrable effect with a gigantic out-of-town shopping centre across the road, one of so many set loose on this country like the thousand podships of an extraterrestrial invasion to devour every local economy and culture they can fit in their maws.

What makes it so depressing is that the English have shown us they can do better. The Brent brought us in contact with engineers, campaigners and visionaries who even while plunging headfirst through an age of remorseless industrialisation or plummeting into the market abyss, knew, no, *decided*, that there was nothing in that most passive and unremarked skeleton of their society, its infrastructure, that meant it had to be ugly to look at or dismal to use. That is why they got splendid bridges and viaducts built to last. That is why they now have pretty canals for picnics or festivals or leisurely narrowboat cruises, not to mention Thomas the Tank Engine. The happy romanticised images of those things in the national imagination erase the reprehensible foundations – racism, exploitation, political violence and so on – that most of this infrastructure junctions to. But those few sparks of will, of understanding that infrastructure not only moves you about but re-models your world and shows people what you are, are the reason they got to paint those images at all.

In so far as horrendous abuses built this stuff we have to acknowledge their victims. Most of these bridges, rails and canals are roads of bones, their bricks and iron laid down by legions of wretched forced labourers, to whom the English's concentration of power in the hands of capital-holders and contempt for the workers' stratum of society gave no choice but to grind themselves to carcasses in the building of routes that people like them would never ride, and to whose names and stories their country shut the historical record with barely a shrug. This is the deplorable pattern in much of the world now, and as the first great industrialiser this nation has to answer questions on the degree to which it set the tone, the development pathway, the meta-infrastructure, that other societies have since contrived to follow. The likes of Brindley and Brunel have statues and monuments; where are the memorials for the people who shovelled and pickaxed their visions into reality by the sweat upon their brows? Would it really have killed this society to treat the navvies better, or provide mobile healthcare and

education services tailored to the itinerant practices of the boat people who for a time kept the engine running for its whole industrial journey? What of those driven to refuge on canal boats today because of its ridiculous house prices, its seizures of land for the luxuries of the super-rich, and its want of means for reasonable human beings to develop an income? Their failure to do all these people justice is not only a dark stain on the story of the canals but a lethal narrative precedent: it let them push those sacrificed victims out of the tale and tell it as a success story, the same narrative which blinds them to the unsustainable systemic abuse, and resultant seething rage, that is the reality of their social arrangements today.

Perhaps what separates today's mentality from that of industrialising times is that they have travelled so far that the sights and sounds of infrastructure, its experience, its *message*, no longer matter to them. Recall again the repugnance of the M4 motorway as it attempted to intrude on the lower Brent. Think about their ongoing quarrels over major infrastructure projects like the High Speed 2 railway or third runway at Heathrow Airport. Consider those uncreative phalluses that pass for skyscrapers ejaculating the gloat of ill-gotten wealth into the London skyline. Few of these have been or might be constructed with a concern for what they will tell those who look on them about the character of English society, let alone for their environments or their communities; indeed, the typical expectation from such things is an annihilation job. In the age of the market, infrastructure exists in order to further enrich privileged sections of society and push up economic statistics – nothing else – and that its projects must ruin lives and landscapes is all but axiomatic.

Yet, if they look to their history and dig around in their labourers' corpses, they might find some valuable fragments that call into question that axiom; fragments that ring with the distant thunder of water cascading through sluices, say, or the shuffling wings of bats that roost in the hollows. Infrastructure *can* be pleasant. It can even be beautiful. With a dash of creativity and enough of a damn, there are ways to make it a lasting contribution to the scenery, habitats, livelihoods and character of an area rather than an altar on which to chop them up. But they have to want it.

9. Hills



At Harrow, we believe that success should be measured not by grades, but by one's influence on the world.

'From the Head Master', website of Harrow School

...the English people are indebted to these schools for the qualities on which they pique themselves most – for their capacity to govern others and control themselves, their aptitude for combining freedom with order, their public spirit, their vigour and manliness of character...These schools have been the chief nurseries of our statesmen...have had perhaps the largest share in moulding the character of an English gentleman.

Report of the Clarendon Commission, 1864

Is there forgiveness?

Charles John Vaughan, former Harrow School headmaster, on his deathbed in 1897

We come to Paradise.

No, really. So claims a signboard: 'Paradise is the name of one of the original fields on the 1773 Binfield Map of the area'.

Amidst Greenford's hell of motors it is challenged to live up to that name. Usually a name like Paradise Fields in any case guarantees a forsaken ditch of squalor and despair. The surprise then is that it might just pull it off because beyond that soulless monolith of a shopping centre, the consumerist palisades crash to a dumbfounding total defeat before the resurgent sovereignty of the wild.

Paradise Fields is not only a nice place, it is a conquest: a recapture of that most ruthless of land rearrangements – a golf course – by an equal and opposite bastion of nature, a wetland. The evidence it had human accomplices does not diminish the magnitude of its achievement: it not only supports a constellation of wildlife but also filters pollutants out of the water with its reed-beds, not a theoretical point amidst the motoring secretions dribbling down from the Greenford Road. Its proud signboard broadcasts the victory through photos of various species of duck, some of which have autographed their images with defecations.

A viewing platform is as close as we can get to these marshes. Their denizens watch us back. Crickets whirr in long gold grass that sways in the wind, while behind the tree barrier the mechanised ranks of the Greenford Road fume impotent. They cannot get in. Even their growls are smothered by birdsong rich with melodies uncommon in this land. These wetlands are not large, but they heave with life.

It is in places like this that one is made sensible to remember that birds are the last living representatives of dinosaurs. The broadcast of a lone jackdaw atop the highest tree, even the explorations of pigeons nodding their heads as they waddle around, assume a sobering gravitas as their motions align with the shades of theropods through time. But alas, those shades fade out as a bench comes into view. The dirt and grass are strewn with the natives' discarded cigarette butts, plastic bottles, beer cans, and other such detritus of English inebriative customs. Perhaps a velociraptor or two to police this oasis would not go amiss.

The shift from neo-industrial strugglescape to beguiling bogs was sudden. Now we transition again, courtesy of a brief reprise by the Grand Union Canal. There

is something jarring about these jerks through realities – as though the further north we go, the more the geo-temporal fabric of the metropole frays and fragments. This quarter was claimed so recently from the Middlesex bush, but its soul remains in the earth and sabotages the reordering of its surface. Rather than coalescing into distinct themes and storylines, it shatters into a jumbled chaos of pieces.

Let us make some sense of them by borrowing the sight of Paradise Fields' birds – say, that crow at the top of the tree. From a height, things become clearer.

Two hills surface from the sea of suburbs. Neither is large, but they dominate this area by standing as worlds of their own, locking out the settlements around them. Theirs is the high ground on these plains, and they own their own stories; even the English centre of power happens around them, not over them. Yet they accomplish this independence in radically different ways.

The nearer hill, that of Horsenden, is a green fortress that clearly thinks little of humans. The further hill, of Harrow, is built up, very much a province of the English – you might have heard of it – but it fits no better in its surroundings.

Why should that be?

These hills are conundrums, a pair of self-contained universes that protrude into separate dimensions. Might we be thrust by their gravity out of our planned orbit if we climb them? It is a risk we shall have to take, because the English have been up them too, especially the latter, and our concern for them requires that we follow. For hills, of course, are the high ground of identity as well as of geography. From atop them you see much, and much sees you. When the English have a hill, what do they choose to put on it? Let us investigate what these people have got up to on their capital region's strange far heights.

Horsenden's crown swells verdant before us. To reach it we must cross the Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal. Its water drifts east, smooth as bottle-green glass, sedate with its little constellations of duckweed. These live up to their name as coots paddle around hoovering up their fronds. A pair swims across to inspect our rights of entry, but first to squeak up at us are four youngsters. These must be at an advanced stage of infancy now for they are almost as large as the adults, yet still wear coats of fluff and show an uninhibited curiosity, following us beneath the rim of the towpath and gobbling up weeds as they go.

There must have been a day when this stretch was clogged with colliding cargo barges and rang with the blasts of bellowing boatmen, but now it feels marginal to the human world and well under re-integration into the interests of other life. What humans we catch sight of are their guests: the occasional cyclist, or moored narrowboats from whose innards we get woofed at in passing. A pyjamaed couple emerges from one craft and they perch themselves on the prow, clutching mugs of morning coffee.

It is pleasant here. Let us avail ourselves of that while we can and walk east to find an opportune crossing point.

Now here is an odd encounter. On the far bank a woman stands preoccupied with her smartphone. Perhaps it is the angle of the sun, or her long dark hair and all-white clothing, but briefly she resembles an *onryō*, a vengeful spirit of Japanese folklore. Her presence would make sense. Those are typically women who died in unjust circumstances, brought about by gendered societies, come back for revenge on the peoples that wronged them. In a country like this there must be countless cases where those varieties of pain has given them legitimate grievances, in which case the English should not be surprised if that redress is extracted through their throats, nor even by means of the fearsome *tatari* (祟り) or vengeful curses that can manifest through mysterious deaths or large-scale disasters like earthquakes. All gender violence is a political failure on society's part, so consequences on that collective scale are proportionate. Till then, if an *onryō* enters an English person's house, the correct response is to offer tea with sugar – apologising, of course, for the massive colonial violence east and west that brought both those commodities to this country – then to hear out her case, because she is right, and commit to the total defeat of gender-based violence in England in compensation. That is fair.

Then the *onryō* moves, and it turns out we got it completely wrong: in fact she is black, with considerable dreadlocks and very much alive. An honest mis-identification. The sun is too bright today – an extraordinary event which no-one in this country could possibly prepare for.

Fortunately the high foliage provides some shade as we pursue the Paddington Arm to a bridge at the foot of Horsenden Hill. The world is so still here. Undefined mechanical grumbings from the engines of progress and profit break in at the margins, but they are little more than an annoyance in an air dense with the authority of the wetlands. A column of ducks groom their feathers on the rim of the towpath. On a log lodged by the far bank, an outrageous cormorant spreads

its stately wings wide, first towards us, then away, then this way again, every now and then piercing us with a brilliant sky-blue gaze to ensure we are taking notice. Beneath the foliage a clump of moorhen chicks with crimson bald heads and thorny amber collars breakfast on the weeds.

A bridge appears, brick but grey like stone, and reminds us that we have a hill to climb. We had better cross. It brings us to some species of installation. Many narrowboats are moored by what looks like a small marina, and beside that is a children's playground whose most prominent fixture is a sizeable wooden pirate ship for them to clamber on. A cylindrical iron cage hangs from its bowsprit, so they can take turns imprisoning each other to be ferried down to the waterlogged realms of the briny damned or suchlike. It all looks in good order – the ship's planks are bright, its gunwales recently painted – but the place is utterly deserted. Around the corner is a car park, and past it a road winds up to a clutch of dormant houses. Agricultural instruments with names no-one remembers sit rusting in the undergrowth.

Signboards identify this as Horsenden Farm, and it is the sole human representation in the clutches of greenery that garb this hill in total. One such display tells of the hill's history through the mouth of a man whose name is missing even from the bottomless depths of the internet: a farmer, Samuel Verrey. Agriculture like his appears to have been the main occupation around these parts – wheat, peas, and rye, says Mr. Verrey, much of it of distinguished quality – and it continues amidst these buildings, albeit in compact allotment-like arrangements rather than sprawling fields. Animal friends are present: two bouncy goats come bleating up to us as we pass behind the farmhouse and pierce the lower woods of the hill proper.

The paths here have been integrated into a network of signs and cheerful animal sculptures. Together they call these a Gruffalo Trail. So those are what the English put on their hills. A good choice.

The story of the Gruffalo, as told by the playwright Julia Donaldson in 1999, concerns a mouse walking through a forest full of animals that would like to eat him. He dissuades them by saying he is on his way to see his friend the Gruffalo. He has in fact just made this creature up, but his fearsome descriptions and hints that each predator in turn is the Gruffalo's favourite food is enough to scatter them in fear. Delighting at his own cleverness, the mouse is then bewildered to run into an actual Gruffalo, but avoids becoming its dinner by turning the ruse on its head and telling it that he, the mouse, is the scariest animal in the forest, then

proving it by leading the lumbering Gruffalo back past all the animals who flee in terror at the sight of it. The Gruffalo, astonished at their apparent dread of the tiny mouse, then itself runs for its life when the mouse threatens to eat it.

Bravo. A magnificent story, and what a splendid idea, on top of that, to borrow the atmosphere of these woods to immerse small children in its lessons. If it is a healthy and vigorous society you want then this is the fable for you.

Why? Consider. The core message of the Gruffalo tale is simple: brains over brawn. But there is more to it. The mouse, having defeated physically stronger foes by invoking the image of a monster so overpowering that its setting's apex predators cannot bear even to think of it, then defeats that impossible monster itself. This is a lesson in the nature of power. Power is not a linear scale of strength and weakness, but a complex quality, and one that changes. It is so complex and changeable in fact that any enemy, no matter how powerful it appears, can be overcome with sufficient courage, ingenuity and presence of mind; nothing and no-one is invincible. Once this is understood, every child is primed to one day prick through the preposterous propagandas of blustering tyrants like the soap-bubbles they are. As the mouse to the Gruffalo, so David to Goliath, Mario to Bowser, and the Viet Cong to the U.S. Army.

There could hardly be a better classroom for this than a real forest. Around the Gruffalo Trail you can push off side-paths into the bushes to find charming effigies of each of the characters in this tale, including a seven-foot redwood likeness of the titular creature. Beside each is a board of ecological fun-facts so you can learn all about the real-life habits of mice, snakes, foxes, owls and Gruffalos. There are even some bonus animals on the nearby hillside: a half-dozen big brown Sussex cattle, munching bulkily away on the grass in wary-eyed serenity.

There is only one problem: no-one is here. Surely a place like this should be swamped with gambolling children? And why is the paint peeling off the signs, thus defeating any attempt by the English, when they do arrive, to learn where mice like to hide from predators or how Gruffalos will be affected by Brexit? They are already suffering the impact of the austerity craze by the looks of things here.

Or maybe the nationalists are responsible, in their panic at the foreign elements in the Gruffalo's tale. There are plenty. The characters' illustrations, now immortalised in the Horsenden woods for all to climb on, are the work of the German illustrator Axel Scheffler. Donaldson has also suggested as one of the story's influences the Chinese fable of the fox and the tiger, which shares the same fundamental theme. For that matter it summons up the legend behind the Chinese

zodiac, where a little rat (or was it this same mouse?) wins a river race against the other animals – tigers and dragons among them – by hitching a ride on the ox's head and jumping off at the end to take first place. The Chinese: as we saw in the Taiping Rebellion, there is a people that has learnt the hard way a thing or twenty about the complexity of power.

Climb further and nationhood matters less. The way to the summit is steep, but soon the woods give way to slopes of long grass bleached pale by the unrelenting summer heatwave. The grass is shorter on the summit, save for a suspiciously regular rectangle completely bald of it: the remnant, we are meant to believe, of one of two underground reservoirs built here in the 1950s then abandoned fifteen years later. It is not clear why. It could be the hill simply didn't like them. Red-roofed Englishness spreads through the suburbs on fine view to the west and into the outlying shires, but a faint hostility to mortal misuse hums through the earth here. For the capitalists this might have been a tempting site for a funfair, a watchtower or a renowned little café, but no, apart from some benches and an obsolete triangulation pillar, the English have left it alone.

Odd that, given that people have been pottering around on Horsenden Hill for as long as they are recorded on this island. Paradoxically, that might explain the limits on their doing so today.

Horsenden Hill is in fact a scheduled ancient monument, protected by law since the late 1970s because of the wealth of archaeological relics dug up from its soil. Some of its oldest flint tools and arrowheads go back three or four millennia to nomadic foragers who might have well valued the view from this summit, a simple enough climb at eighty-four metres, to scout their way through the ocean of trees and marshes of the Neolithic Thames. Later finds include the pottery and jewellery of Iron Age people who settled on this hilltop around 2,500 years ago and undertook major earthwork projects here, likely changing its profile. Evidence of banks and ditches has been found, most likely defensive – against whom? For a fair assessment of English violence it would be helpful to know how violent its people were before they became English. In any case the outcome is clear: Horsenden Hill is a hill fort, one of those immediately recognisable and tantalising remnants of a distant age. One better expects them in the north and west of this island, where Roman and Anglo-Saxon immigrants, neither especially keen on hill forts, were slower to disrupt the established Iron Age cultures. But here is one bang in the middle of the London suburb of Ealing, a survivor of more than two

thousand years, one of the most ancient presences in the English capital region sitting right there looking at them – yet they ignore it. How absurd!

Eventually this area got consolidated into the territory of the Middle Saxons – Middlesex – and the forests gave way to farmland. It is from then that its present name derives: recall that *dun* means a hill, hence *Horsen-dun*, the hill of Horsa. This one is a heftier name in Anglo-Saxon lore, but whether this Horsa was their namesake legendary chieftain or a different individual concerned with horses (or whether he himself was a horse) is out of our line of sight up here. As our farmer friend Samuel Verrey was pleased to relate, the agriculture they began continued all the way through to industrial times, no doubt nourished by the nearby Brent and apparently so delectable in its produce as to make it into Tudor poetry.

Incidentally Mr. Verrey claims that he was ambushed and shot dead by bandits in the 1720s, but this minor irritation seems not to have inconvenienced his commentary. What really shook things up, he goes on, was the arrival of the Paddington Arm, which committed the area's hamlets to large-scale cultivation of hay to ship to London, there to feed the thousands of horses whose ghosts we met on the towpaths. London returned the favour with a delightful gift called *mack*: a mix of excrement, food waste, leavings from butchers' shops and random detritus swept off the streets, at least some fraction of which was meant to be good for the fields. Horsenden Farm with its goats and Gruffalos is a vestige of this time, since when the eruption of London in all directions has overwhelmed the fields with the residences of Ealing. The process would not be complete without them dabbling the hill with their international conflicts: they stuck an anti-aircraft gun up here in the First World War and a searchlight in the Second, and then in the 1990s would convict a spy, Michael Smith, who if we take their word for it would rendezvous on this hill to pass weapons secrets to the Soviet KGB.

Horsenden Hill then: not an unremarkable grassy lump, but a time capsule packed with layer upon layer of stories in the manner of an Antarctic ice core. It is certainly a generous natural refuge, spacious enough to imagine those ancient communities laying out a comfortable village here and no less welcoming to the nine million people in whose city it perches on a day of gorgeous sunshine. And yet it, too, is so strangely deserted. Nobody is here to appreciate it save for sporadic elderly individuals walking their dogs. What does it say about this population's values that so few care for such opportunities, or have had the time and energy to avail themselves of them robbed by a nonsense conception of work? If the English are a free people, where is everybody?

Ah, so that is what they leave behind on their hills, because they cannot take it back down with them. Their freedom.



It leers at us across the way. The other hill. Harrow. Its tree-dense mantle cannot disguise its outlandishness. Buildings poke out that look like nothing anywhere. Look: there is a spire. It cannot hide. That hill is compact, concentrated with an atmosphere all its own.

Harrowing.

That one will be a tough nut to crack. Shall we cross over and give it a go?

First the descent of Horsenden Hill, this time by its north slopes, and no sooner do we set foot on them than its sturdy oaks and hornbeams creak annoyed and insist we told its story incorrectly. How dare we cast the humans as the main characters when in fact it was these woods, not them, that held sway, when in their glory days they linked with remnants all over this area as the Forest of Middlesex?

Alas, we find this wood in unsmiling humiliation. On the other side of the Thames the Great North Wood dominated all the way through to the nineteenth century, but the rollback of the Forest of Middlesex was seen through much earlier. The Romans ploughed Watling Street through it, so all of a sudden it was in the way of their primary access to the interior. Later, after London woke up again, the Normans designated it a royal forest. For a time that preserved it, the Charter of the Forest giving the common people rights to take of its gifts in such manner as preserved it for everyone, but within a century or two they were clearing it out to turn Middlesex into the capital's bread-basket. That is why these tree trunks have growths that look like angry faces.

On the path out of the woods, a giggling, screaming gaggle of school kids in high-vis jackets are piling into the bush to swing their butterfly nets at its fluttering denizens. A supervising teacher in a Muslim cowl and sunglasses stands unimpressed, hands on hips, chastising a more reticent pupil that 'it's hardly the Amazon now is it?'

Quite right, it isn't. But that doesn't mean it was not once burly enough to eat up anyone poking their necks out of London. Tread lightly, and remember these trees are playing a long game.

Between the hills the Ealing suburbs flow in like water. Upon them still floats the name of the agrarian grounds they submerged: Sudbury, the *southern burh*. Southern relative to the northern *burh*, Harrow.

Today Harrow is synonymous with its hill and a certain institution on top of it. That it ranges far further is easily forgotten, save perhaps by those who live in Harrow but not on its hill. Technically speaking it is still a *burh* or borough, if now of London rather than Middlesex, and unrolls beyond the hill across a swathe of lowland *weald* – a Saxon word that means, again, forests – to its north and west. Those too were overrun by farming Middle-Saxons and Normans then by vassals of corporate lords further afield, its present-day London commuters.

Sudbury at least is still of the mortal world. Its eateries and off-licences line up in an elongated mosaic of scripts, while its inhabitants soak our senses in a colourful range of clothes, beards and tongues, altogether suggestive of a higher than average ethno-cultural mix. Some of Sudbury's residential parades show off refurbished porches, loft extensions, boisterous flowers out front – a fresher, better-looked-after suburb than some we have seen. Round a corner some

swanky new apartments launch from the lawns, overlooking the Piccadilly Line of the London Underground as it rolls into Sudbury Town station. That station is a pugnacious red-brick block with a red-brick bridge; a train station in a classic Super Mario game would probably look like this. From over that bridge whips the same main road whose motor-fiends we last met maltreating the victims of Greenford's infrastructural melancholy. Their traffic is no more pleasant here, but at least the cars and HGVs are forced to a crawl as the brick monster wrings them grumpily into the manor grounds of Harrow.

For a short stretch we walk among the residences again, but soon an old trail climbs away up a woody corridor. Here is the true boundary. It may look an unassuming path of leaves, but its steady gradient and concrete bollards stranded in the undergrowth – it used to be wider – betray this thoroughfare's former importance. It wears the mask of 'Green Lane', as though that is going to fool anybody. Its real name rustles through the bushes: *Piggy Lane*.

Alright. We won't ask. Let it satisfy us to learn that this was the main passage up to the hilltop island in the clouds. Not clouds made of water – the hill is too low, and the English don't do mountains – but clouds of mystique, densely packed.

For Harrow-on-the-Hill is no suburb. Piggy Lane deposits us on its approach road and even this pulsates with privilege. Every house along here is a high-galumpling mansion, and from here on it is all sumo-wrestler chimney stacks, pretentious balustrades and private driveways that might as well have been built with processions of liveried triceratopses in mind, each shooing away the unwashed masses with PRIVATE PROPERTY signs. Nobody comes to a street like this to live on it. They come to show others they live on it.

But something is off about these displays. We have already trespassed through the playgrounds of the privileged, back before the bend in the Thames. What we have here is not a copy-and-paste of those. Harrow's physical appearance is not just of privilege but of a specific culture of privilege peculiar to itself.

As we draw up to the summit we come to a mishmash of period architectures in public buildings clustered around a grass triangle. Those houses are not very big. They don't need to be. One is a white plastered something-or-other that titles itself the King's Head Hotel, and it faces a wooden frame in the triangle's centre that looks suspiciously like a gallows. From it hangs a portrait of the king in question, and you can guess which one it is, so no, we are changing the subject.

There used to be a common here. It is gone now. Its name was Roxeth Common, and unlike the holdouts scattered across the south this common's defeat was total.

Forensics suggest the murdering blow was dealt in the 1810s by a Lord Northwick, aided and abetted by the local gentry in spite of a fifteen-year struggle by local people to protect the victim. Most of these defenders were small farmers languishing through a horrible agricultural depression, and with torrential rains and crop failures soon to compound it, the Enclosures of Middlesex utterly undid them. The overflowing bread-basket could forget about Tudor poems exulting its produce now, instead it would get the usual denouement of ruin, riots and suicides by desperate rural people, to whose grievances the English state – now dominated, remember, by the political parties of a parliament stuffed with landowners – responded with its typical answer: violent suppression, hangings, and transportations to Australia. Meanwhile the Enclosed land went to grinning nobles like Northwick. A small but significant portion went to the School. Its boys played cricket on it.

Oh yes – the School. Have you heard of it? It is famous or something.

Where is this School then? Press on and we are suddenly hemmed in by the overwhelming majesty of its buildings, each a show-stopper in its own right. There is the Speech Room – more a Speech Fort – with its stripes and arches and stained-glass windows and lordly statue of Elizabeth I. The Chapel, with its streaming triangular-prism roofs and circles-in-circles-in-circles and Gothic spire and punch-in-the-face black flint finish that glowers down on its sunny companions, convinced they are beneath it. And the dignified Vaughan Library, another exercise in stripes and lines and circles and arches in recurring combinations of bright orange brickwork and smooth white stone – but mere descriptions fail to capture these manifestations of grandiose augustness, and to do so properly would require levels of architectural vocabulary that would delight specialists but leave the remaining 99.9% of us flailing in the fog.

But which one is the school?

Well, it turns out they all are. The closest we can get to identifying a headquarters is the stocky ‘Old Schools’ building just up Church Hill, another white-and-orange brick ogre with twin projections on its façade like 2D ziggurats and a clock tower in the middle. They say that give or take a few re-works that building is where it all started, but in truth Harrow School has long transcended any requirement for a fixed core. Harrow School is this hill: its roads and pavements, its lawns, its stones, its bricks, its clouds, its air. It is a solar system whose pull has so swelled with everything dragged in over the centuries that it

can no longer tell you which part is the sun, because all of it is: not Harrow-on-the-Hill so much as Harrow-is-the-Hill.

And here we are, too. We have gone and crossed its event horizon. Its edifices crowd round, demanding we submit to their splendour. We cannot go through, because of course they will not let us in. The only way out is to tunnel through time.

And so, a warning. These could be our most treacherous tunnels yet. To navigate the history of Harrow School is to fumble through the mirror mazes, smokescreens, illusions and impossible architecture of a closed organisation whose very existence is a composite of its stories. Its stories are everything to it – they *are* it, thus not merely stories but legends, feelings, identities, institutional muscle memories, every one the product of centuries of masks and manipulations which not only obscure any core of truth about the school but *are integral to what that truth is*. Each stream of its history we wade through is lodged between strata of alternative tellings, and we will have to flip between those parallel stories to find a safe way through. And we must have a care, lest our slips through the narrative dimensions bring us too close to the margins and loose our tethers to reality, on one side in the glistening romance of public-school heroism, on the other amidst the grasping horrors of lurid stereotype and scandal. With a challenge the like of Harrow School, simply making it out the other side will be an accomplishment.

As with the difficulty of the encounters, so too the quality of the treasure. Grab what spoils you can, because each trinket of information is sure to be worth its weight in chocolate for what it will tell us about the English people. In their sheen we will find reflections of the bizarre and convoluted English education framework. Oh yes, you can tell a lot about a people from what they would instil in their youth and the ways they attempt to do it. We might even extract some of the historical context needed to make sense of how a bunch of elite institutions – Oxford and Cambridge among universities, Eton, Westminster, Winchester and yes, Harrow among their schools – came to perch in corpulence at the apex of some of the most renowned, critiqued, and interchangeably praised and ridiculed pillars of privilege in England today. Their very names have become international synonyms for the life pathways they elevate high out of reach of the ordinary population, reachable only by those youths whose parents can buy them wings to fly up there, whereupon they soar through a firmament of arcane customs and rituals, which may or may not involve bodily fluids, before sliding straight out the

other side into the windows of ministries and boardrooms at the pinnacles of the English power structure.

Indeed, Harrow, your ambush is our opportunity. Let the games begin.

They were Christians then. Most of them, anyway. Their scriptures warned them that a city on a hill cannot be hidden.

In front of the Old Schools stands an iron-grille arch, and set at its top is a golden lion. The English like their lions even though they never had any, and have put references to them everywhere from their aristocratic heraldry to their sports teams. But in Harrow's case the symbol is more specific. It refers to a fellow whose name was Lion, or rather Lyon. John Lyon: if not strictly the founder of Harrow School, then at least the originator of its vision.

Lyon is a mystery in a mist of mysteries, done up in layer after layer of the mythmaking all creator figures suffer at the hands of those who inherit their handiwork. What seems beyond dispute is that he was a local farmer, and a highly well-off one at that – believable, given the historic prosperity of the farms here – and also a pious Christian. He would have grown up through the turmoil of That King's attack on Roman church authority and all the bloody upheavals that came of it, and anyone who makes it unruffled through something like that has to make us a little wary.

Nonetheless, his project on this hill was neither particularly ambitious nor unusual for his day. What did it mean to be a good Christian, for an individual like Lyon with money to burn? Well, the purist Protestants didn't like it when people built showy churches or conducted ceremonies overflowing with chants and baubles. That is what Catholics do, they thought, instead of just being inherently always right like us. So the obvious alternative was schools, where you could plant the seeds of the faith in new generations' soil. The authorities, keen to hammer out some longer-term framework of stable religious control, would get behind that too.

Now England already had a tradition of *grammar schools*, typically attached to churches and teaching Latin. This literary language gave children access not only to the clerical circles where it was still spoken but also the brimming wells of logic and oratory of ancient Rome, and now it would be all the more versatile a skeleton key since the Reformation and its printing presses were making written texts available to everyone for the first time. So when Lyon obtained a Royal Charter in

1572 ‘for the perpetual education, teaching and instruction of children and youth of the parish’, this did not appear outrageous or bold. There was in fact already a school here on Harrow hill. He was simply ‘re-endowing’ it, that was all.

And yet there were some eyebrow-raising terms to his project. It came with a commitment to look after the roads to London – not a negligible service, if we look at our maps and note that this is our route’s furthest point from the old city. More importantly, this was to be a *charitable* vision. The school was to take in local boys of the Harrow parish free of charge, and provide a subsidy to sixty of their poorest households. Just like Jesus Christ would have done, presumably.

Local boys though. This was gendered education. No girls. As far as schools were concerned you could have said this was usual, you could have said it was not; the pattern in England varied. Had it remained a local concern, this mistake of Mr. Lyon’s might have been forgivable; alternatives would have been available, and all we would have to take him to task for is saddling us with another story where almost all the main characters are male. Instead his school would rear up and latch onto a disastrously impregnable privilege structure by which girls are excluded from almost the entire structure of elite education in England to this day, because in less than a hundred years, this *charitable creation*, soaring high, would flip a hundred and eighty degrees. Rather than the poor, it would serve only the richest of the rich. And when it spread its wings, the educational landscape of the nation at large would cower in its shadow.

That is the puzzle of Harrow School. A project for a village found its destiny in an empire. Its vision, a friendly helping hand to those stuck down the ditches of poverty and oppression in the love-thy-neighbour Jesus version of Christianity, somewhere tripped and fell, and when it got up it had mutated into something more like the I-am-God, get-the-fuck-out-of-my-garden Old Testament version, a bastion of patronage which lowered its drawbridge only to those who could prove they belonged at the towering echelons of the English social hierarchy.

A city on a hill cannot be hidden. It cannot remain *local*. Hills, by definition, are not local – everyone can see them. And those who seek power always know they must control the high ground.

These days, no school subject in England reeks more of exclusivity than Latin. It is useless for everyday life, they say. It is what dead people speak, they say. A *dead language*. But it is not the language’s fault if the way they teach it is boring as hell.

If you want to get at the nuts and bolts of any people whose ways were shaped by the Roman Empire, or by the Christian institutions it took on itself and launched at the world – let alone communicate with either's sets of undead – Latin is indispensable, and what is more you would not have mistaken as boring those who really knew what to do with it. The Roman intellectual culture presents through a thousand orchestras of blistering oratorical fireworks and neverending high dramas drenched with blood and awe and emotional twists the like of which few speakers or storytellers today can tap and still fewer have not been touched by. Even in video games you can make contact with Latin's legacies through your goose bumps, as anyone who has basked in the opening of Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* or fought Sephiroth in *Final Fantasy VII* will confirm with a chill down their spine. So when we observe that the core of Lyon's school's curriculum was the *classics* – Latin, Ancient Greek, and the texts of the old Mediterranean world – the correct image is not that of tedious recitals of verb endings under the gaze of a moustachioed, red-faced master impatiently tapping a cane in his hand, but rather, mountains-and-waterfalls training in the fluency to weave through the fires of history with Livy, to swim through the roiling poetic storm-waves of Virgil, or to stand ten times taller than you are like Cicero and bury your fellow students' foolish opinions with words turned cracks of lightning. Those people knew what words could do to take hearts and civilisations on journeys they would never forget. And in the England of Reformation times, as people's cosmic certainties were turned on their heads and pile-driven into the dirt, there could have been worse ideas of *education* than learning to master those powers of the ancients.

Studying Latin was one thing though. Having to speak exclusively in it was quite another.

Lyon's school required that pupils go about their day in Latin. They had to speak Latin with teachers and Latin with other children, *even while playing*. You might excuse the local kids coming in from poor and illiterate peasant families if that was not exactly a lake they took to like ducks. On top of that, though the schooling was free, they still had to pay for their own texts and stationery – that meant bows and arrows, not only ink and paper – and study all the while cognisant, in Latin, no doubt, that their families were missing their help in the fields.

Lyon's vision for his school may have been charitable, but from the beginning there were cracks in its practices. Through them the tendrils of privilege felt their way in. They would lengthen, thicken and coil. And then they would shake.

Lyon died in 1592. His wife Joan carried on his preparations till she too departed this world in 1608, after which the school's governors steered the project to fruition. They constructed the schoolhouse, developed the roads to London, fought off lawsuits over misuse of funds, all the while implementing Lyon's instructions as close as they could, and in 1615 were ready to open the doors of the Free Grammar School of John Lyon – just in time to watch their country torn to shreds by the demise of royal authority.

If, in the civil wars, London was a hotbed of support for parliament against Charles Stuart, Harrow School appears to have fired itself up as one of the hottest patches of that bed. Some of its governors' opposition to the king was tenacious to the point of recruiting soldiers to fight him and paying their taxes to parliament instead. The School's headmaster through these warring times was a man called William Hide, yet another shadow in the records – which is curious, for this was a day when schools for all intents and purposes *were* their headmasters. The supreme example was the fearsome Dr. Richard Busby of Westminster School, which staunchly supported the royalists from the very heart of parliament's capital, but that place is a complicated matter on which I cannot make even a pretence of impartiality, for – reasons, so let us say no more on this. Better documented as far as Hide was concerned was his work: throughout the unrest he is credited with developing Harrow's staff, buildings, teaching systems and links with the universities. By the time of his removal in circumstances clearly not at all suspicious in 1661, the brainchild of John Lyon was maturing into a serious contender on the petri dish of England's fledgling school system.

All these investments required money. Lyon's endowment went a good way to providing it, but a cultural shift was taking place, and it had all to do with another flexibility permitted under Lyon's original terms. The headmaster was allowed to take in fee-paying 'foreigners' – that is, boys from outside the parish – and charge them as much as he liked, so long as it did not compromise the main purpose of providing free education to poor locals. Soon it would compromise the main purpose of providing free education to poor locals. In fact the metamorphosis was already underway. The fee-payers swelled the school's coffers with riches too lucrative to ignore, as with them rents could be paid, buildings improved, facilities expanded for teaching and boarding, dinners and speech events made lavish. They also brought in the lethal ingredient: the profit motive.

Beware the bloody profit motive. If you have to let it into your works, check the locks and the links in the chains every hour. Every half an hour. You already know what is going to happen here.

By the end of the century this means to fulfil Lyon's vision was replacing it as an end in itself. Charity was becoming commerce. In every intake the 'foreigners' with their sacks of cash were showing up from all over the country; by the Revolution of 1688 they outnumbered the local free students two to one. What was more, the School was establishing a reputation not only as an excellent educator but as a network of bridges to the ruling and landowning classes. One measure of this was the high-flying professionals filing out of its other end, the likes of doctors, lawyers, scholars, vicars and Tory MPs, but it was also distorting the School's internal culture: an 'Oration' in Latin at the governors' annual audit meeting; the practice of archery, by then more an aristocratic observance than a functional life skill; and other esoteric rituals by which its staff and students could share their feelings of specialness and broadcast it to strangers. On several occasions the School's governors, vested with custody of Lyon's original vision and with little stake in its profits, had to haul in headmasters and wiggle their fingers at them to remind them of why this School was supposed to exist. But in time even they tilted to favour the big investments, expensive annual dinners, and attraction of more and more milkable 'foreigners' through its doors.

All of a sudden this place was no longer merely a school. It was a state-of-the-art social laboratory for the cream of English society to shape their kids into tough, swaggering elementals of patrician masculinity, who would carry forth in self-conscious confidence their inherited privilege, boast of it in archaic phrases understood by fewer people with each passing generation, and in due course, press their heels down on all the assembled faces in their factories, families and colonies.

Cities on hills cannot be hidden. Nor can they be hidden from. They are on hills. They see everything. Soon, this one would see across the world.

In the annals of English elite school notoriety, no name commands such intensity of bile as Eton College. That school is not on a hill but plots its world domination from a crimson castle several kilometres up the Thames valley, taking advantage of our knowledge that it would be unfair to snipe at it as some fortified headquarters of all evil because we have to believe, on principle, that a closer look

reveals a more complex story. And fair enough, it would probably be a bit much to suggest that Eton *caused* British imperialism, or the class structure, or the Brexit crisis, even if the last can be told as a story of two Eton schoolboys, one called David and the other Boris, reducing the apparatus of government into a venue to settle their playground feud. Yet no explanation of such phenomena can be complete without at least the stab of a shovel to search for that school's role in their cultivation. Infamous Eton, crenellations and battlements above all the others, stands accused of perfecting the model of school-as-sausage-factory for the Conservative Party and functioning as a spawning pool for rich white English exceptionalism.

What does this matter for Harrow? Quite a lot actually, because in 1669 the under-master of Eton College, one William Horne, packed his bags and made the journey down the valley and up the hill to take up his new post as headmaster of the School of John Lyon.

The custom is to imagine the Harrow-Eton relationship as a rivalry, especially where at its noisiest on the cricket field. More accurately Eton was Harrow's model, then its ally as a fellow beacon of English class power. Horne's appointment marked a new phase in which a long procession of Eton's officials and minions would also troop up the hill, their quality of transport in accordance with their social seniority, and devote their experience to feed Harrow's interest in taking on as much of the Eton system as possible. That included its curricula, its boarding of students, its fee-paying 'foreigners', and above all its cult of the headmaster, who in Harrow's case was now ensconced in a permanent house on the hill, a spider at the centre of a web of paternal authority which spanned the entire school. At a whim, he could pull on any sticky strand of his choosing and control the life of the teacher, pupil or building at the other end.

This, after all, was the Stuart Restoration, that crucible of so many forces that would come to define the English rise. The country was changing, in the general direction of making it fashionable to oppress people while pretending you were empirically better than them, and subtly but steadily Harrow changed too. Its lasting flight path was reflected in its shift in political climate: it swayed away from the *Whigs* – that is, the Liberal Party, who inherited parliament's opposition to absolute monarchy – and towards the more authoritarian monarchist persuasions of the *Tories*, or the Conservative Party.

A word on these, because they are a vital bridge between the divided England of the civil wars and the divided England of today. After parliament came out on

top from that fractious seventeenth century, its own warring factions crystallised into political parties. These carried on the disagreements over which the English had spent decades chopping each other to pieces, but now in a setting where they could do it with words rather than swords. For all their mutual animosities, their assembly was now established, its power constitutionally confirmed, and that gave the opposing parties a shared meta-identity and unified institutional presence. With it they swiftly rose to eclipse the monarch and dominate the English political system.

In simple terms the *Whigs* and *Tories* were the reformers and the traditionalists, successors to the civil-war parliamentarians and royalists respectively. Their very names come from the warring-period slang for Scottish rebels (*whiggamores*) and Irish bandits (*tóraidhe*), which each party name-called the other. Both would mutate with the world around them, but that is still the basic battle line today. The Tories, or Conservative Party, are still the Tories, albeit their fall to market fundamentalism in the 1980s under Thatcher severed them from traditional conservative values (the market religion, as is now obvious, cares little for healthy families, rewarding work, or green and pleasant lands). The Liberals would be displaced by the Labour Party with the rise of the labour movement in the early twentieth century, but Liberal remnants and Labour rebels would merge in the 1980s to birth a smaller third party, the Liberal Democrats.

Whether the Tory tendency from the Revolution of 1688 onward would have been to hold a charitable vision like John Lyon's in as much contempt as their market-priesthood usurpers do today is a fair question, but it was clear that by the eighteenth century the character of Harrow School had drifted far from its origins. Titles, patronage and business fortunes were spreading among its governors, and investments were made in its buildings not to improve their function but to make them grand, imposing, from some angles even beautiful. All the while the contributions of fee-paying students were amassing into an ever-growing pile in the hands of headmasters who, like Dr. Busby at Westminster (who was still there, because no-one, royalist or parliamentarian, found the guts to make an enemy of him), could just as well have fancied themselves heads of state ruling their own sovereign territories.* This money permitted ever more of those

* There is an anecdote about how Dr. Busby refused to take off his hat when king Charles II visited his school, in order that the boys, in his words, 'not think there is a greater man in the land than myself'. It sounds like even the king – the one who romped across the country in disguise and hid in an oak tree to escape Cromwell's army – was afraid of him.

embellishing investments and salary rises, which in turn helped lure in those loaded students from the richest levels of society.

This seemingly irresistible rise suffered a hiccup around the 1740s with a murky affair whose details are hard to pin down. Harrow remembers it as swirling round the figure of a drunken and debt-ridden headmaster, Dr. James Cox – another individual who drifts somewhere between the wrong end of a hostile, finger-pointing historiography and a possibly sadder reality of mental health struggles. But the school's swift return to business as usual following his removal suggests how robust an institution it had become. Fashionable, prosperous and irredeemably corporate, it had now been through enough to build from its community's shared stories a distinct identity – a *genius loci* or spirit of the place, or more cynically, a cult – and transmit it down the generations through dynastic loyalties, thus accumulating a mythology, and a nostalgia for it, that doubled as potent advertisement to the children of the rich and famous. It might not have got a border drawn round its hill like Eswatini or the Vatican, but what need has real power for imaginary lines on maps?

And there was no stopping it, was there? Its revolving doors with Eton whirled so fast that they spun off their hinges, to land as a veritable dual carriageway of headmasters, tutors, subjects and teaching styles, not to mention connections, experience, reputation and cryptic class symbolism. And cricket, because as at Eton, sport was swelling to supreme significance at the heart of everything Harrow stood for. Sport meant fencing, swimming, dancing, fighting, and more obscure activities like fives or some of the racquet sports whose ancestry we explored at Wimbledon, which in this case, right there in that yard in front of the Old Schools, gave rise in the 1830s to a new invention: the sport of squash. The numbers of pupils playing these games – they all had to – fluctuated between some 150 and 350, and when they exited it was no longer merely as gentlemen of the gentry but officers in a new class of planters, traders, bankers and administrators ready to be launched at the colonies in North America (until they lost them), India and the Caribbean. From almost the very start of the English imperial project, Harrow and its fellow elite schools were fused to it at the hip, and yes, the intake was still notably English, not Scottish, Irish or Welsh. Soon it was also churning out prime ministers, and impactful ones too, like Robert Peel – a Tory, who in 1846 repealed the Corn Law tariffs that had enriched the landowners, prompting a dramatic split in his party oft recalled in Brexiting times – and Henry John Temple, the third Viscount Palmerston, a (defected) Whig and

gunboat diplomacy in person. Harrow had arrived to take its place at the vanguard of England's march upon the world.

No surprise then that its boys too were taking on the trappings of a colonial mini-aristocracy. Everyone knows the stereotype: hordes of children suited, top-hatted and out of control, ruling each other through oligarchic power structures maintained by bullying, harassment or plain naked violence in a context where that nakedness was not necessarily metaphorical. The infamous arrangement was *fagging*, the master-servant relationship between older and younger boys, with the latter's service alternately resembling the "service" of domestic slaves, punching bags or sex toys. The classics-drenched snobbery by which these kids were said to look down on the world was further boosted by a vainglorious Whiggish liberalism fierce in the face of any challenge to the unrestrained freedom they had been taught to see as their class's birthright – that is, freedom as the licence to do whatever the fuck you want, and which most definitely did not end at other people's noses.

This picture obscures a countervailing historical trend in English schools, through which an evil with present-day repercussions must be tracked – their authoritarian discipline regimes and treatment of children as inferiors to adults, a horror story of shrieking, thrashing coercion based on power-tripping and dealt from the highest horses of ageist arrogance. That demands exploring and holding to task, but this seems not the most sensible place to do it. Although physical beating was well-established at Harrow (not just by teachers but by pupils authorised by teachers), we seem to have here a situation where masters' powers to exercise firmness were curtailed in exactly the setting where it might have had some warrant. One does not, after all, simply administer punishment to little emperors whose parents can toss your iron fist into their blast furnaces in the Midlands. Authoritarianism preys on the poor, the damaged, the different. People like Charles I stand out because they are rare exceptions to authoritarians' reluctance to pick fights with those who can fight back.

These kids could fight back. In 1771 they rioted when, despite an ominous assertion of their interests ('we hope your determination, private attachment or personal affection will not bias your choice to the prejudice of the school'), the governors appointed as headmaster a candidate the pupils did not prefer. Windows were shattered. One governor had his carriage smashed up, de-wheeled and shunted down the hill, while others fled trembling behind the shuttered blinds of theirs. Another rebellion six years later contested the new headmaster's

reforms; the students took to the streets and stole the School's keys. But the massive one was in 1808, when another unacceptable choice of headmaster was received with stone-pelting, road-blocking, chants and banners and barricades. More memorable still was the presence among its ringleaders of a passionate young fellow who swung words as potent as his fists and would go on to become one of England's most romantic troublemakers of all: a boy addressed by his Harrovian contemporaries as 'Birron'.

George Gordon Byron, to give him his proper name – or Lord Byron, to give his lasting one – was a pupil at Harrow from 1801 to 1805, and it can be anyone's fun to examine how far the extraordinary saga of his Mediterranean adventures, wars and debts and love affairs and all, was prefigured by his time as a schoolboy here. More interesting to our present concern is how his memories, and others' of him, reflect the Harrow of his day. They are a reminder of the difficulties of digging through histories like these. Byron must be one of the most swooned-over characters to have ever walked this Earth, and his mythos, including the considerable part written by himself, became such a part of who he was that seldom can his myth and fact be fully unpicked. As for him, so for his School, whose own mythos owes much to the startling verses of 'Harrow's poet'.

Like many of Harrow's most famous alumni, Byron seems not exactly a star pupil. Nor was his time there necessarily the idyllic, carefree youth reminisced on in his later poetry. Aside from his role in the 1808 rebellion – in which, the rumour goes, he participated in a plan to blow up the headmaster with a bomb, abandoning it only because it would have destroyed the old pupils' names carved in the panels of the schoolhouse – his fellows remembered him as a bully and a prankster, lame in the foot but passionate and physically forceful in fights as well as sports, if also in friendships. He infuriated his teachers by disrupting lessons or idling through them with imperturbable indifference, and like many of his classmates often seemed more interested in drinking, flirting and sexual encounters, whether with female locals and support staff or other boys, as well as in skirmishes with local farmers getting turfed off their commons. At one point he left the school and refused to return for a whole term; at other times his teachers couldn't wait for him to go. If Harrow's secret to its boys' soaring trajectories was less about academic performance and more about immersing them in something more profoundly cultural, Byron's example does not contradict that image.

He was already aware of his poetic gifts and not afraid to use them to make political trouble. Not so much in the high politics of the nation – he dabbled in

them, but his spirit was too free to be bound to its narrow corridors – but most definitely in the politics of his School, where many an official must have roared awake from nightmares in which they sizzled and writhed on the searing grill of his verses. Here was a boy who took to the Mediterranean ancients with fluency and knew full well the abiding power of their tongues to bury his opponents. The ultimate instance was again the 1808 rebellion, whose target, the unpopular headmaster George Butler, enjoyed such blistering mutual resentment with Byron as to become the victim of a devastating annihilation-by-poetry called *Pomposus* – the title alone strikes fear – which, short of bomb plots, has to be one of the most merciless things a schoolchild has ever done to their headmaster:

*Where are those honours, Ida [Byron's name for Harrow], once your own,
When Probus fill'd your magisterial throne?
As ancient Rome, fast falling to disgrace,
Hail'd a Barbarian in her Caesar's place,
So you, degenerate, share as hard a fate,
And seat 'Pomposus' where your 'Probus' sate.
Of narrow brain, yet of a narrower soul
Pomposus holds you in his harsh controul;
Pomposus, by no social virtue sway'd,
With florid jargon, and with vain parade,
With noisy nonsense, and new-fangled rules,
Such as were ne'er before enforced in schools;
Mistaking pedantry for learning's laws,
He governs, sanctioned but by self-applause.
With him, the same dire fate attending Rome,
Ill-fated Ida! soon must stamp your doom;
Like her o'erthrown, forever lost to fame,
No trace of science left you, but the name.*

Probus, needless to say, was a Roman emperor assassinated by his own disgruntled soldiers.

Cities on hills cannot be hidden. Nor can they hide when their world turns upside down.

Our journey has dunked us several times in the traumatic upheavals of England's nineteenth century, and in the space of a generation the glistening illuminations of the hilltop in Byron's day burst out, their fragments to scatter upon a Harrow at breaking point.

Much of its misery it shared with other elite schools. Amidst economic and agricultural crises the school system was withering under mounting criticisms from a society steaming ahead too fast, free and reckless for its own liking. From Whiggish directions came the charge that they were too devoted to reproducing traditional landowning gentlemen, refined of face but profligate of heart, whose recitals of millennia-old Mediterranean witticisms did not suit a world where power was shifting to enterprising industrialists and an expanding middle class who needed numeracy, humanities, and languages people actually used. From another quarter came moral panic and resurgent religious wrath, bewailing the decline of godliness in English society and demanding that schools do something to bring it back.

The changing narrative winds tore through the reputations of schools like Harrow. As we saw in the Byronsphere, there had long been potential currency in deriding its pupils as drinking, swearing, brawling, thieving, smoking, gambling, stone-lobbing, gunpowder-detonating, wantonly fornicating and utterly licentious barbarians. But beneath the Victorian storm clouds the polluting particles in Harrow's image were all of a sudden the image itself. And while the School sank into that mire, it had to wrestle with another, entirely justified confrontation: that from the local people, who had watched a charity founded to offer their children free education mutate into a gated, exclusive community for the rich and famous – on land seized off their commons, no less – and quite understandably felt cheated and violated. The parishioners of Harrow complained that their rights as laid down by John Lyon had been betrayed, and in 1810 they took the School to court.

To cut a bitter battle short, the Court of Chancery ruled in favour of the School and against the local claimants. Harrow's climb to the elite heights was now officially recognised and it could strut on its way without fear of a legal umbrella-handle round its neck. But this tactical victory would turn out a strategic defeat. It infected the School with that great equaliser, complacency, and so it would

dance ahead with crippling inattention to the decay of its name. By the time it woke up to it, it was almost too late.

In China they have the concept of the *mandate of heaven*: when the ruling power loses legitimacy, the gods show their displeasure with crop failures, natural disasters, and the breakdown of social order into a chaos of wanton banditry and violence, thus signalling to revolutionaries that it is time for justified regime change. The masters of Harrow would not have known of this because that would have meant treating Asians as people you could learn from, but the feeling must have been similar as they watched their pupils' descent into savagery. Anyone who has facepalmed at authoritarians' fuming futility knows how it goes: they lose control, give in to power-tripping rages of bellowing, blustering and flogging, and of course this only whips up further rebellion whether by exciting its targets or alienating them into enemies. So was Harrow's fall to disorder guaranteed. Always in the hill's community even if no longer of it, by the 1820s the anarchy was spilling well beyond the School's walls. Drunken brawls tumbled onto the streets, traders and priests were assaulted, stores and workshops ransacked. The nights were a terror of whooping joyrides, burglaries and pistol-fire. Bullying and abuse reached unspeakable new depths. Students ran away at will, and on one occasion so did teachers in the shadows of massive financial disgrace. In the darkest days of these troubles a new boy drowned in unsavoury circumstances that reeked of negligence and cover-up. If it all sounds a bit *Lord of the Flies*, it is important to remember that these were not average children 'reverting' to some imagined state of nature, but scions of pretentious dynasties who had strode in wearing all the entitled pride instilled by their elders since birth as the due of their whiteness, maleness and titled, monied surnames. Such was England's character that it had calibrated its elite schools not to correct these attitudes but to cultivate them, to teach these kids how to channel their cultured barbarism and stamp the world into its proper place at their feet. When the conduit grew too weak and the barbarism burst through its seams, it told us nothing about the nature of humans or children and everything about what today they call 'British values'.

But perhaps they were rebelling against those values as much as embodying them. In the 1820s they were far from the only ones. Think back to the Crystal Palace. This was a pivotal time in England's cycles of struggle against oppression, as panic at everything from machine-smashing Luddites to the guillotines and conquering armies of France came together in ruling-class anxieties at revolution and spurred them to waves of brutal repression like the Peterloo Massacre. If the

Harrow boys were feared and railed at as out of control, it is surely plausible that some of their agitating was in fact anti-authoritarian *political* expression by a most highly politicised, well-connected, independently organising cohort of young people. It would of course have been neither the first nor last time that students' voices were dismissed as riotous criminality by the fools who insist children's place is to keep quiet and obey.

Whatever the case, there was no arguing with the outcomes: plummeting enrolments and incomes, fractiousness among masters and governors (Byron's old nemesis Butler took a crisis-what-crisis approach that ended in farce and saw him removed in 1829) and a sense that the School was in full disintegration. Like a snowball bouncing down a rocky slope, fragments breaking off on every impact, problems piled upon problems until a drama immersed in the Victorian-age revival of self-righteous Christian zeal brought Harrow School to the brink of destruction. This was the war between a religious and unpopular headmaster, Christopher Wordsworth – nephew of the better-known poet William – and an even more religious and unpopular vicar, J.W. Cunningham. The prevailing narrative pits Cunningham as a manipulative villain who feuded and connived against the head to re-make the School in his own evangelical image, constantly sowing conflicts and interfering with management for his own ends in disguise as high holy principle, but neither does Wordsworth emerge with a favourable account of his grip on reality. Ugly administrative punch-ups became the norm and rolled into the gazes of unimpressed parents, parishioners, clerics, universities and national newspapers. In the 1840s these came to a crunch in a dispute which went right back to the unresolved legacy of John Lyon: whether it was an abuse for the wealthy 'foreigner' students to claim the right to study for free, which Lyon had meant for the local poor. It was a vicious business which ended in 1844 with Wordsworth removed kicking and screaming from a School that stared into the abyss, its name in tatters, its buildings crumbling, its resources depleted, and its fewer than eighty students diminished to an ungovernable mob the mere sight of which set the community trembling in terror. When a disastrous fire ripped through the headmaster's house at the end of the year, Harrow's misery was complete. No-one was killed, but it was a dismal metaphor for an institution similarly gutted to a shell of its former dreams.

Take a breather if you like. There is a café there called the Doll's House on the Hill, with marvellous cakes, and don't worry if things are pricey up here because Cunningham is such a charitable Christian that I am sure his grumbling zombie will treat us. Meanwhile take in the humble magnificence of the Vaughan Library, for now its namesake enters the story. Charles John Vaughan, whose surname is probably pronounced "Vorn" because these are the English, took on the headship of Harrow in 1845 and stands illustrious in its tale for not only rescuing it from the hole he found it in, but doing it up in a hearty new set of physical and institutional structures which have held to the present day.

He seems an unlikely reformer. Like his bickering predecessors Vaughan was of a keen religious bent, and his principles plugged seamlessly into the school's traditions of supreme headmasterly authority and imparting knowledge that students could radiate rather than find useful in life. On the other hand his political heart was liberal, perhaps even radical, and his Christian disquiet at immoral times translated more into a concern to build up the school as a pastoral community than to slam Bibles on people's heads. He approved of beating as a punishment just as the English were starting to seriously debate its ethics, yet ever the pragmatist, knew the difference between beating as a power trip and beating as a discipline method – most adults are too arrogant to be trusted to, which is why it cannot be allowed – and earned rather than demanded his students' acceptance.

It is possible that all this was beside the point. Every now and then one comes across a rare category of individual who gives off some supernatural charisma that wins respect and gets things done. It is an aura which try as you might you cannot define, only to feel its warmth is to be filled with confidence that that is the person you want rallying your squad through rough times or leading your siege against unbreakable fortifications. It is the social or political equivalent of those digital-type people at whose touch your computer just magically starts working again.

The way former pupils and School historians write about Vaughan – 'refounder', 'restorer', 'greatest headmaster' – suggests he was just such a character, parachuting in to rescue their home in its hour of direst distress. He was popular, successfully navigated the maze of internecine ideologies and interests that had munched up previous generations of the School's leaders, and handled bad publicity calmly and with skill. By the end of his fifteen-year tenure Harrow was back with a fresh new look, more students than ever, and an undisputed perch atop the towers of a rampant England of railways, gunboats and Great Exhibitions.

Vaughan's reforms were wide-ranging. Some were of a long-term significance belied by their size: he developed clubs and societies, increased numbers of student monitors to whom beating powers were delegated but controlled, furthered links with the army (thus contributing Harrow's meat to the abattoirs of the Crimean War and the Indian Rebellion in the 1850s), and made French and German standard on the curriculum. Through a bout of furious recruiting he revived the ailing residue of staff into an enlarged and formidable roster of intellectual talents, more than twenty in all, and secured them with good salaries. He tussled with the problem of rich 'foreigners' exploiting Lyon's charity by creating a separate 'lower' school nearby for local children – a fudge which satisfied nobody but would serve as the prototype for Harrow's eventual answer to its existential paradox.

Yet his most visible handiwork is right here around us: the physical transformation of this school-on-the-hill into the shape it more or less takes today. To support and express its resurgence, the head oversaw a raft of building schemes: new houses for students and staff, sports fields, a gymnasium. Crowning all of these were the dominating edifices that, on their later completion, would broadcast Harrow's character off the hill to everyone in its line of sight: the combative flint-decked Chapel, and of course the Vaughan Library whose name carries his signature.

If the sailing sounds too smooth to be true it probably was. Harrow hagiography has likely embellished some of this record, and there is evidence that a seedy underside of dissatisfaction, bullying and sexual violence persisted in Harrow's halls. As in many environments in this world where you find large numbers of young men engaged in regular athletic activities together – armies, priesthoods and so on – erotic boy-on-boy interactions, whether consensual or abusive, were not unknown at sports-mad Harrow and indeed sank comfortably into popular stereotypes of its rowdy schoolboys. Nor did it seem considered much of a problem that these were homosexual activities. In the minds of some observers they were a worry, a bad habit, maybe even a sin, but it was only in the decades that followed that England would whip its homophobic undercurrents into the obsessive, baying, all-consuming sex-hysteria that would finish people like Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing.* It would however come to a head – perhaps Vaughan's,

* This is important to notice. Hostility to sexual diversity is not *traditional*, and tolerance is not *modern*. In any period, both of these come and go in accordance with cultural and political choices; recall a certain king weaponising anti-gay prejudice to crush the monastic communities.

though through which orifices is precisely the question – in the extraordinary circumstances of his retirement in 1859.

When he announced it everyone was surprised. He was only forty-three, his designs for the School in full flow. One hundred years then passed with little reason to doubt the official explanation – that he left because in his prudent judgement, fifteen years in power was enough. Then in 1964 an alternative account came to light and sent shockwaves reverberating through the School's psyche. A student at Harrow under Vaughan's headmastership, John Symonds, had written in his memoirs that in 1858 he received proof that Vaughan was involved in a love affair with another pupil. A sequence of whispers brought this information to Symonds's father, who wrote to Vaughan in fury, threatening to publicly expose him unless he resigned at once and pursued no further career advancements within the church. Apparently handling the blackmail with his usual firm and graceful composure, Vaughan agreed to go, and for the rest of his life indeed mysteriously held back from the major positions his successes at Harrow were believed to merit him.

Whether or not this story is true has been debated since it broke. Understandably, much of that debate has been caustic: Symonds's claims were a staggering blow to the narrative of Vaughan as Harrow's heroic restorer, not to mention to its history as a whole, and cast a far seedier light on that head's pastoral concern for his pupils' welfare – his 'wonderful sympathy'; his long chats with them into the night; his closeness to them on the sofa as he supervised their Greek recitals; his instruction that on his death all his papers be destroyed and no biography written. It places a new overlay on his Christian outlooks, so often the themes of his sermons: temptation, the vulnerability of the soul, the dangers of carnal desire, the risks of damnation – and always, of course, humility, redemption, forgiveness. So long after the event, any attempt to get at the truth is confounded by the layers of England's ever-changing but constantly shrill and insecure cultural attitudes to sexuality through which all information is filtered. Such a scandal's full-scale cover-up by embarrassed Victorians is believable, but so is the likelihood that amidst today's outrage over adult-child eroticism, especially in trusted professional power relationships – outrage which, justified as it may be, is historically *new* – the slightest hint of such allegations would see Vaughan discredited in totality and blasted to the deepest pits of odium as yet one more name for the list of disgraced celebrity pedophiles. Was he? Wasn't he? We can

leave them to work that one out, while remembering what he certainly was: a product of their society.

How fittingly English that Harrow pivoted back to the future – to its present – upon such an enigma as Charles John Vaughan. His mysteries speak so much about his people.

In the 1860s England's rows over its schooling system reached high noon. Mismanagement, maladministration, a lurid public profile; the lightning rod for these attacks was naturally the tallest spire, Eton, but there was plenty of splash damage for charities-turned-privilege-factories like Harrow.

The upshot was the Clarendon Commission, in which the government sent a panel of former pupils at these schools to pretend to investigate them. For the schools even a pretence was a provocation too far, and they lied and dissembled their way through the proceedings. Criticisms were made and smug headmasters brought out in sweat by cutting interrogations, but the outcome was a 2,000-page report which praised the schools to the heavens and blessed their indispensable service to the English class system. By now that system had firmly condensed, and its principles were not distant from what we saw of English racism: a model of society split into hierarchies according to wealth, wherein each band was seen as a separate species whose bodies and brains worked differently from those above or below. These schools had functioned magnificently in re-shaping reality to fit that vision: they nurtured a ruling-class identity and culture, insulated it from the grasping masses, and funnelled it to the top of English power structures from one generation to the next.

Assembled because of fears that privilege was corrupting education, the Commissioners decided it should be education's very purpose. So it was confirmed by the Public Schools Act of 1868. This was not the first use of that term, *public schools*, but it was only now that the concept was formalised. Under the Act's terms, Harrow, Eton and the others were made permanently independent – hence the confusing terminology, because *public* in their case means private, fee-charging, and open to not just locals but anyone who could pay. This is a uniquely English definition not found elsewhere.* This reform settled the place of the public schools at the top of the educational hierarchy, an exclusive realm with its own

* Except India and Australia. Guess why.

elitist subcultures out of reach of all but society's wealthiest. The Boris and Dave show is a sign of how far they still live with the consequences.

Harrow got its share of grill-burns from the Commission but emerged with its elitist character buttressed rather than broken. What did not survive was John Lyon's vision of Harrow as a provider of free education for the local poor. The Act ended once and for all the right of locals to receive it at Harrow School, at least from its main institution; what remained of that function was hived off and sent downhill to a new Lower School of John Lyon. This still runs today – we can go down the road and take a look – but the ousting of Lyon's intent from the hilltop confirmed what had long been an accomplished fact. A school set up to counter privilege was now one of privilege's proudest engines. What was meant to confront socio-economic inequality would from now on be famed across the country, and then the world, as its invincible perpetuator. Cities on hills cannot be hidden – but who cared about hiding now?

Thus emboldened, Harrow spent the rest of the nineteenth century rocketing amidst the fireworks of the national establishment. Under another energetic headmaster, bush-bearded Montagu Butler (son of the Butler whom Byron had fought with), the school churned out generals, professors, colonial administrators, bishops, sportsmen, and another future Tory prime minister, Stanley Baldwin. Its house system* matured, its teachers grew comfortable with 'modern' – that is, non-classics – subjects like science, history, geography and English, and Vaughan's building projects were brought to completion. To its premises were added the sports fields down the other side of the hill where the students committed to football, cricket, racquet sports and other games with a renewed fervour, their athletic pursuits bristling with the period's ethos of religious muscularity, while from the music rooms rose a new litany of 'Harrow Songs' which just like national anthems welded melodious bindings on the school's imagined community. As it turned the corner into the twentieth century the school continued to renovate its curriculum, confronted urgent sanitation problems as numbers of boarding students passed the 600 mark, and adapted to new challenges – the surge in population around the hill brought by the

* A common arrangement in English schools where all students are grouped into several 'houses'. These organise key aspects of their school lives, provide a focus for loyalty and identity, and compete with each other in academic and sporting contests.

revolutions of rails and roads, the professionalisation of school teaching, and the rise of a snooty bureaucracy of local authorities and Education Board inspectors.

It was just as well Harrow was finding its sense of itself because England was losing its grip on its own. An engine of the establishment meant an engine of the empire, and at the end of the nineteenth century that meant disasters, traumatic defeats, and the burgeoning tremors that within a few decades would shake the whole thing apart. Gordon's demise in Khartoum, agitations for Home Rule in Ireland, the ongoing struggles in India and Afghanistan, and then that horrible war with the Boers in South Africa in which the ranks of British infantry, massacring and massacred, were swelled by students of Harrow, all contributed to fears, correctly it turned out, that the imperial adventure was on a march to calamity.

Conjoined to the propertied classes who drove the imperial machine, events like these made their mark on the school in turn. When the Liberal prime minister Gladstone attempted to concede Home Rule – that is, autonomous self-governance – to the Irish, Harrow joined the colonialist surge of outrage against him and shed what was left of its Whiggish progressive inheritances. Like Eton it was now committed to the empire and its Conservative Party champions, all the more as the school came under attack from the rising voices of socialists and the labour movement.

It was under this high-temperature atmosphere that two more little boys with legends to make walked into Harrow. One was Winston Churchill, till recently the supreme hero of English history and now as ferociously divisive a character as it has produced. The nationalists defend him till they are red in the teeth, yet as the body count of English racism catches up with its butchers, particularly in Ireland and India, the old imperial bulldog Winston finds himself cornered by those who would take him to task for his role in those crimes. The other boy walked a shrewder, sharp-eyed trail down the opposite side of the same drama. Among the empire's supporters raged a struggle between those who believed it should be about controlling inferior races, and those who saw its mission as to cultivate those races to become enlightened like the British so they could take over governance of their now worryingly unruly and expensive homelands. The latter encouraged those colonies' own high-flying aspirants to come and learn from the English ruling classes; many would later apply those lessons in the independence movements which kicked the empire out of their countries. For now it meant that Asian and African faces began to appear in Harrow's classrooms, and one of these belonged to a boy nicknamed 'Joe' by his classmates but whose actual name was

Jawaharlal Nehru. He would look back with some of the most penetrating assessments of Harrow's cult and culture as he journeyed through a series of colonial prison cells to become the first prime minister of independent India.

The moral hubris of empire reaped what it had sown in World War I, which Harrow dealt with much as England did. Both school and country shipped out its youth to be slaughtered on an industrial scale, and from their carcasses bled out what traces remained of the empire's claims to moral superiority in the eyes of the wider world – but almost immediately England chose to forget it and has blown on trumpets of nationalist triumphalism ever since, interpreting that almighty bloodbath as the victory of its virtue over the evils of the tyrannical European *other*. So it felt at Harrow, which had watched almost 3,000 students go off to fight of whom a fifth did not return. Its landscape changed yet again as its heart was hollowed out for a solemn war memorial building; officers' training became a compulsory part of students' routine, as its self-image took on a military edge; and yet, by the self-congratulatory narrative, the public schools' methods in fostering the nation's upright rule had been thoroughly vindicated.

Nonetheless, the war had changed England, and soon both Harrow and the basis of its existence would be challenged again. Socialism, the Labour Party, votes for women, the General Strike of 1926, the welfare state, and the discrediting and later criminalisation of corporal punishment – the winds were blowing in a renewed and determined consciousness for social and economic fairness, and these did not land comfortably on the notion that there should be this cabal of luxurious fortresses at the top of the school system, selectively admitting the advantaged and grooming them to make puppets of everyone else. By the time a second round of world war came around, it turned out cities on hills are not great at hiding from fascist bombers either. The tally-ho jingoism by which English youths had romped off to die was a thing of the past. In the blitzed-out England of 1945, authoritarian hierarchies and colonial imperialism alike were irrevocably tarred – far from dead and buried, as they are learning the hard way today, but at least guaranteed a fight when they dare to resurface.

With the collapse of empire and exposure of its racist foundations, England has wrestled with itself between reckoning and denial, the latter generally prevailing but the former advancing with gritty determination. Harrow too has had to take a hard look at the heritage it shared as part of the imperial misadventure – specifically, to come to terms with the extent to which it, too, was racist, misogynistic, and discriminatory in its mission to exemplify a rich, white, male,

Anglican Christian concept of Englishness in a setting where bullying and violent schoolboy rituals were the standard means of policing it. Committed from the beginning to Protestant Church of England ideals, Harrow had participated in the country's centuries-long hostility to Catholics. The first openly Catholic student was not admitted until 1869, and vestiges of suspicion to them and to other dissident Christian branches lasted well into the twentieth century. Jews began to enrol from around the same period, allowed because – so goes the stereotype – their market was too lucrative to ignore, but they too faced a background hiss of anti-Semitism, as contemporaries like Nehru noticed, and this persisted well beyond the Holocaust. Ethnic and religious quotas limiting the numbers of Jews, Catholics and other marginalised groups have been spoken of as among the uglier mechanisms of institutional racism at Harrow through time.

The flip side was that class often outweighed colour and creed at least on the steps up to the front door. Nehru himself, as well as Muslims like King Hussein of Jordan and the ill-fated Faisal II of Iraq*, were examples of how late imperial economic logic pressured Harrow towards taking in the Asians and Africans its nation looked down on so long as their titles and bank accounts made up for their regrettable deficiencies in skin colour. We will not barge through those doors now and ask in what ways this racism percolates through to today – only note that with the School's basis in an exclusive identity forged in the fires of a racist national history, it is a question they must do well to consider.

As is plain as the bricks around us, Harrow School hasn't gone anywhere. Its vision, its character, may have inverted, but since then it has held the summit even as the world that built it fell apart. The empire, the monarchy, the aristocrats, even sincere English conservatism – all of it is gone, going, or irrevocably damaged.

They knew that cities on hills cannot hide. Instead, they must adapt. It seems this one learned how to do that.

They survived the arrival of London. They survived yet more public scandals and financial crises. They survived the decimation of the hill's trees by Dutch Elm

* As king of Iraq, Faisal and his family were summarily machine-gunned in the 1958 military coup, bringing an end to the British-backed Hashemite monarchy and setting in train the series of further coups and crises which eventually left Iraq an authoritarian nationalist republic under Saddam Hussein. The House of Hashim rules on next door in Jordan down the lineage of Faisal's cousin and fellow Harrovian, the other (unrelated) Hussein.

disease – an anguish for them, if an opportunity for the golfers – as well as instances of arson and IRA bombing. And they survived the shift in public consciousness by which so many gleaming facets of the public-school mythos, and of the monied mountain of ruling class culture from which they shone down, have dulled into objects of condemnation and ridicule.

Needless to say, the most ironic consequence has been the School's swallowing up of the town whose impoverished youths it was created to support. Its relationship with the locals had long been testy – its moves on their commons, its sidelining of their children for rich outsiders, its defeat of their suit in the Court of Chancery, to say nothing of its boys' rioting and troublemaking in their community – but this had usually been balanced by the money, jobs and infrastructure it brought in for the town's traders and landowners, especially the richer ones. But by the time London came swimming around it the hilltop town had effectively ceased to exist. The School *was* the hill now. All its functions and services had been absorbed into the School's ecosystem, and that is how it remains. That is why it looked so weird from a distance and feels no less so in the middle of it. All the butchers and bakers, the grocers and blacksmiths and other services necessary in a place people actually live in were driven off the hill, down to the weald-lands from where bitter cries of poverty and urban distress have been heard. Up here now it is all estate agents, stationery shops, antique dealers and uniform outfitters, as well as cafés which so unusually are independent businesses rather than those chains like Starbucks and Costa which overwhelm every high street they touch.

Most of all, Harrow has survived the market revolution which has twisted England's schools and universities into profit-hungry corporations, measured not by their ability to improve the people who study in them but by numbers on league tables which reflect only how well they wring the humanity out of their pupils – or exclude those with the hearts to resist – and make of them instead unthinking, unquestioning robots good only for passing exams which mean nothing. Not even the public schools have been immune from that scourge, even if their independence gives them some protection. But as Harrow has adapted its methods and rituals, it has held on to its singular Harrovian character. Perhaps more than ever its imagined realities come less from reality and more from imagination, but in so far as Harrow remains a name internationally renowned to this day, that tells us how powerful the imaginary can be.

Imaginary. Just like England. Like all countries in fact. Cities on hills have nothing to hide.

What is different about Harrow School is that it has grasped this. *That* is its secret. It will not admit the illusion, of course it won't, but neither will it froth hysterically as the nationalists do when strangers like us point it out. Were we old pupils it might be a more hazardous affair. But no, it simply smiles. Perhaps winks. Harrow knows how to play the game.

Play the game. If there is one phrase that captures the ethos of the School on the Hill, it is this.

'Play the Game', whispers old Montagu Butler, whiskers brushing against our ears. 'Remember the School and Play the Game'.

I doubt outsiders can ever really understand what the cult of sports and athletics has meant to this place. Are they truly the glue that binds the imagined community of Harrow School together?

But of course, he doesn't mean cricket. Or rather, he does, but for these people it is so much more than a physical pursuit. On the playing fields they forged their bonds, splashing together in a rope-bounded crucible of shared sweat, spit and blood (and – *shh!* – maybe semen). In its heat, they were re-made, so it is implied, in honour, chivalry, fair play, endurance through pain – in other words, in the civilised image of physical and mental perfection which for the English imperialists was the essence of their national character, their duty to carry it forth to the colonies and raise the feckless primitives in its light.

See that? *Play the game.* Sport was both allegory and foundry for the *real* game: England. England, in that particular vision of Englishness which Harrow School came to stand for, and in whose gentlemanly image it took up a mission of moulding every child who came through its doors. To *play the game* on its fields was to *play the game* in its ministries, courtrooms, armies, plantation mansions and colonial administrations.

'Play the game!' hisses the ghost of some random master, C.H.P. Mayo. 'One of the greatest human lessons...small island race...unique position in the world...civilising agency...backward races...face responsibility...'

No. We have seen the problems with this. We know that the reality of the English footprint has too often been the reverse of those principles. A game of racism. A game of slavery. A game of plunder. A game of genocide. A game of mustering the arrogance to deny it. A game for some, perhaps.

They will forgive us if we learn a different lesson from that they sought to teach. A lesson in the corruptibility of these kinds of English ideals: that rather than playing a fair game, it becomes about *conforming to the pretence* that it is fair. What matters is not that you play the game by the rules – everyone knows they do not exist – but how well you participate in the collective theatre of giving a toss about them. Do it well and you can cheat, bully, lie and fake your way to victory, and no referee will blow the whistle, no umpire will heed your dismembered opponents' complaints.

Conformity. That is what it is about. Fit in. Don't question it. Do not point out the farce. Do not break the illusion. *Play the game*. Or if not, good luck getting anywhere in this society.

To that extent, is the city on the hill so separate from the country below after all?

We have seen where England leaves those who do not, or cannot, play its game. Oscar Wilde and Samuel Matthews – the Norwood hermit – are two among millions who paid the gravest prices for their refusal. Others, often outsiders like the Williams sisters and the Mahdi of Sudan, stunned everyone by defying that game and having the bottle to play by their own rules. Others still, like the canal people, charted a nervous course down the boundary rope, never entirely in or entirely out. But it is Stephen Lawrence who stands for far too many, those who learned that even if you do play the game, it makes no difference. If they do not like the look of you, if your face or skin or voice or heart do not *conform*, then they will make up their minds that you are not fit to play and drag your corpse from the field regardless of any ability or effort on your part. On the other hand, if they happen to like you enough, you can play the game however the hell you like, with no infraction too grave to not be passed off – or rather, cheered at – as a creative use of game mechanics.

Like that time in the early 2000s, for example, when fifty public schools, Harrow among them, were investigated by the Office of Fair Trading for breaking competition law by running a cartel to fix their fees.

I remember that. I attended one of those schools at the time. Not this one – another. 'The bursar's going to be sent to prison!' was uttered by one of my teachers, I recall. It was a joke of course. Ha. I wonder if the old Clarendon Commissioners heard it, for they would have chuckled. In the end the schools were slapped with a forgettable fine and finger-waggled away. What else did anyone expect?

There, I have admitted it. You probably guessed anyway.

Oh, it was certainly a good school. And it is true, what is special about institutions like these is that they impart not merely knowledge but an *attitude* to knowledge. They foster a hunger to learn, offer your mind the equipment to do so, and to do so critically – even if, in my case, most of that critical equipment got U-turned right back at the school's own environment.

Because it was alien as hell. So alien as to be unnavigable for a child arriving in this most alienating country having grown up on faraway shores, already burning with rage at abusive power relationships and the arrogance of the middle-aged (less often the old) over the young. Naturally I had no grasp of how it all fit into so foreign an institutional geography of privilege. Nor was it the arcane rituals that did it, nor the perplexing terminologies, nor even the ceremonies conducted not merely in Latin but the school's *own dialect of Latin*. Those were simply weird, and weird is fine. What was not just weird but catastrophic was the relentless two-front war against authoritarians one way and abusively unhinged pupils the other, both of whose games I found monstrous and abominable. There were also Christian games, and it was not at all a likeable Christianity. Then there were games of history-as-nationalist-fairytale and economics-as-religion-of-the-market, which were worse. Then there were the gender and relationship games, and those were the most impenetrable and excruciating of all.

I could not *play the game* – it was not possible. Nor would I have done so even if it were. These games are inhuman.

It is a separate question how much the school could have done about such problems. Most of the people involved were decent at heart; their toxic systems of norms and values were far bigger than all of them. It is another question still how much of the unresolved baggage I was left with by those damnable games compromises my commentary in this place, or indeed throughout this expedition. But enough of this. We are done here. As for the puzzles of the School-on-the-Hill, better that you work through your own answers – mine are now too personal to be of interest to you. Instead we can leave at Harrow's doorstep some questions which it, its fellow public schools, and its nation will no doubt wrangle over for some time to come.

First, do you, Harrow School, continue to provide your students a level of advantage and power over English society which most of its schools do not?

Second, if so, to what extent are those to receive that power admitted not on merit, but according to the ability first to pay, and second to conform?

Third, if that extent is great, then how far do you share responsibility for England's problems as a country where the wealthy oppress the poor, and where those who conform oppress those they see as different?

Fourth, what can you do to change that?

Fifth, will you?

Sixth, what is to be done about you if you don't?

Beware those who, when they hear protests that the game is unfair, dismiss them with the satisfied smirk of 'life's unfair'. No – life is made unfair by them, and they shall be held to answer for it. But you, Harrow, who have come through much, surely understand this.

Beware, lest unfair games create the agents of their own demise. Have you heard of Edelgard von Hresvelg, Harrow? You know the types. The ones who return with fire in their eyes and ashes in their wake, and striding towards you, blood dripping from their weapons, declare, 'I have no time for games'.

We have learned much of the English here. But listen. Do you hear a voice?

It pleads: 'Must you go? Can't you stay?' The corner of the lip from which it comes is raised.

Charles John Vaughan. He knew how to play the game. He also knew there comes a day when the game is up.



Let's get out of here.

There is an escape route through the back door of time. It beckons us past the Old Schools to the very top of the hill, and into the grounds of possibly the oldest thing here. It is St. Mary's Church, and no, it is not entirely a holdout from ancient times, for different sections were added over the centuries. We can watch that in action, for it is garlanded in scaffolding and plastic sheets with only the steeple left visible. They are still working on it, and this afternoon its divine music is not the harmony of bells or chanting of a holy choir but the jolly shouts of construction workers and popular songs blasting out of their radios. From one or the other 'go suck (sic.) your mum' is heard. Is this the kind of thing the nationalists are talking about when they object to 'secularisation'?

Before the School there was the manor, and before the manor there was...well, who knows for sure, but it is thought that parts of this church date back nine hundred years to the aftermath of the Norman conquest. Was that how it happened? 'Oh look, high ground, let's put a holy site on it'. Then of course the church needs people to look after it, and those need houses to live in and farms or shops for food, so up grows the parish of Harrow.

Or, did the church replace a place of worship for a community already here?

In the Old English language of the Anglo-Saxons, there appears the word *hearg*. It means a temple or shrine in Germanic old religion, one of countless variants lumped together by the Christians under the label *pagan*. Flickers in the record, and little more, speak of a tribe called the *Gumeningas* who possibly lived here in the eighth century. If they were of animistic persuasions, it would make sense if a wooded hilltop like this became one of their sacred groves, their *hearg*. Or their *Herges*, as the Domesday Book remembers it. Their *Harwe*, it later became. Their *Harrow*.

Cities on hills might not hide, but something is hiding on this one.

I wonder if Byron could sense it. He was here often, they say. There is a marker stone where the churchyard opens over a marvellous view up the Thames valley, claiming that this, under this specific elm tree, was his 'favourite spot' where he came to escape school life and 'mused the twilight hours away'. He wrote a poem on this spot, to this spot. It seems to have enthused him.

...How do thy branches, moaning to the blast
Invite the bosom to recall the past.

*And seem to whisper as they gently swell,
‘Take while thou canst, a lingering last farewell!’*

Was it that strange spiritual charge that lingers in cemeteries, those borderlands where the life of trees, birds and visitors mingles with the death that sleeps in the earth? Or was his lyrical imagination nurtured, as much as by the School, by a far deeper power that has resided in this hill since long before the first mortal footsteps were made upon it, and which called to those who made them too? Is *that* the true secret of Harrow-on-the-Hill, which left its mark in the likes of Churchill, Nehru and King Hussein of Jordan? Alas, this is one mystery we lack the equipment to solve.

An eye-catching gravestone reads as follows:

TO THE MEMORY OF
THOMAS PORT

SON OF JOHN PORT OF BURTON UPON TRENT
IN THE COUNTY OF STAFFORD. HAT MANUFACTURER,
WHO NEAR THIS TOWN HAD BOTH HIS LEGS
SEVERED FROM HIS BODY BY THE RAILWAY TRAIN.

WITH THE GREATEST FORTITUDE HE BORE A SECOND AMPUTATION BY THE SURGEONS AND
DIED FROM LOSS OF BLOOD,
AUGUST 7TH 1838, AGED 33 YEARS.

BRIGHT ROSE THE MORN AND VIGOROUS ROSE POOR PORT.
GAY ON THE TRAIN HE USED HIS WONTED SPORT.
ERE NOON ARRIVED HIS MANGLED FORM THEY BORE
WITH PAIN DISTORTED AND O’ERWHELM’D WITH GORE;
WHEN EVENING CAME, TO CLOSE THE FATAL DAY,
A MUTILATED CORPSE THE SUFFERER LAY.

This alarming record of vehicular woe is not the only one in Harrow. As we push down past the School’s core we find another, this time embedded in a brick wall with the words:

TAKE HEED

THE FIRST RECORDED MOTOR ACCIDENT IN GREAT BRITAIN INVOLVING THE DEATH OF THE DRIVER OCCURRED ON GROVE HILL ON 25TH FEBRUARY 1899.

One wonders how many people they have lost to their cars and trains since then. Is it millions, by now? The English are by no means the worst in the world at this – even in nearby parts of Europe the driving is absolutely terrifying – but once again, they were among the first. They created the standard. They set the example. Might they have done it better?

We are not out of the School's territory yet. This is where we turn due east and charge down the hill along Football Lane. A fitting name on two levels. First, because at the bottom the school's vaunted playing fields assemble before us in perfect order and eat the entire landscape, even the public rights of way; one hears that the Ramblers, that organisation which campaigns for the rights of walkers, fought an arduous battle with the School to force them to yield access. Second, because the grand white arch of London's reincarnated cathedral of football, Wembley Stadium, looms colossal in the distance.

Now we could march straight across these football pitches like the colonisers who once played on them would, but that would be *playing the game* and we ought to set a better example. So instead let's follow the tracks around the fields as they should have done on the other continents. At last we reach the edge of the Harrow-on-the-Hill Special Autonomous Region, and can turn around for one last glance. There on the ridge the edifices line up like warlords to watch us go, commanded by that Chapel in its flinty armour and verdigris helmet of a steeple. In the background, deep in the trees, the second spire of St. Mary's Church, successor to the *hearg*, hangs back. It must be twice the size of the Chapel's yet somehow looks slighter, more reserved. Its restraint is its own. It doesn't need to *play the game*. It knows it is part of something much bigger.

At the limit of Harrow School's sphere of control, a final marker stands in the corner of the field. It is a 'Dog Waste Only' bin, on which someone has sketched a cultural expression. Behind the dog in the image, a human stick figure has been drawn with a large and loaded appendage entering the dog from the rear. Surely even by the standards of the British Empire that is a bit much.

We are in the bush now. This is the Ducker Footpath, and behind a fence is evidence of some old ponds. Were these the School's so-called Ducker swimming pools? If so the School seems to have relinquished its claims, because nothing is left now but an unkempt muddle of wire fences and vegetation. Of course, the only way is through.

To the left, a hospital. To the right, a golf course. And in the middle, our route: a savagely overgrown strand of dirt which in the spines and buzzing chops of high summer is nigh impassable. Notice that this alignment well represents the priorities of these people, if their investments are anything to go by: the funding seems to go right to left from highest to lowest.

The hospital is Northwick Park Hospital, and there is little to observe of it from the outside save that it is another 1970s Brutalist monstrosity, and a hulking one at that, although I am sure it is a lot friendlier on the inside. If you are a fan of English comedies from that era – for which you will be pardoned, because that is one field where they have produced quite good stuff – then you might have glimpsed this hospital before, if only for a few frames. It appears in the opening of the *Fawlty Towers* episode *The Germans*. No more need be said if you know it; better to look it up on YouTube than hear an explanation if you don't.

This is not a place to linger. The plant life and hungry things that live in it are getting restless, and there is nothing for it now but to machete through their curtains of strangulating aggression, dodging blows from triffids and piranha plants as we trust the flutter of a lone orange butterfly to guide us through. From somewhere to the right comes a swish, a whack and a cheer. The leisure of golfers adjacent to the hardships of hikers, one's world lavishly maintained, the other's abandoned to the wilderness, set apart by only a flimsy but oh-so-impassable fence – what a pain. I have seen this before; in Japan of all places. Makuyama on the Izu Peninsula if you must know.

After hurtling for an age we burst at last onto another open playing field. It has those H-shaped rugby goalposts but this one at least looks public. Northwick Park.

Northwick. The landowner who shattered the lives of this area's farmers and tenants, Enclosing their commons, driving them into poverty, hunger and debt yet hounding them for their rents with unforgiving ferocity. Among his casualties was the family of another Harrow pupil, the novelist Anthony Trollope. 'From the first to the last there was nothing satisfactory in my school career', he writes. This was an understatement. Attending Harrow in the 1830s right in the midst of the

School's plunge over the precipice, Trollope seems to have had visited upon him the cruellest version of English public school life. He was hated and bullied by other boys, abused and held in contempt by teachers who flogged him over and over again and with relish, forced to learn nothing but Latin and Greek, and quite possibly – 'I was never able to overcome...the absolute isolation of my school position' – left traumatised for life. This was all while, or perhaps because, in spite of Trollope's origins in the local gentry, his father's professional misfortunes had left his family stranded in penury and thus sitting ducks in the sights of 'the cormorant who was eating us up', as he characterises Northwick. As the cormorant's bailiffs descended on their farmhouse, the family was forced to flee to a sorrowful exile in Belgium to escape further persecution.

They named a park after the villain. They named a *public* park after a champion of pitiless privatisation. And not just the park, this entire ward is called Northwick Park. That's right, remember the despot, you English, not the vulnerable people of Middlesex whose lives he chewed to pieces. *Play your fucking game*. Just don't act so surprised or scapegoat the foreigners when you find your game plays you.

It has a colourfully-painted playground too, with two tiers of trains – the Bakerloo Line, and long-distance West Coast services up to Glasgow in Scotland – rolling along the horizon. How idyllic, as though that makes it okay.

Well we have certainly seen what the English put on their hills. I think I like the Gruffalo best. How about you?

10. Wings



Our far-flung squadrons have flown over home waters and foreign seas, the Western and Italian battle lines, Rhineland, the mountains of Macedonia, Gallipoli, Palestine, the plains of Mesopotamia, the forests and swamps of East Africa, the North-West frontier of India, and the deserts of Arabia, Sinai and Darfur...

King George V's message to the Royal Air Force, 11th November 1918

Whatever be the lengths to which others may go, his Majesty's government will never resort to the deliberate attack on...civilians for purposes of mere terrorism.

**Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the House of Commons in September 1939,
just after the outbreak of World War II**

...there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed, whatever people may tell him. The bomber will always get through...

**Stanley Baldwin, Head of the Privy Council, in his 'A Fear for the Future' speech in
the House of Commons, November 1932**

Flight. The old dream. The superpower. When did the land-bound humans start to want it? The Icarus legend of the ancient Greeks tells us the thought has long been entertained, and as with so many technology stories – fire, longevity, artificial life – carries a hubris we have warned ourselves off: it is not ours; it belongs to the gods; we will get hurt trying to get it; but get it we will, because we want it.

Or, should those last two be spoken the other way round: the acquisition of a thing we did not understand, whose terrible power carried us to our doom?

High up the Brent, the English learned to fly. Did the growth of wings change them? Or merely pitch the violence of their search for Englishness rolling, tumbling and snarling into the skies?

The story of aviation is one this nation clasps to its heart. Play a word-association game with them and out of the midst of their first images for *England* – the St. George's Cross, red telephone boxes, fish and chips – will swarm thousands of Spitfire fighter aircraft, each with those bulls-eyes painted on their wings to show the anti-aircraft guns where to fire.

Why this importance? Are we to take at face value their belief that their 'finest hour', as Churchill called it, took place in the skies, where in their night of gravest peril their wings were their salvation? Or is it because those planes gave their empire a new lease of power over the world just as it looked set to slip from their grasp? Are there reasons deeper still?

We are about to stumble on the nursery where the English were reborn as birds. It lies in Hendon, far across the lost lands of Middlesex up our old friend the River Brent, which winds through the borough to which it lent its name and where once unfurled the fertile fields of London's larder. Formerly a forest of trees, it is now a forest of suburban bricks and tiles, spawned from a concrete sea that has engulfed the earth like Zerg creep. But the woods, the fields and of course the river still command strong ground within it, and we must cross the lot to reach the Hendon airfields, where to take off and scrutinise a hundred years of flying English.

That task is considerable. They flew to the ends of the Earth. Pursuing them there will require commensurate fuel and flight time. Let us make haste.

First in our path: a little neighbourhood called Preston, which is considerate enough to present a park. *Prēost tun* – priests' estate. Simple enough, which may be why there are dozens of Prestons all over England. This one has a pad of bright new orange-and-black exercise machines which anyone can use, and even comes with an information board identifying what you do on each one. Isn't it nice when the authorities spend money on public health?

There follows the part of Preston people live in, and there is also a Preston Park Primary School, which displays proud on a banner that 'children's rights are learned, understood and lived in this school' to the point that UNICEF has granted them a silver award for it. Oh good. Respect for children is not a thing this country is renowned for, to put it politely, so this at least seeks to imply some effort.

Preston Road station on the Metropolitan Line comes next. Have a look at your London Underground map. No, we are not getting on board, but notice how many of those colourful worms uncoil their necks out here to the northwest. There is a reason for that. As London engulfed the Middlesex farmlands to settle its inflating population, it needed ways to suck them in then spit them back out after each day's chewing. Each exhalation swelled the suburbs still wider, and this line, the Metropolitan magenta serpent, was the first in what would become the London Underground when it opened in 1863 and nosed up here the following decade as part of the Metropolitan Railway. It is one of four we must cross today, along with the Bakerloo Line behind us (brown, extended here in the 1910s), the Northern Line's Edgware branch (black, 1923), and a stretch of the younger Jubilee Line (silver) grabbed off the Bakerloo in the 1970s.

This last is down a hill of residences called Uxendon Crescent, whose reference is more intriguing. *Uxen* is thought to come from the Wixan, one of the many Anglo-Saxon communities that settled here a millennium and a half ago. *Uxbridge*, further west, was their bridge, and *Uxendon* was their hill. And today their hill connects the oldest and newest of London's municipal railroads, for across the bottom rocket the constant and untiring shuttles of the Jubilee Line. On its flank a bunch of earmuffed and helmeted workers are engaged in some tree surgery, feeding branches into the chops of a rattling orange monster with caterpillar treads which annihilates them and splutters a brown-green mist out of a chimney. Across the road from this operation is a stream, smooth as marble in deep embankments: the Wealdstone Brook, tributary of the Brent, which glides down from the Weald to remind everyone of the true power in this land.

The Jubilee Line dares to disagree. Every two or three minutes one of its trains hurtles with gleeful impudence across the terrain as if it owns it. The sight of it insists we question our senses, because such smooth and regular service is not typical of the Underground and we ought to suspend belief till we have that experience while actually in it. The Brent must be aware of this: it tolerates the Jubilee's boasts out of pity for a people who as far as functioning trains are concerned have little to boast about.

The newest line it may be, opened after Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee or 25th anniversary of taking the throne (hence silver map colour and *Jubilee* line – *silver jubilee* – get it?!), but here it will lead us into an older layer of time. It reveals a path between houses into woods, and these give way to an open meadow which stretches at leisure across a hillside. Yes, this is a third hill, to add to those of Harrow and Horsenden. The more modest Barn Hill, as they call it, stands on a hefty hundred-hectare expanse called Fryent Country Park which might be the closest thing that remains to the Middlesex of old.

Fryent refers to *friars*, religious brethren, and hereabouts the friars in question might be none other than the Order of the Knights of St. John, who in their early days held Middlesex farmland in nearby St. John's Wood. The Knights Hospitaller. Now theirs is a story and a half, but one for another time. If you want to hear it from them directly, the hard-as-nails-military-order-turned-humanitarian-charity has a nice little museum under an arch in Clerkenwell.

Before we plunge into the wooded crown that cloaks this summit, it is worth turning round for this hillside's good view across the capital region's northern reaches. Houses, trees, houses, trees, rolling as far as the eye can see, cordoned off by the Jubilee Line still at it along the bottom of the meadow. It is so quiet here save for that neverending rattle of the 'Tube'. The sound of people *passing through*.

The mature woodland atop Barn Hill, on the other hand, evokes the ancient Forest of Middlesex of which some of the other clumps round here might well be remnants. But the pristine image is deceptive. They wreath a hilltop clearing whose main feature is a pond with reedbeds, shoals and logs which together look so aesthetically fine-tuned that you think some gardener must have arranged them that way, and that would be because they did. They, or Humphrey Repton to give him his name, was a landscape artist regarded as a successor to the ubiquitous 'Capability' Brown who did up this hilltop when it was claimed by the sprawling and inevitably privately-owned Wembley Park estate in the 1790s. A viewing tower he stuck on it has not survived, but we can head to the plateau's

south side to look on the fate of that estate because right there in our faces is the Elephant in the Lost Land of Middlesex: Wembley Stadium, the *The Legend of Zelda's* Death Mountain reincarnated as a football arena, raising its arch like a cloud halo it failed to orient correctly as it squats in a muddled nest of construction cranes, characterless apartment blocks and maybe one or two which do show a little character, crowing at the top of its voice as the rest of Wembley drowns in London's all-consuming suburban sea.

Till recently it was a different stadium. The old one had a pair of white Raj-inspired towers, a beloved imperialist landmark for the natives so they say, but in the face of public outcry it was demolished in 2003 to make way for this new edifice as part of the area's regeneration – in other words, to help people with too much money make even more. Fortunately our quest for the flying English does not take us that way. Instead we must descend the hill to the northeast, where along the end of the woods runs a dirt trail mistakable for any other if not for a sign that labels it with a sole, haunting word: *Eldestrete*.

Old Street. How old?

On an info board that stands here courtesy of the Borough of Brent, there is a drawing of a cheerfully hirsute wayfarer in a monk's patchy leather garb with a traveller's staff over his shoulder. All suggestion is that this is an ancient pilgrimage route that joins the capital to the province of Hertford to the north, most likely to St. Albans, one of this country's principal Christian pilgrimage sites whose abbey was sacked with outstanding brutality during That King's purge. The Borough seems to think this route goes back to Anglo-Saxon times, but there were significant Celtic and Roman settlements at St. Albans too – the latter obliterated by Boudica – so there is a chance it is older even than that.

So too the hedgerow it runs along. Look out, there are lots more hedgerows ahead, because now we leave the woods, traverse the not-so-pilgrim-friendly A4140 Fryent Way and arrive in the eastern Fryent grounds which are a quilt of fields of hay. Or at least they should be, but the blasting heat of this summer has parched the grass, wilted the flowers, strangled the soil, murdered the ponds and harassed away the butterflies to leave a desiccated wasteland that would bring to tears any farmer who actually relied on these fields for a livelihood. Fortunately this at least seems no longer the case; they harvest the hay for horses, who we can hope have other supplies of food (although you never know with Brexit), otherwise leaving these fields as a biodiversity conservation area most of whose participating species the sun has persuaded to skip it for this year. All that persists

are the fields' old names – Half Yarde Meade, Bugbeards, The Brache and suchlike – which hint at a time when speaking English might have got you berated by the nationalists for not speaking English.

These fields roll, and one of them, Gotfords Hill, rewards our arrival with a fine panorama. Who Gotford is we can only guess, but its rounded grassy profile has apparently earned it the local nickname of *Teletubby Hill*, on which the less said the better. Our latest acquaintance Barn Hill dwells in a verdant clump to the west, above which the Wembley Stadium arch has usurped the place of a rainbow. To its north, with that blocky Brutalist hospital as bouncer, is the unmistakable Harrow-on-the-Hill ('Must you go? Can't you stay?'). Further around a concentration of cranes assembles taller blocks-in-progress, and then it is trees and houses, trees and houses, our next suburban sea: Kingsbury.

This *king's manor* is another from before the Norman arrival, and following the pattern was likely a forests-and-farms hamlet till London's encroachment in the early twentieth century. Here we feel the first magnetic tugs of the Hendon aviation industry, because the need to house its workers drove up Kingsbury's rebirth as a residential area. A further sign of this landscape's recentness is its extension, Queensbury, a name which did not exist till 1934 when it won a naming competition in a newspaper because it looked good next to Kingsbury. A branch of the spiritual ancestry of *Boaty McBoatface*^{*}, quite possibly.

Apparently buildings too fly around here. Such we are to believe of Kingsbury's St. Andrews Church, a stone-and-spires job which could be called pretty in that thumping Victorian way and originally stood in the West End, just off what is now that consumerist hell-pit called Oxford Street. The story goes that this church was fashionable and popular for its superlative music, but its congregation did not survive the commercialisation of that area (and if you've seen it you can hardly blame them). But instead of tearing down such a well-liked building it occurred to them to send it up here to Kingsbury, whose old church, built for a scattering of farmers, was struggling to cope with the influx of Londonese settlers arriving on the railway. So in the 1930s they took St. Andrews apart and put it back together right here, 'the biggest jigsaw puzzle in the world' as a newspaper called it.

What doesn't quite fit the jigsaw is the cemetery. Vines and moss have claimed the dark gravestones in a carpet of dead leaves, giving it an autumnal eeriness

^{*} The research vessel *RSS Sir David Attenborough*, whose name was to be crowdsourced through a public poll in 2016 until the organisers reneged when *Boaty McBoatface* received the most votes. A manner of compromise was reached by giving that name to one of the ship's submersibles.

amidst woods of sweltering summer green; at least till the effect is broken by an overturned supermarket trolley someone has dumped by a grave. Round the corner we find the reason for this mismatch: the cemetery belongs not to the new church but the old one, and this still stands in its midst, a modest little barn whose humble size belies the depth of its tales. Indeed they believe it could be the oldest building in Brent. It is estimated at almost a thousand years old, built of materials evoking those ancient days: sandstone blocks, sarsen stones, and rubble in which Roman tiles and pottery fragments were found, suggesting they cannibalised parts out of nearby Roman ruins. It has since travelled all the way across the Christian spectrum. The Knights of St. John held it as a Catholic place of worship till all their stuff was seized by That King, then as a Protestant church it must have consoled the misery of many a desperate local farmer shoved into poverty by the new mechanical ploughs which, unsuitable to the heavy clay of the local ground, saw their fields turned over to hay to feed London's horses. Replaced for a burgeoning Kingsbury by its neighbour that flew in from the West End, the church has found a new congregation in the Romanians, who have a growing community here and got a lease for it in 2012 for Orthodox services. Quite a journey.

Our own journey moves on from Kingsbury via another residential street whose only feature of note is the distressing sight of an eviscerated X-Box on the grass. The roofs and masts of a sailing club rear up from the right, indicating water. And then there is water. It is the Brent. And it is huge.

We have rejoined the river where it becomes a reservoir, the crescent of blue that dominates any map of this area. As we see from the sailing club and the origami triangles of sailboats out on the water, this is a recreational oasis for the locals. But its origins are in the Grand Union Canal: they dammed the Brent here in the 1830s to borrow its water supply for the Paddington Arm. It let them do that – why not, for such a sizeable increase in its territory? – and has since become another precious haven for wildlife and relaxation in a city hospitable to neither. It is better known by its nickname, the *Welsh Harp*, you would think for its shape, but in fact after a nearby coaching inn which recently closed after centuries of service and now, of course, battles developers who want to raze its ruins for flats.

The reservoir extends west to east, and we must pass along the north side because from the south an almighty roar bellows across the water. It is the North Circular Road, a route sort of like the one we have been taking except for people who are not interested in the areas they travel through and want to go slower by getting stuck in traffic. The UK Noise Association, which apparently exists, named

it the noisiest road in this country in 2002 and all the way along the reservoir their wisdom is not in doubt. It never shuts up and nowhere is there shelter; goodness knows how people manage to live in those houses beside it.

Such has been the fate of the Lost Land of Middlesex. London gobbled it up piece by piece then shat down the North Circular Road as its signature. That permanent whoosh of people hurtling through, from the Jubilee Line to the cars on the A4140 Fryent Way and now this impenitent crescendo: you do not go to Middlesex now, you go *through* it, and this non-melody of people going *through* is its theme tune, its colonial anthem, audible from everywhere, nowhere to hide. We could ask if they think that was worth it, but they have probably not even realised what *that* is.

They did go to Hendon though. For a time. It is near now, beyond the Edgware Road where the Welsh Harp inn used to give travellers and their livers a reason to stay. Today the reservoir offers no clue to Hendon's significance, for though its surface teems with sailboats and kayaks, its skies are clear. That has not been long so. If only we had some of those goggles with the dial you can turn to see through different time periods, we could watch this sky shriek with the jets of warplanes, and turning it further back, watch those subside to the rumble of older models, right back to the whirr and flutter of the experimental paper-aeroplane types they started out with. That would take us a hundred years into the past, but we must go back a little further for a more amusing sight from when they searched for ways to the sky not by planes but hot-air balloons. In those days an inviting scene of water, grass and air on the crowded, choking capital's rural verge, the Brent Reservoir was already attracting sailing, ice skating, greyhound racing and more eccentric recreational innovations, not all of them savoury, and balloon flights must have fit neat in that mix of activities. Most of the balloons did not get far, and one attempted ascent by Louis Henri Capazza of Corsica in 1892 stands out because his balloon slipped and took off without him, which somehow enraged the expectant crowds of spectators into assaulting him. Violent country, yes.

It is doubtful any witnesses to that are still alive, but perhaps grandparents still living in these parts would remember when the Welsh Harp's theme tune was not the passive-aggressive North Circular Roar but the more actively and nostalgically aggressive engines of military aircraft. Just a little further now, and if we are clever about it we can catch them in their hangars. On, then, along the reservoir, past one of those grandfathers who rests on a bench, protected from our questions by a colossal Border Collie. Some people go by, among them two little kids of whom

one is detonated into a giggling, screaming excitement and proceeds to touch and scurry around and attempt to climb this friendly dog; the other child is frozen in high terror at the sight of it then shatters into tears. At the water's edge a mother warns another child back so as not to get eaten by two swans with a squad of curious cygnets. Further past the log-cabins and slipways of a canoe club two more divisions of dogs are active in the company of a pair of dog walkers, a dozen apiece, each representing a different breed and leaping and splashing and barking and tugging sticks off each other while going 'rrrr rrrr' at the reservoir's shore.

Thereafter all is blue sky, green fields and gold path except for a random I-am-always-right beige apartment block which rises in from whatever dimension it usually prowls. At last the reservoir comes to an end at a funny little brick bridge shared by cars and pedestrians. There is no pavement; you press the button to tell the traffic light you exist like at ordinary crossings, but in this case the lights alternate confusingly to signal when it is the vehicles' or walkers' turn to hurry across. If you ever dreamed of designing a traffic system to maximise both the likelihood and disruptive impact of accidents, then this is the arrangement for you.

At this bridge the water splits. To the south, in the far corner, the upper Brent arrives – it is not quite done with us yet. To the north is a cut-off reservoir segment which unlike the main body is a sanctuary swathed in trees, fenced off from the humans and coated in bright green munching material for a heaving population of water birds. Among them enough swans are assembled to batter down any aircraft they like should it so please them.

Now then. This is Hendon. *Heah dun*: high hill. One gets the sense they are very literal in these parts.

As with most of Middlesex, so too with Hendon till a hundred years ago. Then people came to poke exploratively into the air with their hot-air balloons. Soon they were doing it with strange and dangerous experimental craft, then all of a sudden they were taking to the sky and staying there. They loved it. They soared around, they looped the loop, they put on fabulous air shows, and then they flew off to kill foreigners as they have continued to ever since.

But one thing at a time. It was here, at Hendon, that the English Z-axis went thrusting into the clouds and so stretched their story into three dimensions. The ground from which it burst sprouted hangars, runways, factories and training schools, and had it continued down that path it might have become the world's first true airport. But this, as our journey has made all too clear, is a violent country,

and so it was on memories of war, not of peace, that this place would go down in English legends as Hendon Aerodrome.



The English were not the first to reach for the sky. We can dig through many societies' libraries to unearth the corpses of the first explorers who strapped wings to their backs and jumped flapping off cliffs or tall buildings, typically making their homecoming a few seconds later with a loud crunch. The more methodical people of the European Renaissance sketched their dreams on paper with mathematical precision and serious facial hair, a trend which eventually gave rise to hot air balloons in France, although the Chinese probably got there first. Balloons were fragile, difficult to steer, and as Monsieur Capazza found out, liable to get you half-murdered by mobs of angry English people if they take off by accident. Then in 1903 came the famous breakthrough, when the American brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright made humankind's first successful flight on a powered and controlled heavier-than-air aircraft.

But the rise of the aeroplane was more than a technological advance. For those whose life stories were intersected by its threshold – humanity before flight, and humanity after it – this was also a spiritual threshold, indeed an existential one.

The impossible dream had come true. Yesterday flight was a hubristic fantasy, but today it was reality, and tomorrow everybody would have it. Most Europeans were Christians then with centuries of stories and images depicting heaven in the sky: their god had designed them without wings, but now they had built their own and could literally fly up to knock on his windows and say hello, we are perfect now, like you. All our failings, our violence, our greed, our made-up divisions like class and race and gender would be left far below, for in the air we would join in the free and united humanity we were always meant to be, in perfect liberty and democracy and equality and clean-air health and all live happily ever after.

Technology will deliver us.

Spoiler warning: it didn't.

The aviation ecstasy spread to England. In Hendon, already poking into the sky-world aboard its balloons, a partnership of two engineers called Everett and Edgcumbe cleared some trees for a basic airfield to test a prototype monoplane. Also caught up in the excitement was a young engineer called Claude Grahame-White. The son of a well-off property-owning family, he had spent most of his life immersed in motor car projects only to have his gaze drawn skyward when a French inventor, Louis Blériot, made the first aeroplane flight across the Channel in 1909. Claude went to meet him in Reims, after which one thing led to another and the Englishman returned as a trained and licensed pilot. Soon he was fluttering about the Hendon skies, and the following year he competed in the *Daily Mail*-sponsored London-to-Manchester Air Race, finishing the course but losing out on first place to another Frenchman, Louis Paulhan, who chose the Hendon airfield as his starting point.

There is little special about short-distance hops like these nowadays, but at this dawn of flight they were extraordinary. These rickety early aircraft models were ill-suited to fly beyond sight of their airfields, and aerodromes like the one emerging at Hendon had to be very large to support them. By the end of 1910 it had engulfed more than two hundred acres, with Monsieur Blériot's flying school and an aircraft-building company coming in to nest in its hangars. The locals of Hendon, most of whom had never even seen a motor car, thus became some of the world's first on a vast list of noise pollution victims to suffer the incessant growl of aircraft through their skies. In April the following year one of those planes made the first non-stop flight from London to Paris, a signal of just how fast the technology was improving.

With the addition of new hangars so came Claude Graham-White, this time with his own new flying school and half a dozen planes. Flying displays and aerobatics filled the skies, pulling into Hendon huge numbers of awestruck spectators who in most cases were encountering flying machines for the first time. For the First Aerial Derby, an air race around London in June 1912 which ended with Graham-White giving a night-flying demonstration in person, almost half a million people came to watch. Meanwhile the rattle of aircraft engines disguised a complicated string of corporate chemical reactions on the ground over control of the aerodrome, whose ultimate result was to put the Grahame-White Aviation Company in overall charge of what was now known as the London Aerodrome – a place which, thanks to Grahame-White’s flying school’s advertising, was now firmly associated with his name.

In the space of two years, the site had gone from a rudimentary airstrip in a field to a feverish full-scale aviation hub where planes were designed, manufactured and tested, pilots trained, and air shows put on with ever more daring innovations and technological developments to excite the crowds, from flying in loops or upside-down to England’s first parachute jump in 1914. Big Names took notice too – royals, politicians, writers, actors, foreign dignitaries, and just possibly a smattering of German industrial spies hiding among them. For a couple of years this was Hendon’s lot, and there are interesting thought experiments to be had about how aviation might have turned out if things had continued in that vein. But they didn’t. In 1914 came the war.

In 2013, Japanese anime legend Miyazaki Hayao released *The Wind Rises*, a semi-fictional depiction of the life of the designer of Japan’s iconic Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighter aircraft. Typical of Miyazaki’s work it was nuanced, reflective and beautiful, with no contradiction between mourning the militaristic cruelty of which the plane became a symbol – Zeros took part in the bombing of Pearl Harbor and later in *kamikaze* attacks – and an appreciation for that aircraft as a techno-magical accomplishment. But nuance is not a thing all humans do well. *The Wind Rises* was rounded on. From one side came accusations that its creator was glorifying the aggression which laid waste to his country and continent. From the other the Japanese nationalists themselves abused Miyazaki, perhaps the one Japanese who has won his country more love than any other individual, as an unpatriotic traitor

for portraying the war in a negative light and opposing their calls to erase pacifism from the Japanese constitution.

In Japan we see a country whose relationship with its wings is deeply insecure. The contrast with England could not be greater. The emotions of the English for their Royal Air Force (RAF) flow overwhelmingly in one direction. They adore it, to the point that we find Hendon Aerodrome, now the RAF's museum, celebrating its hundredth anniversary with a romance you could never imagine in nations like Japan with more obviously troubled military legacies. Neither however is this romance the drum-beating, enemy-vilifying, flags-and-trumpets celebration of countries whose military imaginations are stuck in toxic-masculinist hallucinations of glory in war crimes. The English's RAF romance is one of heartening cheer and fun for all the family, much as might be the atmosphere of a festival to red buses, fish and chips, or Boaty McBoatface.

Why no raging controversy like the Japanese, given that British planes have wrought bloodbaths every bit as gratuitous as theirs?

Do they not know it?

Are they in denial?

Do they convince themselves it was justified because the victims were evil?

Or because they were racially inferior barbarians and savages?

Let us give these people the benefit of the doubt and presume they simply don't know. In the atmosphere of their historical storytelling that would be little surprise because as far as we can discern, their image of the RAF is a heroic figure in goggles and a leather flying helmet, with a handlebar moustache and aristocratic accent, honourably defending his home (and here it is always a he – not everywhere though) in an aerial joust against scurrilous Nazis who refuse to play by the rules.

Tally-ho Biggles and all that. Let us ruin that for them.

The RAF bubbled forth from the cauldron of World War I. Standing in those crowds impressed by the Hendon air marvels were military types, and the war gave them cause and opportunity to dabble in the new technology's combat potential.

At that point the English military had no air force, only an army and a navy. So to start with, each of these improvised its own aviation wing. The Army's was called the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), while the Navy had the Royal Naval Air Service

(RNAS). Each carried out photographic scouting and supply runs before it discovered its ability to kill things from the air.

Militarising these planes required a complex set of technical operations. That is why most recruits to the RFC and RNAS were not pilots, but skilled tradespeople of whom a whole mess was required to make things work: mechanics, metalsmiths, carpenters, electricians, wireless operators and suchlike. These people came from diverse backgrounds, not just in England but from all over the empire with many Americans thrown in too, so hereon it is more accurate to treat this as a British story than a strictly English one. Because this is a gendered country which prioritises made-up stereotypes over realities they had very few women, but in a pattern we have noted elsewhere, more women joined the RAF as male staff got conscripted to die on the front lines. Still, women worked in separate branches and were limited to nursing and ambulance-driving until 1917, and even thereafter were confined to support roles like cooking, maintenance or administration. Only as shockingly late as 1991 did the RAF get its first full-time woman combat pilot in Julie Ann Gibson, and in 2017 announce to noisy objections that it was at last opening all its roles to female recruits.

Into the RFC and RNAS ran most of the English pilots at Hendon (while the foreign ones, most significantly its French instructors, went home to join their own armed forces). Among these pilots was Claude Grahame-White, who had a friend in the First Lord of the Admiralty, a certain Winston Churchill, to whom he offered the services of his company as well as full use of Hendon's facilities. The Admiralty took him up on this at once, requisitioning part of the site, its aircraft, and its flying schools to train combat pilots; in the course of the war they would expand its grounds and add new buildings. They also banned civilian flying, meaning no more exhilarating air shows and certainly no more members of the public crowding in to gape at them.

Thus did Hendon Aerodrome become not a civilian airport, but a military airbase. It would remain one for the rest of its life.

Aeroplanes entered this world as miracles, the fulfilment of daydreams held since the first time our remotest ancestors looked at a bird. In fewer than five years, war had slammed them onto a different evolutionary flightpath. Their mission was no longer to bring dreams to life, but to shred, melt, and blast apart the brains that dreamt them. They would become the most fearsome machines of mass

killing yet known to humankind. Millions would die because of them – slowly, hideously, and in agony.

The bread and butter of this death from above would be fighters and bombers. Fighters are fast, nimble, and best at shooting down other aircraft; whereas bombers devastate ground targets but are slow, ungainly, and easy prey if enemy fighters get at them, which is why you control the air with your fighters first.

This is an obvious simplification, but will suffice as a picture of how it started. We are not yet into the territory of catastrophic explosions and firestorms, so as yet there was not so much to fear from these paper aeroplanes which even with guns stuck to them were more useful for reconnaissance, moving stuff around, or backing up your more important ground forces. Still, once they found their combat callings they never looked back. By the end of the war fighters were flying in large-scale formations, streaming the concept of *air superiority* into the front pages of military doctrines where it has never since lost its importance. It was here that the chivalrous handlebar-moustache persona began to emerge, as air-to-air dogfights echoed Europe's old traditions of individual combat in which two knights duelled it out in an honourable contest of skill. The archetype of the air ace was born, and it well outlasted its propaganda service at the time. Many English people will have heard of the 'Red Baron', whether or not they can name him as Manfred von Richthofen, the German fighter pilot whom even his enemies respected as the paragon of his war art. On a related note, if you ever wondered why the British paint bulls-eyes on their planes, it was because they began with their flag as the insignia but found it too easily mistaken for the Germans' Iron Cross so switched instead to that stripy roundel.

The other type of combat aircraft, the bomber, flew on a more ominous trajectory. This was a marriage-in-hell of two technologies: the aeroplane and the bomb. Their union would change humankind forever.

They had dreamed of this too – more often in nightmares. The Chinese were making bombs before England existed, and we saw the English playing on Wimbledon Common with the rockets they got off them via the Mysore kingdom. But dropping them from the sky? An early dread vision of airships releasing fire onto cities came to Italian priest-scientist Francesco Lana de Terzi in 1670. All below would be in mortal danger, with only the assailant out of reach of harm. 'God will never allow that such a machine be built', he shuddered, with tragic incorrectness. In 1726 came a more curious foreshadowing. In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the flying city of Laputa looms over rebellious towns to deprive

them of sun and rain, hurls down stones ‘against which they have no Defence but by creeping into Cellars or Caves, while the Roofs of their Houses are beaten to pieces’, or in the final instance, simply lands on and crushes them. Swift exactly anticipated, right there, the ladder to hell that bombing would descend in the twentieth century: the show of force, strategic bombing, and finally weapons of mass destruction, as so memorably manifested in Miyazaki’s brilliant take on Swift’s vision in *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*. And perhaps the master satirist guessed it was the British who would craft that ladder, for Laputa was also an obvious analogy for the British boot on the throat of colonial Ireland.

But the Italians placed the first rung. A newly-unified country squeezed at the margins of the European empires and hungry for some colonies themselves, in 1911 they sent boatloads of migrants (yes) across the Mediterranean Sea to Libya, in those days a vulnerable piece of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. The Libyan Arabs and Turks fought back. The Italians bayoneted merciless retaliation into the civilian population. In the midst of the bloodbath, pilot Giulio Gavotti tossed four grenades from his plane onto the Ain Zara and Tajura oases. Aerial bombing had begun.

Bombing Libya. Sound familiar? And the Italians too, whose unworthier elements complain so much about refugees coming the other way – without bombs, it might be added.

In the next few years the Spanish and French followed up in the ‘protectorates’ they were carving out of Morocco. It would be some time before the technology came along for bombers to strike with precision, so instead they chose large targets: crowded villages and herds of grazing farm animals.

That should feel bad, by the way. If you are okay with it, we’re still not far from that Fawlty Towers hospital so I can wait here if you want to go back and get some corrective heart surgery.

Ready to go on? Good. The thing to take from these episodes is that burning and blowing up the defenceless was written into the spine of bombing’s story right from the start. Civilians and animals were not what they now call *collateral damage* but the intended targets. There will not be so many Red Barons or Don Quixotes of the sky down these particular contrails. A more common epithet will be The Butcher.

Soon the English would get a taste of it. In 1915 the Germans drifted across in the dreaded zeppelins which upset W. G. Grace as he grew asparagus in his Mottingham garden. They dropped incendiary bombs. Hundreds were killed.

Thousands more were left with psychological scars at the sight of these drifting cities of death which came looming out of the clouds to ignite their babies in their cots. Like most people the English had never seen anything of the sort outside their Christian end-of-the-world prophecies, so it is hard to visualise the spiritual terror these airship raids must have seared into their psyche. Once they saw through it however they found the airships were paper tigers: huge balloons filled with flammable hydrogen, so once they equipped their fighters and air defences with incendiary bullets it was game over. In response the Germans switched to bomber aircraft, and these were more dangerous, but also prosaic enough by this point that the English's main response was outrage rather than fear. They demanded retaliation, but German air superiority was against them: neither the RFC nor the RNAS had done a great job at protecting their homeland.

Fortunately for them, the infamous dysfunction of their war leadership in these years was not absolute, for present in its midst was at least one significant brain, connected to eyes whose stare could have given any machine gun a run for its money. They belonged to an Afrikaner – a descendent of Dutch settlers in South Africa – called Jan Christiaan Smuts, one of those high-gravity, larger-than-life and necessarily moustached types who these people like to build statues to. A Cambridge University graduate, Smuts had fought against the British in the atrocious Boer War, but survived to clamber his way through the hard elbows of colonial South African politics. He was dogged, ruthless, and difficult to get on with – which was probably why, by the time the bombs were dropping on London, he had achieved the extraordinary condition of being simultaneously a South African cabinet minister and a Lieutenant General in the British war council.

In these days of reckoning for imperial racism, Smuts's views on black South Africans and segregation have placed him high on the list of figures to receive renewed critical scrutiny, especially in so far as they appear to have sown the seeds for the monumental atrocity of Apartheid. When it came to aerial bombing however his foresight was clear. 'The day may not be far off', he warned, 'when aerial operations with their devastation of enemy lands and destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principle operations of war, to which the older forms of naval and military operations may become secondary and subordinate'. On this he was exactly right.

If that was to be the way, then to arrange their aircraft as limbs of the army and navy was to get it backwards. Instead he concluded that the RFC and RNAS should be combined into a single independent body, and a new Air Ministry

created to direct it. So it would be. On the first day of April 1918 the RAF was born, although whether it was the world's first independent air force is another matter – the Finns have their own claim to that one.

Time has proven Smuts's prophecy. In the space of a hundred years, the centre of gravity of military power has shifted into the sky. When you imagine modern world powers asserting military clout, especially the Americans, the first images tend to be of bombs and missiles raining from the sky rather than hordes of soldiers massing over a ridge or naval cannons bombarding a coastline. That is not to understate armies or navies, and as we will see, air power soon struggled to come to terms with its crippling limitations as it still does a century later. But until the military paradigm shifts as dramatically as it did in 1918, no invasion of a superpower, or even a middle power like Britain, could be countenanced without some way to take its planes out of the sky.

The RAF frames its power in versatility as much as destruction, and matured fast into a wide range of roles in the closing months of the war. It fought for air superiority and bombed not only Germans in the meat-grinder of the Western Front but also Austro-Hungarians and Bulgarians in the eastern Mediterranean and Turks in the Middle East, as well as pushing into Germany and exacting the reprisals the English so hankered for. In most of these it worked in concert with ground operations; photographic scouting missions were especially important for intelligence-gathering, especially in places like Palestine where the British had no maps. Back home they worked together with the anti-aircraft batteries to defend their airspace while prowling the sea lanes for German submarines. It is unlikely any of this had a decisive impact on the war's outcome, but it was intended as more of a statement. The RAF existed. It meant to stay.

Meanwhile in Hendon Claude Graham-White was not enjoying World War I. It had given him an unpleasant divorce, all while quarrelling with the Admiralty about expanding his company's factory. When the war came to an end in 1918 he faced the sudden cancellation of most outstanding aircraft production contracts, leaving his over 2,000 staff with no work. It was time to get his aerodrome back off the Admiralty, ideally with compensation for earnings lost by its putting an end to the air shows and public spectacles where all this flying success had begun.

But the RAF had other ideas. For a start it held its first Royal Air Force Pageant at Hendon in 1922, proving itself just as capable of wowing the crowds as the civilians' Aerial Derby which within two years it had eclipsed into the ground. Grahame-White's company struggled on, reduced to selling furniture to keep its

factory running, and faced protracted negotiations with the Air Ministry who were clearly intent on keeping hold of the Aerodrome. In the tussle that followed there was only going to be one winner. In 1926, having just come out of his mother's funeral, Grahame-White signed the settlement to bury his company too. Here he exits our story, a despondent figure who nonetheless had mileage left in him yet; no sooner was he ousted from Hendon than he closed his personal triangle of land, air and sea by getting involved in speedboats, and would go on to amass a fortune in real estate before dying in 1959 in France, aged 80.

Back in Hendon the government took control of the Aerodrome and ushered out the companies still active there. Soon life changed completely. Fences and barracks sprung up. Military squadrons arrived to base themselves there. Ranked officers took over the daily routines and these became regimented under their strident bellows. The London Aerodrome was reborn as RAF Hendon.

The orthodox English story of the twentieth century goes something like this. There was peace, then World War, then peace, then another World War, and finally a peaceful Cold War (hence *Cold*) save for occasional clashes they won like the Falklands.

This could not be further from the truth. In fact the English were fighting in conflicts all the way through, but they prefer not to learn about these, or if they find out, to ignore them. This is either because they lost; or because they committed atrocities; or because peoples and parts of the world they consider inferior were involved. Or all of the above.

Britain had come out of World War I with a promising new air force that could reach far further than their traditional forces and whose potential they were only beginning to tap. But while exciting, its contribution to victory had been strategically negligible, and as a war-impooverished Britain cut back its military the fledgling air force's survival was not guaranteed. To survive politically it would have to find a new role, and fast.

Conveniently, its country was also clinging onto a worldwide empire whose subjects had grown more restive than ever. They had witnessed the moral bankruptcy of European claims to civilisation in the bloodthirst of the worst war in human history, a war which had also taught them how well their oppressors could bleed. Peoples all over the empire now renewed their independence struggles with vehemence and true belief. The RAF officials must have looked at

their bombers, then at their rebellious colonies, then at their bombers again, and thought – why not kill two birds with one bomb?

This is why the period from 1918 to 1939 was anything but peaceful. Let us follow the RAF into the conflicts its country prefers not to discuss, while pondering if this, perhaps, was its air power's real significance: that it gave the British the ability to fight nasty wars far away while pretending to be at peace.

1918 is an arbitrary boundary. For the Europeans it matters because that is when its war ended. But for others it matters less, because their stories were running to the rhythms of conflicts more important to them. It was on these that the fighters and bombers of the RAF cut their teeth. The first began even while the youth of Europe were still being blown to chunks on the battlefields of World War I, and ended up no less horrible and destructive. It happened in Russia.

Russia was Britain's ally in the war until the revolutions of 1917 brought Lenin's Bolsheviks to power and took it out of the conflict. In the colour-coded civil war that followed, a wide spectrum of the Bolsheviks' enemies coalesced into the anti-communist White movement, which for five years of blood-spattered grisliness grappled with the Bolshevik Red Army for control over Russia. The British, trembling at the omens of communist revolution and hopeful of getting Russian pressure reapplied on the German eastern front, joined France, Japan, the United States and other foreign powers in interventions on the side of the Whites, and the RAF gave them effective ways to do it, beginning with bombing, scouting and support operations around the northern Russian cities of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. When World War I ended they reinforced these squadrons and extended their work to the Volga river and Caucasus mountains in the south, as well as the Baltic in the west, opening new fronts from which to bomb Bolshevik bases, ships and railways; the famous Kronstadt naval base was hammered almost every day for four months. It was to no avail. In 1920 the foreign allies pulled out, and the war ended a few years later with the Reds in control of Russia's blighted smithereens.

Did the British air crews bomb anyone they should not? Alas, this is hard to assess. The Russian civil war was one of the most hideous conflicts of its day, making monsters of all its participants to leave uncountable millions dead and a national psyche brutalised beyond repair. The circumstances of the Soviet Union's birth in its gore and debris would corrupt it as long as it lived.

At the same time the air force found itself involved in another conflict with more immediate stakes for the British Empire. After the war the RAF was sent to

deal with ‘civil disturbances’ in India – make of that what you will – but in May 1919 found itself facing an invasion by a determined and fiercely independent foe with which its descendants ought to be quite familiar: Afghanistan.

The Afghans had fought two wars with the British already, humiliating them the first time and bloodying their noses the second. Those had been British wars of aggression, mistaking the Afghans for insects to trample while competing with Russia for influence in central Asia, but this time it was the turn of the Afghan king Amanullah, an ambitious reformer and political visionary, to make the first move. His chances looked good. British forces in India were depleted by the war in Europe, and the Indians themselves, many of whom were enrolled in the British army, were in high outrage since Colonel Dyer had commanded his soldiers to open fire on an Indian crowd in Amritsar the previous month in the infamous Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

In a month-long confrontation the RAF proved decisive in helping the British repulse the Afghan invasion, although the resulting Treaty of Rawalpindi reaffirmed Afghanistan’s independence and limited British India’s expansion to the Khyber Pass, giving Amanullah most of what he had set out to get. Nonetheless, RAF bombers hit Afghan cities like Kabul and Jalalabad, killing numbers the British did not bother to record. The strongest impact however was psychological. Like the British in the face of German airships, the Afghans were shocked and appalled at these new unholy machines that brought screeching death from the sky. The bombing of Kabul blew chunks off Amanullah’s palace, prompting him to write an angry letter to the British. His complaint is hard to fault, and well captured the chilling hypocrisy intrinsic to this new age of aerial warfare:

It is a matter of great regret that the throwing of bombs by Zeppelins on London was denounced as a most savage act and the bombardment of places of worship and sacred spots was considered a most abominable operation, while now we see with our own eyes that such operations were a habit which is prevalent among all civilised people of the West.

The British military officials were indeed pleased with the potential this ‘habit’ had demonstrated in colonial operations, and set about making it very much ‘prevalent’. Among their number was the squadron commander who had led the bombings of Kabul and Jalalabad and scored the first civilian kills in a coming illustrious career of melted faces and blown-off limbs. He so relished this godlike

power to terrorise the enemy from the air without fear of reprisal that in the years ahead it would become synonymous with his name. Indeed, it would be his name: Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris. We will meet him again.

Another part of their empire gave the perfect opportunity for further trials. In British Somaliland they had spent twenty years fighting a rebellion by the Dervishes of Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, a religion-charged independence movement that exploded out of disruptions to local ways of life when the British, Italians and Ethiopians tried to carve up the Horn of Africa between them. As usual it was as much about politics, livelihoods and dignity as about the Islamic fervour through which it found expression – all this should sound familiar by the way – and drew inspiration from the campaigns of our old friend the Mahdi in Sudan.

Again the RAF did its job, ending in one month a story that had flummoxed the army for two decades. Reconnaissance planes hounded Hassan through the desert while bombs fell on villages and forts. They blew up several of his advisors and close family members, and at one point nearly did for the ‘Mad Mullah’ too, as the British derided him, even though he was neither mad nor a mullah; instead they hit a camel in the way. In the end Hassan escaped, but the uprising was put down and the Dervish state extinguished.

The effectiveness of air power in these campaigns brought a shift in the RAF’s conception. After World War I an exhausted, near-penniless Britain had asked if it really needed its air force. With its demonstrations in Afghanistan and Somaliland, the RAF answered that question. It would be preserved in leaner and meaner form with two thirds of its force based overseas, its first duty ‘to garrison the British Empire’ as Churchill declared in 1919. Up till then the empire had relied on garrisons of army troops – large, slow, expensive, and with a proven susceptibility to fall ill, find themselves in rows with the people they were policing, or get massacred in wars and uprisings. Not any more. From now on a clutch of aerial squadrons would do the job in a fraction of the time, expense and danger – to themselves, that is – and strike into the natives’ hearts a terror far more potent than mere murderable soldiers.

This doctrine was given a name: *Air Control*. It looked different from either end. From the charts-on-mahogany-desks end in London, Air Control was about deterring natives from making trouble through minimum effort. By flying low over their heads in a ‘show of force’ or dropping leaflets, they could take advantage of the novelty of combat aircraft outside Europe to cow their subjects into submission, or if it came to bombing them, ‘dislocate’ their infrastructure so they

would be too busy repairing it to set their arms to rebellion. From the other end it was experienced through realities rather than euphemisms. Surprise attacks, chemical and incendiary bombing, obliterated livestock pens, poisoned water supplies, blown-up bridges and dams and irrigation canals – this was the deliberate targeting of civilian life with violence and fear as a means to influence political and military outcomes.

That was what Air Control meant at the business end. Of course, the British call it something different when others do it to them. Terrorism.

Terror bombing, as we could more objectively call it, became the new norm of military air operations. Against colonial peoples they had little trouble justifying it to themselves. As a racist society the British dehumanised those people as inferior ‘savages’ or ‘barbarians’, rather than human beings with lives as valuable and hearts as real as their own. How more comfortable that illusion must have felt at thousands of metres in the sky, the realm of the gods, from where all that blazing, starving, wailing flesh was reduced to a scatter of meaningless dots below?

Pixels. ‘It’s just a game mate’. *Play the game.*

A hundred years later, the British complain about evil ideologies of terror that seek to destroy their ways of life.

What they should have discerned in the 1920s was that they were consolidating a standard not just for bombing colonies, but for *all* aerial bombing operations. Whether purposefully targeted or blown up by accident because nobody knew how to aim bombs yet, civilian death seeped through the engine fluid of air force doctrine from birth. It would only get worse as the bombs grew larger, crueller, more destructive. And when they fell back to Europe in the 1940s, these air crews’ children would pay the price.

This is the part missing from the English’s mainstream storytelling, which portrays the 1920s and 30s as a peaceful interbellum in which the RAF had little to do beside sipping tea with a wary eye to potential threats from the old rival France or the Soviet Union. ‘Air Control’ is why this was not the case. Are you ready? Here come the atrocities.

First for the rollout of Air Control was the Middle East, where the RAF did its bit to turn the nursery of some of the most ancient and powerful civilisations in human history into the divided, traumatised, war-torn and perpetually violated disaster it is today. These had been provinces of the Ottoman Empire until its

defeat in World War I, after which the British and French carved them up for themselves in the guise of League of Nations *Mandates*, drawing the present arbitrary lines on maps that ignored the distribution of peoples with different identities, cultures and claims and thus set up much of the miserable shambles that has since continued. One Mandate the British got was Mesopotamia, the land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers which five thousand years ago had nurtured one of the first known human civilisations, the Sumerians of *Epic of Gilgamesh* fame. There the British installed a compliant king they hoped would keep the divided Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd and other communities quiet in a territory that made no sense as a single nation. The Sumerians' ancient city of Uruk most likely influenced the choice of name for it: *Iraq*.

Divided as they were, Iraq's peoples did find common ground in one thing: hostility to the British for dragging them into another empire no sooner had they broken free of Ottoman rule, and already saddling them with oppressive taxes and land reforms while filling their officialdom with British people. So in 1920 they launched a revolution, seizing control of huge swathes of the country and setting the occupying imperial soldiers reeling. In response the British sent the RAF down on them. Its bombers transformed a few thousand of them into smouldering corpses and by the end of the year had control of Iraq again. Air Control had delivered, so not only was the RAF given control over all imperial forces in the puppet kingdom, they would now be resorted to straight away whenever its subjects challenged British rule.

Next to make that challenge were the Kurds, who those lines on the map had stunningly screwed over by splitting them across four countries as a despised minority in each. In 1922, their battle-hardened leader Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji declared an independent Kingdom of Kurdistan. The British were having none of it, and for the next two years RAF bombs indiscriminately battered its capital Sulaymaniyah and the villages around it. If *bombed* is a tired verb by this stage in the story, try imagining it happening here and now to the residences and high street of Hendon, only with the elemental disaster of incendiary bombs versus thatched straw roofs. It was a slaughter, and few British who knew about it showed any sign that they cared, certainly not Squadron Leader Arthur Harris, who wrote with excitement that 'the Arab and Kurd...now know what real bombing means in casualties and damage; they now know that within forty-five minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real

target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape'. As far as the British were concerned, the laws of war were only for fighting civilised white people and did not apply to inferior tribes of savages. But this was a conscious ideological choice, not some abstract spirit of the times, and as proof of this stood a small but significant minority of British who had the conscience to see terror bombing for what it was. Air Commodore Lionel Charlton, a World War I veteran, will stand for them all when he openly criticised what his country was doing in Iraq after witnessing mutilated civilian air raid victims, children among them, in a hospital in 1923. After a few years of being ignored or pressured to shut up, he quit the RAF in disgust.

But these Kurds, ancestors of the modern vanquishers of Da'esh, were as tenacious then as they are today, and it is fitting that they be the ones to weave a new strand into our story of oppressive air power which would thicken to paramount important. It is a simple one: bombing doesn't work. No matter how many mangled civilians the British dumped into hospitals and mass graves, they rose back up for Mahmud Barzanji in revolt after revolt until a final conflagration in 1930-1, when another massive round of punitive village-bombing finally forced him into exile. Not deterred, they rebelled yet again under one of the Sheikh's understudies, Ahmed Barzani, who carried on the struggle into 1932. At this point the British Mandate ended, but the independent Iraqi kingdom would inherit all the minority discontent the British had engineered – from Shi'a, Yazidis and Assyrians in addition to the Kurds – as well as the practice of violently inflaming it made standard by the RAF, a pattern extended rather than created when Saddam Hussein bombed and gassed Kurdish Halabja in the 1980s. This ill-conceived nation still suffers under the geopolitical calamities the British wrote into its destiny with aerial bombing in the 1920s, and it would be far from the last time their bombs blew up much there but solved nothing.

Had enough? The RAF hadn't. They were also at it in northwest India – present-day Pakistan – where in the unrest that followed the war with the Afghans the locals were also rising for independence. The Tochi Wazir and Mahsud peoples of Waziristan, fierce and proud frontier Pashtuns who submitted to no-one, made a stand in 1919, bled heavily under the usual RAF fare but stood up again in 1925 in the so-called Pink's War, named after the Wing Commander who strafed their mountain strongholds. The following decade saw more of the same in the nearby borderland of Mohmand inspired by Fazal Wahid (a.k.a. Haji Sahib) of Turangzai, which culminated in a ferocious British air campaign in 1935 with more villages

levelled, water supplies tainted and so forth. Yet another platform of resistance emerged nearby around the figure of Mirzali Khan, the Faqir of Ipi, who would exchange violence with British India well into World War II and later clash with independent Pakistan. Decades later the white powers would act surprised when “jihad” suddenly became a thing in this region, but there was in fact nothing sudden about it: none of the present-day strife in the borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan can be understood without due regard for the history of these peoples who found their interests and identities disdained by the politics in either direction, and whose steel of long resistance was hardened, not melted, by the bombs of the RAF.

But we’re forgetting another Air Control playground: Palestine. You’ve heard of it. This is the British Mandate where during World War I they promised the long-persecuted Jews that they could establish a homeland there, and simultaneously promised the Arabs who already lived there that they would get independence for rising against the Ottomans. Thus the Arabs and Jewish settlers came into conflict, with each other and with the British whom both quite reasonably accused of betraying them. Riots and intercommunal violence broke out, which in 1921 the RAF helped ‘police’ by dropping bombs on the Arabs. Because bombing was so effective, it all calmed down and they lived happily ever after. Or rather, years of resentment boiled into an eruption of riots and massacres which spread from Jerusalem in 1929, and although this time the air force restrained itself to transport, reconnaissance and intimidation roles, it was straight back to bombing the villages when a much larger Arab insurrection broke out in 1936. Again, the bombs solved nothing. Fed up of this ungovernable situation they had created, the British hustled out as soon as they could after World War II, bequeathing the world today with one of its most notorious and intractable conflicts.

And one more bonus bombing: Aden, the strategic and lucrative port near the mouth of the Red Sea secured by the East India Company in 1839. In the 1920s its British masters got into conflict first with the Imam of Yemen, and then with the Subehi people. In both cases they answered with relentless bombing, in the latter case deliberately wiping out their animals and grain supplies with incendiary bombs. A century later the regular violation of Yemeni children by aircraft made in Britain continues.

This is the carnage RAF Hendon now helped to train, supply and administer while drumming up public support with its annual RAF pageants. Meanwhile the technology was improving. Ten years earlier a flight between London and Paris had been a long-distance marvel, but in the 1920s and 30s the vast span of the empire proved convenient for striking awe at how fast these aircraft were soaring ahead. Records were set then instantly broken. Flights were made, in stages, from Egypt to Nigeria, Britain to Australia, and with obvious imperialist symbolism from Cairo to Cape Town. The aircraft themselves still resembled the cardboard cut-out biplanes of the World War I era, but gradually transitioned into the sleeker polished-metal creations that would whirr permanent trails through English public imagination in the next big war.

Preparations for which engulfed the RAF, along with most of the country, by the end of the 1930s. The Nazis were re-arming Germany. The expanding Italian and Japanese domains were imminent threats to Britain's colonies in Africa and Asia. They along with the other empires like the French, Spanish and Americans had been having their own fun dropping genocidal horror in their own lists of places their descendants don't care about*, and now all their attentions would swing back to Europe for the confrontation which, just as it brought back European racism, would return 'Air Control' to the continent which invented it.

Before we follow it in, take one more glance at the laboratories where Britain developed that terror bombing. Afghanistan. Pakistan. Iraq. Palestine. Yemen. It reads like a menu of the most unsettled regions in the world today, in all of which the British are to greater or lesser degrees still stuck in the quagmire. What broke out in Europe in 1939 was secondary there. Their anti-colonial struggles would continue through and after World War II, and in most you will still find people old enough to have grown up through these bombings, who have brought their kids and grandkids up on stories of how the meaning of Britain in their lands was not freedom or democracy but terror, fire, explosions, and roasting flesh delivered by dishonourable bastards in the sky who gave them no fair means to fight back. Is this country's unpopularity in those parts so surprising?

* Especially notable was when the Spanish called in American airmen serving in a French squadron to bomb Chefchaouen in 1925 during the Spanish colonial subjugation of Morocco. Among those impressed by this deliberate aerial massacre of a civilian population was a young Francisco Franco, who twelve years later in the Spanish Civil War would repeat the exercise – and thanks to Picasso, generate the most enduring symbol of the cold-blooded inhumanity of aerial bombing – when he called in Nazi bombers to annihilate Guernica.

But nah, let the British go on thinking it is because Islam inherently hates them, while hinging their RAF story around its heroic stand against the Nazis. Meanwhile these stories will continue to resonate in the collective memories of Iraqis, Pakistanis, Afghans, Yemenis and Palestinians much as the Battle of Britain does for the British. The anonymity in British memory of people like Mahmud Barzanji or the Faqir of Ipi reflects only the happenstance of power and the British choice to use theirs to oppress foreigners, rather than any real difference in importance. In another timeline it is no less imaginable that the story of Hendon Aerodrome might have instead taken place in Baghdad or Kabul – not a stretch if, say, the Mongol Conquests had not disembowelled the flourishing Islamic civilisations of the region in the thirteenth century. Might then they have sent their aircraft to pacify the warlike hill tribes of Yorkshire or the ungovernable savages of the Cotswolds, giving a passing mention in their history books to some stubborn and raving Mad Prophet Winston, whose public incitements to violence and refusal to accept their benevolent sovereignty left them with no choice but to bomb the Oxford villages from which his criminality – or his independence rebellion, as the revisionist historians call it – drew support? Who is to say it will not still happen in our world within two or three hundred years, or sooner, as power and technology continues to shift?

Short of that, our own timeline was about to feed the British and other Europeans a dose of their own medicine. Their bombing campaigns in Africa and Asia had let them trip on godlike powers, raining thunderbolts down on tiny creatures they regarded as far beneath them racially and morally as their physical distance between land and sky. Thousands of years of military doctrine no longer mattered: you could soar straight over the lot and blast, burn or gas the heart out of your stupefied enemy. The infinite reach and randomness of destruction by air had also helped scratch out the line between front lines and populated rear areas, between military and civilian targets: from that far up you could hardly control what you hit, and it didn't matter anyway because the whole point was to sow terror and disruption to make ordinary life impossible.

Against 'savages' and 'barbarians' they had found no problem with that. But when the same mentality wheeled round to sink its teeth in European bodies, it was their own civilians who would crackle the loudest.

In World War II the RAF faced an aerial adversary capable of fighting back. The Germans had been paying attention and knew well the ability of an air force to decide a war, so had worked rigorously to develop the Nazi *Luftwaffe* to the highest possible standards of technology, training, doctrine and – after piloting it through the abhorrent Spanish Civil War – murderous experience. As they rampaged into France and the Low Countries in 1940 they took special care to destroy Allied airfields and shoot down their planes, driving the RAF back to Britain with disastrous losses.

Not seriously tested since the war which birthed it, this was the first time the RAF entered a fight in serious apprehension that it might lose. Except for its fighter section it was neither prepared nor equipped for a war against equal opposition: its aircraft were crude, its crews poorly-trained, its tactics inflexible. Its antiquated squadrons, still scattered around the empire where they were comfortably used to ‘policing’ natives, were about to get their blasted frames and bent propellers handed to them by the cutting-edge German and Japanese air forces, while its bombers began the war proficient at hitting anything other than their actual targets. The RAF gave a competent account of itself in contesting the East African colonies with Italy, but an attempt against the German invasion of Norway in April 1940 saw the planes it sent all but wiped out.

All these portents of doom set up the twist for which the RAF is venerated, the Battle of Britain, in which it held off the *Luftwaffe* assault on this country through a perilous summer of dogfights. Up till then, with most of Europe fallen to the fascists, the British had been staring defeat in the face. But unable to break the storm of Hurricanes and Spitfires, Hitler had to abandon his plans for a ground invasion of Britain, saving it from conquest and ultimately helping to turn the war against him. ‘Their finest hour’ as Churchill called it instantly launched the RAF to the pinnacles of national mythology and has since become the subject of umpteen gazillion books, articles, films, video games and museum exhibits. Well done RAF. Have some biscuits. Let’s move on.

Triumph was followed by embarrassment. After another year trying to shoo the Italians out of North Africa, squadrons found themselves diverted in shock to the other side of the world, where the Japanese were following up their attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 with attacks on the Allies’ colonies in Southeast Asia. Japan too had not failed to grasp the consequence of air power – remember *The Wind Rises* – and had carried out its own share of terror bombing to carve its way into China. Now its own air fleet, backed up by formidable aircraft carriers,

would serve as the tip of a relentless shower of spears to drive the white imperialists out of the region. The result was one of Britain's worst routs yet. Suddenly an Asian people had brought it to one of its most ignominious ever surrenders at Singapore and was banging on the door of its Indian territories, to where the region's RAF squadrons were battered into retreat and would spend the next several years contesting the Japanese advance into Burma while flying supplies to the Chinese over the Himalayas. These blows against the colonisers left a lasting influence that would feed the collapse of European imperialism after the war – though not, as the Japanese nationalists misbelieve, to the point where they can claim credit for it, not least because their own occupations of those colonies were every bit as arrogant and cruel as the Europeans'. Meanwhile in the shadow of the main narrative the colonial bombing continued in places like Iraq, where the RAF put down an anti-British revolt in 1941.

In 1942 the tide turned. The Japanese lines grew overstretched while the Americans fought them back across the Pacific, the Italians were driven back up their own peninsula, and the Germans became stuck in their atrocious but foolhardy invasion of Russia. Now it was the Allies' turn to bring down hell on the Axis. For the RAF that meant a dark stain which unlike its colonial misdeeds has drawn it grim remarks even among the British. 'Air Control' had returned.

At the beginning, most participants, even the Nazis in their own twisted way, were under the illusion that this was a war between civilised peoples so bombing civilians was not on. That, however, was at odds with twenty years of doctrinal and practical muscle memory fostered in the skies above dark-skinned people. In theory they restricted strikes to military targets and officially forbade attacks on civilians. In practice military targets included factories, railway stations and workers' houses, hit either on purpose or because they were next to stuff hit on purpose. Accidents happened. Civilians died. Those who survived were not in the mood to see them as accidents. The *Luftwaffe* bombed London. The RAF bombed Berlin. By 1940 they were having it out at each other's cities. The British romanticise the bombings theirs suffered in the story of the Blitz while ignoring their own bombings of German cities, but do make one important point which fits the same pattern we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan. Getting bombed did not break their spirit but brought them together in renewed defiance and courage. So it goes.

Instead of learning the lesson, they escalated. In 1942 all pretence was abandoned. The RAF was to indiscriminately bomb residential areas, burn civilians and destroy their homes to break their enemies' morale, exactly as they had tried

and failed to in the colonies. This was what they had form in, and no-one had more than Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris, who was appointed to direct with enthusiasm the burying of Germany.

On 28 March, over 200 bombers descended on the historic city of Lübeck. They dropped 400 tons of bombs and incendiaries which consumed half the city in a terrible firestorm. Hundreds died, thousands were left homeless, but no damage was done to industry or morale. A month later the Nazis returned the favour on Exeter. A threshold had been crossed. Everyone was barbarians and savages now.

Under Harris’s moustache the RAF followed that savagery down the atrocity ladder made so comfortable in the colonies: war crimes, crimes against humanity, the verge of genocidal slaughter. This was the very barbarity they were supposed to have gone to war to defeat. Within two months a lengthening hit list brought a monstrous fleet of one thousand bombers to devastate Cologne. The same destruction was visited on Essen, then Bremen. In 1943 the slaughter was ramped up further; the British celebrate the tactical heroism of the ‘Dam Busters’ raid that May, rather than remembering the thousands killed or ruined either by the strikes on the dams or the calamitous floods that resulted. Then in July the RAF subjected Hamburg to a week of the worst bombing yet. It was an eradication. The rain of incendiaries made of the city an inferno. The lucky ones passed out in the shelters when the oxygen was consumed; the less so were sucked screaming off the street into the hurricane-strength vortex of fire. Children were grilled like meat on skewers. 40-50,000 died. Air Control. Harris liked it. He wanted more.

In February 1945, with Germany on the verge of defeat, he got it. The bombing of Dresden, measured by the civilian death toll, the horrifying manner of the deaths and the strategic meaninglessness of the attack, was without a doubt one of the worst British atrocities in history. The death count is somewhere between tens and hundreds of thousands, the huge error margin reflecting how many people were blown to chunks, melted together, or burnt to ash to the point that an accurate count was impossible. Suffice it to say that there was too much flesh to bury so after two months they had to clear out the rest with flamethrowers.

This was the logical conclusion of what Britain had started in Afghanistan and Somaliland, and to the extent that they feel bad about it, one individual has caught the brunt of their condemnations: Arthur “Bomber” Harris, the Butcher of Dresden. He was the pioneer of a new character archetype: the ruthless, unrepentant bomber commander who sets out under the pretext that bombing is ‘strategic’, that is, an effective method of obtaining military outcomes, but

inevitably comes to resemble a maniacal avatar of death from above as an end in itself. But Harris cannot carry all the blame. He too was the product of a violent and racist society whose national conscience has even now not come to terms with the demons it unleashed.

The British had done much to craft the ladder of aviation's corruption, but the final rungs would be left to a new air power: the United States. In the closing year of the war it unleashed an orgy of carnage and annihilation by firebombing against the cities of Japan, fuelled by extra racist disdain for its Asian victims that overshadowed even what the RAF had done in Hamburg or Dresden, and even, on top of that, the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which lurched the tale of aerial bombing, along with all humankind, into a new age of dread. They had their own bomb-happy maniac in the form of U.S. Air Force chief Curtis LeMay, as well as a nasty habit of naming their flying death-machines after North American indigenous peoples they had tried to wipe out. The baton of developing terror bombing now passed to them, and they would take it to the ultimate extremes in the years ahead.

Here as in the US, they do not like to admit they did bad things. A standard defence is to distract critics by pointing out the larger-scale depravities of Germany and Japan, whose uses for bombing and other atrocities, some of the most unspeakably evil in history, make it easy to punt responsibility to their own populations for getting what they deserved – but this is whataboutism so fails to merit the dignity of a response. More thoughtful British people defend atrocities like Dresden by invoking the concept of *total war*, in which everything, including civilians, is both a military resource and legitimate target. But we should not take this concept as given. It was invented, and the pertinent question here is: what role did the rise of the air force play in making it real? Sure it had land-bound precedents in everyone from Genghis Khan to General Sherman, but the imagined separation between armies fighting honourably on battlefields and civilians safe in their homes had long held a significant grip on the general imagination – and still does, even if only in the calling out of its violation when civilians are killed.

Did that separator's practical power collapse to ash beneath the bombs of the RAF? For a country like Britain, which then and now celebrates its fight as a stand for democracy, humanity and civilisation, that is not good enough. All such higher claims are a hollow pretence unless you hold your deeds to the standards that you preach. Till they begin to do that, on what grounds do they complain when the suicide bombers of today do the same to them?

The end of World War II did not bring about peace – contrary to the popular storyline of a world dominated by two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, of which neither started a fight because everyone would be destroyed by their nuclear bombs if they did. Actually this view is an extension of their inherited beliefs that they were racially superior, and thus entitled to ignore in their storytelling the majority of the world's population who live outside North America and Europe.

Those people experienced these decades differently. For many they were astonishingly violent, and ran to different narratives than the capitalism-versus-communism one even if they sometimes took on its trappings. Fighting off European empires who refused to accept their power was slipping away (most of whom were on the capitalist side and disguised their violence in the rhetoric of freedom and democracy); fighting off either superpower's attempts to capture their territories, resources and loyalties, or against the murderous tyrants both blocs parked on them; or merely the bone-crackling pains of standing up as newly-independent societies still carrying the injuries of colonial repression, pillage, and divide-and rule manipulations; these are the Cold War stories that mattered for the majority of humankind, and the ones the British will have to understand if they want to engage happily with the likes of Arabs, Africans, Indians or Chinese going forward.

Those who watched the Cold War from their cockpits should get it, because for the RAF it was straight back to colonially oppressive business as usual. From the end of the war to the collapse of the Soviet Union and beyond, most of the stories the RAF's pilots flew in had nothing to do with warding off communism but were exactly these kinds of reactions against other people's self-determination.

First in their sights were new enemies for Britain: the Vietnamese and Indonesians, whose French and Dutch colonisers respectively had been chased out by the Japanese. Those had now themselves been ejected to leave free peoples with no intent of letting the previous empires back in. Sukarno in Indonesia and the Viet Minh rebels in Vietnam declared independence. But France and the Netherlands, themselves so recently occupied and tortured by the Nazis, found no moral barriers to embracing the Nazis' methods against those they continued to view as inferior races. They called on the British for help, so the RAF were sent to intimidate the rebels: a cursory involvement, but one which signalled Britain's

choice in the continued struggle between empires and colonies. It was the losing choice. After further years of gratuitous war both Indonesia and Vietnam would kick out their colonisers, the former in 1949, the latter in 1954 in a spectacular drama at Dien Bien Phu where Viet Minh guerrillas took on the French in a conventional set-piece battle and thrashed them, air force and all, in a humiliation they have never got over.

Meanwhile the British were trying to pull out of their mess in Palestine. In the process they got caught up in the emergent state of Israel's war with its Arab neighbours. The RAF tried to carry out reconnaissance but lost aircraft in the confusion because it, the Israelis and the Egyptians were all using Spitfires. There they couldn't wait to go, and in India too the very idea of continued British rule had become ludicrous. But these were exceptions. A blitzed and bankrupt Britain still found the bitter will to claw for whatever pieces of imperial loot and prestige it could salvage. The popular view is that British decolonisation was a relatively orderly affair, hence how they are all still friends in the Commonwealth, but the RAF's adventures tell an uglier story.

When the Japanese took Malaya off them in the war, the British trained the guerrillas of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) to fight back. Afterwards these fighters demanded Malayan independence and civil rights for their largely ethnic Chinese support base. The British, wanting Malayan tin and rubber for their own recovery, said no, so in 1948 the MNLA turned against the British. The British labelled them communists and terrorists. The conflict that followed would last twelve years and was termed *Malayan Emergency* by the British because the rubber and tin companies wouldn't get insurance payouts for their losses if they called it a war. It was in fact a war. The RAF carpet-bombed villages and jungles and loosed huge quantities of defoliant over agricultural fields which did far more to wreck ordinary peoples' lives than thwart the guerrillas. The Americans were watching and taking notes, but failed to take down the most important thing: it didn't work. Though the MNLA was ground down to a military defeat, it cost the British authority, resources, and political concessions they could not afford, paving the way for Malayan independence in 1957. Even the RAF questioned its own bombings as wasteful and counterproductive.

In the same period British oppression in Kenya received its fiercest challenge yet. The 1952 Mau Mau rebellion grew out of a population which had suffered enough from vast expropriations of their land and floggings by white settlers for whom they were forced to work for feeble wages. As though the Nazis had never

happened, the British insisted to a genocide-weary world that these were barbarians and savages. Over the next three years the RAF took part in another round of wanton aerial bombing and machine-gunning, backing up a more general hideousness of torture, massacres and concentration camps below. As was the pattern, the most homicidally unhinged participants of all were the white settlers they were there to protect, who took to their own private planes to hunt and kill Africans for sport. As in Malaya the British eventually defeated the rebellion but at an unsalvageable political, financial and moral cost, and by 1963 Kenya was independent. If today's British know little about this foul business they might at least recognise the Mau Mau name from more recent headlines: in 2013 survivors successfully sued the British government for millions of pounds in compensation, forcing it to acknowledge both its use of torture in Kenya and its deliberate suppression of documentary evidence.

Then there was all that trouble in the Middle East. Where else? From 1947 it was back to bombing Yemeni peoples' villages to keep their hands off Aden. From there bombings and rebellions fed each other in an escalating spiral of hatred and frustration, while next door in Oman the RAF were also drawn into the unpleasant little Jebel Akhdar War in which they helped the Sultan of Oman fight the Saudi-backed Imam of Oman by systematically bombing irrigation infrastructure. They finished in time to watch Yemen split in two in the 1960s, in a collapse into revolutionary upheaval which finally booted them out of Aden. The RAF did its usual, but swiftly fell back from airlifting howitzers around on mountains to evacuating British people out of there.

By then the big one had done the empire in. A military coup in Egypt had overthrown the British-backed monarchy and brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power. An authoritarian strongman with his own oppressive tendencies, Nasser nonetheless won huge popularity for his pan-Arab statesmanship and defiance of European imperialists, and in 1956 he nationalised the Suez Canal. The British and French authorities, who hated Nasser obsessively, decided this was the last straw and went berserk at Egypt in a rampage of bombings, paratroopers and marines on landing craft to seize back the canal zone by force, coordinating secretly with an Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. Bombs fell on cities like Cairo, Luxor and Port Said, killing hundreds of civilians. But it was the wrong place and time for such thuggery. Waves of worldwide outrage broke upon the British authorities, not least from this country's own protesters and political opposition, and at alarmed finger-wagging from the Americans they were forced to climb down.

Britain's humiliation at Suez has since gone down as the blow from which its empire would not recover, but viewed from Hendon it stands with the stories from Kenya, Malaya and Aden in a pattern that was really the same as before. Aerial bombing could slaughter, demolish and appal, but as far as achieving your goals was concerned it was bewilderingly powerless. It did not work. It lost.

If confirmation was needed, it came in the one conflict the RAF got involved in that is actually framed as a major Cold War set-piece. Its role in the Korean War of 1950-3 was largely limited to transport and observation, although some crews did fly with the Americans who led the intervention to support the capitalist Republic of Korea, in the South, against the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North.* Here again they came up against an aerial match in the form of Chinese MiG-15 jet fighters, once the newly arisen People's Republic joined the fight after the Americans pushed too close to their borders. It was a complicated struggle, as much about fiery Koreans contesting each other's visions for their country as competing Cold War blocs, but it was also bloodthirsty, brutal, and concluded much as it had in Japan with a desperate, cigar-chomping American bombing frenzy against everything in sight: cities, villages, farms, roads, railways, bridges, factories, hospitals, schools, power stations, dams – they levelled everything, till there was literally nothing and no-one left to bomb.

This was bombing taken to its ultimate conclusion. There, too, it failed. The war ended with Korea split down the middle just as it was at the start, the destruction's only accomplishment to leave the North's survivors emerging from their caves with extremely good reasons to hate the people who demolished their country – even if the culprits have chosen to caricature rather than remember.

What, then, did the British do with half a century of lessons in aerial bombing's cruel futility? Why even ask – they sought to get their hands on the biggest bomb of all.

The Americans destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atom bombs, then made it easier on their national conscience by establishing a myth: that they had saved lives by making a ground invasion unnecessary. But that is another story.

* When talking seriously about Korea it is preferable to refer to these states by their formal names or their acronyms ROK and DPRK, rather than 'South Korea' and 'North Korea', because each claims to be the legitimate sovereign over the whole Korean peninsula, not only the half it controls.

In this one, British scientists and military advisors cooperated closely with the Americans in developing the atom bomb. But in 1946 the Americans passed the McMahon Act, turning its nuclear information into a state secret and shutting out its allies. The British were furious. They felt betrayed. They went into panic at the prospect of their crumbling empire displaced from world power by the patronising Americans, on whose so-demonstrated reliability their security would depend. It almost makes sense, in that context, that the post-war Attlee government resolved to a rash solution: a nuclear bomb with the Union Jack on it.

Dr. William Penney, who we met in Woolwich, was put in charge of turning Britain into the world's second nuclear power, but they had to settle for third when the Russians developed their bomb in 1949. When the tests began the RAF were in on it to move people around, observe the effects and record radiation levels. Britain's first device was detonated in a lagoon on the Monte Bello Islands off West Australia in 1952. Its design became the 'Blue Danube' bomb, delivered to a special RAF bomber unit called the V-force. But by then both the Americans and Soviets were setting off far more destructive hydrogen bombs, and against Penney's better judgement the British wanted those as well. So through the 1950s nuclear tests continued at Maralinga in South Australia, as well as Malden Island and Kiritimati (Christmas Island) in the Pacific, now with RAF aircraft dropping the bombs, with obvious contempt for the annihilated wildlife, irradiated land, and nearby indigenous peoples who have had their health blighted by the radioactive fallout ever since. By the late 1960s missiles launched from submarines were superseding air-dropped bombs so responsibility was passed from the RAF to the Royal Navy, but the planes had played their part in giving the British their budget-devouring white-elephant superweapon which they are never going to use, lest they be damned for a thousand generations, but which helps them sustain for just a bit longer the mirage that they stand on the top tier of world powers.

Most of them know it to be a mirage, and they also knew it in the 1950s as their imperial authority haemorrhaged away. The 1957 Defence White Paper was an attempt to re-calibrate their military for a Britain whose industrial and geopolitical sun was setting, and now faced the task which sixty years later looks close to defeating it: finding a new meaning for itself in the world. To that end the RAF, which had grown from some 230,000 service personnel at its inception to over 1.2 million at its peak in 1944, began the curtailments that would draw it back down to its present 109,000. Regiments were halved, even quartered, and aircraft development projects cancelled as missile technology became more effective at

killing people. The new NATO framework and fear of the Soviet Union provided them an excuse to keep fighters and bombers stationed at faraway airbases, and new technology like air-to-air refuelling gave a boost to their pride, but these complicated times called more for versatility – monitoring, reconnaissance, rescue – than sheer aggression.

It showed in the RAF's next slew of adventures. In 1961 one of Iraq's revolving door of military rulers laid claim to oil-rich Kuwait, so the RAF dropped in a pile of British reinforcements to fob them away without a fight. In 1963 it was back to Malaya, now Malaysia as it laid claim to the British colonies in Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, much to the consternation of the Indonesians who declared a *Konfrontasi* against what they saw as a British colonial machination. Ugly bouts of on-and-off raids, infiltrations, sabotage and civil unrest ensued, spilling over into Brunei and Singapore, and the RAF flew in to support a secretive British operation to confront Indonesia back; much as with Nasser they saw Sukarno as another communist-leaning Third World* bogeyman. That same year they went to newly-independent Cyprus as Greek and Turkish Cypriots came to blows, returning in 1967 for aerial staring contests with Turkish planes, and yet again in 1974 when a coup by Greece's military junta and Turkish invasion brought the island to actual war. Here too the RAF shuttled, deterred and surveyed rather than committing its bombs to a headache which still troubles Cyprus today.

The RAF's next challenge was caused by one of its own former fighter pilots. Ian Smith had left the air force, gone into politics, and risen as the leader of the white settler regime in Rhodesia which declared independence in 1965 and set about turning it into a white-supremacist horror show in the same vein as Apartheid South Africa next door. In so doing he was spitting in the face of Britain's prime minister Harold Wilson. The two loathed each other with a bitter and personal passion, and the latter sent the RAF to threaten Rhodesia and ward Smith off its comparatively sane copper-rich neighbour Zambia. But here in the one colonial case where they faced genuine dyed-in-the-wool hoodlums who arguably deserved a violent reckoning, the guns stayed silent. Instead they pulled back to blockade Smith's oil shipments through Mozambique, leaving the black

* *Third World* is not a euphemism for impoverished or "developing" countries as people like the British are heard to use it. Rather it is a political term referring to the Non-Aligned countries: those who refused to be seen as appendage of the capitalist or communist blocs (the *First* and *Second* world) and asserted their own identities. Sukarno's Indonesia was among the leaders of this movement and hosted the conference which unleashed it in 1955 at Bandung.

Rhodesians to languish in Smith's hell till they courteously eased him out and turned Rhodesia into Zimbabwe under the not especially pleasanter Robert Mugabe. Likewise there was never any chance that the RAF might be sent against probably the most repulsively brazen and universally reviled racist state in the post-WWII world, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, given that Britain chose to be its staunch ally and helped protect it by opposing sanctions, arresting protesters, and labelling Nelson Mandela a terrorist.

The RAF was less hesitant with its teeth on Anguilla in the Caribbean, where in 1969 it dropped paratroopers and police to bully it out of an independence revolution. The same year saw the start of a long RAF saga of transport flights and helicopter operations in the latest chapter of that most interminable of Britain's colonial calamities, the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Then came the 'Cod Wars' with Iceland, in which air force patrols watched the two countries' gunboats and fishing fleets ram, chase and posture at each other till NATO, which needed the air and naval bases in Iceland and thus bowed to its leverage, decided Iceland had won and so ruined the British fishing industry. And to round things off, 1975 saw the RAF menacing the Guatemalans away from Britain's last territory on the American mainland, Belize, and joining a multinational peacekeeping force in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war.

Most of these could be read as imperial hangovers on the part a country intent on showing it still mattered in the world and which hoped to stay put in its final holdings, but compared with its earlier destruction frenzies the change in the RAF's character was plain. No longer was it in a position to try to bomb its way through every problem. More often it became a third party in quarrels whose main characters were independent states fumbling their own way out of a shattered colonial order, many of which had their own air forces to abuse by now. Further defence reviews in 1969 and 1975 pulled more RAF squadrons back from overseas, streamlined its command structure, and slimmed it down to fewer but ever more advanced models of aircraft. Meanwhile the Americans were headed the other way, reducing Vietnam to a slaughterhouse of cluster bombs, defoliants and napalm. That didn't work either.

The British wisely steered well clear of that one. Still, this was not peace, and any doubts ought to have been dispelled in 1981 when the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands or Malvinas provoked Britain into a confrontation with its most serious opponent since the Nazi war machine. The Falklands were now one of the last remnants of Britain's empire, most of their residents the descendants

of long-term settlers and in favour of British rule. Argentina had contested these claims for nearly two hundred years, but in this period it had fallen to a military junta, one of several in South America backed by the U.S. which must rank among the most cruel and inhuman excuses for governments to ever exist on this Earth.* When it overran the Falklands it became the sole case among them that Thatcher's Britain had a problem with, and ignoring U.S. President Reagan's appeal to compromise with his Argentine allies the Iron Lady blazed in with warships, submarines, landings, special forces, artillery guns and of course the RAF.

It was a massive gamble. This was no colonial pacification but a proper war of dogfights and bombing sorties against an enemy which, if not quite Britain's equal, could certainly have defeated it had one or two cards fallen differently. Both sides blew up each other's ships, planes and helicopters and suffered body counts in the hundreds. In the event the British prevailed, rescuing Thatcher's premiership and re-instilling the populace with a spirit of violence. Their bombers were not done yet.

The RAF's violence had taken on a new face in the Falklands when its Harrier jump-jets flew into battle with laser-guided bombs. Similar weapons were used in the 1990-1 Gulf War against the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, who the British had armed for his horrific eight-year war against revolutionary Iran but now turned against when he seized Kuwait; and then again in the wars surrounding the breakup of Yugoslavia. These conflicts were as foul and indeed genocidal as any before, but now they were also televised and placed British actions under unprecedented mass public scrutiny. As though just in time, the age-old problem of bombing's inaccuracy mysteriously disappeared. In its place was a new watchword: *precision*. Thanks to new technology, they could now hit the stuff they actually wanted to and fulfil the government's supposed pursuit – who could ever have guessed? – of zero civilian casualties.

* Iconic crimes by these governments were tens of thousands of forced disappearances, pushing people to their deaths from aeroplanes, and the jailing, torture and murder of tens of thousands of intellectuals, activists, clerics, professors, students and Jews along with anyone suspected of any hint of dissenting views. As fundamentalist Catholics, they kept pregnant female prisoners alive long enough to give birth, then slaughtered them and passed the babies to be brought up by military families with more agreeable authoritarian persuasions. They were part of the capitalist bloc. Some like Pinochet in Chile were brought to power with CIA backing, in that case with a symbolic role for aerial bombing in the Chilean Air Force's bombardment of La Moneda Palace.

There is an immediate problem here. It assumes dead civilians an accidental by-product of strikes on military targets. The reality, as we have seen, is that killing civilians and disrupting their lives has been built into the marrow of aerial bombing from the beginning. What imaginative acrobatics must it take, to think to invert this into a sanitised promise of bombs and missiles winding round corners and knocking politely on windows before they enter, blowing up evil terrorists with such honourable cleanliness that their severed limbs do not hit the children next to them?

Of course, the British public do not learn about their country's bombing traditions so have found this convincing, at least in so far as they are readier to stomach air raids and drone strikes than send their own soldiers into inevitable messy meat grinders. It is also because they remain a racist society: they complain less when the skin on the meat that gets ground, civilian or otherwise, is dark. Perhaps, as Britain has grown its cultural diversity and thus its ear for voices that those people are humans too, the service of *precision* has been as an extra layer of moral padding to placate them: as though to say, yes, it was wrong to just randomly bomb their villages, but *technology has delivered us* and now we, being civilised, only strike the evil terrorists, so don't worry and get back to work.

But if the nature of bombing did not change, something else did. The people on the other end found ways to bring the violence back to the bombers' home streets.

The story of Britain and its allies as they reel from 'terrorism' did not start in the 1990s, still less with the September 11th attacks on New York in 2001. Placed in its context of over a century of colonial violations in which *terror bombing* was so instrumental, it is fitting, if farcically and frustratingly sad, that the triumphalist glee that that end of the Cold War meant eternal peace and glory for the capitalist settlement was shattered by those peoples its bombs had done so much to prohibit from peace. With the turn of the century those unresolved colonial conflicts in the Muslim world reminded the British they still existed and drew their bombers back in for a fresh new round of catastrophic mistakes. In them the cycle continues: misunderstandings and hypocrisies based on racism, followed by bouts of wrecking and violating by air which fail to sort out the consequences. They call it the War on Terror, but framed properly as an extension of the 'Air Control' story the War of Terror seems more accurate.

Most notorious was their return to that land they had done so much to derail: Iraq. The brutality of Saddam Hussein was symptomatic of this patchwork of divided peoples the British had irresponsibly stitched into a non-nation so long

ago. Saddam kept order down the barrel of a gun. Britain and its allies had sold him that gun, and were okay with it so long as it was pointed at the uncooperative Iranians or irrelevant Kurds but not when it turned on the oilfields of Kuwait. RAF precision-bombing had played its part in driving him out, but the U.S.-led coalition failed to stop Saddam's massacres and persecutions of revolting Kurds and Shi'a Marsh Arabs. The RAF stuck around to help police the No-Fly Zones, but then in 2003 came the infamous U.S.-led war of aggression to depose Saddam and restore Iraq into a place compliant with American geo-strategic visions, oil interests and ideological dreams. The regime of Tony Blair committed Britain to this invasion with debasing enthusiasm, and the aggressors' obvious contempt for Iraqi lives – they did not even bother to count civilian deaths which reached at least the tens of thousands – resonated right up the chain to the bombings of the 1920s, making the British objects of hatred there for a whole new generation. Inevitably they replaced Saddam with a great deal of corrupt and unaccountable nothing, which led to more resentment, more insurgencies, more bombardments to fail to suppress them, and the ultimate result in which the post-World War I borders and the populations within them were drowned in blood by the apocalyptic sadism of Da'esh, whose deeds belong more to stories of demons than human warfare. Fifteen years after the invasion the RAF went back to bomb those too. Sometimes they hit civilians. The cycle continues.

Two years before the Iraq invasion, terrorists hijacked passenger planes and flew them into the World Trade Center skyscrapers in New York. It was a heinous atrocity. In the experience of the British and the Americans it was new. In the wider story, it was not. There was little substantive difference between terror attacks like 'Nine-Eleven' and the RAF terror bombing episodes that went back through Kenya and Malaya, Hamburg and Dresden and the Mandates: massacre the defenceless, sow panic and fear, disrupt the enemy's ways of life and morale and ability to make war.

What is not yet clear is whether it has been more effective. The British used to be as resilient to bombs as anyone else, if the Blitz was anything to go by. But now the real and spectral bombs of the terrorism they fear has ignited them into a high panic, floundering into a puddle of constitutional self-harm and anti-Muslim, anti-foreign hysteria. It seems a massive irony: has the doctrine of terror bombing, with which the British tried and failed for so long to disrupt the minds and hearts of people in their colonies, now been perfected by those victims' descendants who have succeeded in using it – indeed, the mere threat of it – to disrupt the minds

and hearts of the British? Like that, this story of flight glides right back into the overall tale of a people becoming its own worst enemy.

It has in the meantime brought more futile bombing the other way, enticing the RAF back to its second old proving ground: Afghanistan. In the 1980s the Soviet Union had also learnt the hard way that you don't invade Afghanistan. The British did not like being taught it themselves but were okay when it was taught to the Russians, so sent equipment and funding to train the Afghan *mujahideen* to terrorise them. Decades of violence since the fall of the Afghan monarchy had inured these people to blood and oppression, and after the Soviets gave up they turned on each other, the strongest and nastiest emerging as the Taliban regime. The Americans blamed them for harbouring the masterminds of the September 11 attacks, so in 2001 the British followed them into war against the monster they had created. Eighty years after 'Bomber' Harris rearranged King Amanullah's palace the RAF were bombing Kabul again. The Taliban went away and waited while the old colonial powers inevitably failed to replace them with functional and legitimate governance and alienated the people even more than they had. The more the alliance has got frustrated and withdrawn, the more the Taliban have surged back upon a raft of insurgencies. It is no coincidence that these draw such strength from the same border areas with Pakistan that the British thought they could bomb into submission in the 1920s and 30s. The cycle continues.

Then in 2011, it was back to where it all began: Libya, where exactly one hundred years earlier Giulio Cavotti had opened the story of aerial bombing with four hand grenades lobbed out of his plane. This time the RAF was there as part of a UN-authorized NATO intervention in the Libyan Civil War to impose a ceasefire and protect civilians, but of course, once in the air there is too much to tempt you off the flight plan, and it became in effect a war to overthrow Colonel Gaddafi with the usual plateful of bombed and forgotten civilians on the side. The airstrikes were of little help to build anything in place of the deposed regime and Libya swiftly collapsed into chaos, and is now of little interest to the British except as a source of refugees they can leave to die while pretending their bombing had nothing to do with it. Others will not forget. The cycle continues.

Libya. Afghanistan. Iraq. The RAF and its bombs have come full circle. As in the 1920s, it is disguised in the worthiest causes of the time – empire then, democracy now. As in the 1920s, it is those least able to fight back who are having their lives ruined, erased from significance in the ruiners' stories because they are too small, too far away, too low down on their hierarchies of importance measured by skin

colour. The latest air weapon, the drone, has maximised this distance between violator and violated: its controllers can do all the killing from a room on the other side of the world and enjoy it like a computer game.

There is the true distance, the critical contradiction that defeats the use of one's wings to kill. At one end, that rush of godly omnipotence; at the other a cruel and counterproductive powerlessness that is exactly what guarantees the god's defeat. Fighting with honour is not just about feeling better in your own conscience. It is about winning your opponent's respect so they accept it when you defeat them. Those done in with dishonour will never accept. They will rage, they will hate, and if they cannot hurt you back they will pass that hate on to their children, then their children's children, till it finds a generation that can reach out and strangle yours.

And with that, we can come back in to land at Hendon Aerodrome. It was a long flight. It was necessary. What did the English choose to do with their wings? Many things, it turned out, but the most important of those was to *kill*. Until they have contextualised their present problems of terrorism and war as part of that same story, they will be helpless to resolve them.



Look at that sky. We have peppered them with flak.

Let's not shoot at the pilots as they parachute to safety. That the British air force has been implicated in a hundred years of terrorism and massacre does not mean that most people in it are unpardonable demons with huge sharp teeth and spines full of spikes. The RAF is a huge organisation in which the majority of staff serve on the ground and never get near the buttons that kill people. These personnel present the same quandaries as the munitions workers of Woolwich and the prison officers of Wandsworth. How informed are they when their service becomes structurally complicit in authoritarianism, racism, or bombing for bombing's sake? What is their responsibility if they suspect that it does? When does integrity as a human being override integrity as a professional, and the duty to obey orders give way to the duty to refuse to take part in abuses or atrocities? What support would society provide today, say in media treatment or the justice system, for a Lionel Charlton, the commodore who had to quit the RAF for refusing to bomb the Kurds? How would it hold to task another Arthur Harris, whose statue still stands unbowed at the RAF church on the Strand?

If they want the RAF to be a force for good in the world outside nationalist fantasy, these are questions the British will have to address. They have to come to terms with the grievousness of the wrongs inflicted by people wearing that badge. Not only those who take the immediate decision to make people scream as they are blown to joints or charred to human bacon, but every British individual who counts the RAF as a public service and holds it up with their taxes and celebrations. 'Obeying orders' is simply not good enough – Nuremberg should have made that clear for the ages. Neither is indifference, nor the comfortable refusal to think. If they do not share the responsibility, they can only share the consequences.

Can the RAF be a force for good? What we have seen of their record makes it challenging to imagine, but let us finish with one last list of engagements which might, at a stretch, offer hope.

Working backwards, then: Anguilla and the Turks and Caicos Islands, 2017. Mount Sinjar, 2014. Mozambique and Sierra Leone, 2000. Sarajevo and Luanda, 1992. Somalia, also 1992. Mexico City and Colombia, 1985. Ethiopia, 1984. Nepal and west Africa, 1973. Agadir in Morocco and Valdivia in Chile, 1960.

These were not bombings, thank goodness. Not the RAF's at least. Recognise them?

One more then. Berlin, 1948.

The Berlin Airlift was the first great Cold War set-piece, in which the Soviet Union blockaded the capitalist allies' part of the occupied German capital after the war. The response was a massive but peaceful airlift of food, fuel and medicine to keep the population supplied, which went on for a year till at last the Soviets relented. At its most intense the RAF was flying in and out of Berlin three or four times a day, in its most famous instance of the tradition that list of dates and places represents: humanitarian assistance.

We can question if kindness and care were the whole story. Political calculations, inconvenient details and other sides of the story must also be reckoned with. What is beyond doubt however is that at least in some places in this mix of emergency airlifts, searches and rescues, refugee and survivor evacuations and relief for victims of earthquakes, volcanoes and floods, there are people across this world whose lives are better for the RAF than they would have been without it.

Now there's a creditable use for those wings. That is how you protect your country: by giving people reasons to love your planes, rather than tremor with hate at the sight of them. How about, from now on, a hundred years of a Britain with less terror bombing as a sticky plaster for its political failures or a truncheon for a racist relationship with the world, and more of flying in as a *deus ex machina* to gift a way out for the trapped and life to those who must otherwise die? Who then would want to attack a country that helps their most vulnerable out of peril? Is that not a better way to ferry them 'through adversity to the stars' – *per ardua ad astra* – as the RAF's motto goes, rather than blasting them up there in pieces?

Hendon Aerodrome has ceased to exist. After helping to host the American air force in World War II and carrying on as a transport hub, the air began to settle as the squadrons scaled back and air bases fell to redundancy. By 1966 the airfield was no longer in use. After some final air displays to mark the RAF's fiftieth anniversary it was handed over to the civilian authorities of the Borough of Barnet, who proceeded to turn it into the 1,700 residential houses of the Grahame Park estate, named after Claude Grahame-Wright with whom this story began. The rest of the premises have since been converted to the RAF Museum where visitors can enter the original hangars, admire a hundred years of dangling aeroplanes, and learn the story we just went through with the blood taken out.

In 1998 the Swedish writer and historian Sven Lindqvist visited the museum. In his book *A History of Bombing*, which is far better on this subject than anything I have shared with you today, he reflects: 'Both the planes and the bombs are there, enormous and overwhelming. But what did these planes and bombs do?...The result of residential bombing is never shown. In this exhibit, no human being was ever harmed by British bombers'. As then, so today, save for a short video under the title *Consequences of Bombing*, based on the RAF's destruction of German cities, and a question posed to the public: can the ends ever justify the means? Slips of paper and pencils are provided; visitors can write their answers and pin them on the wall. This afternoon there are about twice as many Yeses as Nos. At least one author of a No understands what is important when they write 'because it hurts other animals'.

For the Yeses, the world will not wait forever for them to learn, so here is a vision for them of what will happen on this spot one day if they continue in dereliction of their humanity. A London brought to ashes, on a scale beyond what the *Luftwaffe* could have ever dreamed of inflicting. Piles of smoking rubble where bastions like Eltham Palace, Wandsworth Prison or Harrow School once stood; the rivers and canals evaporated, their bone-dry channels clogged with lumps of flesh that for a few popping seconds, perhaps, were corpses; a shattered urban husk, infected, irradiated, its stories ripped from the pages of human memory and lost forever. One day the Great North Wood and the Forest of Middlesex would reclaim this land. The humans would not. At least some of those who eradicated them will have enjoyed it. They will teach in their history textbooks that it was right, necessary, justified, a means to an end. When students say they feel bad about it, they will be taken out to the corridor and get lectured, threatened, accused of rewriting history and rebuked for sympathising with unimportant nothing-peoples. London will pass from history into mythology like Troy or Atlantis, its fate to inspire poetry, or academic metaphors, but not so much in the way of care for its victims.

Consider that, you who call yourselves British, before you choose what answer you stick on that wall.

It was a long walk and a turbulent flight. Let's glide through Hendon till we find a good place to land.

There is a clutch of major north-south routes to cross, and the first is a deep, deep well of common humanity. It is the Hendon Broadway, also known as the Edgware Road, and we ford it across a twin cascade of multicultural shops. Behold the Yellow River oriental restaurant; Azizi Rugs; the Madeena Supermarket. Kabul Kebab and Aladin's Kebabish stare each other down from opposite corners. One wonders how many of the people who set up these enterprises had branches blown off their extended family trees by RAF bombing. Yet here they came in magnanimous forgiveness to contribute to England's high-street economy, not to mention to rescue its ailing cuisine.

We have seen this elsewhere, but this case is special. By another name we have already crossed this road on the far side of London, at Shooter's Hill to be precise. It is Watling Street, ancient trackway of the Celtic peoples, paved by the Romans, so named by the Anglo-Saxons, and for a time host to the collage of ethnicities, cultures and languages that made up their Mediterranean empire. It now has a fourth name, the A5, and still goes all the way up to Wales.

Then a bridge which spans an infrastructural crush. A battery of railways race away to the Midlands. They used to serve the Brent Reservoir's own Welsh Harp station till it closed in 1903 and disappeared without trace. Separated by only a margin of bushes roars the southern extension of the M1, modern Britain's replacement for the Great North Road since 1959 and the first of their full-length motorways. All these cuts over the carcass of Middlesex, the land they go *through* rather than to.

One last crossing, then we are safe: the Edgware branch of the Northern Line. An unpretentious magenta-brick footbridge ferries us across it to Hendon Park. Here stands a cheerful little kosher café, but there is something suspicious about the white box-shaped bunker structure beneath its bright green welcome signs.

Of course. It used to be a bomb shelter.

11. Homes



...for a man's house is his castle, and each man's home is his safest refuge.

Traditional English proverb, as established into common law by Chief Justice Edward Coke in the *Institutes of the Laws of England*, 1628

Must we be content, now that education is bringing all sorts of people nearer together in sympathy, to have classes topographically divided by an arbitrary division depending upon their rate-paying powers?

Henrietta Barnett, founder of Hampstead Garden Suburb, 1905

The landlord rules, not the tenant. But I think you've worked that out, haven't you?

Fergus Wilson, one of the richest landlords in the UK, on his summary mass eviction of hundreds of people from his properties in Kent in 2019

We come to a land cleared by burning.

No, it must be, because that is the Old English phrase from which *Barnet* supposes to derive, and if they did not claim this territory from the ancient Forest of Middlesex by fire then they should not call their places names that are not true.

Barnet followed the familiar pattern as the settlers converted it to farmland, which in due course came under the control of rich manorial landowners. Hendon Park stakes its place in their patchwork: first part of the Goodyer family estate, then from 1698 that of the Kemps, till 1903 when Hendon Council opened it to the public. But by then the capital had set about swallowing these reaches whole. With the administrative reorganisation of 1965 Middlesex was lost to history, and Barnet, with Hendon as part of it, was re-imagined as a London Borough.

1965. That is startlingly recent. It was recognition of a second round of clearing which only within living memory has transformed these farmlands beyond recognition: the sweeping away of the old manor farms, the insertion of railways and roads, and the conversion of the Middlesex crescent into an overflow for the capital's swelling population. Long-distance road junctions in the middle of nowhere were targeted for Underground stations, with Hendon Central a case in point, whereupon a flood of speculative builders converted the fields into batteries of residential suburbs. Unplanned, uncontrolled and without concern for the consequences, the capital sprawled, and today some two thirds of its population of over eight million people live in these suburban satellites, in areas till the latest century more of the English interior than its metropole.

These suburbs resume on the far side of Hendon Park, setting us up for a renewed submersion in this residential sea along with the more intrusive routes they drove through here to support it, including our latest garrulous acquaintance the North Circular Road. But this time, rather than take those houses for granted, it is high time to draw a spotlight on them because they themselves are a thing.

The English middle classes do not just happen to live in suburbs. The suburbs are historical: they *happened*. And they, along with wider realities of English housing, have enough to tell us about this country to warrant that they be brought forth from the background.

The English middle classes. They too are recent, a product of the industrial capitalist upheavals of the nineteenth century. As them, the suburbs. Because who was it who fled to these leafy havens from the smoky, dirty, noisy and increasingly

unlivable city centres? Who else, on reaching the countryside, would have been so sensitive to the ruggedness of the earth, the small animals that crawled on it and the dialects and body hair of the people who worked it, that they would not suffer to live there unless it was artificially terraformed into a simulacrum of urban refinement? Not the industrial workers of course, but those above them on the social hierarchy who built their wealth on the workers' backs, and thus could afford to escape and build new comforts in the outer rings opened up by the roads and railways. Once a tedious, dangerous slog through hours of bandit-ridden wild lands or muddy open country made still more treacherous by the English rains, the new transport options made it far easier to pop into the city on business then retreat to a new conception of residential zone where what you were breathing could be called air and everyone else was pretentious like you.

So it went around many English cities, and so it went for Hampstead, the centre of gravity in these lands where Barnet ebbs through Camden into the capital proper. Hampstead simply and fittingly means *homestead*, a reference to the original Anglo-Saxon village that, like many others, punctuated the capital's rural backyard till it was consumed by it, sped on by the eighteenth-century discovery of mineral springs and now superseded by one of the most affluent and culturally expressive residential sectors in London's orbit. Aside from being too expensive for reasonable people to live in, Hampstead is also known for the best-preserved descendent of the old Middlesex wilds, Hampstead Heath. But that has little to offer our quest; instead we shall arc round its north to explore a more eccentric take on the suburban *homestead* for which these lands became a laboratory.

Homesteads. They don't really use that word nowadays, do they? It evokes adventure, a staking out of your place in the wilderness – that is, quite the opposite of the sheltered, boringly safe, nothing-ever-happens-here suburban *home* today. But is not the modern English usage of *home* no less confused? They speak of *homeowners*, or *buying your own home*, when what they really mean is a *house* – that is, a physical structure for living in. But as suggested in their old adage about your house being your castle, they have not totally forgotten the weightier meaning of *home* as more than a roof and walls. We might feel that weight in the invasive nature of *homework*, which not only follows you into your house but violates your psychological castle of peace and safety; or, topically, in *homelessness* which implies a lack of something more vital than just a physical structure to live in. *Home* is an abstract locus of belonging made of your relationships, emotions, stories and experiences in its setting, which as we saw

with the canal people or the Romani communities of the Great North Wood, does not have to require a fixed building – though the hostility such groups have received in England points further to the psychic grip of their home-means-house conflation. So too how for most of the period in which the English have elected their leaders, only the tiny minority with fixed property were permitted to vote, and that even today, their essential services like hospitals and schools are wont to make themselves unavailable to people who cannot provide a permanent address.

If *home*, then, is something all humans need, it is as though they have turned it on its head into the prejudice that a person without a *house*, and thus without a *home*, is not a human and has no rights.

This fatal mix-up of *house* and *home* – when did it start? The obvious suspect would be the religion of the market, which does not recognise concepts with non-quantifiable human content like *home*. But even the *house* is an unstraightforward concept as much as a place, expressing elements of the relationship between person, society and space. If you live in a house, there is a good chance it anchors your everyday life: your sleeping, your eating, your work – especially with modern communications technologies that let your bosses in even when the doors and windows are locked – and your interactions with others who live there, family or otherwise. The shape and environment of your *house* and the things that happen in it might say much about you, your values and your social position, which they shape and are shaped by in turn.

The suburbs shouted one set of values out loud: the values of *class*. Is the English person's house the place they relax in the sights of their lawns and wallpaper, the scents of their stocked fridges and the warmth of their central heating? Or where they lie poisoned by mould and asbestos, chomped on by bedbugs, dripped on by leaks, subsisting on what they can scrape from the foodbank as they await the bailiffs who will throw them out on their ear?

If you want symbols for the English spectrum of wealth and social power, their houses will suffice. They also represent the *work* values which built those class relations: in a society of working practices shaped around the commute, the house becomes the place you go *back* to, a site where you can pretend for a few hours to be a real human being instead of a unit of labour. The picture is not complete without *gender* values, because in the English inheritance both *house* and *home* are feminised spaces as the nuclei of monogamous families: almost every English imagination, compliant or critical, is saddled with stereotypes of the house as a private domain whose upkeep is the responsibility of women, the sweat on whose

brows is misogynistically not counted in official figures as real *work*; that being reserved for the men, who go out into the public world to obtain an income.

Private and *public*: that imagined division is a cultural mainstay in this country, and the walls of the *house* are its boundary. It too informs the image of the house as one's castle: a sovereign space whose residents (or in reality, the residents with most power) hold authority which no-one – not the neighbours, not strangers, not the state – has the right to invade. Even in recent decades, English disputes over this border have been noisy and acrimonious. Are consenting adults' sexual relations within that private realm any business of those outside them? If parents assault their children, are the authorities permitted to go into their houses to stop them? And if someone intrudes in your house, have you the right to kill them in defence of it? The case of Tony Martin, the Norfolk farmer imprisoned for murder after shooting a burglar dead in his house in 1999, generated a fierce public controversy which has resurfaced in similar episodes, most recently when seventy-eight-year-old Richard Osborn-Brooks, this time in south London, was arrested in 2018 after stabbing an intruder to death with a screwdriver.

Whichever sides of those debates look more reasonable to you, the common denominator is that housing matters. Its condition reflects a society's character, and failures therein are a matter of life and death, with the ultimate such failure none other than their defining disaster of the age: the fire that destroyed Grenfell Tower on 14th June 2017 and dealt seventy-two people deaths comparably horrific to those of the victims of the wartime Blitz. It was not an accident but the outcome of a systemic cultural and political housing paradigm which held the residents in undisguised contempt, with classist and racist undercurrents, before and after the disaster, through every institution present in its responsibility structure, from political authorities like the Conservative Party – in both central government and the local council – to the Tenant Management Organisation which managed the tower, and the gamut of bodies – constructors, cladding manufacturers, regulators and so forth – which put profit and expedience before the safety of people who lived and died by their decisions.

In other words, in England today, housing has also become something else: a weapon of mass murder.

Grenfell Tower was a wake-up call to what people struggling under the consequences had found their voices ignored on for years: the English housing

crisis. This country lacks enough houses – not due to lack of space, but because the houses it has have been made ridiculously expensive, and nowhere more so than the capital where prices rocketed into outer space on the fuel of reckless mortgage loans by banks, thus soldering housing into the dysfunctions of the English financial system and the great economic crisis that followed its crash in 2007-8. As housing in central London becomes the exclusive domain of hyper-rich oligarchs, and decent housing more broadly the preserve of inherited wealth and status, the mass of the English people have been left stranded. Those with houses at all are likely to be renting them at the mercy of unreliable private landlords, with nothing to commit them to the well-being of clients they keep in dilapidated or dangerous conditions or turf out with impunity. In other words, the problem is not just that housing is crappy or insufficient, but that access to it has been made reliant on unaccountable and abusive power relationships.

Take a few steps into the city, and you will find no field of view that does not contain the legions of people reduced to living on the streets who make up the housing crisis's most abject casualties. These homeless are a new surge in the numbers of people in England made literally unable to afford to rent a house or a flat, let alone buy one, and many will have been forcibly removed from those they once had, possibly along with their property, by the traumatic process of *repossession* by which the mortgage lender seizes back control of your house and in so doing is allowed to send bailiff-thugs to physically drag you out. The law does not permit them to use violent or intimidatory methods, but of course, this is England, so who cares about the law in cases of people too vulnerable or desperate to have recourse to it? Where it once took the *Luftwaffe* to abuse the English out of their homes, the housing system is now itself made the means by which they do it on an industrial scale.

Naturally the lower your rank on England's scales of prejudice – race, gender, age, mental health, disability, cognitive conformity and especially class – the more susceptible you become to this violence. That even so miserable a set of victims as the homeless then becomes vilified and blamed for their own violation attests to the depths of the English capacity for bigotry; and the impact on young people in particular, already having their backs broken by the soaring costs and decaying quality of English school and university education, looks set to nurture generations of deprivation and rage for decades to come.

Their proposed solutions are measures like responsible lending, more rigorous and impartial advice for people looking to buy houses, and above all just building

more of them. Theoretically that raises further questions of where to put them, such as whether they are worth the sacrifice of Green Belt* land. But that is not the real problem; there is in fact plenty of land. The crisis is actually a symptom of a deeper rot at the heart of what homes and housing mean to the English, which itself, in turn, is a primary limb of how this people sees itself today.

As a theology of the market, what is good for those with market power – in this case, the private property developers – takes priority over what is good for people. High house prices are good for those with market power. Deliberately constraining supply, including by hoarding public land you bought on the understanding you would build houses on it, then failing to do so, helps keep them high. So too do strategies to build houses on the intent to sell to the highest bidder, rather than to those who need them. The values that guide England's housing system are thus that housing exists not to shelter and support human beings, let alone provide them a sense of *home*, but to reward those most ruthless in their greed. English houses, in other words, are less homes for living in, more speculative capital for preserving and expressing abusive power. The spread of this culture into English governance and housing-related institutions – not only the landlords but the banks, the utility companies, and privatisation-happy regimes – have abolished any ethic of social responsibility for housing, made it taboo to consider housing in terms of its advantages for the public good, and made actual human beings who require houses to live in disposable.

The picture is a sorry one – but to their redemption the English do have worthier approaches to housing on record. There was a time in living memory, for example, when they were in far more dire desperation for houses: the aftermath of World War II, when housing was a gloomy challenge for a bombed-out and bankrupt population expecting a baby boom. Their response was led not by market forces but government intervention, beginning with the emergency provision of factory-made prefabricated houses – large boxes, basically – overseen by Clement Attlee's Labour Party government but in fact first set out by the Conservative Party-led wartime coalition of Winston Churchill. These 'prefabs' proved surprisingly popular, but as the country recovered they evolved into longer-term social housing programmes, known in England as *council houses*: that is, houses rented out by local authorities with the express purpose of being

* Zones of open countryside where development is restricted, typically designated in a ring around major cities to limit urban sprawl.

affordable to people who lack the means to buy or rent from private companies. They had in fact done this before, most famously after World War I with the 'Homes Fit for Heroes' programme of Health Minister Christopher Addison, but social housing after the second war would experiment in new forms, in particular the council estate and the tower block. Grenfell Tower itself sprang up as part of this process in the 1970s.

These developments often ran into disrepute for being poor-quality constructions sited in remote and inaccessible places, and for those privileged with the wallets to never see one outside the television became the target of stereotypes about crime, 'chavs' and black people. But they also provided homes for huge numbers of people the market would not otherwise have permitted one, and as at Grenfell, often grew to support vibrant, dynamic and interdependent communities. When Margaret Thatcher's government launched her vaunted Right to Buy scheme in 1980, giving tenants the right to purchase their own social housing – often at massive discounts, that is, budgetary losses for local governments – it was a delightful liberation for better-off residents who could afford to do so, not to mention for the private landlords many of them sold it on to at full market price in turn. But it was a terrible blow for lower-income or unemployed people, strangling both their affordable housing supply and the means of cash-strapped local councils to provide it ever since.

Nonetheless, the history is there to show the English can and have done better when they wanted to. They need not conjure solutions out of thin air; precedents exist, even beyond the aforementioned landmarks, for scattered around their country are all manner of eccentric approaches and experiments, many on a local scale and each with its share of successes and failures to learn from. A few even hide out in London's crowded orbit, and here, appropriately in the land of the *homestead* – Hampstead – we are about to encounter just such a story.

It is a story of a suburb, but do not let that put you off. Because it is also the story of a vision to defeat the English class system, with a radical approach to housing as its instrument to a fairer social settlement. Many people were involved in developing this dream into a plan, and then into at least a partial reality, but it owed its essence to one single iron will. It was the will of a woman, a fearsome one at that, for whom urban planning was a legitimate weapon to literally chart England's classist and sexist values off the map.

To get to know this woman, we must make haste to the place she built her will into the English landscape. Our passage there is choked by a less admirable knot of suburbs and infrastructure. Good. It will show us first how not to make an environment for people to live in.

A constant friend makes it just bearable. Beneath a railed bridge, ignored by the surrounding roads and houses like a cousin with difficult political opinions, the Brent river ponders a course through this concrete maze. This land's power, its originator, the nourisher of the Middlesex breadbasket, has here been reduced to a topographical nuisance, shunted away down a crack in the scenery.

Through overgrown banks it trickles over a stony weir in disgruntled anonymity. Squint through the bushes however and a pair of ruined pepperpot gazebos, one on each side, stares back like haunted watchtowers. That is what they are, watchtowers, guarding a forgotten ghost-land from the usurper tribes of *Homo economicus* who cannot be bothered to remember its existence, because these gazebos are all that remains of the Brent Bridge Hotel. Of this establishment only a few hard traces seem to remain in native memory. Most are found in the annals of jazz and dance communities, through which snatches of music flutter then fade just as fast; it appears the Hotel was a popular venue for band performances and ballroom dancing in the 1920s and 30s. A century later these gazebos conceal, rather than broadcast, their secrets from this weird thin sheet of reality, one that must have slotted somewhere into the transition from rural Middlesex to urban London. An artistic and cultural magnet for city people, yet one whose identity, and doubtless whose attraction – consider its name, and its situation on the banks – drew on the prehistoric power of its river. That didn't last long. Art and culture involve *doing* things. Nowadays the humans here do not *do*. They only pass through, or lie dormant between shifts.

The Brent descends from the north, and so does the North Circular Road with which we now collide in all its disheartening glory. Lashed through here in the 1920s and 30s to link up industrial communities around London's fringes, the authorities have since repeatedly sought to expand it against the better judgement of protests, disruptions and public inquiries. As a result these adjustments have been implemented piecemeal, but what we encounter here typifies its character as a noisy, polluted highway designed as though to depress every motorist or pedestrian who uses it into a resignation that all life, like the North Circular itself, is a tedium with no redeeming features. Earlier in the canal

zone we found evidence that they do know how to design infrastructure to not feel shitty to use if they want to. This is not such an infrastructure.

Unfortunately we are now stuck with this monster as it curls north, contracting its coils to engulf as much space as it can. But the Brent is still there, and comes to our rescue with the offer of a strip of parkland down the west bank of the highway. Brent Park, as it is aptly named, serves as a sturdy cordon of green to separate the participants in the kilometre of negotiation that follows. It is an arm-wrestle between these two Ways, old against new, the abiding natural sovereign versus the self-aggrandising synthetic pretender. And in all fairness the cordon is effective, because it takes the side of the river, and so protects a corridor of moist and faint wooded fragrance with whistling birdsong from the all-flattening, all-into-nothing roll of the doom road.

The river is languid now, glides rather than flows, its ripples soft like liquid silk. The people here have known better than to sate their urban hunger right up to its banks, for tolerant as its mood might be today, as part of the Thames watershed it reserves the right to change its course and burst its banks at its discretion, so when the humans decided to funnel their torrents of motor traffic nearby they left the highway's sleeves unbuilt. Otherwise the Brent might flood it, costing however many pounds of economic growth to be lost forever, humiliating the government of the day, and reinforcing public belief in the uselessness of the political class. Water is good at that.

A trail traces this cordon past a bridge boarded off 'due to Health and Safety reasons', or so says a sign, with no evidence that action might be underway to remedy those, whatever they are, within the next seven generations. There are some interconnected ponds here with the customary population of mallards, moorhens, coots, swans and discarded drinks cans, each nosing a glassy arc through thick duckweed. These pools are not decorative features but remnants of a pre-North Circular age when this area appeared on maps as Decoy Farm and Decoy Woods. They are, indeed, decoy lakes, placed to lure ducks for hunting, whose present disuse in that role speaks of a change in culinary culture. Today's urban English are not such eaters of ducks, except perhaps in the restaurants of Chinatown, and the fortunate birds have largely graduated from foodstuffs to living landscape ornaments. When and why did that change occur? Was it simply because clumping people into cities put ducks further away than other sources of meat? Or was there a deeper change in ducks' cultural status akin to the English's distaste for eating, say, horses?

To soak in this heritage is to appreciate that Brent Park is not just placeholder greenery. There is stuff here that pre-dates and endures the North Circular Invasion. The trees are chunky and mature, the birdsong lively, and the vegetation more diverse than befits a strip abandoned to big up the civilisational pride of a dual carriageway. Through the lens of history the strip of life is great and the road of death is small.

A park. A fence. A playground. It could be anywhere, but this leafy corner carries an air of finality. It even has a tyre swing, perhaps for lonely citizens to sit in the rain and reflect where everything went wrong.

There is an argument for the weight of this spot. The Brent, which we joined where it spills into the Thames, no longer exists beyond this junction, splitting instead into two feeder tributaries. One is the Dollis Brook, named after a farm which itself is named from the Anglo-Saxon *dole*, or portions – of land in this case, but of money in its present-day usage as slang for unemployment benefit. It carries its water down from the province of Hertfordshire to the north, while the other stream, the Mutton Brook, named after the *Mordin* family of Norman French origin rather than sheep meat, arrives from the east at a right angle. Of course the river itself laughs at all this human sense-making because it is meaningless to its physical reality. For all the dictates of geography textbooks about tributaries and confluences, water scoffs at imaginary boundaries. You might as well say the Thames is a tributary of the North Sea, or that when you pee you are creating a tributary of the sewers which, because they flow into the river, are themselves a network of its tributaries.

Tributes. Offerings by which the lesser signal submission to the greater. Humans reduce everything to dodgy power relations like that. The water doesn't care.

So even if it is no longer called the Brent, we shall follow the same flow of water along the Mutton Brook as it tunnels through to the south side of the North Circular Road. Again we are kept to a tightrope of grassy slope between the brook on our right and the monster-road, exultant with HGVs, up to our left. The water's startling clarity reveals the thousand colours of a bed teeming with pebbles, but this is misleading – we are in danger here. Every few hundred metres, passers-by, and there are not many, are scared off the banks by red 'POLLUTED WATER – KEEP OUT' signs, themselves heavily polluted with rust and what looks like

chemical damage, to the result that they would not look out of place in a dead zone abandoned to nuclear fallout. The runoff from the North Circular's hundred thousand engines per day must be doing a number on this watercourse. Could they not have built something to catch it? Or was the river that kept their ancestors alive no longer important enough?

A little more of this and we can finally part from that poisoned artery of a highway, but guess again if you hoped it would tolerate that without a proper send-off. Up ahead lies in ambush its worst infrastructural miscreation yet, where now at a whopping ten lanes it crosses the six-lane Finchley Road in an unreconstructed atrocity of an intersection. One day, if their scientific progress is not derailed by social collapse – and that *if* is not small – they will probably have instruments precise enough to record the exact number of days, minutes and seconds a person loses off the end of their life with each use of this junction's pedestrian crossings. To make matters worse, there is something interesting on the north side – the wrong side – whose invitation requires us to cross not once but three times.

If the handkerchief over your mouth is thick enough, you might still be alive after that to stumble into the front gardens of some apartments that huddle in the corner. They have chosen this of all places to site a striking bronze statue: a naked woman, sword in hand, standing on tiptoe on a hemisphere with her arms and weapon raised to the sky in a V-shape.

This is not a thing you randomly put up for no reason. We can clear one thing up straight away: she was here before the horrible crossroads was, because Finchley Road is the more reasonable of its two participants. Originally a toll road to give the Great North Road a bypass round the Hampstead hills, the statue was placed here next to it in 1927 when it was probably still safe to inhale while standing on it. The North Circular Monster came later, and she stands with her back to it, no doubt in hope that if she ignores it it will go away. Who is she anyway?

A plaque asserts that her name is *La Déliverance*, and that she was sculpted by a Frenchman, Emile Guillaume, to commemorate the First Battle of the Marne in September 1914. This was a decisive juncture in the bloodbath of World War I which effectively shut down its first phase: the ruthless advance of the German army through Belgium, sweeping aside the French to push on a haplessly exposed Paris. At the river Marne the French forces rallied with their British allies and launched a skilled and surprising counter-attack, breaking the Germans' resolve

along with their hopes for the swift victory on which their war strategy had depended. They were pushed back to what is now infamously remembered as the Western Front, where the war entered the phase that defines it in the memories of its participants on this side of Europe: that in which they dug themselves into trenches and engaged in a four-year slaughter of each other's young people to no meaningful end, while shaming those of their own who questioned the morality of it and shooting those who refused to take part.

The First Battle of the Marne exemplifies Europe's civilisational breakdown in those years. Something like two million individuals, mostly young men, fought on the fields of this single battle between societies which claimed to stand at the pinnacle of human progress. Around a quarter of those young men were reduced to meat. But told by these peoples, the Marne is parsed as a glorious turning point in which the heroic eventual victors, France and Britain, threw back the evil Germans who of course would go on to lose. For the French, it became a *good thing* that half a million boys watered the soil of their country with their spilled blood and guts, and that many times that number of hearts were broken in the chests of parents, siblings, companions and friends across half a continent. How outlandish is it that shot at, bayoneted or blown into pieces, France died tens of thousands of times that week but the story is told that France was *saved*? *La Délivrance* of whom from what?

We can leave that problem for now because none of these peoples look ready to resolve it, and wonder instead about what it has to do with a naked lady with a sword. Monsieur Guillaume built this sculpture after the battle and in 1920 it won a big award at an eminent art exhibition, the Paris Salon, but the connection between what it represents and how it does the representing is puzzling. There is no obvious record of anyone resembling this figure fighting at the Marne; these were all gendered countries that filled their armies with vulnerable young men, and even if a woman did participate, it is unlikely she would do so with one melee weapon in what was predominantly ranged combat with guns, let alone with all her other equipment slots empty, so to speak. Or are we missing a more metaphorical point? But then, metaphorical of what? Of the 'freedom' they believe they had defended? Certainly not either of the freedoms she is expressing: to carry a bladed weapon, and to take off your clothes in a public place – the latter of course policed more repressively against women in accordance with sexist notions that the female body is obscene. The latter might account for a string of

tittering nicknames the locals have given *La Déliverance* in lieu of her actual name, none of which are worthy of our consideration.

Some mysteries will have to remain mysteries. At least it is known how she came to be here. Poke around and you can find black-and-white footage of an ebullient former Prime Minister David Lloyd George in 1927, unveiling it with a speech to a throng of top hats and bonnets. She had been bought by Harold Harmondsworth, the first Viscount Rothermere, founder of – what else? – the *Daily Mail*, and he insisted it be placed on this prominent spot where he could see it whenever he drove past.

Hmm.

In the corner is an opening back into the Mutton Brook's leafy corridor, where we can shelter while the North Circular Road snarls off north. It is either that or leave this junction in an ambulance.

Here at least is a pocket of green apparently undefiled. Like Brent Park it is dense, diverse, and harbours healthy portions of dead wood upon which an impressive fungal presence peers at passers-by. One clutch resembles a set of scrunched-up pizzas, deep reddish-orange in the middle but white round the puffy edges, recalling the Tragedy of Hanwell Bridge.

Ahead we enter Northway Gardens, and now it is clear we have crossed an invisible threshold into a more genteel sphere of influence. This is a realm of neatly choreographed flower beds and well-surfaced tennis courts, while down the centre babbles the Mutton Brook, no longer a contaminated victim but a fresh, bright centrepiece upon which sag the weeping boughs of the salaried English's favourite willow trees. Where the North Circular's conquered stretches stagnated in desolation, here the terrain secretes an effusion of people, and lively ones: dog walkers, contented elderly folks, parents pushing babies around in strollers. POLLUTED WATER signs would be unthinkable. Money has been spent here. More than money, in fact. Ideas. Ideas of things more important than money.

What we see around us is the inheritance of a scheme to build a different kind of suburb: not a middle-class limbo, but an integrated community where people of all backgrounds could come to live and work amidst pleasant surroundings, and in so doing finally transcend the whole damn structure of the English class system. This is Hampstead Garden Suburb. The capitals matter. Not a suburb, but a *Garden Suburb*.

That might need a bit of qualifying. It does not at first glance look drastically different from some of the better-quality suburbs we have been suffered to trek through. The landscaping is less pompous than the showiest of, say, Richmond or Harrow, but still these scenes are as bourgeois as they come. We could interpret that as the failure of that project, or more cynically, as the class settlement it secretly stood for all along: a forklifting of the less well-off out of their cultures and identities, blending them against their will into middle-class affectation.

But no, let us not settle for that. Here we have a story too complicated for caricatures, and if we dig around in its gardens, we might unearth some treasures of value to the English as they struggle to make a land fit for people to live in.



By 1800, the population of England had rocketed to between seven and eight million. By 1900 even this had quadrupled to over thirty million. Cities went from housing a small proportion of these at the start of this period to the overwhelming majority by the end; urban London's figures blew up by a similar ratio from less than one million people to four and a half million. Each was a real human being, and in a period our path has presented as a story of energy, a story of political upheaval, and a story of technological change, the real story for most ordinary

people was an uprooting from a ruralised world that had sustained their ancestors for centuries but had now been Enclosed to smithereens, thrusting them bewildered, afraid, and in a good many cases already well-violated into a new-fangled hell of cacophonous crowds, infectious disease, and urban squalor on a scale never before seen on this Earth. These people *were* urbanisation: straggling to the cities out of hope or plain desperation, but in so many cases finding only a nightmare which offered no safety, no peace, no love, no stake, no future, and no escape. That was what *house* and *home* alike now meant for millions of English: a humanitarian catastrophe.

Most of those profiting off it couldn't have cared less. Some cared only in so far as they dreaded the prophecies of people like Marx and Engels that it would drive its victims, with nothing to lose, to violent revolution; the latter commentator was heavily influenced by his facefuls of that dystopia in industrial Manchester. Somewhere between exploiters and exploited emerged the urban middle class, not personally sat at the steering wheel of oppression but benefiting indirectly from the labour it ground out of bones through the systemic indifference of a new consumerism. That has persisted to become the dominant culture of today, but back then accounted for the main set of people who bolted from the inner-city infernos to settle the suburbs, a new zone designed so they could still dip their tongues into urban cream but not have to taste the blood in it, and thus could safely pretend their country was civilised.

But for some of them this was not good enough. These individuals decided a civilised country ought to do better than that. In the face of ideas, part inherited and part newly-fashioned, which held these hierarchies of privilege and poverty as based on inherent moral differences it was pointless to challenge, these contenders spoke of their nation's responsibility for the class injustice and called for reforms: reforms to labour conditions, reforms to voting rights, reforms to the workhouses or the penal system, and quite often, reforms to housing. All else, after all – food, sanitation, literacy, moral and spiritual health – was refracted through the physical space in which a person lived or their lack of one, and all else were necessary considerations in making it liveable.

Some of these reformers targeted specific issues like construction regulations or drainage systems, but a small handful dreamed to a higher vision. The typical social seer of this type was a rich industrialist among that small but significant minority who cared about their workers, or at least realised that cramming human beings into dystopian slums was morally bankrupt both in the characters who did

the cramming, and in the workers that such environments could be expected to produce. So instead they conjured plans for model settlements, where decent housing served as a fulcrum supported by all the necessary facilities – schools, churches, libraries, gymnasiums and so forth – for workers to lead healthier, happier and more fulfilling lives: breathing clean air, growing vegetables in their gardens, experimenting in art and music, debating religion and politics with their neighbours, and of course, performing better work in the factories as a result.

These imaginers came up against the usual naysayers lampooning their ideas as idealistic fantasies, so they went ahead and built them anyway. One by one, the jagged hills of British industrial history lit up with beacons which refused to pay lip service to the reign of the Dark Satanic Mills: Robert Owen's New Lanark for cotton millers in Scotland; Titus Salt's Saltaire, also for textile people, in Yorkshire; William Lever's Port Sunlight for soap manufacturers near Liverpool; and another pair known by most English today for their sweets and chocolates but titanic figures in the country's philanthropic record too, George Cadbury's Bournville in Birmingham and Joseph Rowntree's New Earswick north of York. Some English might remember the outcry in 2010 when Cadbury sold out to the U.S. food conglomerate Kraft; the pain this generated was so acute because it went beyond the usual fare of factories closed and staff laid off, to a sense that a deeper, more fundamentally humane ethos rooted in this tradition had been betrayed to the jackals of American-style fuck-you capitalism.

Model-city projects like these varied in both their integrity of motives and their outcomes. A fair assessment is hard to arrive at because the contradictions between the values of oppressor and oppressed challenge anyone to believe that a person can stand with a foot on each side, to be both capitalist and socialist simultaneously, without losing their balance. What they did do however was feed their ideals into the next grand scheme: the Garden Cities of Ebenezer Howard.

Stick Howard's name into Google Images and you are treated to a wall of beautiful and eccentric diagrams overflowing with lines, concentric circles, perfectly-calibrated connections and calligraphy, like some table-top role-playing game which grew too complicated and gobbled up all its players. And yet through their baffling esotericism you can grasp a simplicity in his underlying vision for the Garden Cities, whose point was to offer an alternative model of life, and of development, to the urban-industrial nightmares in which the English had got themselves trapped. Garden Cities were planned from the outset to combine the opportunities and connections of the urban world with the fresh air and

rolling slopes of the countryside, fused together into a self-supporting community in which every citizen held a common share, every revenue was invested back in, and class boundaries blurred as people from all sections of society came to share their lives side by side.

Howard would put his plans into practice in the Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City projects in the early twentieth century, and it is to this conceptual family that our Hampstead Garden Suburb belongs. But the brain behind this one belonged to a different character who went by the name of Henrietta Octavia Weston Barnett. She, too, was a reformer and visionary who looked aghast upon what the English had done to their homes, and at the kinds of characters those dreadful homes created. And she really did *look*, choosing to plunge for twenty years into some of the ghastliest horrors of industrialised London and live right there among its most forsaken victims. She decided it did not have to be like that; was convinced there had to be a better way. If corrupted homes corrupted their dwellers, surely it followed that healthy homes had the power to soak that health into those who lived in them and so banish the evils of poverty and class conflict.

Hampstead was where she came to prove her point. Let us see what brought her to it and whether she managed to do so.

We are back in 1851. Queen Victoria of the Hanover Dynasty sits on a throne rising upon the steam of the industrial revolution. Rails and bridges, farm and factory machines, colonial soldiers and administrators spin together like a social centrifuge, stretching out the distance in power between those who own the land and machines and those the land and machines hold in poverty. The latter break their bodies to operate this magical technology, while the former seize the benefits for themselves and make creative use of them to further cement and perform their class power.

Take for example an industrialist who might have been any other: Alexander William Rowland of the Macassar Oil company. Makassar is today the largest city on Sulawesi, an island of Indonesia, where Mr. Rowland's family discovered that perfume from the flower of the ylang-ylang tree was good for doing up the hair and faces of middle-class men to make them look like they had money, power and status in the fashion of the day. A look at the takings of the modern cosmetics industry tells you all you need to know about the fodder such anxieties offer

market forces, and by Alexander's generation his family – instead of the Makassar people – had pumped that oil into a fortune.

On the first day of May 1851, the Great Exhibition opened at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. Three days later, Rowland's wife, the German-born Henrietta Monica Margareta Ditges, gave birth to a daughter. She was their eighth child: tiny, fragile, her grip on the edges of life not helped by the rowdiness of the other seven, nor by the death of her mother a few days later. Deaths in childbirth happened a lot those days irrespective of class, not because it was always like that but because England's rising male-dominated medical establishment held anything to do with women in contempt, for example midwives and basic neonatal hygiene.

This was a monied family, so they could afford to send the baby, named Henrietta like her mother, out of range of sibling torment to a comfortable second home in Lewisham. Together with her severely brain-damaged sister Fanny she was brought up there by a sensible and compassionate nurse, Mary Moore, whose love would mean a great deal to her for the rest of her life. We crossed the modern Borough of Lewisham near the beginning of this journey, but in those days it was a relic of agrarian Kent which rich Londoners had decided they liked, and so it became fashionable and prestigious for them to sweep upon it, kick out local farmers, and build mansions like the Rowlands' with gardens, fountains, peacocks, and full complements of live-in staff.

There the young Henrietta, or Yetta to her friends, grew into a headstrong and mischievous girl. She got on well with adults like Moore and her affable father but also proved adroit at manipulating them. It seems to have been a happy time of childhood adventures and home education by governesses, which was not unusual this high up the English pecking order. More unusual was for girls to receive this education, rather than being taught to throttle their own intelligence, service a husband and spend their lives in his shadow; indeed this was the period that English prejudices against women as physically and mentally inferior to men were concretised by the same pseudo-scientific arrogance that invented race and drove it to genocidal consequences. But the stigma against girls' education was ridiculous enough that aside from getting critically tackled by weighty contemporaries like Charlotte Brontë, it gave way to plenty of exceptions like Henrietta Rowland if they had the means to procure it. And this girl was curious, an asker of questions, a painful thing to be in a climate dominated by authoritarians who trembled with rage at the faintest hint of a question mark on

the lips of a child, but this, too, she questioned till she saw through to the adults' own immaturity and cluelessness.

From her books and training she built for herself a robust philosophical bedrock. Languages gave her more frustration, as her French textbook discovered when it landed on the fire ('why should everybody not talk alike, and then I need not learn French?' she reasoned). Meanwhile she drew from her art-loving father an intense interest in colour, light and texture, especially as marvelled at in sunsets. From her botanist grandfather she learned how to grow flowers and fruits and vegetables, picking up a fateful appreciation for the lifegiving power of gardening.

In winter she and her family escaped to yet another house they owned in the coastal resort of Brighton. When she wasn't immunising herself to fear by pacing upon the shoreline in defiance of the rumbling waves, she had the chance to gaze across the South Downs and deepen her sense of the dance between light and landscape. A contrasting but no less potent impression was left by a visit to the Peak District in the English interior, where there are of course no peaks, but rather rough crags and moorlands with an abundance of flowers, woods and sunsets for the young Henrietta to chew on. And hers was not the oohing and aahing of the tourist, but passion of a more cerebral character: she memorised flower types, observed seed formations, and took detailed notes in her diary.

Not going to school meant she was spared the axis of abusive, disciplinarian teachers, bullying student hierarchies, and the terror-strewn conformist culture those entailed, even and especially, as we tasted in Harrow, where the cream of the schoolkid elite came at its highest concentrations. There was no such environment to break her intellectual stomach, nor were there employers to gripe that things like sunsets and gardening were not economically useful. Henrietta Rowland would decide for herself what was useful. Sunsets and gardens? Extremely so. These would *matter*.

Her upbringing was sheltered, comfortable, privileged. She knew it. She didn't like it. In her early teens she already sensed that not everyone got to have it that way, whether in her encounters with the street children of the Brighton poor (not a thing they associate with Brighton today, but its reputation back then was seedier) or the suffering of her brain-damaged sister Fanny. Perhaps she wanted to break out of her artificial high-bourgeois bubble-world. Perhaps she simply wished to grasp the reins of her own destiny. Either way, at sixteen, she prevailed on her elders to get her into a boarding school in Dover.

Dover was not Brighton. The gateway to Britain and hub of all the not-so-clean activities you expect of professionals of the sea, the town had received its own industrial upgrade with the coming of the railways and the rise of the imperial merchant and military machines. That meant it came with not merely a handful of seamy elements but a cutting-edge underworld of brawling, drinking, thieving, smuggling and sexually violent impoverishment, and one with naval characteristics at that.

Henrietta Rowland chose for her school the establishment of the charismatic sisters Carrie and Margaret Haddon, two living refutations of the myth that weakness and deference in women was some spirit of the time rather than a cultural mistake in want of contrition. The Haddons had opened the school and orphanage in Dover to do something for its abandoned children, teaching them to think confidently for themselves and take issue with injustice rather than submit to social propriety. Carrie in particular became an object of nigh-spiritual admiration for the young Henrietta, whose own awareness of class disparities and concern for social justice began to crystallise amidst the Dover orphanage's street children. She learned to respect them as complex people in their own right, not a monotonous class blob. She was impressed by their vigour and wilfulness, their vibrant language, their resourceful thought processes, and their rowdy dignity notwithstanding the squalor in which they lived. Like the Non-Aligned Movement in the Cold War, they had their own identities and destinies to assert, rather than a compliance to slot into the narratives imposed by dominant forces. Henrietta was class-privileged and well she knew it in Dover, but perhaps that far, she and they had something in common.

But then, just as she was about to turn eighteen, her father died. Primed to bursting by the Haddon sisters with all that pent-up energy to save the world, Henrietta found herself stuck back in London with no way to release it. Stranded in a new house in the struggling Bayswater district, where because of Victorian mourning norms every window and person was draped in suffocating black sheets,* Henrietta Rowland's social conscience now rounded on these melodramatic performances into which the upper classes poured such energy, time and resources as a way of signalling their luxuries thereof (never mind her share of her late father's inheritance, amassed by the business of literally oiling

* The paragon of this standard was Queen Victoria herself, who after her Prince Albert died in 1861, lurched into a shadowland of bottomless grief and seclusion from which, for a good ten years, it was feared she might never emerge.

those rituals, though we can hardly blame her for that). She needed an outlet, and fast. She would find it in the Charity Organisation Society (COS) of Octavia Hill: a sister's companion's acquaintance, founder of the National Trust, and one of the most eminent social reformers of the age.

Here was Henrietta's chance to put her convictions into action. The COS operated out of the Marylebone district and, as suggested by its intimidating full name, the *Society for Organising Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendacity*, was not about simply giving money to poor people. It was imbued with the Victorians' infamous moral judgementalism and distinguished between *deserving* poor, who would use the benefits to lift themselves into respectable work, and the *undeserving* who it was believed would only squander them on mind-altering substances. Seen through the lens of England's present-day prejudices against poor people there are alarming echoes of cruelty in this attitude, for which it was as condemned by others in the charity sector then in similar terms as now. On the other hand, the COS did seem at least to offer an attempt to look beneath the surface of poverty. At the core of its values, misguided or not, stood the honest belief that poverty was not an inevitable reality but a problem *created by* and thus *fixable by* society through effective systems. These were valuable upgrades for the emergent Henrietta Rowland social justice machine.

And so her ambitions took up the troublesome trappings of philanthropy. In its modern incarnations like the Gateses and Geldofs such people are contentious, derided from the one side by market fundamentalists who do not believe in altruism or consider it a character flaw, and from the other by more substantial criticisms that its practitioners are insincere, paternalistic, arrogant in their ignorance, more concerned with abating their own guilty consciences than the suffering of the oppressed, or with harmonising and fixing in place oppressive hierarchies rather than reforming them, and at any rate too removed from the downtrodden to ever seriously understand their lives and problems. In industrial England's spark-spitting crucible of privilege and poverty this terrain was all the more treacherous, which means we must tread carefully as we track Henrietta Rowland's footprints across it. Our concern here is not to chart a singular truth between her supporters and detractors, but rather to taste the potentials and the pitfalls of her approach, and gaze in its reflections of the English, their homes, and the ways her reaction to these informed her ultimate project.

Delving into the Marylebone slums where she observed and reported for the COS, she found much to dismay her in the everyday fabric of lumpenproletarian

penury: pawnshops, body lice, oozing foodstuffs, filthy shacks and rags hanging off stricken bodies. Swift to absorb the COS's values, she was prone to miss that working-class diets and hygiene might be consequences more than causes, or even adaptation strategies that came from the very tenacity she had respected in the orphans of Dover. But as time went on those classist dogmas nagged at her conscience and she quarrelled with Octavia Hill, whom she held in high regard but did not lack the backbone to critique when their values were at odds. Meanwhile she grew frustrated with male friends and colleagues making romantic advances on her ('Bother the men, why can't they let me do my work?'). She was not indifferent to affection, but was wary of the prevailing culture by which her society's relationship frameworks abused it to reduce women to appendages of their husbands. Henrietta Rowland had no interest in letting flirtations, let alone the shackles of marriage, dilute her passion to improve society.

That was why one young man was a particular pain. Samuel Barnett was a churchman and Oxford graduate, and like Henrietta nurtured his own sense of wrath at social injustice and at the greedy and profligate villains who created it, observed in his case on a trip through the ruins of the American Civil War and sharpened by traumatic abuse at school. He and Henrietta first met at Octavia Hill's birthday party in 1870. She disliked his awkward mannerisms, especially his 'nervous laugh', picked holes in his sermons, and wrote aghast in her diary about his baldness, beardedness and disastrous dress sense which made him look many more years her senior than his actual seven. A dauntless and self-determining woman she may have been, and one well-practiced at twirling men like her dad round her fingers, but Henrietta Rowland was still an essentialist: she seemed to believe that even if her society was rigid and mistaken in the separate forms it dictated for men and women, separate forms still existed, and that whatever form men were supposed to take, Samuel Barnett wasn't it. He returned these compliments by falling madly in love and springing on her that baffling thing that gendered societies reduce everything to in these situations, a marriage proposal. Surprised and rattled, Henrietta told him to give her six months to think while she wallowed in furious anxiety about what she wanted out of her life and whether this odd little man might derail it, distracting herself through injurious overwork. At her wits' end, she dropped everything and stormed out to wander through France and Germany, seeking space away to think things through.

France and Germany had just butchered each other again in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and Samuel, languishing in despondence, was further

discomfited by letters from Henrietta describing with frightful precision the atrocities she witnessed on its battlefields. Rather than panicking, she was moved and then infuriated at her inability to help the victims. Perhaps as she reflected on the French and the Germans and debated her musings with Samuel, they developed a relationship of intellectual exchange and closeness of purpose that brought her through his unkempt surface to discover something in his heart she could respect; or at least to convince herself that a partnership with a fellow like that could support, rather than wreck, her ambitions to reform society. She might also have factored in that England's misogynistic marriage laws had started to crumble under ridicule: the husband-and-wife team of liberal intellectuals John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor had just unleashed a crippling broadside in *The Subjection of Women* that filleted 'equal-but-different' essentialism as a façade for maintaining male power, arguing instead for marriage as a companionship of equality and mutual respect. Reforms the following year did away with laws that the English should feel bad for ever having had on their statute books, that made women and all their money and property the belongings of their husbands on marriage. Henrietta Reynolds was no-one's satellite but a woman on a mission, and it was on that mission's terms that she married Samuel Barnett in 1873 and, this being a gendered country, took his surname. In turn a job offer for Samuel from the Bishop of London brought her to where she needed to go next, a place the Bishop warned was the worst parish in his diocese: Whitechapel.

Whitechapel is in London's East End, past the Tower and the old eastern limit of the city proper. For most of its urban existence this area has held supreme repute as the ground zero of poverty, noise, waste, filth and criminality in the English capital in every racist, sexist, classist and drug-ridden flavour imaginable, a mix which reached its consummation in the Victorian period as its dark and bloodstained slums grew overcrowded with the industrial labouring class, the much-maligned Jewish and Irish immigrant workers among them. Naturally it has thus also served as a fervent hive of counter-culture, critical art, and political radicalism of which its portrayals by Dickens are only the most legendary.

When Henrietta Barnett descended on Whitechapel it housed over 6,000 people, mostly men, living in conditions as horrible as any society in the world has created outside wartime. This was absolute poverty, a piece of failed state piercing the heart of one of the wealthiest cities on Earth. The common language was violence, the currency was violence, and the way of life, for dwellers ground down by England's cannibalistic revolution till only the toughest marrows and fibres

remained, was violence, and so they owed society nothing and had deference for no-one. Faced with what they saw as the snobbish and sanctimonious high horses of philanthropic crusaders like Henrietta's COS, they made their feelings perfectly clear with missiles of stones and unprintable vituperations.

This was more than enough to terrify most people of her social stratum straight back out again. If being the target of violence didn't do it, the psychological strife of having it saturate your eyes, ears and tongue at every moment of the day and night did. Henrietta withstood it to stick around, because she had what they call plot armour. But not even her sojourn across the battlefields of the latest European mechanised carnage preserved her unsettlement at Whitechapel's culture of unadulterated cruelty, which she found at its most sadistic in those victims least able to defend themselves: the animals dragged through the streets to slaughter, jeered and whooped and stabbed at by hysterical crowds of children all the way. This too was England, and for all her disgust, for all that gulf between it and the England she came from, Henrietta fixed on what for her was the fundamental point: that this was *created*. Who you are, what you value, how you treat people – these could only be understood as a function of the physical conditions in which you were nurtured. Cruel and sadistic *homes* produce cruel and sadistic people. Change the homes, and you change the people.

So she gave it a go. She set up classes, libraries and concerts for the impoverished locals, while Samuel sought to attend to their spirits with his priestly sermons, with limited effect till Henrietta realised they were too full of difficult words for the audience at hand and took a ruthless editorial razor to them, after which his congregation grew. It was a massive struggle. She still adhered to the COS ideology of assistance with moral conditions attached, especially those that railed against working-class indolence, alcohol and suchlike, which as in Marylebone earned hatred and suspicion. On the other hand she made a conscious effort to immerse herself in Whitechapel life and entered people's homes to listen, the sheer audacity of it stunning the inhabitants and providing a key to their hearts, while her sharp appreciation for the spiritual, emotional and intellectual aspects of poverty – the need for loving and caring relationships and a sense of stake in the world, not just material resources – got her generating discussions with them over political events in newspaper articles, debates over sexual norms and suchlike, with the kind of rigour and informed critical exchange she had learned to value in Dover.

These, too, were more than theoretical. Henrietta was shocked more than anything by the kaleidoscope of sexual abuse that was a way of life for the rough and rambunctious girls of Whitechapel, who every day negotiated a world of rape, syphilis, sex work in exploitative brothels run by violent pimps and madams as often the only available means to make a living, and then as now, the stigma of moralising scorn by a middle-class society which labelled them as ‘prostitutes’ or ‘fallen women’ and preferred to blame and further punish them for their own struggles than to listen to or support them like human beings. It was no coincidence that this was where the following decade, England’s most notorious murderer, known only as ‘Jack the Ripper’ because they never found out who it was, carved out a rampage of murder and mutilation which was largely blamed on its victims, then turned by posterity into giggling tourist-bait rather than remembered as a monument to the horrors and failures of a gendered England. Henrietta responded by taking it upon herself to see if she couldn’t steer these girls to a better existence, such as by extricating them from Whitechapel to work in middle-class homes or campaigning to shut down the brothels.

These and her other endeavours in Whitechapel had mixed results. Well-intentioned plans often got wrecked on contact with the reefs of naïve assumptions or unexpected complications. But they did bring Henrietta Barnett into close relationships with those she was hoping to help, and such encounters gradually built a greater empathy with England’s abandoned underclass. With it came a more pragmatic grasp of the nuances of the poverty-environment relationship disdained by mainstream attitudes, by which she could learn from her mistakes and question her accumulated beliefs.

Her involvement in two major planks of reform was to leave lasting legacies, both for Whitechapel and for her. One was in housing, when the national outrage at the place as a hive of iniquity following the Ripper murders spurred an official drive of slum clearances that got bogged down in the quagmires where bureaucracy and real life smother each other, or otherwise, as so often happens, served as a magnet for grasping landlords and developers whose motives had nothing to do with providing liveable and affordable housing. Henrietta loathed villains like those so instead got involved in schemes to re-do Whitechapel with houses designed to different values: benevolent concern for the tenants who would live in them; inculcation of a sense of pride in and thus responsibility for their homes; a fostering of warm relationships between residents and rent collectors, many of the latter charismatic young women drawn from her own

philanthropic circles after a trademark practice of Octavia Hill; and significantly, insistence on the need for open gardens, parks and play areas.

The other plank was education reform, in which Henrietta joined a team of activists in doing a number on the ‘industrial schools’, essentially workhouses where unhinged authoritarians tortured homeless children to their deaths in fires, food poisoning and physical abuse. With echoes relevant to Grenfell Tower and similar very English scandals, corrupt officials and a complacent public blamed individual fall guys or freak accidents rather than admitting the system itself was rotten, and punished the whistleblowers for speaking out until Henrietta and her colleagues blew their racket wide open and forced reforms, sustaining vitriolic and highly personal attacks from displeased official trolls in the bargain. In wider education reforms her attunement to rural light and scenery informed her work as she promoted countryside holiday schemes for children, but most who remember her in East London will do so for her creation of Toynbee Hall: a centre for better-off university students to come and live side-by-side with the Whitechapel poor so each could learn from the other and together crack class barriers. Toynbee Hall sprouted a vast range of classes, clubs, debates, art and music events and support services; it would later nurture the ambitions of people like Attlee and Beveridge from the post-World War II welfare reform generation and still operates to this day.

All this was unfamiliar stuff for a community more used to being left to fester, and the schemes were more successful in some instances than others. All of it however sharpened Henrietta’s conception of what a *home* really meant for real and rounded human beings. It had to mean more than a building to live in or a piece of property to hold. That alone was ineffective, not least for struggling people whose problems, whatever the merits or faults of her analysis of them, were inseparable from their physical, cultural and intellectual environments. If *home* was not holistic it was meaningless. Home was about gender. Home was about class. Home was about brightness, clean air, space to move around, a sense of belonging. And in a gendered, classist England, not to mention an ever darker, filthier, cramped and alienating one, home was necessarily about political struggle.

After a decade of Whitechapel the struggle was tiring her. Exhausted and battling pneumonia, Henrietta and Samuel took her doctors’ advice and went for a long break in Egypt at just around the time a disgruntled Charles Gordon was heading

back the other way. Perhaps the pair hoped for a refreshing convalescence upon the Nile with pyramids and camels in the background. What they got instead was Herbert Spencer, an intellectual now associated with the notorious *survival of the fittest* phrase he came up with to describe Darwin's work on evolution, whose misapplications are the bread and butter of so many racist, sexist, classist and faith-of-the-market worldviews.

Spencer might or might not share responsibility for those theories' dire outcomes. What was more of consequence to the Barnetts was that he was a cantankerous and curmudgeonly pain in the arse who ranted constantly, with explicitly racist overtones, about the Egyptians, their religion, their ancestors, their river, their food, their coffee, their sand in his shoes and in so doing utterly ruined their holiday. Henrietta for her part was profoundly moved by the history and culture of the Nile, got on well with the locals, and reflected on possibilities troublesome to raise today, let alone in imperial times – that rural Egyptians often seemed happier than the English and held values her own country could learn from, or that holidays should be about engaging with places and people and thereby improving and truly refreshing yourself, rather than faffing about in selfies and shallow indulgence. But when she looked upon Spencer, who was picking up just enough Arabic swear words to bellow at Egyptian children as he brandished his umbrella at them, she could only pity the 'lonely, unloved and unloving old man' that she saw. Perhaps he, too, deserved to have it questioned what environment had made him that way.

After Spencer got fed up and left, the pillars and pyramids of Egypt not only rejuvenated Henrietta but re-ignited her passion for art and her belief that it, too, was important for improving the lives of poor people. What started with exhibitions of artifacts she had picked up in Egypt – we should ask in what circumstances – would culminate in the opening of the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1891, whose immediate impression on the locals is not documented but like Toynbee Hall has stood the test of time. In the meantime Henrietta and Samuel got back to work on reforming the area, but this was a rougher decade than the last: Samuel's mother died, plunging him into deep depression, while Henrietta's high-intensity existence of unshakable confidence and multi-tentacled workaholic landed her in its own flip side of depression, exhaustion, and in 1889 her most destructive attack of pneumonia yet.

The solution was another voyage of recovery, this time all the way round the world: India, China, Japan, the United States and Canada. All these places made

deep impressions on Henrietta Barnett because her idea of recuperation was to hurtle nonstop between social engagements and work opportunities to learn as much as possible, attempting to reconcile received colonial arrogance with the realness and complexity of the cultures around her. There was much to get fed up about this time. The stench of cow dung and interminable heat in India got to her, and she had penetrative words for the submission expected of Indian Muslim or Japanese women, interspersed with epiphanies like this:

I have discovered the key to the Japanese character. Why they rise so early. Why they spend so much time in the city. Why they commit hara-kiri. All is because paper walls make a house so unendurable.

But Henrietta saved her harshest verdicts for the lawless and materialistic Americans: the ‘hideous towns’ and ‘wasteful farming’ of San Francisco, the ‘great greedy devil’ Seattle, the capitalist monster-corporations like the Pacific Railway, a New York which rushed everywhere for nothing, and there too, she reflected, it was the women who would determine whether the U.S.’s ‘great soul’ would deliver it or watch ‘its spiritual force be crushed by its physical wealth’. And yet, if humans bent their world in maddening directions, it was always the natural landscape that brought redemption in peace and beauty: the light of the sun over the Red Sea; the stars at night across her ship; the snow-capped peaks of Mount Fuji or the Rockies, the mighty California redwoods, the cascading grandeur of Niagra Falls.

But not the snakes. Oh no. Snakes were the one element of nature Henrietta Barnett preferred not to exist in her garden. Not even hypothetically.

After her latest round of globe-trotting a forty-year-old Henrietta Barnett landed back in Whitechapel. She was once more re-energised, but sensed that its reforms now bore their own inertia and that there was little more she or Samuel could do for them. Instead she would spend much of the 1890s in Bristol, where Samuel was offered the church post of canon, escaping the slums for a more relievedly bourgeois way of life amidst the forests and riverbanks of the Avon. She remained active in social reform networks and projects, campaigned with vehemence to protect the Clifton gorge from voracious quarry-diggers, and meanwhile devoted great energy to caring for an orphaned little girl of Toynbee parents, Dorothy Noel Woods, whose death to diphtheria in 1901, aged seventeen, after years of devotion

and confidence in her potential, did Henrietta physical and psychological devastation. She sank into her worst despondence yet, to which her answer as usual was to bury herself in her work, and it was just as well that it now took shape around an endeavour compelling enough to meet her in those depths. It was a project which aligned her reformist values and experiences of the slums with just the right personal circumstances to blend them into her boldest ambition so far.

Back in the 1880s Henrietta had acquired a cottage on Hampstead Heath, which she used both for weekend breathers and as a place to bring the raucous Whitechapel girls for a no doubt mystifying experience of the bourgeois world. So when on another voyage, to Russia this time, they bumped into the American financier Charles Tyson Yerkes, and he put it to their attention that he and London Underground intended to extend the Northern Line up to Hampstead, Henrietta was mortified by visions of Whitechapel-esque rows of ugly houses crawling up the slopes to overwhelm the sylvan tranquillity of this then largely rural corner of Middlesex, not incidentally destroying the view from her retreat. Her response was to create a Heath Extension Council which, thousands of letters and several rounds of representations later, secured the funds to buy up land to extend Hampstead Heath, then gave it over to the London County Council to preserve it open, public and green for posterity.

Was she joining a worthy tradition, still alive today, of activists buying up land to stop its ruin by evil developers? Or was this shameless NIMBYism, as the English call it – ‘not in my back yard’ – in her role of a rich and entitled landowner obstructing a public interest project because she no longer wished to see poor people outside her windows? Either way, it was in the laborious tedium of this fundraising that more ambitious strands began to weave together in Henrietta’s psychic geography, transformed over and over as it was by opposite and alternating winds, as the fresh breeze of the countryside and the blood-and-fluids stench of industrial poverty replaced each other in a tiresome contest of rage and relief. The way she saw it, divisions of class were in the first instance divisions of place, of environment, of *home*: the cleaner, fresher, healthier heights for the privileged, and the crowded, filthy, disease-ridden pits for the exploited masses. Class divisions shaped the environment you lived in. The environment you lived in shaped you, and therefore reproduced class divisions. Not only that, they all but guaranteed those classes’ violent struggle, as their bastions like Whitechapel on one side and Mayfair or Chelsea on the other became class fortresses, territories with different colours on maps, warring states-within-a-state. If that

geographical barrier could be broken down, might the social barrier not then follow? If people of different classes could live in the same communities, where they dwelt in the same types of houses, walked their dogs down the same roads and parks, shopped from the same stores, and expressed their creativity in the same art studios and concert halls, what, then, would be left to separate them?

At some point, this warpath of reflections must have crossed another stream of thought: those model village projects of people like Cadbury, Rowntree, Lever and Titus Salt, and most of all Ebenezer Howard, who had just published his groundbreaking work called *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*. Something clicked. This place, Hampstead, was already in tension at the fault line between urban and rural worlds. Was it not the perfect place to implement Howard's vision of a settlement designed to harmonise the best of both, and provide a haven from the corruptions of either, for everyone, within easy access of London, in a Garden City of Henrietta's own?

The obvious analogy is with Andrew Ryan of *Bioshock*, who found it not impossible to build his city at the bottom of the sea because it was impossible to build it anywhere else. Likewise Henrietta Barnett might as well have announced she was building it on the Moon for the downpour of condemnation and mockery it now brought upon her. The predictable round of sneering officials and scathing journalists she could deal with. Heavier on her heart was the scepticism of her own Samuel, who aside from wanting nothing to do with so quixotic a scheme, knew well Henrietta's private battles with illness and depression and the impact thereon of the unstoppable force of her will, and feared that Hampstead Garden Suburb would be one quest too far for her. Of course, she went ahead anyway.

The land for the Hampstead Heath Extension had been held by Eton College, so the first order of business was to prise its claws off the rest of their 250 or so acres so she could put her suburb on it. The notoriety of Eton's complexion might be fresh in your memory from a recent hill, and as a negotiating partner it showed when their representative, a Mr. Sanday, responded politely and with regret: 'well, Mrs. Barnett, I know you, and I believe in you, but you are only a woman, and I doubt if the Eton College Trustees would grant the option of so large and valuable an estate to a woman'.

It is anyone's guess where the English, or other societies that have made similar mistakes, obtained their delusions about women, but if the theory in Sanday's words was nonsense, it was also in practice the wrong thing to say to Henrietta Barnett, who seized upon his absent-minded aside that it might be okay 'if you got

a few men behind you’. She therefore went out and gathered up exactly that: specifically, the Bishop of London, the leader of the House of Lords, the future Governor-General of Canada, two lawyers, two churchmen, and having lassoed together this ‘veritable showman’s happy family’ as she called it she dumped them upon the carpet in front of the flabbergasted trustees. Nor had she rounded up these particular socio-political gorillas just for show – they were all extremely busy people, which meant that once they lent her their names to hit obstacles with they would be too preoccupied to interfere with her actual work. The Eton misogynists relented. Thanks to them, Henrietta ‘Only a Woman’ Barnett was now a leader of men. And she hadn’t even started.

To actually get started she grabbed hold of another one: the architect Raymond Unwin of Yorkshire. Unwin was a socialist and avid town planner who was already engaged in assembling Ebenezer Howard’s first Garden City at Letchworth, but unlike the terrifying geometric complexity of Howard’s schemes he found his inspiration in what he saw as the honest organic simplicity of England’s traditional villages. This was the partnership that would make Henrietta’s dreams a reality. He would draw up the blueprints. She would scrawl upon them and chop up the bits she didn’t like until they looked exactly as she wanted: ‘this is the highest place and here we will have the houses for worship and for learning’, and other instructions in that vein. In due course the crew was joined by another figure, Edwin Lutyens, a mammoth of English architecture best known for going on to design the huge edifices of imperial New Delhi. The suburb’s design took shape. Henrietta rampaged around giving speeches and lectures and haranguing the ears off everyone she could catch to raise awareness, funds and support. Her ‘happy family’ evolved into the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust Company and completed the purchase of the land. At last, on a windy late spring morning in May 1907, as she approached her fifty-sixth birthday, she assembled a crowd in ceremonious fashion – there were marquees and a maypole and everything – and symbolically dug her spade into the soil on the site where in due course, Nos. 140 and 142 Hampstead Way, the first plot of her model suburb, would rise. While the detractors and naysayers had dogged her efforts all the way and would continue to do so, on this day there was only praise and awe, and none more heartfelt than the informed amazement of her beloved companion Samuel. It had begun.

So what kind of place did Comrade Barnett intend her Garden Suburb to be? In her outline for the magazine *Contemporary Review* in 1905, Henrietta offered a flavour:

- 'that the part should not spoil the whole, nor the individual rights be allowed to work communal or individual wrongs - hence, that houses should not spoil each other's outlook;
- 'that the estate be planned not piecemeal, but as a whole;
- 'that houses should not be in uniform lines, nor close relationship, nor built regardless of each other, nor without consideration for picturesque appearance;
- 'that each house be surrounded by its own garden; and that there be agencies for fostering interest in gardens and allotments and for the co-operative lending of tools;
- 'that every road be planted with trees and be not more than 40" wide;
- 'that the noise of the children be locally limited;
- 'that there be all the advantages of a community - houses of prayer, a library, schools, a lecture hall, club houses, shops, baths, washhouses, bakehouses, refreshment rooms, arbours, co-operative stores, playgrounds for smaller children and resting places for the aged who cannot walk far.'

An integrated community. Accessibility. Gardening. Good views. Gardening. Beauty and elegance in houses and infrastructure. Gardening. Trees. Gardening. To these priorities we might add something she asserted throughout the design process: the mixing of residents of all backgrounds, abilities, means and walks of life, including provision for people marginalised by mainstream society such as single women, elderly people, orphans, or people with physical or mental impairments, all demographics which still experience discrimination in England today. Her emphasis on trees, woods, natural views and of course gardens cannot be exaggerated and at times escaped into romantic daydreams erupting with flowers, orchards and creeping vines, if the exasperation of co-conspirators like Unwin and Lutyens is anything to go by. But in sum it appears a huge volume of thought and rationalisation went into her design, much of which can be traced through to Henrietta's own lifelong influences: her passion for light, colour and contours, picked up from her dad as a girl and charged with every spectacular piece of scenery she had witnessed since; her long years in both the countryside mansions of the social elite and the impoverished slums of the East End; the

horrendous child abuse she had fulminated against in the industrial schools; the fenceless, hedge-less gardens of the suburbs she had seen in the U.S., which to her mind symbolised and fostered trust and a shared community spirit; her faith in education as a lifelong process; and above all, her ardent belief in the enriching and redemptive power of the garden, where just as diverse plants thrived when grown together in good light and soil, so too, she supposed, should humans from different social groups. In short, Hampstead Garden Suburb was to be an antithesis to not only the likes of Whitechapel but also the sprawling, unkempt suburbs to where the new middle classes were fleeing the blighted city. It was to offer an alternative concept of *home*.

And it was in a hurry to get there. Hundreds of houses sprang up in the following years, and by the end of the decade visiting dignitaries were already swooning over the idealistic paradise that ‘Only a Woman’ earnestly looked to be on the verge of pulling off. Behind the scenes it was a constant battle as Henrietta, a single-minded steamroller who relented on nothing, rowed with planning applicants, trustees, construction workers, her team of architects, and even the incoming residents to keep her settlement developing in a shape fit for its purpose.

Once the first houses were up and their residents in, Henrietta pressed on with their cultural engineering into her image of a classless, civically engaged and enlightened community. The path to salvation ran through the garden. Where Marx’s route to a classless world would soon be painted blood-red by the Russian revolutionaries, Henrietta Barnett’s was to flourish in the thousands of colours of petals and produce which the masses could raise from the earth, for this was not a Suburb but a *Garden* Suburb. Everyone was to be a gardener, cultivating deliverance from the corruption of iron and steam through the flowers, fruits and vegetables they would enter into the flower shows and garden contests set up to convert the lot of them to this new religion of the bourgeois-of-the-soil, complete with tool handouts for those who could not afford them. When they were not enriching themselves in fertiliser, they would do so in the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute, which with Henrietta as its President, you bet a hands-on one, offered instruction in topics from home upkeep to arts, humanities and languages. There were tea rooms in the Suburb – of course there were – but no alcohol, although pubs were in easy walking distance across the perimeter for anybody desperate enough. Then after a hard day’s work either at the Institute or at knee depth in their flower beds, residents – in particular those from working-class backgrounds – would not relapse to interminable ‘sex-romping’ as the founder

called it but work off the rest of their energy in the Suburb Club House, with facilities for every sport Comrade Barnett could think of. Except football – a game the alleys of Whitechapel had convinced her was tantamount to armed warfare.

The problem with such detailed plans is that they rarely survive contact with the people in them, who have this infuriating tendency to have wills of their own. These shaped the Suburb in ways not so convenient to Henrietta Barnett's, especially when her initiatives did not transpire as intended. The gardeners' vegetables could turn out mushy, their flower contests vicious, their peacocks shrill. Interest in the education programmes was often lacklustre. Houses were energy-inefficient and difficult to clean, and their rents and utilities were still expensive for residents on lower incomes, even after Barnett quarrelled with Unwin about scaling down his architectural ambitions to keep the properties affordable. Work opportunities inside the Suburb were also limited. All this meant that incoming residents tended to be lower-middle class aspirants rather than working types from the crumpled heap at the bottom of the English social cliff. These were resourceful people with an established sense of identity and accumulated skill and pride at navigating their journeys in life, who wanted less to be pedagogically coaxed to fit the founder's version of their new home and more to have their own say. Frustration or indifference bubbled into resistance, even resentment, as Henrietta's fellows on the Trust grew alienated by her decisions and residents complained that her dream of an integrated, self-determining community was getting jeopardised by her own autocratic direction of it.

All this however belies the real accomplishments of Hampstead Garden Suburb. It was, on the whole, a safe and welcoming place to live. It did offer a distinct approach to home and community which attracted significant numbers of people to come and give it a go. It *existed*. In its English dream-crushing context, that alone had enormous meaning. And by 1918, barely ten years after she had dug its first sod of soil, Henrietta Barnett felt sufficiently confident to declare that Hampstead Garden Suburb had 'led the way in showing how thousands of people of all classes of society, of all sorts of opinions, of all standards of income, can live in helpful neighbourliness...and by their care for literature, art, music, history or nature obliterate class barriers'.

Obliterate class barriers. Can you imagine a more forbidding challenge in a country like England?

There is a strand of thought that would claim this made Henrietta Barnett quintessentially English. The route she charted to the defeat of class exploitation was after all very different from that suggested by Marx, which at just that moment was getting transmuted by Lenin into its memorably bloody political fate. To Marx, famously, industrial England was a far likelier prospect for impending revolution than stagnant agrarian Russia. But the English like to think they escaped that fate because they are a non-violent culture – just ignore the bombers over your shoulder lifting off from Hendon – who found imaginative ways to alleviate the worst sufferings of their working class through exercises like this. All the better if they can be framed in terms of the benevolence and compassion of their enlightened rulers, who provided shelter and nourishment to the grasping masses, uplifted them into shared hard-working bourgeois civilisation, and thus, through the smiles and sunbeams of their benevolent rule, convinced them that revolution is unnecessary.

That is the fiction. What happened at Grenfell Tower is the fact.

The English socio-economic caste system would not be dismantled so easily – not by this self-praising narrative of the privileged, nor even by the creative drive that sought to mix the classes away in cauldrons of community like Hampstead Garden Suburb. The Suburb would endure, but rather than make the classless dream come true, it would buckle and settle back into very the class realities it was meant to transcend.

A series of setbacks made sure of it. The first was World War I, which ripped through the Suburb's idealism like it did that of so many others. It suffered the same gendered pattern we have seen elsewhere: its men went off to die in battle, its women to fill the production lines of the weapons factories. Most were young; many would not return. The Club House, the community's sporting nexus, became an impromptu hospital for wailing and dismembered casualties ferried back from Europe. The homes of families who had arrived in hope and optimism became the shipwrecks of orphans and widows, stranded in pennilessness and despair. Refugees from occupied Belgium percolated into the Suburb; as we see nowadays, English attitudes to refugees are regularly unimpressive, and here, too, insults and stones were flung. Even the eternal sunshine of Henrietta Barnett's garden kingdom could not stand up to the darkness of industrial war, in which all high-minded dreams were done to mincemeat.

The end of the war was no relief. Inflation and the dry-up of capital pushed up building costs, causing more ructions among the planners and architects about

how to sustain the Suburb's development. The answer those other than Henrietta increasingly arrived at was to build houses to sell outright, rather than to let at affordable prices, and the casualties would be all those low-income people priced out along with the social, environmental and aesthetic ethos that went with them. At the war's end scarcely one tenth of residents were from the working class, and as the revolutionary spirit capitulated that portion would only dwindle. By the time construction was completed in the 1930s, the Suburb housed about 16,000 people. Almost all were like these middle-class folks we see around us here now.

Not that Henrietta Barnett lay down and watched it happen. But just as her battles with uncompliant residents and Trust members were at their fiercest, she was hit by a series of deaths of those most beloved to her. Her childhood nurse and lifelong friend Mary Moore passed away in 1907. She was shortly followed by Henrietta's jovial and mischievous brother-in-law Frank. Most devastating of all was the slow decline and departure of Samuel, who left this world in 1913, articulate, passionate, and exhortative against injustice to the last. These blows left Henrietta isolated and reeling, but this was not a woman who wore her vulnerability on her sleeve, so as usual her grief ran off into another relentless round of work which produced, among other things, her biography of Samuel, a bunch of memorials to him, and a girls' secondary school in her Suburb, the Henrietta Barnett School – which still runs, with strong repute.

But public consciousness recorded a more alarming change: in another tempting parallel with the Soviet project, in thematic rhythm if not in body count, the transition from Henrietta the class liberator to Henrietta the despot. Emerging from the war nearly in her seventies, in the period that followed she is depicted by residents and fellow Trust members as something between a benign dictator and an out-and-out Stalin of the gardens, burying anyone who got in her way in a storm of abrasive condemnations or even violent abuse. Never an enemy of change in itself, she criticised much in the changing world around her: the dull, ugly characterlessness of Addison's 'Homes Fit for Heroes' and the new high-rise apartments; the indifferent or all-trivialising parenting styles that seemed to be taking over; the cinema. Not only the emancipator's dream but her very personality was being brought down by the merciless gravitational pull of centuries of English authoritarian heritage, just as the Russians were by theirs.

Or was it?

It is too much for us, standing here now, to assess if these portrayals are fair. The image is a believable one: this resolute matriarch, now in residence right there

in her greatest accomplishment to lord over its affairs down to the tiniest detail, bulldozing her way down its streets in her chauffeured Rolls-Royce, scattering its terrified children lest they be flattened beneath its treads. On the other hand, it cannot be said that her criticisms of society were devoid of nuance or merit, least of all of a society which then in the midst of its convulsions over women's right to vote, harboured dogged ideas that drive, determination, assertiveness, impatience, learning, leadership and a will of one's own – or in two words, Henrietta Barnett – were not what women were supposed to be.

This English misogyny would harry her to the end when, utterly ineffective against her in life, it would crawl upon her corpse in death. In her funeral address, the Archbishop of Canterbury would have the gall to suggest that her ideas had only attained real power through the practical work of her husband, a characterisation of their partnership that neither would have tolerated. The English of a later age will well understand how character assassination and slanders of female deviance are standard tools by which gendered societies suppress such individuals; it is likely at least some of these characterisations would not have been flung at her had she happened to be a man.

In her final years Henrietta took her social commentary to public broadcasting, appearing in newspaper interviews and on BBC radio to offer more helpings of accumulated critical wisdom. She continued to domineer the governance of her Suburb and reduce her fellow Trust members to cowering jelly, but this was a high-energy lifestyle that had taken its toll on her physical and mental health in the past, and in the 1930s those arrears caught up with her. She withdrew into her own private world to finalise her affairs; there are touching stories of her cutting out pictures of kittens from calendars and Christmas cards in this period and writing reflections upon them, the sad ponderings of a venerable juggernaut whose wheels have grown too heavy to turn. In June 1936, they finally stopped. She was eighty-five.

And the Suburb? Well, as we see around us, it did not live up to its founder's intent to be a new concept of *home* to mix away the English class structure, let alone export this revolution across the country. More shocks and pressures were to follow, not least another world war, in which it was badly served by its closeness to Hendon Aerodrome and thus received its share of Nazi bombing; where the previous war had bloodied the Club House, this one flattened it. The Suburb survived, and rebuilt, only to suffer the exorbitant increase in house prices that has grown into a defining anguish of modern London. What remained of the low-

rent workers' cottages has since been sold off, leaving this another well-heeled bourgeois suburb, with a small s, in one of the outer capital's most prohibitively affluent neighbourhoods.

Some aspects of her vision can still be glimpsed. To look at it now, with its 5,000-odd properties and population of some 13,000, is to cognise a landscape laid out to be physically pleasant to live in, in the welcoming and refreshing sense rather than one that reeks with ostentatious cash, and we can hope it entertains a friendlier and more vibrant community spirit than is typical of a city where amicable local relationships are not what people come for. Some measure of the Suburb's uniqueness has been recognised with official protected status in the form of listed buildings or conservation areas, at least protecting its architectural idiosyncrasies and open spaces from wanton change. Hampstead Garden Suburb's original Trust is no more, but has survived a labyrinthine and at times precarious journey of corporate and financial rearrangements to emerge at the other end as a New Trust. To this day it asserts a mission to direct and regulate the development of the Suburb and preserve its essential character, but as to its effectiveness you would have to ask the residents. With a squint, if not for all the cars whose parking spaces have eaten away at its sacred vegetable patches, the Suburb today might not even look all that different from how it did at its best.

So much of this has been a story of mixed results, of contrasting accounts and lessons that differ according to the eye that extracts them. One thing is clear though. Whether you measure it in years or decades, Henrietta Barnett made her mark on the story of English housing. Hampstead Garden Suburb was a flawed but authentic work-in-progress – or at the very least, something *different*. Even if that something is effectively gone from the suburban consciousness of England today, it is the Suburb as a concept, more than a place, that now more than ever they would be foolish to overlook.

What, then, is its significance? What does the work of Henrietta Barnett tell us of the English today? What use could they yet make of it?

It is easy to take pot-shots at her idealism, or call her arrogant. Her approach had flaws and made mistakes as we all do. Gender essentialism, middle-class myopia and colonial elements are all things for which her mentality ought to be scrutinised against contrasts in her own day, not just in ours. But the question

remains: with her own experiences, her influences, her inheritance, what ought she to have done instead?

Historians have taken to her motives and actions with some hostility. To examine that commentary is to wonder whether it, too, to some degree expresses a classist England that disdains people who step out of line on the social hierarchy, let alone attempt to rearrange it. It is quite necessary to give Henrietta Barnett the same critical scrutiny as anyone else we have met on this trail. But what remains, after all that? Surely a human being, born into a social order she found objectionable, who instead of putting her head down, adapting to it, and shaming others for complaining – which many people on *all* levels of it do – said no, thought about how it worked, decided to have a real and meaningful go at changing it, and drove that decision through all the mountains of classist and sexist incredulity, ridicule and obstructionism her people could marshal in her way.

In that, she along with Unwin, Octavia Hill, and industrialists like Cadbury and Rowntree were all variations on a curious type of character which dominates these stories of industrial English social reform and are puzzlingly difficult to place. They rebelled against systems of class oppression but were simultaneously rooted in and enabled by them. Are they conservatives or reformers? Capitalists or socialists? Disturbed by the present, did their hearts belong in an idyllic past or a visionary future? In a rural world, or an urban one? Perhaps both and neither, and that in the end is the point: they objected to these rigid binaries whose effects on society were so alarming and blatantly inhumane, and believed it possible to blur their lines towards eventually transcending the lot.

Hampstead Garden Suburb, like much of their handiwork, did represent something different. To the extent its vision was based on the middle-class ways of the garden, the school and the tea room, it was conservative. As a mission to overcome the class structure, its existence as a creature of that classist world would restrain and ultimately undo it. But conversely there seems little cause to doubt the sincerity of Henrietta Barnett's challenge to the unjust society she was born into, nor the vehement, fearless originality of the way she went about it, and to that extent the Suburb really was revolutionary because England's privileged are not supposed to behave like that. They allow one another to wear the faces of compassion and altruism for those beneath them, and to mouth pretences that the struggling can lift themselves out of poverty by their own hard work – but the unwritten rule is that they, the rich, must as an in-group adhere to absolute certainty that those serfs are intrinsically and immutably beneath them. For them,

the worst crime possible is to make any suggestion that drivers of poverty lie in the structure of society. To actually do things to upset that structure, as Henrietta Barnet sought to, is to them treachery of unforgivable proportions.

Facing that down took courage. The same courage, against the same forces, will be needed to fix the English housing crisis today. Those forces are likely why creative gems like the Garden Suburb go unremarked in its present housing discourse, despite the treasure chests of experience they offer. What do we find if we dig around in Hampstead's? We find indomitable will; we find vision; investment; creativity; a consciousness of past examples and future possibilities; and above all, cooperation across the network of involved parties, operating to motives worthier and better-rounded than rentier profit. Where in English society today can they best find similar material to assemble into a true solution to their housing crisis, one strong enough to hammer through the greeds and dogmas that control the story to keep it that way? Are there places where new models of *home* for our time are under construction? As Henrietta's ghost might challenge them: if 'Only a Woman' could make a good innings of it, then why shouldn't they?



Let us take our leave of the Garden Suburb in Lyttleton Playing Fields, a grassy sports rectangle framed by the nests of trees, roofs and chimneys that are Henrietta Barnett's legacy. Seeing us off are their unmistakable beacons: the conical spire of St. Jude's Church, the pillared clock tower of the Institute Hall, and the attractively humble rotunda of the Free Church, where people from the quarrelling Christian sub-branches could worship together. Each deserves books in itself, but they give this place a distinct visual identity. That helps, too.

Comrade Barnett collected together a bunch of men for her project, and one of them, recall, was the Bishop of London. His office held an existing connection to this area. The east extent of the Garden Suburb mingles into the old Middlesex parish of Finchley, once a clearing full of finches according to its name. Perched on high ground and hosting the Great North Road, the Bishops of London – third in the Church of England hierarchy after the archbishops of Canterbury and York – dominated this area for centuries, and hereon their stamps on the land crop up like Digletts.

Beyond the synagogue in whose hedge for some reason sits a pink plushy bear with a heart-shaped nose, beyond the final photogenic scenes of period cottages, flowery hedges and soaring trees, the dream ends as we collide with East Finchley station on the Great North Road. This node on the Northern Line's eastern branch is another Super Mario red-brick polygon but is distinguished by the Art Deco figure of a stone archer in side profile, knelt upon a good vantage point on the station's roof as though he has just put an arrow through the driver of the latest train from London. In fact he was shaped by Eric Aumonier, a sculptor of Huguenot descent, and his appearance in 1940, after the station's rebuilding, can be interpreted to endless London Underground symbolic speculation. Is it a comment on the Northern Line's then-awesome range after its southern extension to Morden? Are the trains themselves the arrows?

But it is also an echo of a far older tradition in this area, for the archer's skill with a bow comes from nearly a thousand years of hunting in earlier incarnations. As we cross the Great North Road, we push into our final quarter of what is now London but in pre-suburban times led to some of the richest hunting grounds available to its civil and ecclesiastical overlords. Forests like Waltham, Hainault, Epping and Enfield control the region's history and endure in some cases in partial physical fact, in others in name and cultural memory. Here, too, was forest, once contiguous perhaps with the Forest of Middlesex, and the huntmasters here were nearly a millennium's worth of Bishops of London. A great slab of what used to be

Finchley Wood was the Bishop's exclusive hunting grounds, in prime position next to the Great North Road which itself is an old, old thing with no defined boundaries in time. For as long as people in this land – builders, traders, animal drovers, soldiers, tourists, protesters, refugees – travelled between here and the northern interior, this road has existed, changing shape to service the users of the day but fundamentally the same unifying route. In line with that pattern the present-day highway diverges nearby and charts a slightly different course. Where travellers originally would have hopped between towns and coaching inns for the safest and most nutritious journey possible, their descendants today are more concerned with bypassing settlements and navigating past these haphazard suburbs so as not to get stuck in traffic all day. Hence the A1, paved in the 1920s as the example all the other big roads would follow.

By then the dangers of this stretch of the old road must have been wiped from memory by the rise of the suburbs. Here in the wooded darkness you were clear of the Highgate coaching station; the 'high gate' was an old village on this high ground, probably quite proud of itself upon the tolls it charged travellers and mini-industries that grew up to support the Bishop's hunting estate. But you were not yet in sight of the next coaching point, upon the Barnet hill, and near this spot many valuable objects must have changed hands from travellers to bandits in disagreeable circumstances. Nowadays the bandits hand out mortgage loans and suck their victims dry through what was once resented as the crime of usury, but if you long to imagine a time they relied on more honest methods then Highgate preserves some surviving patches for your consideration. They are three separate woods, disjointed survivors of a greater whole, which we now cross in succession to begin a slow march back to the Thames.

First is the Cherry Tree Wood, the smallest at 5.3 hectares but home to pockets of woodland with a claim to prehistoric endurance. Mature oaks and hornbeams dominate the canopy here and have supplied the locals with fuel wood for centuries. They also kept pigs on these grounds, and grew hay which they fertilised with 'night soil', which sounds enchanting but was in fact human and horse shit carted up from London and kept in a house near here, hence the original name of 'Dirthouse Wood'. Here too is the source of the Mutton Brook, making these woods an origin of the power of our old friend the Brent. When the railways and suburbs ate their way in, they disrupted the Brook's flow and turned the area marshy, but enterprising locals took advantage of that to grow watercress for a new revenue stream. Further encroached, the wood was bought

off the church by the local authorities, protected, given its present name to sound more attractive, and opened to the public in 1914-5.

Beyond and up a hill, across a creepy overgrown gully which hides a disused railway line, towers the second and most imposing of these sylvan survivors, the 28-hectare Highgate Wood. In the realms of the market you know a place where money has been spent when you see one, and this is evidently a centrepiece for Highgate's committed prosperity. Right there at the gates is a temple-shaped black information board done up in the livery of the Corporation of London, offering a map, basic information, and a reminder of all the things you are not allowed to do on pain of a £200 fine. It speaks a great deal about the status of this wood that in the years when the more sensitive of powerful urban types were rallying to preserve what open land they could, this one drew the interest of the most esoteric and venal of the lot: the ancient body formed by the merchant guilds of the City of London to serve as their municipal authority, and which to this day protects that stronghold of financial predators from the commoners' silly notions of parliaments and democratic accountability. Quite what brought those cloth-wearing Mafiosi to acquire this particular wood and spend a dash of their ridiculous money to maintain it is worth inquiry, but there it is.

These are serious woods. The air is cool and the trees reach high, their canopy dense yet gentle enough to let in such splotches of light as bestow a sense of safety on child-centred family groups and dog walkers. An obelisk-shaped granite fountain appears in a clearing, 'the gift of a few friends' in 1888 it claims; it has a horse-level drinking trough and a smaller base-level dispenser for dogs, accompanied by a few lines from Coleridge bidding refreshment amidst the mellow gales and bees. Further on is a large and well-maintained open space for sports, complete with atmospheric café at its edge, though today this space resounds with the shrill cries of little children expressing legitimate grievances about their parents' generation and the joyful barks of dogs marauding upon other people's picnics, while couples in varying degrees of monogamy lurk in the shadows. But further commentary on Highgate Wood is quite superfluous, because they have also paid for an information cabin overflowing with displays and leaflets that tell you more than could ever dream of knowing about the wood's heritage: its gravels, sands and clays dug up to build everything from Neolithic flint tools to London Underground tunnels, hence its prior name of 'Gravel Pit Wood'; the Roman kilns and pottery concerns whose remnants have been excavated here; the coppicing and lumber harvesting that has gone on here for

centuries, some of its oaks having helped construct the English navy; and of course the tons of things the Corporation has done to happify its biodiverse population of trees, bushes, fungi, birds, foxes, moths, butterflies, bats and spiders. On the other hand, if you are interested in the disputes that inevitably cropped up when a bunch of medieval merchant heavies whose time machine broke down tried their hand at conservation work they did not understand, the information provided is not so helpful.

Across a road there descends the third and final wood. The Queen's Wood extends the oak and hornbeam sovereignty of its neighbours, but unlike the Corporation of London's Highgate exclave is run by the local authorities of the Borough of Haringey, into whose domain we henceforth trespass. Sheltered by Highgate Wood's flashier profile, Queen's Wood accordingly feels wilder, denser and closer to its ancestry, an atmosphere amplified by its bumpy waves of slopes. The Queen at issue is Victoria, after whom it was re-named from Churchyard Bottom Wood, reflecting its changing of hands from church to local government, in those days Middlesex's district of Hornsey. Nestled in its vegetation is Queen's Wood's own café, this one a community-run enterprise of magical reputation which purveys organic food grown in its own garden. Here too the stories are of coppicing, conservation and some loving attention to bats, while more of that crumpled-pizza fungus ambushes passers-by from the cover of rotting logs.

There is an irony in all this. Many English who think of their cities as *home* would probably count woods, parks and open spaces like these as part of that cherished imagery, and indeed they hold a decisive presence in those cities' international appeal. But dig around in these spaces' timelines and their stories are as much of the loss of home, and the desperate struggle to preserve something of it, as of the timeless value of fragments like these, rescued by vocal locals or powerful stakeholders as so many other such spaces fell to Enclosing landlords or suburbs sprawling out of control. Their destruction was not just a matter of feeling sad because of trees getting chopped down, but a destabilisation of the industries, traditions and ways of life those environments sustained, and whose local people were thus, by structural force, made *homeless*.

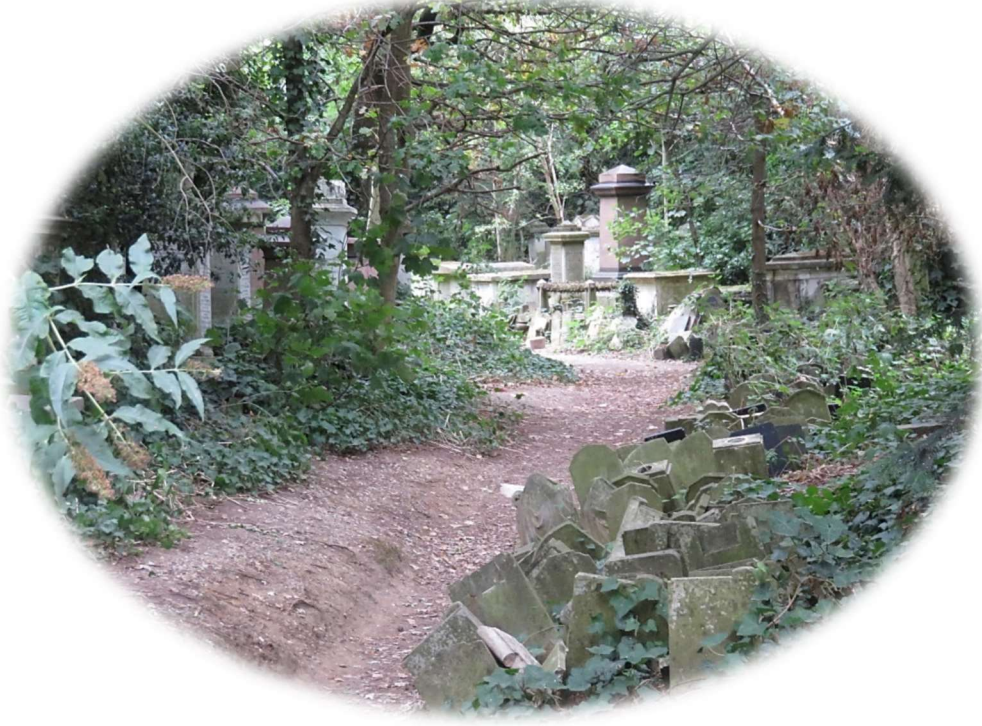
Ought today's homelessness-creation be read as an extension of the same pattern? Fundamentally, if that pattern is one of dislocation of vulnerable people by the powerful, especially when land and resources the former call *home* are coveted by the latter for profit, it is the same. By no coincidence this land they have come to called Haringey is one of the worst forced eviction hotspots in

England, and on the very first residential street out of Queen's Wood we find a car with a notice in angry red letters plastered to a window, warning its owner not to touch it because it has been seized by repossession officials due to overdue debts. Meanwhile the area's Labour Party council has managed to disgrace itself among its people over a controversial housing scheme, the Haringey Development Vehicle, that till it was dropped in the face of furious opposition looked set to overwhelm local communities, businesses and public facilities with an all-devouring public-private scheme cloaked in armours of bureaucracy and jargon with no suggestion of affordable social housing or transparent accountability structures.

From this car right here to Grenfell Tower, the English have managed to turn a house from a home to a tool of violence. But what, in that case, is *England*? What is a nation, and what worth its people's loyalty, if it cannot even be a *home* to them in the meaningful sense of a physical place to belong? If the home to them is a house, then the removal of their houses is more than an individual tragedy for those caught up in it – it threatens hollowness to their very existence as a nation. Remember those youths who went to fight at the Marne? They were not fighting for a free or democratic England, because it was neither, but still, so many of them went willingly. They decided England was worth dying for because for all its oppressions, for all its flaws, they still saw it as their *home*. If it cannot even be that, then what is left? Does England even exist?

They might find it sensible to attend to this one quickly. To do so they must redefine the values and visions that drive their housing efforts, for it is by forgetting these values matter that they have let their housing decisions slip to those who grasp from a pit of greed. Better alternatives exist, and perhaps people like Henrietta Barnett can help them find them.

12. Hearts



Consider, my friend, what were the passions made for? Not merely for the conscious pleasure of human nature, but to give it vigour and power for useful actions.

Nonconformist writer, poet and logician Isaac Watts
in *Discourses on the Love of God*, 1729

The English have feelings too.

It might seem strange to point that out. Emotion is a pillar of the human condition, and the English, last time we checked, continue their participation in the human race. If the rest of the world is passionate with rages, joys, and desires, why should they be any different?

The English make a significant cultural effort to downplay the importance and good name of human feelings. The *stiff upper lip* stereotype of the Englishman strolling serenely through corruptions and massacres, his eyebrow not betraying so much as a twitch of ruffled sentiment, is perhaps more believed by foreign

observers than by the English themselves. But its imaginative fibres have been underfoot all round this journey, from Rudyard Kipling's admonitions to tennis players to the bullying climates in English public schools, the latter fostered to harden their rich kids' hearts while they immerse in ancient Stoics who saw emotion as something that happened to lesser people than them. Upon such English traditions has now been layered the revolution of the market, which bluntly disdains subjective feelings, spiritual connections and mental health – hence why storytellers who insist on its success must rely on arbitrary numerical indicators that ignore the suffering it has caused to actual people.

It is of course a sham. The English are as emotional as any other people, and for better or for worse, it is the way they feel, sense and dream, as much as the way they reason or calculate, that has given rise to every story in their repertoire. Look at the rogues' gallery we have accumulated on this trip and consider how many of its outstanding characters were angry, fearful, or otherwise passionately driven people, if not plain nuts. Charles Gordon, Oliver Cromwell, Henrietta Barnett – these were people who *got angry*. Charles John Vaughan, the public school headmaster, evidently got, if not angry, then something else emotion-wise on which the less said the better. How many tennis players have walked stoic beneath Kipling's *If*- at Wimbledon only to be found, a few minutes later, smashing their racquets and screaming at umpires on international television? What love and what hate is required to explain the movements that levelled the dykes and fences, tore down the judicial killing ritual, rescued the canals, and raised the labouring classes into a real political force? The English's lips may be stiff but you can see their hearts through their mouths.

As feelings shape events, so do they shape physical landscapes. This becomes extra apparent as we descend through one of London's most complicated satellites. It began, so they imply, when some fellow called Haca settled an island, an *ēg*, in the marshy morass of the Lea river valley ahead, thus originating its present name: *Hackney*. Rivers, as we have well noted, are powerful, and this one would have exerted its influence over what was a largely agrarian corner of Middlesex till its proximity to the capital brought it drastic transformations in the industrial age.

Perched on the city's doorstep, Hackney was too close to escape by magicking itself into a suburb. Instead it would be yanked in all directions and become exemplary of all the tensions of the capital region: its rural and urban worlds, its wealth and poverty, its ethno-cultural diversity and its racism, its religious

cooperations and conflicts, and above all, the so many pasts and futures it still struggles to choose from.

Hackney lives the emotions these things are made of: love, pain, conviction, defiance, fear of change and determination to achieve it at all costs. From these arises a region packed so rich with stories that to thread from one side to the other will scarcely penetrate its surface. A skim will have to suffice – but to make the most even of that requires we look past the appearances of things, and into the emotive realms of the hearts that shaped them.

The boundary marker for this heartfelt realm is Highgate station on the London Underground Northern Line. We can tell it is more than it appears because though its trains run deep beneath the earth, there are surface-level platforms in plain sight above the station entrance. No passengers wait there for trains which never come. Haunted?

Straight away we have found a mystery. Or it has found us, because now it is going to follow us a long way. Backing away from the station to escape down a dubious tiny path into the woods doesn't help, although we can pretend for a moment that it does as we come out onto the Archway Road.

This is part of the A1 north-south trunk road, diverted through here in the 1810s to bypass the steep Highgate hill. Getting it past the Hornsey Lane, which crosses it, was a complicated engineering problem which they first tried to solve by tunnelling beneath it, only for the tunnel to collapse and bring the lane down with it. So instead they called for rescue from John Nash, one of their architect-heroes of the day who was also involved in building Regent's Canal, and he, or rather his army of navvies whose names are not recorded, propped the Lane back up with a brick viaduct called the Archway, thus birthing the Archway Road, which runs down this chasm the tunnel created. The brick Archway was replaced in 1897 by the wider cast-iron bridge visible down the road, whose main present claim to fame seems to be its use as a place for suicides. Local newspapers tell of fury as measures like signs and red tape have got bogged down in bureaucracy, while the commonness of these suicides in the first place speaks of the English's failure to build a mutually supportive and empathetic society.

Let us succumb to the ghost railway mystery as it drags us off the Archway Road by a side street. It drops us into an overgrown cellar with a dirt path, which runs away as though somehow beneath the fabric of the surface world. Here

begins what must be one of the most surreal routes in the capital region, and they have even called it the Parkland Walk as though such a boring name could disguise its uncanny nature.

To the east this spooky trail offers us passage to Hackney. But first, look west, because there the next piece of the puzzle stares back at us. A pair of arched, pitch-black eyes, overhung with eyebrows of vines. Railway tunnels – only, there's no railway.

Step closer if you dare. These tunnels have been bricked off and barred with iron railings. Their inhabitants now are not trains, but those fine furry fellows obligatory of English creepy settings: bats, seven species*, a colony of which now roosts in these tunnels and which we shall not upset lest we incur their toothy remonstrance, to say nothing of a fine of £5000 per bat disturbed and six months in prison, because all bats and their roosts are protected under European law.

This fuzzy diversity only deepens the mystery. Alongside and indeed within these railway-age fixings dwells the rich life of a nature reserve, in fact the longest nature reserve in the capital region. To proceed along the Parkland Walk is to cognise it as basically a narrow strip of plants with a path down the middle, but into this ribbon is packed an extraordinary variety of ecological relationships. There are dozens of bird species along with the likes of foxes, hedgehogs, owls, insects, spiders and of course our bat friends, as well as more unusual residents like muntjac deer. The flowers and plants are equally assorted, but unlike those three woods of Highgate the trees here are young with few giants standing among them. Odder habitats are here too, including a rare acid grassland which supports bees which mine burrows into the soil, as well as a brown ant colony that has appeared in hundred-year-old texts. Where has all this come from?

A spine-chilling sight further along holds the key to this puzzle. Two platforms appear – *train station* platforms – both enveloped by plant growth. The path runs right down the middle, exactly where the railway would go if this were a station. Looming above the left platform is a graffiti-covered beige brick structure with pillars sticking into the air as though its construction was never completed; the former office, surely, for what was once recorded as Crouch End station.

Except – Crouch End station doesn't exist. Not in this timeline, at least. The feeling is that it does in another and is trying to break through, with only the tight clutch of nature keeping the dimensions sealed.

* They are: the brown long-eared bat, common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, Daubenton's, Leisler's, Natterer's, and noctule.

In the present dimension it is obvious there was once a railway here which ceased to function long ago, and whose remnants were only partially removed. Once upon a late-nineteenth-century railway craze it was called the Edgware, Highgate and London Railway and linked the new suburb of Edgware, north of Hendon and itself birthed by the railways, to Finsbury ahead and from there to the city proper. One of the landmarks it was built to service was the nearby Alexandra Palace, a northern counterpart to the Crystal Palace which had the fortune to burn down at the start of its story rather than the end, in 1873 to be precise, and thus got rebuilt and functions to this day. The rail line was popular, indeed grew overcrowded, and by the 1930s became subject to a grand plan to electrify and integrate it into the Northern Line. But World War II interrupted the work, then put paid to it in the aftermath as funds were diverted to repair the bomb-damaged network, passengers travelled less under the strain of post-war poverty, and the designation of the Green Belt suppressed new housing construction and thus the line's projected demand. The scheme was wound down, with the existing line closing to passengers in 1954 then to freight ten years later. By the 1970s it was abandoned, except the one bit whose integration into the Underground they had managed to finish – that being, and explaining, the Northern Line's piddly one-stop extension to Mill Hill East.

The closure of the railway brought the usual battle between ravenous developers and borough authorities swooping down on its land, intent to convert it into profitable batteries of housing or bury it beneath another dual carriageway, versus strong-willed locals who saw its corpse as a public treasure both in its own ecological right and for its benefit to the community. The latter fought hard and won, getting the path resurfaced and new entrances added, and so the Parkland Walk nature reserve was born. But unlike most nature reserves, this was not long-term wilderness but an eccentric habitat shaped specifically out of its prior use as a railway. The rail companies had kept it clear of large trees and bushes for their trains, while the trains themselves, running on steam, had set the grass on fire, locking out major plant growth except for that brief window in the 1970s when the trees grabbed what space they could. The result is that rather than being a wood in the common sense, the Parkland Walk resembles more the boundary zone between a wood and surrounding grassland – a crossroads between the life in those distinct environments, hence its extraordinary biodiversity.

As for other life forms, so for humans. The walk's traffic is a standard fare of joggers, dog walkers, cyclists and the odd downcast commuter, but the

atmosphere all the way along is one of suspension on the border between their world and others. Part of this is no doubt because it is physically raised on account of being a former rail embankment, and indeed, the frequent incursion of platforms, cuttings, or incomplete concrete things, as well as its sheer insistent straightness, are a constant reminder that this is a ghost railway. Through portals in the vegetation there are regular glimpses of the houses of Haringey, and in places we hover right over people's back gardens. The path crosses bridges over their world, and at times those bridges cross it; in either case they are splashed with graffiti that carries an otherworldliness of its own. It is larger and brighter than is usual for these parts, often in pastel colours and taking the form of humans or flamingos, with the overall effect of drawing out the liminal, indeed folkloric gravity of this space. It would be easy to imagine a hidden doorway to some forgotten civilisation in the bowels of the earth here, if not to other worlds altogether. The mundane city suburbs, ever-present through the gaps, are no less *over there*, on the other side.

You have to be very careful in these in-betweeny spaces, because everyone knows they are the domain of strange entities whose anatomies break the logic of the more stable settled dimensions. Not for nothing did Crouch End give its name to a 1980s Lovecraftian horror story by Stephen King, featuring alien dimensions leaking into this one and eldritch abominations who eat Americans. And sure enough, on the far side of Crouch End "station" we run into a terrifying ambush. Along the side of the path is one of those brick walls with arched alcoves like you often see from train windows, and out of the top of one of those arches – out of the very wall! – clammers a large grinning humanoid, stark naked save for a crown of leaves on its head, its eyes diamonds of depraved mischief.

We will never know what it intended, because it is stuck. Perhaps the laws of physics work differently in its dimension, because when the sculptor Marilyn Collins summoned it through on a dark night in the 1990s, it took on a metal form on contact with our atmosphere and has been stranded immobile halfway through ever since. Perhaps one day it will be released by better-prepared reinforcements from its own realm, but for now it is inert and safe for us to examine.

Technically speaking it is a *spriggan*. You might find it familiar from video games where spriggans have appeared, most notably *The Elder Scrolls*, but it bears a wider resemblance to a huge family of supernatural beings we might call fairies or sprites. But do not be fooled. This individual might be a recent arrival, but it carries a psychological ancestry as old as any power in this country.

The place in our world most associated with spriggans is Cornwall, the province at England's extreme southwest. Cornwall is home to a non-English people, the Cornish, who have a separate culture, language and heritage with Celtic roots. At that heritage's core is a metal so useful and rare that it made the Cornish peninsula one of the most important places in the prehistoric European world: tin. Alloyed with copper, tin produces bronze – durable, handsome, strong, and a maker and breaker of societies and political structures throughout the millennia of the aptly-named Bronze Age, which in Europe, it is believed, grew up on the tin of the Cornish mines. Not surprisingly then the English have frequently oppressed the region, most recently by means of their austerity programmes and wealthy colonists seizing Cornish houses for second homes, and it has its own cultural and linguistic revival movements at the far end of which Cornish nationalists demand autonomy or indeed independence from England.

England's religious persecutions and hard-nosed literalism have pushed its own deep folklore to the margins of modern existence – especially clear when contrasted with the poetry and musicality that persists in the cultural veins of neighbours like Ireland and Scotland. But there are still secret currents that influence its people from far deeper in time than any of the history we have covered on this trek, and in places like Cornwall they linger clearer than elsewhere. We speak of course of that poorly-recorded supernatural universe which when the Christians came, they reduced, for ease of dismissal, into a blob they called *Paganism*. An average English person, especially an urban one, could go through their life none the wiser to its influences, but it is there if you look for it, and nowhere more concentrated than in ancient rivers like the Thames and its tributaries. As almost everywhere in the world, those whispers of Old Religion suggest animistic origins, in which spiritual power was to be found in the forces of nature which exercised such overwhelming power on people's lives: the rivers, the forests, the seasons, the harvest cycles, the sun and the moon and so forth. Later religions like Christianity broke from this by framing godhood as basically humans on stilts, but even the monotheisms borrowed and re-interpreted many pre-existing customs, Christmas being the standout in this land.

Our spriggan is an emissary from those long-forgotten layers of time. People imagine fairy folk in accordance with a scale that ranges from playful innocence at one end to sinister malice at the other, and spriggans occupy a place somewhere on the moderate right of that spectrum. Cornish folklore has it that while not typically malevolent, spriggans tend to be bad-tempered, quick to bear

grudges, and find enjoyment in punishing those they decide have wronged them. Punishment would mean storms, whirlwinds, blighted crops, stolen cattle or demolished houses, which the Cornish habitually blamed on spriggans before the scientific revolution. More drastically, spriggans were notorious for stealing children and leaving *changelings* in their place – that is, a fairy with the child's appearance, a convenient explanation if the child behaved unusually or fell ill with a strange disease. Alternate accounts portray spriggans as the benevolent muscle of the fairy folk, protecting the weaker of their kin and guarding burial sites from treasure-seekers. In hushed tones, it is even hinted that though small, spriggans are actually the ghosts of the massive giants of prehistoric times who feature so heavily in Celtic mythology, especially as explanations for unusual geological features. The spriggans thus have the power to expand to their original gigantic size, though presumably for short periods and on a long cooldown.

This particular spriggan is already about twice the size of an average adult human, suggesting it was in mid-transformation when it got stranded. Well, that settles it. Obviously it was here to abduct kids through the windows of the nearby houses of Londoners it blamed for marginalising its homeland, and take them away to be brought up as Cornish nationalists. Meanwhile the changelings it left would grow up to infiltrate the capital's political authorities, businesses and police, and orchestrate the breakup of the United Kingdom from within. No other explanation is possible.

As we can see, it did not think its cunning plan through. But it is still smiling because the English appear to be managing that well enough on their own.

The significance of the spriggan is not merely the one specific piece of folklore it represents, but its connection to that sprawling world of spirits, gods and strange phenomena that would have been the lived reality for the majority of generations who have inhabited this land. These have only sunk from the surface of consciousness in the most recent millennia, under the pressure of hostile and organised religious movements and then the rise of scientific rationalism, but that does not mean the English of today live free of those spirits, nor of the dreams and fears they once embodied. The spriggan's laurelled face brings to mind one of their most abiding ancient animistic motifs, the one they call the *Green Man*: an inscrutable figure portrayed as a human with leaves and branches growing out of him, or even some kind of plant elemental. In his myriad forms he is extremely well-travelled, and in England it is still common to find his face carved into church walls – that cannot be an accident – or on pub signs. Fair folk like these are an

internationalist bunch, travelling up and down trade routes, crossing cultural boundaries and scattering their seeds every time a story is told in a dock, an inn, a university, or other such places where people from different worlds mingle. Some sources, like the *English Dialect Dictionary* of 1905, even claim the spriggan shares a kinship with the much-loved trolls of Scandinavia, which is quite plausible given that whole stretch of coastline from Norway down to Iberia (now Spain and Portugal) was a major maritime highway in Celtic and Viking times.

These are crafty beings. Old as they are, they know all the mind-tricks and psychological shortcuts off by heart and as such are nigh impossible to suppress, even by the most ruthlessly violent and well-equipped enemies. England's inhabitants may have stopped believing in the literal truth of them long ago, but that has not stopped their likes hopping from generation to generation on cultural stepping stones – Shakespeare's fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Tolkien's ents, Rowling's Forbidden Forest – from where they tug at the strings of centuries of English imagination. The rise of cinema and especially video games has given them bounteous new opportunities to consolidate their reach; practically every variant of spirit, monster, elemental, undead, magical being or fantastic beast that has appeared in these apparently novel arts has its essential origins in this deep mythic inheritance upon which all of today's cultures and religions float. It is surely no coincidence that the one society that has achieved the most widespread influence in these media, Japan, is also the only global power which has sustained its animistic spirituality as a living religion, Shinto, to the present day. In the *kodama* forest spirits of *Princess Mononoke* and the koroks of *The Legend of Zelda*, too, the spriggan greets its cousins with a smile.

Have we reached an understanding with this fellow then? Those who think only with their brains and never with their hearts must fail to notice the spriggan's power, and they do so at their peril. As the English and so many others have learned the hard way, its power is not over reason but that far more potent well of emotion, sensation, imagination and subconscious impulse that now as ever is the true fount of human behaviour. Their fear of dark nights or phenomena they do not understand; their longing for the sun, and annoyance at the rain; some people's hunger, and others' scorn, for a magic seemingly banished by modernity, yet clearly not, if it still inspires such real emotional responses; their paranoia about bad stuff happening to their children, or their food or toilet paper running out; that is the level at which the likes of the spriggan maintain their grip on the English psyche. And they can change their governments, change their names, or

change their gods, but they will not change any time soon the underlying psychology that has informed how they interact with their world's primal forces since the earliest of their ancestors who learnt to *imagine*.

They might well laugh. But ask them, then: would they be willing to walk past this fellow alone in the dead of night?

It is a sure bet that most of them would rationalise, at a theoretical level, that it wouldn't move when they shone their torch on it, or that the strange sound they hear is the hoot of an owl or a bailiff smashing down someone's door rather than the spriggan threatening them in Cornish. Discussing it in a group here in daylight or studying its photo in a classroom, they might claim this as sure fact. Yet how many of them would feel secure enough in that knowledge to dare approach its grasping arms after dark? Of those who do, how many would be lying when they said they did not feel even a tinge of fear?

The proportion of people with houses nearby who keep their windows locked at night, relative to the national average, might make an interesting study.



Past the spriggan's dimensional gateway is a community centre whose log-built adventure playground encroaches on the strip, probably so all the sprites can climb around and raise a din on a nightly basis. There follows a further sequence

of bridges and tunnels, one of which is all that remains of the former Stroud Green station. But the world we glimpse through the portals is changing. From the murk beyond the roofs and roads the unmistakable skyline of central London phases in. There is the Shard over London Bridge, the tallest building in Britain, whose luxury apartments and offices and vital strategic position were handed to the pleasure of the government of Qatar. It looks disturbingly near and heralds the end of our exile through the Lost Land of Middlesex. At last, we begin our descent into low orbit of the capital.

The Parkland Walk comes to an end and funnels its wayfarers onto a footbridge across the East Coast Main Line railway. Not far to the south is King's Cross, which shoots trains this way to England's northeast and from there on to the Scottish capital of Edinburgh. As we cross we can take notice of a Thameslink train halted beneath the bridge, its windows close enough to browse a catalogue of irate and frustrated faces in side-profile.

In the old days, it would have been around here that the Forest of Middlesex began to yield to the swampy sovereignty of the River Lea. On this site stood one of the forest's outposts, known as Hornsey Wood until the upstart humans cleared swathes of it for pasture. It must have been a quiet place, drifting in the middle distance between the urban core and the hunting, farming and travelling grounds further north, sufficiently removed from public notice for offended Londoners to come and settle their differences here with duelling pistols. It might have stayed that way had London's population explosion and descent into industrial darkness not placed it square in the path of the fugitive rich people.

Around the mid-eighteenth century, enough of the Wood remained to provide a backdrop for the area's re-imagining as a countrified retreat with the renowned Hornsey Wood Tavern as its centrepiece. Contemporary accounts paint this as a cheerful and cosy establishment akin to the first inn you come to outside the starting village in almost any role-playing video game. The satirist William Hone reminisced in the 1820s that it 'well became its situation' and 'seemed a part of the wood'. The inn was run by a pair of sisters, a Mrs. Collier and a Mrs. Lloyd, whom Hone recalls as 'ancient women; large in size, (who) usually sat...on a seat fixed between two venerable oaks, wherein swarms of bees hived themselves.' Their hospitality and beer were apparently much beloved, then lamented after they passed away and the place got redeveloped at great expense into a tea house at the centre of a fashionable garden with artificial lake, where city-dwellers could escape for weekends of strolling, boating, crayfish-fishing, cock-fighting, cricket,

and other English recreations of the time of greater or lesser ethicality. The wave on which this was lifted was their craving for tea brought back from India and China, but as the craze subsided so too did this oasis, deteriorating by Hone's time to a state he mourned as 'a ruin of art within a ruin of nature'.

By then London's eruption was at full steam. A tsunami of housing smashed upon these slopes and all but submerged these stories and memories. Or it would have, had not the alarmed local people embarked on an intensive campaign of assembling, letter-writing, signature-collecting and king-of-the-hill contests with developers to preserve a public open space here, motivated at least in part by the desire for a valuable breathing space – and in parallel with Henrietta Barnett's philosophy, a chance for moral improvement by partaking in middle-class habits – for the new industrial workers struggling in the city slums nearby. It took ten years to convince the authorities and another ten to actually build the thing, but in 1869 their efforts were rewarded with the opening of Finsbury Park, this area's cornerstone to this day.

If you seek an archetype of the urban parks for which London is romanticised, you may as well pick this one. Finsbury Park is more modest than the grand regal money-scapes of Westminster but large enough to count: a generic but nevertheless pleasant green space with a café, children's playground, and boating lake that descends from the one created for the expanded Hornsey Wood Tavern. There is a little art gallery, a flower garden, a gym, and more unusually a cycling track with a range of unconventional machines on offer: tricycles, recumbents on which the rider lies back, and chunky tandems which two or more people ride side by side. Mounted upon them we witness a commensurate spectrum of ages, genders and ethnicities, their grins and whoops betraying a higher-than-average enjoyment of English urban life.

Finsbury Park is the heart of one of the most culturally diverse districts in the capital region. This was already of note in the industrial age with the coming of large numbers of Irish workers, but it peaked after World War II with arrivals from places as varied as Cyprus, Montserrat, Algeria, the Kurdish territories and the Indian subcontinent. Every sight of human activity here, from its high-street shops and restaurants to the people on these funny cycling contraptions, attests to a fluidity that is not merely kaleidoscopic but constantly in churn, invulnerable to generalising summaries or the tidy conclusions so cherished by quantitative people.

At times this has made the wrong kind of headlines. In the Tony Blair era, when England's modern Islamophobic stereotypes solidified, Finsbury Park became synonymous in the media with its mosque, opened in 1988 but by the late 1990s fallen sway to a bloc of violent extremists under the Egyptian war-cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri, who wore hooks in place of his hands and thus became a perfect pantomime villain for the tabloid newspapers. In the atmosphere of the 11th September 2001 terror attacks in the U.S. his bellicose preaching at the mosque brought the English security forces down upon it, culminating in a police raid, but it was the Muslim community itself that managed to oust Abu Hamza then keep his followers at bay on the street outside till his arrest in 2004. Since then the mosque appears to have made a committed effort to rebirth itself as a progressive and socially-engaged community institution, but it then suffered on account of racist violence when a radicalised Welshman drove a van into pedestrians in June 2017. The incident is remembered for how when the attacker was subdued by an angry crowd, which he continued to insult and provoke, the mosque's imam intervened to protect him from injury until the police arrived.

These are complex stories which reflect a complex area, and perhaps driven by its exposure to so broad a mix of class and cultural inputs, Finsbury Park has always held a certain association with radical movements. In addition to the campaigns to create the park in the first place and defend it from those who would prey on it ever since, pacifists and labour groups organised here around the World War I years at a time both faced violent repression. In the 1930s the park was the venue for clashes between the British Union of Fascists under Oswald Mosley and anti-fascist counter-demonstrators. Later in the century the authorities cut off funding and left the park to fall into disrepair, so once more the locals rallied, appealing for investment and holding cultural activities to keep the park in the hearty and functioning condition we find it today.

This is one place we will not hear a word about stiff upper lips, a landscape shaped by expressions of love and rage. Emotions are why Finsbury Park exists.

A plural space ends with a singular road that thinks it is plural. To be fair to them the Green Lanes did once consist of multiple routes linking a network of village greens through here to Hertford province to the north. Drivers would walk their cattle down them to Smithfield Market, long London's prime butchery for both

livestock and political dissidents, making the Green Lanes' name one of the last relics of this area's pre-industrial animal husbandry.

This is where Hackney begins. We have left the hills in the clouds, and the high plains with their privilege-fortresses and high-minded social experiments, and from here descend into the marshes of the Lea and lower Thames, where those of more vulnerable castes, crammed in prejudice and squalor, have fought in every age to remake their environment in a better image. In Hackney's deep south is the Shoreditch quarter, where the lowest rungs of the English social ladder were sawn off into the poverty-stricken East End. Today it is a battleground, for the wealth of the city centre has bankrolled an invasion of pricey redevelopments to float the place out of reach of those who live there. Conversely, here to the north the air from the hills still wafts enticingly in, and drew the monied industrialists to escape this way till those on the march for equality followed them up and laid claim to their lands for public spaces and social housing. The lands ahead are a transition zone where all these classes, cultures, and emotions are in constant contest, and a way in is offered us by the New River.

The New River, as runs the cliché that anyone who lives near it will have heard a thousand times, is neither new nor a river. Rather it is an artificial aqueduct, built from 1604 to 1613 with the support of a compelling main shareholder in the first Stuart king, James I, to supply London with drinking water from the springs of Hertfordshire. Building a water conveyer over 60 kilometres long and powered only by gravity – a drop of 8 centimetres for each kilometre – was an impressive engineering challenge, requiring the usual army of poorly-paid diggers and carpenters to actually carry out the work as well as a sizeable investment from the king. They also had to dig through the resistance of landowners along the route, but the ever-profligate James dumped piles of money in their pockets to win them around, leaving the political consequences of such spending habits to land on his son's neck. So it got built, and did its job until London's population growth necessitated further sources of water.

Nowadays the New River only flows as far as a pair of reservoirs that await us ahead, but impressively it still contributes to the capital's taps. In that capacity it has fallen under the hegemony of Thames Water, who have grudgingly allowed walkers to approach it but want everyone to know that does not mean they are happy about it. Beneath their logo runs the notice: 'Non Public Right of Way, but the owner allows the public to use it at their own risk for the time being'. All that's missing is a button you can press to hear them snarl.

The real owner of course is the River Lea, because even if humans built this channel it is the river's watershed that exercises supreme control. With its permission, we shall proceed.

Imagine the canals miniaturised a degree or two, and you have the New River. Its waterway is unnavigable and only as wide as two or three people are tall, but has its own grassy bank with a path overlooking an increasingly speckled pattern of land use. Terraced houses jostle with small-scale factories and warehouses, many with signboards cleaner than they are which suggest occupancy by businesses or studios in a less muscular economic sector than those that once built them. Low-rise apartment blocks, probably council housing, poke their heads over the horizon to check if their prime representative is still alive. The representative in question is right next to us, cradled in this bend of the New River: the Woodberry Down estate, the largest mass of council housing in Britain, with some fifty to sixty (depending how you count them) blocks of flats soon to reach a proud hundredth birthday as an active battlefield of London class politics.

The first shots were fired in 1934, when London County Council, the municipal government and grandfather of today's Greater London Authority, seized this 64-acre site by compulsory purchase. At its helm was Herbert Morrison, later Luigi to Clement Attlee's Mario, driving a new Labour Party administration intent on housing reform to relieve the slums of East London, which for all the philanthropic magic of Henrietta Barnett were sprawling out of control. In this spot, they declared, regardless of what the well-off Tory-voting inhabitants of its Victorian villas felt about it, they would erect an ambitious new housing estate for London's poor. Except they wouldn't, because those locals had no interest in allowing 'slum dwellers' into their lines of sight and fought Morrison's developers with court actions and obstructive negotiations all the way, until in World War II the *Luftwaffe* came along and settled the issue by demolishing much of the existing housing anyway. From the debris rose the Attlee government, sweeping up every local constituency and charging them with its intent to rebuild the country with social justice as the glue. In that febrile atmosphere, Woodberry Down became less about building a housing estate and more about building a paradise: a home for over six thousand people with its own community centre, library, shops, clinics and old people's home, as well as a flagship health centre and comprehensive school. This was to be the 'estate of the future', a land of sunlight and prosperity where the workers would live happily ever after.

Construction began in 1946, and the first residents arrived two years later. By its completion in 1962 it housed a community of thousands of people with mixed but overall promising feelings about their new home. But within a couple of decades it was all coming apart: buildings decaying, services closing, support and management staff leaking away, youngsters upping sticks and a miasma of crime seeping through the windows. By century's end it was a showpiece less of the social optimism the English found after the war and more of their failure to keep those dreams alive, till at last they let them drown in the market revolution.

That heralded a new phase of battle which has brought Woodberry Down full circle, and ironically it was another Labour government, the New Labour inversion of Tony Blair, that opened this next round of hostilities. It launched a regeneration scheme for the estate, turning to private developers in what has become a textbook case of the English's gentrification controversies and drivers of their housing crisis. Those companies have started refurbishing or demolishing the old apartment blocks, replacing them with luxurious towers that make up the more than half they have been permitted to sell on the open market rather than keep affordable to the people who already lived there. Thus are the residents being driven out – characterised, depending on who you ask, either through courteous terms like 'decanting' or more accurate ones like 'social cleansing' – to make way for new waves of higher-income colonists to populate the new religion's re-interpreted 'estate of the future'.

This of course is only one way to tell the story. Those closer to it will have their own, and many of them, especially those who speak the liturgically-scripted language of the market, will assert theirs as the only rational and objective view. But does such a thing exist? Can we trust any perspective on the story of Woodberry Down not to be loaded by partial information, class prejudices, and values that prioritise the well-being of some people over others? No. This tale is woven of the mightiest subjective feelings: dreams, convictions, attachments to home and community, fear for their loss, and the greed for gain that smothers so many stories in present-day England. Any telling that ignores these feelings is not a story of actual people.

Woodberry Down's anchoring feature is just round the corner, and to get there we must follow the New River's bend. Over the cliff of its north embankment crouches the Haringey warehouse district, which raises a periscope over the River

in the form of a slender brick chimney. The letters 'OCC' have been hoisted upon it, which the sign beneath reveals to stand for the Oriental Carpet Centre. You do not need a funnel like that to make – or more likely, transport – oriental carpets, or if you do it would probably be by a process to which traditional carpet-weavers in Central Asia would react with much the same disapproval as they did to the RAF. Chances are that this OCC, like the New River Studios with its gorilla mural further along, have repurposed these skeletal remnants of London's industrial past. Then we must cross another noisy thoroughfare, the Seven Sisters Road to Tottenham, which fords the aqueduct over a brick bridge. Some locals have decorated its wall with 'KISS MY ARSE' and a smiley face in spray-paint, thus surely identifying it as the Kiss My Arse Bridge – perhaps another old name referencing the interactions between one wave of immigrants and the next, though the precise character thereof is not recorded.

The New River completes its curve and doubles back in the foreground of the great pair of cartographic sunglasses that are the Stoke Newington Reservoirs. Geographically these hold down the centre of northern Hackney, but to arrive at them is to feel you have somehow stepped out into its backyard. Here along the waterfront we find the dazzling grin of the Woodberry Down redevelopments, oriented away from the common folk on the main roads and every glinting tooth a state-of-the-art magic apartment. They have sunk their chops right up to the water's edge, such that the path has been corroded by its saliva into a smooth and winding trail through landscaped lawns with ornamental rocks and creative-art fountains. The montage is peopled by figures with money to spend on nice clothes and lunchboxes and personal hygiene. At the far end another swanky super-tower is just emerging from its subterranean womb to a fanfare of drilling, digging and welding courtesy of the Gentrification Symphony Orchestra.

It has to be admitted that this is not an unpleasant setting, and in certain weather conditions might even feel fresh or comfortable to live in. But is it in reach of the ordinary people who keep a city functioning – teachers, nurses, bus drivers, postal workers, or these construction fellows right here in their hard hats and high-vis orange jackets? Or only for those who have learned to move imaginary money around?

The real charm comes from the reservoirs themselves, which were added to the landscape in 1833 – again cue some two hundred grunting navvies with shovels and pickaxes – as the East End grew ever thirstier for the New River's water. This close to the Lea valley, the reservoirs became havens for a rainbow of migratory

water birds and the rich ecosystems they supported, thus offering a sumptuous backdrop for the Victorian mansions whose residents backed their gardens onto them and warned their grandchildren to beware the Labour Party. As the area crowded, they grew worried about the water's cleanliness and mussels blocking the pipes. The answer, they decided, was to pump it full of chlorine and ammonia, which had the unfortunate side-effect of annihilating all that rich wildlife and dooming the reservoirs to decay to sterility. By the 1990s they had landed on Thames Water, who put them up for sale with a view to get them filled in and be done with it, and even to drain the New River, but again it was local residents to the rescue in a thirty-year grassroots campaign of meetings, marches, letters, articles and lobbying of MPs, much of it driven by people from the Woodberry Down community. The Thames Water juggernaut was remorseless, grabbing the filter beds and beginning to drain the West Reservoir just because it could, but in the end the locals were victorious and today a humbled Thames Water works with the London Wildlife Trust to manage the Woodberry Wetlands, as they are now known, for the benefit of all. The East Reservoir is now a nature reserve where the herons and kingfishers have returned with a flourish, while the West Reservoir pulls the humans themselves into the drink as a water sports facility.

Between the reservoirs runs a road, and right in the middle is the beige-bricked Coal House, last survivor of the reservoirs' original service buildings. It has been repurposed as a little café with a view across the East Reservoir which well sums up this area's condition of constantly-negotiated change and continuity, of old things re-used as new ones, a land with its feet in multiple timelines at once. Elderly apartment blocks, three or four storeys low and triangular-roofed like classic houses, tremble beneath the great glass goliaths of the Woodberry Down redevelopment. A trio of Brutalist towers representing a stage somewhere between the two holds vigil on the far bank, but each wears a sleeve of bright blue scaffolding which broadcasts it will not be like that for long, though what it will become is anyone's guess. The palisade of sailboat masts before the West Reservoir water spots centre cannot disguise its building's origins as a no-nonsense red-brick filtration works. Behind it soars a similar exercise so stark as to approach ridiculousness: 'The Castle', it is called, and it literally is a great stone-faced fortification of towers and turrets and crenellations. Any invading army would certainly take it for one unless their intelligence services were good enough to work out that it used to be the New River Company's pumping station and is

now – you'd never guess – an indoor climbing centre with community herb garden, café, apiary, and volunteer workshops.

Truly this is a land in flux. Tossed in the air by the industrial revolution its parts have not yet landed, and unlike the suburbs of Middlesex or the palaces of Privilege Island it has yet to set its course on a long-term destiny. Predicting any place's appearance in a hundred years is challenging; here it is impossible. Anything could happen here. The same seemingly unstoppable forces of greedy destruction as rampage all over this country are on the prowl, but have found it no simple matter to crush a spirit of local self-determination that whether on the Parkland Walk, at Finsbury Park or here, has held them back at every turn. The most prominent features in the landscape only exist at all because of the strength of the public fight, and looking at this Castle you might not be surprised if its resourcefulness could turn anything into anything. Perhaps on the map the reservoirs resemble a pair of spectacles for a reason. As a barometer of this nation's contesting values and powers, Hackney is a place to watch.

Hackney has settlements, not only water features. Beyond the reservoirs stands one of its nuclei, whose first settlers must have been extremely imaginative people because they decided to call it the *new settlement* – *New-ton*. Perhaps a few minutes later someone realised this did little to distinguish it from all the other *Newtons*. So they observed either that they were close to the woods (*stoccen*) or their houses were made of it – history does not record which – and latched an extra bit to their town's name to show it.

At last, everyone could see that they were different. Perhaps people society perceived as different saw it too, because many of them made their way here, fleeing judgemental authorities and bigoted in-laws or seeking others like themselves they could work with to return the world to its true course – and so Stoke Newington has been a place of dissidents, radicals, writers, artists, fugitives, refugees and miscellaneous misfits ever since.

Whether it happened quite like that invites further research. But there does seem a certain association of Stoke Newington with the more eccentric and defiant elements of English society, and these bob to the visible surface of its mix of humanity most of the way down its journey as a medieval manor village on the radar of St. Paul's Cathedral, then an evacuation site for escaping rich industrialists to drop their mansions on, then a zone redeveloped with working-

class council estates like Woodberry Down after much of it was bombed to ruins in the war, then impoverished as the destruction of industry wiped out the manufacturers still practicing there only for the gentrification brigade to come rolling in to convert it to an engine of all those things involving dubious substances and bodily fluids that young middle-class English people do.

Each wave of change transformed Stoke Newington's landscape for the purposes of new sets of people but never completely smothered those of its predecessors. Something of each remains. If you have ever eaten the *okonomiyaki* grilled pancakes of the Japanese, you might know there are two main types: the more common Ōsaka style, where the different toppings are all jumbled together, and the Hiroshima style, where the toppings are piled up in layers. Where Middlesex was more like a Hiroshima *okonomiyaki* of suburbs on top of farms on top of forests, a crossing of Stoke Newington reveals it as very much the Ōsaka variant. It is all the tastier because so many of its proverbial chunks of seaweed, fish flakes, ginger and shredded cabbage were either cooked up by those dissidents and non-conforming people, or leave an unmistakable flavour of them.

In the present day you will find plenty of frustrated young people here with points to make, dislocated as human beings by an English world where abuse, coercion, and prejudice dominate the structures of their lives. But they are only the latest of those who have come to Stoke Newington with very good reasons to be angry at the establishment. To listen to them is essential, but our task today is to listen to the ground they stand on, because there, too, reverberate the voices of those who refused to let English authoritarianism tell them what to be. They, too, have a stake in what Englishness means and may yet have useful shoulders for the ongoing struggle behind its steering wheel.

Imagine two kites, flying close together. If Finsbury Park is the large kite, the smaller is another park called Clissold which hovers right on Stoke Newington's head.

Clissold Park is a restful landscaped affair, with flower beds, ornamental lakes, and its own livery for the benches requiring that the armrests emerge into little golden lion heads. This suggests private money in its umbilical cord, a suspicion confirmed by our arrival at the Clissold House at its core. For an aristocratic mansion it is modest rather than showy, a stack of cuboids of the sooty beige bricks of London Clay that are an architectural signature in these parts, albeit with

a colonnaded portico in the Greek style because that was how they used to signal that they had culture. Inevitably its purpose now is to dispense coffee and cakes to the general public, but it also holds onto stories of several generations of peculiar people.

First in that sequence came the Hoare family, who migrated across from Ireland in the eighteenth century. They were Quakers, of which more in a moment, because that is about to become important. At that time Stoke Newington was emerging as a ruralised retreat for rich bankers, and being a rich banker, Jonathan Hoare built this mansion and called it Paradise House to be like how it sounds. Then he ran into financial problems and was forced to mortgage Paradise House while, rumour has it, he went door to door selling milk to make ends meet. In the end he was buried by his debts, lost the house, and ended up in reduced circumstances on the nearby street where, rather sadly, his Paradise gazed back at him through his window, out of reach for the rest of his life.

From there the house passed through a string of people with too much money until in 1811 it landed in the clutches of William Crawshay, another lord of new industry with his own kingdom of ironworks in South Wales and the obligatory trade concerns in India. It is necessary to be tough on this guy, because soaked into these bricks is a memory that implicates him in one of the foulest offences a human can commit: the separation of those who love. Given that one of those separated was his own daughter, Elizabeth, we also have the aggravating factors of parental abuse of power, and that worst of crimes against the universe in all times and places: a man attempting to control a woman's body.

The story goes that Elizabeth fell in love with a young cleric, Augustus Clissold – there's the surname – at the church the family attended round the corner. Whether out of some class-based abhorrence at church people or because he simply disliked the fellow, Elizabeth's father raged against their relationship, not only believing he had the right to forbid it but turning heaven and Earth upside down to keep them apart. That meant raising the walls of his estate and deepening their foundations for good measure – you can never trust these priests with their cemetery shovels – and even threatening to shoot anyone he found carrying messages between them. This may sound laughable till we remember the seriousness of death threats, as well as the soul-shattering pain of heartbreak which most human societies have yet to treat with respect. The pair had to endure many years of it until Mr. Crawshay did them the service of dying, and it was only then, in their forties, that they finally so much as got to touch each other.

It is too easy to excuse such things with the notion that parental control over children's relationships, especially over women's, were simply the traditional practices of the time. But that reasoning is a disgrace upon a disgrace, and the English – along with many others, let us not kid ourselves – have yet to give it the conclusive cultural confrontation it deserves. In this world there are no star-crossed lovers, only society-crossed lovers. Norms like these were built and chosen, and responsibility for the hurt they cause falls squarely on the shoulders of us all.

Many times they end stories miserably. In this case the lovers at least managed to salvage some years together, because with Mr. Crawshay out of the picture Elizabeth and Augustus inherited the mansion. She took his surname, which must usually invite scrutiny, but in this case one can hardly fault her if she wished for distance from her own. Thus it was the Clissold surname which ended up on the house itself.

Elizabeth and Augustus died in 1882, by when Stoke Newington village was well under ingestion by the London brick-and-mortar amoeba. The pair had no children to pass it on to so it fell back to the Crawshay family, who did not particularly want it either. So they sold it to the church authorities, who would have fed it to the amoeba for profit were it not for the now familiar pattern of its targeting by campaigners intent on saving some open space lest the amoeba devour everything in sight. These were led by two men with top hats and the inevitable big beards, Joseph Beck and John Runtz, and you know the story from there: public meetings, strongly-worded letters, money in the pot, and at last the estate's purchase and opening as a public park in 1899. The locals have commemorated this by naming its two little lakes after them as Beckmere and Runtzmere. Lest hindsight make their victory look predestined, let us remember that these too would have been efforts against the flow, against the odds, against the momentum of history, and against powerful figures who would have called themselves *reasonable* and the campaigners *emotional*.

One last memory is to be found on the corner of the house, and it passes the baton back to the Crawshays. It is engraved into a stone drinking fountain on the wall, erected, it says, by the widow Rose Mary Crawshay, partner of the problematic William's grandson, in 1893. It tells of her three sisters, who died in the 1830s, on first sight at the eyebrow-raising age of 134 – until you look closer and see it means the much sadder ages, one after another, of one, three and four. We are left to imagine the circumstances, in a reminder that between the perils

of childbirth and cholera there was a lot of nasty stuff lurking around which, till these people gained ground in understanding and containing them, cut many stories short. Only those who survived to tell their stories pass them to us. Let us pause to pay our respects to those who did not.

The focal point of traditional English settlements is the church, and like many old parishes on these outskirts that suddenly found themselves overwhelmed with crowds of Londoners (remember Kingsbury), Stoke Newington has an old one and a new one.

In a grove at the corner of Clissold Park retires its original St. Mary's Church. This is where Augustus Clissold worked and got kept apart from Elizabeth Crawshay by her dad, and is therefore a crime scene. The building itself is a cute grandparent of a Christian temple, set back in its leafy armchair where, we can hope, it will happily entertain those who come for its red-brick conversation but certainly won't go looking for people to bash with its steeple. It is over four hundred and fifty years old, dating to the reign of Elizabeth I and thus a Protestant site from the beginning, but that does not mean it demands all Christians should be the same. If it did, Augustus Clissold would have objected, because in his capacity as a cleric here he took great interest in the work of a Swedish religious philosopher, Emanuel Swedenborg, whose doctrinal differences made followers of the mainstream church suspicious.

Now turn around and look across the road to the New St. Mary's: a sterner, stonier Gothic giant assembled in the 1850s as the congregation grew too large. It is not convinced by the idea that spiritual purity means material restraint, rather it has a point to make that material matters too, because the first thing it places in your sight are three red billboards positioned along the road. They read: '6617 HOMELESS IN HACKNEY'. 'SHELTER & FOODBANK HOSTED HERE'. 'BE INFORMED. GET INVOLVED. DONATE.'

Sneak inside and we uncover more evidence – leaflets, notices, newspaper cuttings. A partnership with a church in Tete, Mozambique. There is indeed a weekly food bank here. A migrant advice centre. A winter night shelter.

Religion is well complicated. For many English it has fallen out of favour, most of all in a fast-paced materialistic megacity like London. There is no denying the role of Christian institutions and belief systems in causing colossal hurt to people through its service to authoritarian power structures and hostility to those seen

as different, especially as concerns gender and sexuality, ever the Abrahamic religions' crippling weakness. Here on the other hand we are invited to think on the good they can do when they get it right, and act on the values represented by a central character who was, after all, supposedly an itinerant Middle Eastern social activist of modest means who advocated brotherhood and empathy with the struggling and the different and thus drew the murderous loathing of the authorities of his day. For all the blood that Christian swords have spilt across the world, the religion also contains a genuine and important tradition of defying authoritarians and standing against oppression, without which movements as disparate as the anti-racist civil rights struggle in the U.S. and the Liberation Theology against capitalist authoritarianism in Latin America cannot be understood. If St. Mary's Church in Stoke Newington now commits to confronting the similar political injustices of present-day England, of which homelessness, food poverty and hostility to refugees are the consequences of what is certainly as much a moral black hole as a political one, it is possible to locate its actions both in that general tradition, and in a tightly-connected local one: that of Stoke Newington as a place where people do religion different.

In England that can be extremely dangerous. We have seen, thanks to a certain king who dismembered monastery folk as well as a bloody civil war, just what the English have been prepared to do to you when you hold religious opinions they disagree with. We last left that story at the end of the seventeenth century, when nearly two centuries of Reformation upheaval in this country had settled into a Protestant triumph. The Protestants controlled the dominant Church of England, now an instrument of state with the monarch at its head, and as the narrative goes, could set about building a more rational, liberal, humanistic, hard-working nation while it kept the terrorist Catholics at bay.

We are now going to bump into some people who upset that narrative. They were Protestants, but their Protestantisms differed from that of the established church. Many of them hated it and it certainly hated them. It is time to add another chapter to the story of English religious persecution.

In Protestant England, it was not enough for Christians to be Protestants. They also had to be exactly the right kind of Protestants: that is, to follow the Church of England's prescribed beliefs and rituals to the letter. As usual the prejudices that demanded this conformity came disguised as political sense: religious divisions had dragged this country under the butcher's knife and to guarantee stability it was required that people fit in, or at least outwardly pretend to. But

this of course is not a reasonable request of human consciences, and by this time Protestantism had already rarefied into a rainbow of branches which for as many different reasons as there are stars in the sky, took issue with the doctrines or the observances of the mainstream Church of England.

These people refused to conform, instead setting up dissident churches and worshipping how they wanted to. As a group they became known as *Nonconformists* or *Dissenters*. Mainstream Protestants suspected or outright attacked them, with little obvious logic beyond the general pattern that the friendlier and more tolerant they were, the more intense the detestation they received. Although their punishment no longer extended to getting torn to pieces – a century and a half of nation-ripping carnage had been more than enough for everyone – they were still labelled illegal, barred from public office, and faced fines, imprisonment, social ostracism and laws designed to make their lives as miserable as possible, as well as the resultant poverty when so many doors are shut against you. Many gave up on England altogether and made their way abroad, especially to America, with the intent to live in proper holiness beyond the reach of Old World tyrants and corrupted churches. This is a background worth remembering when Europeans like the English marvel aghast at the continuing power of religion in the U.S., in contrast to their relatively secularised selves.

We have already met some of these Dissenters. They included the uncompromising Puritans so prominent in the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell, as well as the Presbyterians who took Scotland to war against Charles I. These were good examples of how Nonconformist *religious* conscience was for many of these people inseparable from *political* struggle against oppressive governance by the English church and state. Once Charles II was restored to power in 1660, both groups went straight to the top of the list of annoying and offensive religious troublemakers who had caused the country enough distress and now deserved to be marginalised. The Nonconformist umbrella – one which the rain fell under rather than onto – also covered a trickling-on of those smaller sects like the Levellers, Diggers and Ranters, which had asserted themselves during the civil wars and often boasted populist power bases and eccentric programmes for full-scale social reform that anticipated later liberal or socialist movements and represented the first seeds of this nation's attempts at democracy. Another extremely important group was the Quakers, formally the Society of Friends, with a reputation, if we excuse the generalisation, for being the nice ones: tolerant, peaceful, committed to social justice and the equality of men and women, and for

those reasons among the most persecuted of the lot both by mainstream Protestants and many of the other Dissenting sects. Despite that they have popped up at subtle but significant plot points throughout our journey, including John Cator of the Beckenham estate and the philanthropist Joseph Rowntree. And there were many other groups – Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and so forth – of whom a great number potter around in Stoke Newington's memories.

As this range makes clear, Nonconformism was not a single or unified thing. It spanned a vast and often mutually hostile breadth of values, practices, and visions of what a Christian should be. Not all of these are easy to admire, and plenty descended into the same abusive social totalitarianism and coercive brutality – including towards children – as they hated the dominant Church for inflicting on them. This is an easy thing to imagine with a glance at the more fanatical of their descendants in the U.S. today, or, say, at one particular Nonconformist current which flickered across to Connecticut via settlers, and then to Guangzhou (Canton) in China via missionaries, where they ended up in the millenarian visions of Hong Xiuquan and infused the titanic bloodbaths of the Taiping Rebellion. The least that must be admitted is that Nonconformist doctrine, by lone virtue of being Nonconformist, was no vaccination against evil in any meaningful sense. A stronger charge would be that its frequent millenarian themes and apocalyptic visions, divisions of people between a worthy elect and the expendable condemned, and a terminal disdain, verging on paranoia, for the corrupted world outside the in-group, naturally gravitate its adherents to mistreat others.

But where some of the Dissenters' worlds fell that way, others appeared to settle on quite different values: an open-minded welcoming of disagreements; humility and restraint; honesty to one's conscience; democratic spiritual and administrative decision-making; and a peaceful yet insistent scepticism towards dictatorial authority. In that manner they lived with their fingers in the eyes of English authoritarianism long enough to become a recognised part of the country's civil and religious landscape, and over time became grudgingly tolerated, even respected. Fairly or not, they acquired a general reputation for frugality, hard work and moral integrity, as well as for standing ahead of the curve on many of England's progressive reforms and social justice movements, in which they often surfaced in key positions. These kinds of Dissenters became an invaluable voice of conscience for this nation just as it was losing its own down the barrels of cannons and chimneystacks.

Over many generations Nonconformists managed to pick away at the institutional prejudices obstructing their lives. Acting politically through the Whig Party – the Liberals – in the nineteenth century, they got their barriers to political office removed and challenged the mainstream Church's dominance through religious taxes and the education system. Their political crescendo came in the Liberal government of 1905, remembered for its pioneering raft of reforms to the social welfare system. Nonconformists accounted for hundreds of seats on their parliamentary benches as well as several of their leaders, including Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and a certain odd Welshman by the name of David Lloyd George.

After that the terms *Dissenter* and *Nonconformist* tail off in the record, as the significance of religion as a whole diminished from English public life through the twentieth century. Nowadays to hear these terms is rare indeed, and relative freedom of spiritual conscience – *relative*, mind you – is largely taken for granted. Diversity between faiths receives more attention than diversity within them, such that the English gape at the hostilities between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, or at the pandemonium of American Christian sects wherein each believes it alone is exactly right – or much closer to home, the sectarian hatreds in Northern Ireland – and shake their heads at what must feel like totally alien worlds to them. They forget that till quite recently, that was their world too.

Meanwhile England's mainstream has turned to a new god, the market, with its own set of rituals, assumptions about reality and disdain for dissenting attitudes. Who among the English today inherits the Nonconformists' mantle? Now there's a question.

We have already made introductions with some of Stoke Newington's Dissenters, beginning with the Quakers of the Hoare family who built Clissold House. Joseph Beck, who got it open to the public, was also a Quaker, while Augustus Clissold himself was a Swedenborgian. And if we are to discuss Nonconformist tendencies to social activism, here too is an example of one of the most important of all: Samuel Hoare Jr., brother of the Jonathan who built the house, was one of the twelve founders of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

For those English who like to think well of their country, there are few prouder clichés than its role in ending the traffic of West Africans into slavery. In truth this stance is poisonous, not least in its ignorance of England's part in creating the slave trade in the first place or reimbursing the slaveholders with taxpayers'

money until 2015 – that is not a typo – as well as suppressing the role of Africans themselves in favour of a benevolent white liberator narrative. With the recent scrutiny of English racism this topic is burningly salient in England's current conversations with itself, and here is one of its interesting features: if you cut away at the column of English abolitionists, you find a chunky seam of Nonconformists running down its centre. Quakers like Samuel Hoare, along with their counterparts in the American colony they founded, Pennsylvania, were some of the first among white people on both sides of the Atlantic to make major noises suggesting there was something morally objectionable about turning human beings into disposable inventory. Hoare's organisation held rallies, petitioned parliament, and produced anti-slavery trinkets to spread their message among a populace whose mainstream moral systems had allowed them comfort enough with one of the most heinous atrocities in human history. When the authorities relented and began, reluctantly, to wind it down in the nineteenth century, it was not because England had had a change of heart and suddenly become a humane country, but because, to the extent that English people struggled for it, it was stigmatised dissidents and eccentrics like these who applied pressure while mainstream power and opinion wished they would stop being so emotional.

Clissold Park and the two churches stand – of course – on Church Street, a village lane which noses east into the heart of old Stoke Newington. The buildings here present a sepia-brick antiquity, with their chance location in a blind spot of the London Underground sparing them the worst of Hackney's redevelopment streamrollers. Stores and cafés glance up the street with a wary localism, as though on alert for the next contingent of gentrifiers who will step up to test their gnarled resilience. And there are people going in and out of them: a liveliness somehow circumspect for somewhere so close to central London. Is that too an echo of the days when Nonconformists ran secret religious meetings and teaching academies behind these storefronts, here beneath the City's harrying radar?

The chunkiest of all Stoke Newington's names has a street named after him here, and also a pub till it was seized and rebranded by the gentrifiers. Daniel Defoe is best known for *Robinson Crusoe*, which he wrote in a house on this street in 1719, but the reason he was here in the first place was that he was a Presbyterian in constant trouble with the authorities and came to Stoke Newington to duck the eyelids of the Church-State complex in the City. Born in 1660 just after the return of Charles II, Defoe had a go at all manner of odd business ventures – farming civet cats to make perfume from their musk, for instance – but it was as a writer

that he really made his name, and a voluminous and meddlesomely political one at that. In 1702 he published *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, satirising the growing hostility to Nonconformists just as an especially hostile monarch, Queen Anne, last of the Stuarts, came to power. For his trouble he was arrested, tried for seditious libel, fined, stuck in a pillory – that thing where the public throws splattering stuff at your head and hands – and hurled into prison, which he only escaped through a deal to serve as a spy for the Tory Party.

So Daniel Defoe had good reason to take cover amidst the Dissenting academies of Stoke Newington, where he was friendly with the Quakers who had assisted him during his persecution and for whom he reciprocated by writing in their defence. Although he never disengaged from political commentary, its hazards gravitated him towards historical, journalistic, and in particular fictional directions too, and it was here on Church Street that he churned out his most famous novels.

Then we come to its far end, and it is here that the big beast of Stoke Newington Nonconformism swells out and swallows the public into its sanctuary.

Abney Park Cemetery is not like other English burial grounds. It is towards the heftier end of the cemetery scale, approximately twelve acres containing some 200,000 graves. Take those away however and this would be not an open lawn or garden as most of these graveyards are landscaped into, but a genuine woodland of sturdy aged trees and choral birdsong. Then replace the overlay of gravestones and notice that beyond the standard fare of arched or cross-shaped headstones there are more extraordinary shapes: humanoid figures, obelisks, scrolls, even clusters of miniature gravestones all clumped together that bring to mind the more crowded theologies of animistic sacred groves. Here too there are people, a mixed host not bent in mourning but strolling upright, walking dogs, chatting on benches and listening to the radio, as well as a handful in such garb and facial hair as we might associate with insecure employment, sitting or reclining on the graves, taking respite in the democracy of the dead as they contemplate the petty tyrannies of the living. There are gaggles of schoolchildren and guided tour groups, as though this be a family-friendly ruin or nature reserve rather than a field of corpses, but of course it is all those things. This space of cheerful seriousness belongs both to the vivacity of flesh and the solemnity of bone, and they neither contradict nor compete for the atmosphere.

This land was once split over two estates. One was the Fleetwood House, named for Charles Fleetwood, an uncompromising Puritan and one of Oliver

Cromwell's top commanders who helped ruin Ireland for him during the Protectorate. After the Restoration he was stripped of all public credentials in Charles II's purge but narrowly escaped with his life to Stoke Newington, where his house later became a prominent Dissenter meeting place. The other manor was Abney House, which conveys to the cemetery the name of Thomas Abney, Lord Mayor of London, but had its own Nonconformist record of housing one of their heavyweights, Isaac Watts, of whom more in a moment.

Such a concentration of Dissent in the soil more or less guaranteed its spirit carried over to the cemetery built on it. It was privately established in 1840 as part of a wave of model garden cemeteries to cope with a population of London dead overflowing as fast as the living, but the official Church never consecrated it and that meant Christians outside its structure could take their rest here, thus making it a magnet for the Nonconformist departed. In its centre still stands its chapel: a simple design, shaped in a cross, but – unusually – with all four arms equal in length, symbolising its openness to all sects and disdain for main-Church ostentation. This form even has a name, Dissenting Gothic, and is a recognised architectural style in its own right. A heap of logs occupies a corner nearby, on which a notice by someone calling himself the 'Sheriff of Nottingham' offers a reward of ten gold pieces for the capture of another band of dissidents, to wit: Robin Hood, Will Scarlet, Jeremy Corbyn and Friar Tuck.

With London's green spaces disintegrating around it, a nature function for the cemetery was built in from the beginning. It was landscaped as a magnificent arboretum with over two and a half thousand varieties of trees and shrubs and over one thousand types of rose, laid out for the picnics and promenades of a Victorian public because nothing tastes better with a sandwich than reminders of your mortality. Those picnics came under threat in the twentieth century as jostling corpses elbowed each other onto the paths, money ran out, and the wilds moved in to reclaim the poorly-maintained site till in 1979 it was sold to the Borough of Hackney for a feeble £1. Ironically this neglect allowed a dose more wilderness into its sylvan lungs, and this has remained part of its character as its public management steers it back from the brink.

Any city of the dead is also a library and every resident a storyteller. You could lose yourself for days in their tales, all the more because these are all the kinds of people the modern English refer to as weirdos. We have a journey to complete, so with every due respect must fail to indulge them all, but can hardly come into the

presence of such a perfect aurora of diverse Nonconformists, and their social justice causes, without at least an ear for a few who jump out.

Straight through the gate is a hulking badge-shaped headstone whose gold-engraved letters definitely want you to notice them first. This is the resting place of William and Catherine Booth, the husband-and-wife team of Methodists who founded the Salvation Army. One of the world's most recognisable charities for supporting the left behind out of a sense of religious mission, and now a huge organisation, in recent decades it has been tarnished by all-too-familiar religious wrongdoings, from hostility to sexual diversity to the sexual abuse of children.

Another bunch of slavery abolitionists is also here. Thomas Binney, a Congregationalist (a Nonconformist branch which believes local congregations should govern themselves rather than being told what to do by a church hierarchy), founded the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which still campaigns against present-day slavery under its current name of Anti-Slavery International. Thomas Burchell, a Baptist, went as a missionary to Jamaica where he campaigned against the brutal British plantocracy alongside Samuel Sharpe, the former slave and Jamaican national hero who led the great 1831-2 Montego Bay uprising and along with hundreds of others paid with his life in the bloodthirsty crackdown that followed. Indeed this is known as the Baptist War, due to the prominent role of Baptists: Nonconformists who undertake the initiation-by-water ritual as consenting believers rather than in infancy. Samuel Morley is also here – another Congregationalist and radical Whig MP who helped fund the Canada-based writer and escaped slave Josiah Henson.

A more cryptic figure is a woman by the name of Joanna Vassa. She is the daughter of none other than Olaudah Equiano, who in the 1750s was taken at age eleven from his Igbo home in what is now Nigeria and sold into slavery in the Caribbean. There he was given the slave name Gustavus Vassa*, but he managed to buy his own freedom and eventually settled in London where his articulate writings, in particular his autobiography, confronted the British with the guttural realities of their slave trade. He met and married a white English companion, Susanna Cullen, and they had two daughters of whom one died in childhood. Little was known of the other, Joanna, until the discovery of her grave here in Abney Park in 2004 set off a flurry of research to piece her life together. Raised a

* The original Gustavus Vassa was a rebel leader in the Swedish liberation war (1521-3) and subsequently Sweden's king, Gustav I. It was a practice among slavers to give their slaves the names of powerful figures from history as a mockery of their disempowered status.

Nonconformist herself after her father's Methodist leanings, it has been established that she got together with a Congregationalist priest, Henry Bromley of Islington, and that they worked closely together in religious pursuits and church-based social activism. Beyond that however Joanna Vassa is obscure, perhaps on account of being mixed-heritage and female in an England where the former was rare and both received intense discrimination, including in its historians' decisions on what was worth recording.

Other causes mainstream history is not so good with are represented among the cemetery's residents. Remember William Hone, who shared fond memories of the Hornsey Wood Tavern where Finsbury Park is now? Another Dissenter, Hone was a major figure in the nineteenth-century rise of England's popular print media and the struggle against censorship. His satirical critiques of political and judicial power abuses during the paranoid 1810s landed him in prison for blasphemy and sedition, but he turned the tables by reading his parodies out from the dock and reducing the courtroom to hollering laughter. Transfiguring every fume of his prosecutors' authoritarian menace to a hapless joke, he was released a popular hero and went on to ridicule the establishment for atrocities like the Peterloo Massacre. Where he stood, the likes of *Private Eye* stand now. Then we have James Bronterre O'Brien, an Irishman and a leader of the Chartists: the working-class movement which in the 1840s and 50s campaigned for all men to have the vote, as opposed to that small minority who held property. For this they were brutally repressed by the authorities. O'Brien had his writings seized and spent eighteen months in prison, with gradual reform only achieved over the following decades. Another Irishman, John O'Connor Powell, got into parliament and deployed his forceful oratory to raise consideration for England's colonial abuse of his country. Then there is a nurse, Betsi Cadwaladr, a fiery character from a working-class Methodist family in North Wales, who travelled the world before taking medical training in her sixties and going off to the Crimean War, where she tended to the wounded on the front line and quarrelled with the more bureaucratically-minded Florence Nightingale. And another figure here will stand for the struggle to extend suffrage to those who were most dishonourably denied it: Emma Cons, a fervent campaigner for women's right to vote, who got onto the London County Council in the face of angry contentions that women should not be admitted.

Notice how many of these causes – freedom of the press, the right to vote irrespective of wealth or gender, or recognition of ethnic minorities as human beings – are spoken of by today's English (and no few foreigners) as though they

be second-nature to this country. In fact, none were in its national foundations. They had to be clawed out of its tyrannical power structures and majority social conventions, in relatively recent times, by such dissidents with the guts to put their names and bodies on the line to challenge the dominant order.

That just about ought to do it. But there is one more fellow we cannot leave without meeting, not least because a raised stone statue of him dominates the centre of the cemetery. The logician, poet and hymn-writer Dr. Isaac Watts is not buried here, but lived for many years at Abney House, the cemetery's predecessor, immersed in both the Stoke Newington Dissenter community and the flora and fauna of these grounds in whose midst he composed so much of his verse. His experience is in many ways exemplary of the English archetype of the Dissenter-hero, so let his be the final story we attend to today.

Isaac entered the world in Southampton in 1674 and found that the English had imprisoned his dad. Isaac senior was a Congregationalist, and spent his eldest son's childhood under constant persecution for illegal opinions and association with illegal churches. He was in and out of prison and forced to live apart from his family, such that the young Isaac's main exposure to him, beyond when his mum lifted him up on the prison stairs to glimpse him through the bars, was in his heartfelt letters encouraging Isaac to think about and 'get your heart to delight in' the Bible, rather than just memorise and do what it says, as well as to serve God 'in his own ways, with true worship and in a right manner' instead of by the 'inventions or traditions of men' – no prizes for guessing which men. Reportedly immersed in this more reflective atmosphere of devotion, Isaac grew up with a deeply spiritual heart of his own as well as considerable literacy – five languages by the age of thirteen – and a fondness for conjuring up poetry.

In his late teens, the Dutch invaded and William of Orange came to power along with the deposed James II's daughter Mary. They were comparatively tolerant to Nonconformists and relaxed the official punishments, but institutional barriers still ran deep. Universities like Oxford and Cambridge for example were barred to Nonconformists, and that brought Isaac instead to the Dissenting Academy here in Stoke Newington. As a Dissenter facility it had a radical and rigorous approach to education, with a broad curriculum and an emphasis on free, novel and investigative thinking rather than the rigid chains of tradition. In a Europe pushing towards Enlightenment rationalism and scientific discovery, that meant engaging with the great problem that it, and humanity at large, has still not truly resolved: how to reconcile reason and faith, or at least to do so without anyone getting hurt.

Here Watts would get used to contemplating troublesome questions like these. He would do so for the rest of his life, engaging with leading commentators like John Locke, whom he admired, while watching Christians struggle to different conclusions which took them down increasingly divergent branches. Later he published the outcomes of his own thinking in a book he titled *Logic*. In it he celebrates reason and science and praises its pioneers of his day – Locke, Newton, Descartes and their like – with a firm conviction that people should seek the truth with their own best judgement and conscience. At the same time he warns that their ability to reason objectively often gets distorted by partial influences and passions like pride, envy, prejudice or material self-interest, through which a religious heart could play a valuable role in guiding them. Writing as a Christian he parses this through the framework of original sin – harmful passions are ‘sinful desires’, while divine salvation because of Jesus’s sacrifice restores them to disciplined harmony – but whatever you choose to call them, there is a challenge here with pertinence for the techno-capitalist present which was last presented to us by the not-quite-dinosaurs of Crystal Palace. If the sleep of reason produces monsters, does not also the attempt to write emotion out of the story?

There was little sign then that views opposed to his own upset Isaac Watts, but something else did. After he went home from the Dissenting Academy he quickly grew irate at what he considered the awful quality of his church’s hymns. Challenged by his dad to write something better, he did exactly that, and his congregation was much impressed by the new verses he got them singing – another thing difficult to imagine then as permissible in the main Church. He then came back to Stoke Newington to work as a private tutor, getting fed up that he couldn’t find decent material for teaching logic or astronomy and so deciding to write it himself; his manuals were considered so good that some ended up used as textbooks not only in Dissenting Academies but ironically in the very top universities that had excluded him for his beliefs. While here, he attended a Dissenting church in the City which drew in people from the more eminent end of the Nonconformist population. He networked well with them and became so popular that in 1702 they made him their pastor.

Watts was in the same club as Henrietta Barnett’s companion Samuel in so far as being not the kind of man that gender-prejudiced people believe men should be. Physically small, averse to conflict, and skewed more towards intellect than strength on the character configuration screen, shall we say, he also suffered regular attacks of ill health which sent him staggering to the spa town of Bath for

weeks on end to restore himself. Nonetheless he continued to preach and write, advancing Dissenter arguments and making firm friendships and a name for himself. His poetry also attracted an admirer, the writer Elizabeth Singer, with whom he fell profoundly in love only to be rebuffed on the rather merciless grounds that she only wished she 'could admire the casket as much as the jewel'. Devastated utterly, he never attempted romance again for as long as he lived.

Still, he had plenty of distraction in the new wave of anti-Nonconformist hysteria that accompanied the rise of Queen Anne. Watts's notebook logs rioters smashing their way into Dissenter meeting houses in these years, threatening the clerics and tearing down the pews and pulpits to burn on bonfires. Pandering to the hatred was a group known for similar tendencies today: the Tory Party, who passed newly restrictive laws* and would have shut down the Dissenting Academies completely had Queen Anne not died on them just in time and so given the Whigs the chance to drive them from power. Watching all this through worsening anxieties and hallucinations brought on by his illnesses, Watts shuttled between the houses of supportive friends until he landed in the hospitality of Sir Thomas and Lady Mary Abney. They invited him to stay for a week. To their delight, he stayed for thirty-six years.

The Abney family had several houses, but after Thomas's death Mary and her daughter gravitated to Abney House in Stoke Newington, predecessor to this cemetery, and here Isaac Watts would live out most of his life. For someone so ransacked by health problems he got up to an astonishing variety of tasks. His primary occupation was as a churchman offering pastoral care to his congregation – not light work if you recall that this was the time of the South Sea Bubble, a forebear of more recent financial crises in which the South Sea Company, driven by crafty speculators and promising a trade bonanza but in fact doing fuck all, took in huge numbers of excited investors including some of the most powerful people in the country from King George I down before collapsing in a disastrous heap of bankruptcies, scandals and suicides. As well as practical guidance for the casualties Watts penned more general advice for congregants, immensely popular songs for children, and educational treatises for all ages. His writing developed into full-scale explorations of logic and philosophy, while also

* Specifically, the Occasional Conformity Act of 1711. 'Occasional Conformity' meant that a Nonconformist could attend a ritual of the official Church from time to time and be accepted as 'conforming', and thus allowed to hold public office, with society turning a blind eye to their living and practicing as Dissenters in private. The Tories closed down this loophole.

propelling him into theological debates over Arianism, Deism, and other such topics coming out of Christianity's frantic heart-searching as it struggled between its bloody seventeenth-century breakdowns and the piercing questions fired at it by Enlightenment rationalism. Meanwhile he devoted much ink to reflecting about prayer and the rhetoric of preaching. He did not preach much himself, being too ill, but when he did it was with a considered style that combined clear and logical content with eloquent passion.

There is eye-opening stuff in this galaxy of writings, but none of it was what the English remember him for. It was his writing of hymns that has done most to lift his name in the records. In an age where singing in church at all was controversial and that which occurred was by all accounts hideously dull, Watts composed new songs he hoped would shake congregations out of their indifference with lyrics both easy to understand and tasty to the emotions. The idea was that they should know and think about what they were singing, as well as experience it, warm and heartfelt, with the power his rhythms sought to awaken. He appears to have succeeded. Today hymn-singing is the soundtrack of English Christianity to the point it is hard to imagine that religion in its absence, and its songs have spread well beyond religious life into the likes of military marches and football songs. But this was never inherent to it; rather it too is the outcome of historical movements, challenges and innovations, of which in this case Isaac Watts' were some of the most important. He wrote over seven hundred hymns in his lifetime and many are still being sung, most famously perhaps the Christmas carol *Joy to the World*. It would not have been possible if not for an understanding that the heart matters, and of the power at its depths that poetry and music have the magic to activate. There are lessons there that go far beyond religious concerns.

Watts did most of this writing here in the grounds of Abney House. Stoke Newington's sub-rural environment and Nonconformist milieu did much to influence and inspire his work, but his health continued to decline. He turned his verse on his illnesses, much of it remarkably descriptive and no doubt mouth-watering for today's forensic diagnosis-hunters:

*If I but close my eyes, strange images
In thousand forms and thousand colours rise.
Stars, rainbows, moons, green dragons, bears, and ghosts;
An endless medley rush upon the stage,*

*And dance and riot wild in Reason's court,
Above control. I'm a raging storm,
Where seas and skies are blended; while my soul,
Like some light worthless chip of floating cork,
Is tossed from wave to wave: now high-mounted on the ridge
With breaking floods, I drown, and seem to lose,
All being.*

He died in 1748, aged seventy-four, and was buried in the Bunhill Fields cemetery – another famous Nonconformist graveyard closer to the City, where his community now includes other notable Dissenters like John Bunyan, Susanna Wesley, William Blake (a semi-Dissenter, but an extraordinary one) and our old friend Daniel Defoe. Nearly one hundred years later the present cemetery opened on the grounds of his old refuge and its admiring founders put up his statue. It has deteriorated with age and vandals have made off with his right hand, so the Abney Park Trust is now raising funds for his restoration. 'Give Isaac Watts a hand', appeals their blog.



The main entrance to Abney Park Cemetery – our exit onto Stoke Newington’s modern High Street – has all gone a bit Egyptian. Corniced pillars with lotus and palm leaf carvings frame the gates, adjoined by lodges with hieroglyphs denoting the ‘gates of the abode of the mortal part of Man’. The formal name for this is Egyptian Revival, but it was really about a phase of English excitement about Egypt after they managed to kick Napoleon out of it, and so appropriated its ancient forms in order to feel good about controlling it instead of the French.

Mortal the Dissenters might have been, but they appear to have punched well above their weight in the undying mark they left on the English imagined community. On top of that, so much of that mark seems to have been made of commendable matter, from contributing cultural riches to standing up for oppressed parts of the population. This in a nation which spent so much effort trying to squash them, yet in failing to, could not help coming to admire them instead. What a conundrum!

Only a handful of their number have become acquainted to us in this crossing, so we should not imagine these stories, each of course partial, to stand for the overall Nonconformist phenomenon, if indeed such a thing existed at all. Its innards are so multicoloured and its boundaries so hazy that a coherent picture verges on impossible; so too must there be no limit to the Dissenters’ commentary on this land and its people. But we must accept some parting gifts from them – it would be rude not to – and so against the backdrop of this region of vibrant feelings and neverending flux, let us take two.

The first concerns religion. Today so much of the human religious landscape, in England and elsewhere, wilts beneath raving doctrinaires who generate a terrible racket of pain and ignorance – picketing abortion clinics here, disowning gay sons and daughters there – while filling all who look through the temple windows with dismay. As we reach for the earplugs, we can easily forget that religion does not have to be like that; that spiritual life matters too much to be ignored or left in the power of bigots. For a stranger, to read the writings of Isaac Watts is at times to flounder in unnavigable waves of Christian theology, but dive beneath the surface and there is a deeper sea whose taste on the tongue is not the briny abyss of violent IAmRightism, but an engagement with friendliness and integrity in the real complexities of human life; an enjoyment of peaceful debate between contesting views; and a balance between forces in tension – reason and spirit, principle and practicality, the mind and the heart – of which each comes across as vital, but is also dangerous if it runs off unchecked by its counterpart.

Again it is too vast a generalisation to suggest all Dissenter religion was more like this, and less like the zealotry that too often allies itself to humankind's worst blunders. There are those who once called themselves Dissenters and their temples Free Churches who have fed that tendency, and even now they occupy strategic positions in so many movements that worsen the lot of humankind. But these are knots that must be worked loose, rather than set on fire, because they wind round too many hearts and necks to blast them away without catastrophic results. If we seek to disentangle these snarls of religion-based social problems, we are better equipped to do so if we explore where their ropes came from, where they got stuck on the way, and what strings, surely still trapped in their midst, might, if pulled loose, ultimately take them somewhere better.

To the extent the opposite tendency existed – Dissent as intelligent, open-minded and friendly – it surely offers a healthier spiritual basis than those that make the most noise. That healthier basis is something of which England and the wider world are in urgent need. Its problems, including those religion is most accused of driving, require speaking to and improving spirituality, taking it back from those who would direct it to abuse, rather than extinguishing it outright. It will not be extinguished. Remember our good friend the spriggan? Isaac Watts understood, from one angle out of an infinity, that a level of consciousness remains, at the bottom of what it means to be human, which is as old as the species itself and too deep for reason and logic, for all their pivotal power, to reach on their own. For that you still need stories, arts, music, poetry – that is, a language of raw emotion, or spirit we might call it, that only such aspects of life can supply. Religion isn't the only such aspect, but it can hardly be coincidence that others that do, particularly sports and immersion in the wild outdoors, are loaded with religious associations.

They will not bury this spiritual part of themselves, nor should they want to. Better they learn to take care of it in an inclusive and empowering way, and maybe among the Nonconformists there are those who can help them work out how.

The second take-away concerns the treatment of people who are different. What the Nonconformists were put through was but one expression of a far wider struggle: that of all people who do not fit in. Human societies have on the whole been terrible with difference, too inclined to punish people for failing to conform to their arbitrary norms. The stories of alienation and violence we have seen in this land based on race, gender, class, religion, or plain ego expose an England as abject as any society in these demands that diverse human beings become the

same. And yet, look what happened here. Individually, yes, many Nonconformists were made to suffer horribly for being themselves. Collectively however they went in the space of two centuries from a shameless political punching bag into a recognised and respected column of subcultures with the ability to put their people into the most influential positions in the governance, business, literature and arts of a society indebted to them. To put it another way, if England was an MMORPG, to admit that one was a Nonconformist would initially have meant being instantly kicked from any dungeon group, harassed and abused by its members then reported and banned by prejudice-complicit game masters; but that then changed to a situation where the same admission would get you a flood of invitations on the feeling that any group would be worse off if it did not include at least one of you. That is a remarkable shift, all the more so because there was no big revolution or bout of bloodletting to bring it about. England demanded they change. The Nonconformists said no, you change. They stared each other down. England smashed their faces around a bit. Then England changed.

Was this the result of deliberate long-term strategising on the Dissenters' part? Or did they simply be themselves, in so doing communicating a bold political point while also proving that they were not a threat, thus making attempts to persecute them ridiculous? There seems something almost Gandhian about how they managed to transmute prejudice into admiration, with all the lessons and limitations that model holds for struggles against prejudice in general. What could the English take from it against the prejudices that beset them today?

If they go to Stoke Newington, they might find a cemetery where every grave is a tunnel of examples and ideas. Each will have its Buts, What Ifs and Categorically Nos. None will show them exactly what to do. But delve a while, and they might find things they can't do without.

13. Lines



Foreigners grew wealthy with the spoils of England, whilst her own sons were either shamefully slain or driven as exiles to wander hopelessly through foreign kingdoms.

Monk and chronicler Orderic Vitalis in the *Ecclesiastical History*, early twelfth century

...with their sins they infuriated God so excessively that He finally allowed the English army to conquer their land, and to destroy the host of the Britons entirely... But let us do as is necessary for us, take warning from such; and it is true what I say, we know of worse deeds among the English than we have heard of anywhere among the Britons...

Wulfstan II's *Sermon of the Wolf to the English*, c.1014

Today we will meet an old, old power. It is second only to its friend and ally the Thames, yet exerts an influence even that river has not. While the Thames's strength is the strength of the core, this secondary river draws on the profounder properties of edges and thresholds. And it means that here, as close as we shall come to the heart of English power, we stand at its furthest frontier and look out on alternative Englands far beyond.

Yet the more we look, the more hallucinatory this frontier, indeed all frontiers, become. Because where does England's world end, and those of the 'foreign kingdoms' begin? For lifetimes, the answer was: here. Here they were made distinct. But here, too, they crossed till no distinction remained.

The border became a mirage. Perhaps it was one to begin with. Aren't they all? Are mirages real?

The dead understand better than the living. The dead of Abney Park, for instance, get it. Having passed on they are free citizens of all worlds, and with shrewd expressions they point us east to Stoke Newington's fringes. The lessons, if not necessarily the answers, lie that way.

Here the old village gave way to manorial pasture till the residential pile-in of London's new rich dropped another lump of housing on it. Some of those newcomers had the foresight, around the time Queen Victoria joined the dead, to plant seedlings in neat rows along these thoroughfares. The result is that we progress down avenues resembling tunnels made of the proud lush boughs of London plane trees, while behind their trunks the stubborn Victorian terraced residences hold firm.

One wad of them has received a creative facelift, sprouting a green dome to start a fresh life as a mosque, the Masjid-e-Quba. Pedestrian evidence on this foggy Friday morning points well to this being what they call a multicultural area. The local Muslims are on the move, garbed more from the wardrobes of mosques like this than of the sullied world of suits and ties, and there is a similar abundance of orthodox Jewish individuals with their great black hats and impressive configurations of facial hair. Noticeable for its near-absence in either case is female representation, though as we have seen, this stems from a problem shared by human societies at large rather than the faults of one segment or another.

Outside a local school, black zigzag slabs have been implanted into the paving stones and carry what look like children's drawings of animals, planets, and spaceships. Statements of love and belonging run alongside. 'When I'm in Hackney', runs one, 'I hear birds tweeting like happy families'. Both these Muslim and Jewish communities seem well-rooted in the area, and a dig through its newspapers reveals, like those birds, a chorus of positive sentiments about how wonderfully they get along and protect one another from a society with violent tendencies towards both. Let us hope.

And then, we reach the edge of them all.

Gently but with inevitability, the land falls away. It yawns – and so the mists lift, and the morning sun casts its light across a great broad valley. From where we stand, facing east, it runs left to right: from the Chiltern Hills to the north, down this fringe to the city's old slums and its rendezvous with the Thames at London's fallen docklands. On the far side a horizon of deciduous trees and electric pylons fades into the remnant clouds of a realm outside the map.

This is the river called Lea, and it no longer churns from bank to bank. It drifts instead down an ever-shifting orchestra of channels through the marshes it has controlled since the glaciations of ten thousand years ago apportioned its share of the land. It shall carry us the rest of our way until, like the rat from the head of the ox in the Chinese zodiac legend, we jump off just before the end to land in those docks and complete this circuit of stories.

Before the descent, the diving board. This grassy hillside is Springfield Park, overlooking the Lea from a ridge long landscaped to serve its nucleus of Springfield House. The modest white mansion is more of a lodge, one of the area's last manorial estates to survive when the customary public campaign secured it as a public park in 1905. Following the pattern a café now runs out of it, while displays in the lobby proclaim the Hackney authorities' grand strategies to manage the house and park as a community space.

To this end it offers the usual open spaces, bandstand, tennis courts, bowling green, cricket field and play areas, but beneath those it has been forced to adhere to the contours dictated by a deeper authority. Even up here the Lea sets the drumbeat. The silty clay beneath its gravels supports peculiar ecosystems and structures, among them another rare acid grassland as well as the springs that gave the park its name. To this valley have come generation after generation of

humans. Builders' and archaeologists' shovels have dug up Stone Age flints and axes, Roman pottery and coffins (bones included), and even an Anglo-Saxon log-boat from beneath the old children's playground. We are in the presence of a power, and the strings it pulls extend far beyond the limits of objective scholarship.

Where then to begin? Perhaps with its name. The Lea is one of those weighty titles which like *London* and *Thames* is tethered deep in the mists of time. Earlier generations called it the *Leye* – hence, on the far side, the settlement of Leyton – but an older form, *Luye*, persists in the name of Luton, the closest large town to its source. Ultimately it seems to glow from an ancient darkness – literally, given its plausible origins in *lug-*, a Celtic word root for 'light' or 'bright'. Is the Lea then the *bright river*, or better yet, the *river of light*? Given the Thames's own echoes from the same linguistic origins as the *dark river*, that is a tantalising juxtaposition.

These days its naming disputes are more prosaic. Locals as much as foreigners scratch their puzzled heads at whether to spell it *Lea* or *Lee*, both of which occur in official usage. The answer seems a matter of custom. In its natural capacity – the river itself, its geology and its habitats – they call it *Lea*, whereas its human works and functions are spelled *Lee*. Of the latter there have been many, of which its canalisation as the Lee Navigation is the most important.

The mightiness of this gaping floodplain is apparent when you head down into it and it makes you feel small. The river runs along the base of the slope down this western side, where it is perhaps some fifteen metres across. For now it gives over the rest of its valley to its marshes, but this will change downstream as it widens, narrows or splits, while the ground it supports morphs between solid and liquid states. It drifts gentle, smooth, but this is deceptive, for make no mistake, the Lea is not this current trickle of water but the full span of this valley in all times and conditions. If the Borough of Hackney authorities are to be believed, analysis of its wood and pollen paints memories of a much faster flow and abundant water vegetation. There must have been periods when the Lea swelled in a rage across this entire strip, devouring the dwellers along with the farms and works for which they dared think to harness it.

Like that, the Lea thrusts a corridor down London's flank with such force as to suggest a natural boundary, marking the capital off from the eastern provinces. The barrier is thick with biodiversity and geologically deep, and the more the natives have worked and modified it for their own ends – and have they ever – the more solid it has become. It would be hyperbolic, to put it mildly, to ascribe it the same magnitude as this world's epic geo-civilisational fault lines such as those

between Egypt and Sudan or North and South China, but it is still comparable in so far as it has long served as a contested frontier between distinct potential Englands. It remains an administrative boundary today, separating the inner borough of Hackney from the outer borough of Waltham Forest (and downstream, the Tower Hamlets on the inside from the New Hams on the out). But the boundary is also ethno-cultural, constraining to the one side the inheritance of the London-Middlesex amalgamation, while opening on the other on a weird foreign country: Essex.

Today Essex is an English province, its formal border pushed back by the capital's expansion and its cultural identity reduced in the minds of strangers to aggressive youngsters driving white vans. But for many lifetimes, these lands that face each other across the Lea were separate political units.

In other words – we stand on an international border.

Two opposing views frame English attitudes to the age between the collapse of Roman rule in the fifth century, and the Norman conquest in the eleventh. On the one hand it is dismissed as a *Dark Age* of warring barbarians, some temporal sea of chaos you don't need to know about because England's ordering took place before and after. On the other they find it crucially significant, locating in that period's immigration from Europe the very seed of the English people.

This is not the contradiction it appears. It arises because in some ages they have found an interest in bigging up the stories of this so-called *Anglo-Saxon* period, while at other times their preference has been to bury it. Like everyone they play with history to suit their agendas of the day. For example, in the medieval period when their great national legends of King Arthur were most popular, those presupposed different origins for the English (namely descent from Trojan refugees) and so marginalised interest in the Anglo-Saxon immigration. Conversely, from the Reformation onward, both Protestants and Catholics ransacked Anglo-Saxon history for evidence that their precursors had established English Christianity in favour of their own side of the argument. We also saw Charles I's enemies in parliament drawing on the Anglo-Saxons, dubiously, as the authors of deep political traditions that looked like themselves. This let the parliamentarians present themselves as defenders of the true inherited English way, rather than, as the royalists claimed, an anarchic revolutionary menace to it.

The least we can say is that the Anglo-Saxon period has mattered immensely to the English journey. One of its chief legacies is both its most mundane and most problematic: their use of the term *Anglo-Saxon* today to denote some imagined ethnic basis for English-speaking white people, especially their settler diasporas in North America and Australasia. This too is no accident. In medieval times, when they identified less with the Anglo-Saxon immigrants and more with the people still living here after the Romans left (around whom those Arthurian legends were built), such a usage would have been unthinkable. But as England found its strength and self-confidence, those arguments made by the civil war parliamentarians crystallised into a belief that something in their Anglo-Saxon heritage, naturally and uniquely in the world, inclined the English to freedom, democracy and good governance. With the rise of both the British Empire and the United States of America, this sense of superiority swelled in the hearts of their world-changing visions but also took on a poisonous ethnic flavour: the blood-children of the Anglo-Saxons as superior, the dark-skinned Others as inferior, and the destiny of the former to rule or wipe out the latter. Not coincidentally, in England interest in the Anglo-Saxons reached its peak in this period. To history-conscious Victorians, the moment those ancestors' sacred feet landed on this island's shores was nothing less than the beginning of English history. Anglo-Saxon history had been subverted into a chosen people myth, supplying moral justification to the racist mission of the white English-speaking empires which despite its bloody discrediting in the twentieth century still bristles in the instincts of their descendants. *Anglo-Saxon* has become a byword for a concept of whiteness utterly alien to the people it originally described.

For of course it was all a fiction. Race had not been invented yet in Anglo-Saxon times, and this is *extremely* important when attempting to understand these people. The present delusion that humans can be divided into clear-cut ethnic categories may tempt us into seeing the Anglo-Saxons, as well as the Scandinavians and Normans who entered soon after, as whole, distinct and separate groups – which would be a major obstacle to making sense of what were nothing of the sort. England emerged from a period in which migration, ethnicity and identity-creation were far more fluid and complex than the racial narrative reduces them to and in which their outcome was at no point pre-determined. Be that as it may, the very usage of the term *Anglo-Saxon* in that way tells us important things about the construction of English racism and the ways the English have misappropriated old history to imagine themselves.

In fact these immigrants brought things of far heavier consequence than imaginary blood. They gave England its name – *land of the Angles*. Their settlement patterns, rivalries, and regional governance arrangements set down population distributions as well as provincial names, shapes and administrative structures which survived the fall of the kingdoms that established them and in many cases remain virtually identical today. They dislocated Christianity but then went over to it for good – slowly, intermittently, and thus committing not only to monotheism but a) the return of political influence from Rome and b) the growth of a wealthy and popular alternative power structure in the form of the Church, with all the trouble that would make for them for centuries to come. Most importantly, they brought the main body of what would become the English language – critically one not only spoken, but written and read.

Their coming was not a simple process. It was not a matter of hordes of people from Germany surging out of the foggy sea to submerge the stragglers of Roman Britannia and build on top of their ruins, but a far more complex and colourful set of interactions that took place over several hundred years and varied too much to summarise by any single model. One importance of their literacy, as well as their monastic communities that fostered it, is that they produced some of the finest source materials any society of that time has offered to later explorers, in which pride of place is taken by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the writings of the Venerable Bede. Great caution is needed in conversing with texts like these. Most of them date from the later Anglo-Saxon period, and so comment on events as distant to them as the Reformation tumult is to the English today, most likely basing their accounts on oral traditions and filtering them through their authors' own biases and interpretations. Yet they, as well as wider written material ranging from administrative bean-counting to creative masterpieces like *Beowulf*, are precious gifts left by the Anglo-Saxons to the explorers of our time, and we should not look lightly on the givers. Bede, arguably England's first historian, was a formidable intellect who deduced among other things that the Earth is spherical, and was a masterful conductor of the written word; his works remain easy to read today so he can tell you all about how if bad things happen to your country it is your fault for not celebrating Easter on the correct day. Together with the recent boom in archaeological finds these written sources are painting an ever more detailed picture of this beguiling England-before-England, so removed from the country they know yet foundational to it in respects they cannot ignore.

As is true of most boundaries, the divide between the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods is not a solid line between different-coloured boxes on a time chart. For a start, burials of Anglo-Saxons in Roman military equipment raise the possibility that some might have come earlier as federated soldiers (*foederati*) in the Roman legions – something the Romans did to integrate their empire's conquered or peripheral peoples – while the evidence of place names suggests early Anglo-Saxon communities living under the oversight of either the Romans or, with the departure of their armies and expulsion of their magistrates around the end of the fourth century CE, the Romanised population*. Some might even have been invited as mercenaries to replace Roman muscle against other marauders like the northern Picts; the trope of them entering on such terms only to turn on their hosts instead, as in the story of king Vortigern, is popular among the period's writers.

These immigrants originated from a broad swathe of what is now Germany and Denmark, a spectrum of peoples who lived, dressed and buried their dead in different ways. Some raided and pillaged their way through what the Romans left behind here, but others appear to have been farmers, traders, or malnourished refugees escaping political violence or climate change, who in some parts were angrily rejected by the Romanised population but in others lived side by side with them. If the overall trend was the marginalisation of sub-Roman and Celtic cultures and identities by Anglo-Saxon ones, excavated burial sites give strong indication of the immigrants' tendencies to buy crafts off established artisans (who tweaked their styles to appeal to the newcomers' tastes) and to fascinate over Roman ruins. Their rise to redefine the story of this land is still far from fully understood, but the least that can be said is that it took a long time and followed no universal pattern.

By 600 CE the Anglo-Saxon settlers were coalescing into political units. Unlike the Romans before and nation-states long after, their ranges were defined more by social networks like kinship groups and war-bands than by claims to fixed

* In histories of this period it is common to see these sub-Roman inhabitants, in particular the Welsh, called the *British* or *Britons* after the Roman provincial name for this island, *Britannia*. (In contrast, for example in Bede, *English* refers to the Anglo-Saxon immigrants.) But let us steer away from these usages here so as to not confuse them with the *British/Britain* and *English/England* of the present day, which are concepts of altogether different construction.

physical territory. The most powerful of their leaders were already calling themselves kings, controlling largely rural societies by means of villas – a Roman inheritance – from where they could assess land, collect tributes in food or other resources, and assemble the locals to fight. Warring with the Romanised inhabitants or with each other for land and booty was a favoured method of convincing people to call them kings, but some of them, at least, understood that power could not be maintained by bashing people's heads in. It had to be stabilised by fostering reciprocal relationships of loyalty from below and generosity from above, be it through tribute-paying arrangements, royal intermarriage and kinship-building with conquered or allied areas, promises of protection for communities reliant on you, or bonding with your own followers over the kinds of lavish feasts popularised in *Beowulf*, splashed no doubt with insensible quantities of ale. The kings also looked for authority in dynastic lineages carried over from the continent, in Celtic and continental models of rule, and in the religious frameworks to which their claims appealed, whether centred around the war-god Woden (better known today by his Norse persona, Odin) or, later, the Christian church. Artifacts like the famous Sutton Hoo helmet, now in the British Museum, are not just battle gear but elaborately-crafted works of art: a warrior-king's authority was as much about symbolism, reputation and visual propaganda as about winning battles, and these newcomers drew much of that symbolism from the land's Roman and Celtic traditions which it is clear they knew about and understood. Threats to their authority or indeed their lives came as much from their own scheming nobles or family members – including women of course – in the ever-frothing ocean of political manoeuvring and succession intrigues that often posed far more danger than the armies of enemy kings. As their states developed these kings also emerged into more complex administrative and lawgiver roles to maintain the peace, arbitrate disputes (with jury trials among notable things to emerge), manage land and resources, and oversee trade with Europe – their competence in all of which determined their legitimacy.

Of these kingdoms, seven rose to prominence: Kent, East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, the West Saxons (Wessex), the South Saxons (Sussex), and the East Saxons (Essex). Of these the first two – Kent and East Anglia – were initially powerful, being closest to the continent and thus benefiting from early migrations and prosperous European trade links. But they and the two smaller kingdoms of Sussex and Essex would be eclipsed by the rising power of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex. The last would emerge as the final kingdom standing in the evening

of the Anglo-Saxon age and leave behind the template which those who came later would add to and subtract from to invent England.

And yet, in the hundreds of years it took to get there that outcome was never an inevitability. Between them these kingdoms' ranges of influence grew and shrank over most of modern England's territory, with multiple centres of gravity shifting back and forth so that no-one could have guessed how, or even *if*, this island's flux of political plurality would settle. In the course of it, almost all these kingdoms exerted some effect on this Lea frontier at least once.

What then of the Middle Saxons – Middlesex – whose territory has accounted for almost half our journey? Well they too seem to have arrived as a distinct people, but unlike the others they did not cohere into a strong independent state of their own. Perhaps the pressure on their location was just too great, stranded in the middle of these powerful neighbours along the hotly-contested lower Thames highway. In those contests the Lea would have been pivotal. Recall the ship dug up from Springfield Park. These were seafaring people, their ships so important to them physically and culturally that some even buried their dead in ceremonial watercraft, with Sutton Hoo the iconic example. Travel by water came much more naturally to them than travel by land, such that the Channel and the North Sea were bridges, not barriers, to the worlds of western Europe and Scandinavia. After the Thames, the fast, navigable Lea would have been their primary highway for trade, communication and troop movements in this area, and thus a vital strategic control point in any political jostling.

The main character in that jostling appears to be that understated little kingdom of the East Saxons, Essex. It is also one of the most obscure. It left few written records of its own, so explorers have had to rely on the commentary of Bede, who looked in on it as a proud Northumbrian. Perched on the Thames estuary, Essex received some of the earliest migrants, mostly from Old Saxony, and seems to have taken its shape as a kingdom during the sixth century. Its heartland was east of the Lea and contained the old Roman capital of Colchester, but it also pushed its sphere of influence west up the Thames Valley into Middlesex and beyond. That meant it held London – much reduced since its Roman heyday, but still, according to Bede, 'a trading centre for many nations who visit it by land and sea'.

Two themes stand out in the assembled shreds of the East Saxons' story. One, Bede's favoured plotline, was their conversion from their traditional polytheism to Christianity. As in all the kingdoms this was a complicated process that grew

out of the involved politics between Anglo-Saxon and sub-Roman populations, the Irish (who were never Romanised so had a different Christianity of their own), the Frankish state – precursors of France – and the Pope in Rome. In short the project appears to have been driven by the kings, who found Christianity helpful to their authority: it offered the order of imperial Roman administrative culture, a magical mystique to infuse in their clout, rituals to inspire warriors and glue political relationships in place beneath them, and power over religious sites and clergy, though before long the bishops would start to fight back. All these things, as we have seen, would reverberate trouble long into the England to come.

The other theme was the relationship with the other kingdoms, which in Essex's case heavily influenced and eventually overwhelmed it. These two strands are inseparable and run back and forth through the kingdom's life.

In its early days Essex was heavily leant on by its powerhouse neighbour across the Thames, the kingdom of Kent. Sitting astride the gateway to and from Europe, the Kentish peninsula was also settled early, by people from Jutland (now peninsular Denmark). It inherited its name from Roman *Cantium* (hence its focal town, *Canterbury*), held rich connections with the Franks, and was one of the best-recorded of the Anglo-Saxon states. Its foundation legends are among that world's highest in resolution, featuring the Romanised chief Vortigern and the brothers Hengist and Horsa – you might remember the last from Horsenden Hill. On some of the murkier pages Kent's relationship with Essex becomes the subject of one of the earliest stories of the Lea. In 527 CE it is reported that the Kentish king, Hengist's son or grandson Octa, came to blows with someone called Erchewin, who might have been a rebellious subject, or a king or founder of Essex, or all of the above – the evidence here is extremely hazy. War was declared, and one morning Octa put 15,000 soldiers onto his ships at Rochester and sailed them up the Lea, intending to put them ashore for a surprise attack on Erchewin's London power base. But the Essex man had anticipated this. Setting out to meet Octa's army, he gave battle to them right here on this stretch of the river. It was a humiliating rout for the Kentish forces, who fought desperately but were cut down in their thousands and forced to retreat. Whether or not this so-called Battle of Hackney actually took place, the pattern it stands for, of defiant Essex people holding their ground against bad neighbours out for pieces of them, would characterise most of Essex's life as an independent kingdom.

Stories like these straddle the bounds of history and mythology, but Kent's first substantially attested king, around 600 CE, was Æthelbert*. It was under him that the Kentish became the first Anglo-Saxon people to take to Christianity, under the influence of his Frankish queen and the famous mission sent by Pope Gregory I in Rome which Bede will happily tell you all about. Supposedly Æthelbert had the first St. Paul's Cathedral built, and his groundbreaking law code is the oldest surviving piece of writing in Old English.

Æthelbert also happened to be the uncle of the East Saxons' king at the time, Sabert, and it was under the Kentish king's influence that Sabert converted to Christianity. It was also at the end of that influence, when Æthelbert died in 616, that Sabert's successors threw the Pope's missionaries out of London and went back to the old religion. The far-reaching consequence of this obscure little tussle was that it left the Kentish seat of power, Canterbury, to rise to lasting religious centrality instead of Essex-controlled London. That is why the leader of the Church of England today – under the monarch, since Henry VIII – is the *Archbishop of Canterbury*, of whom the first was Augustine, leader of Pope Gregory's mission.

Perhaps this expulsion from Essex was as much an objection to Kentish meddling in their affairs as to Christianity itself, but it is possible Sabert's sons didn't hold it too much against their dad. He was a prime candidate for the occupant of one of the largest burial chambers ever discovered in this country, excavated at Prittlewell near present-day Southend-on-Sea in 2003 – in Essex, but also facing Kent across the Thames estuary. It was loaded with exotic treasures and high-quality wares, including gold-foil Christian crosses, for an individual evidently held in great regard but whose bones had sadly dissolved beyond interrogation.

About forty years later the East Saxons were persuaded to convert again, this time by missionaries from the opposite direction, Northumbria. Drawn nervously together out of preceding Anglo-Saxon and Celtic groups and resolutely Christianised (ask Bede if you want to know how), that large northern kingdom, host to the great monastery and manuscript industry of Lindisfarne and key

* The letter æ in Anglo-Saxon Old English is thought to sound like the *a* in *ash*. Note that it is pronounced differently in Latin and Norse usages, and also that as spelling was not standardised in this era you will find most of the names here spelt differently elsewhere.

events in the rise of English Christianity*, was by now a rising power under the relentless king Oswiu. Northumbria's present-day heirs are the culturally assertive provinces of Yorkshire and Northumberland, which sit on the rusting fringe of what one Tory grandee unwisely called the 'desolate north' but back then were the centre of a lively and frequently warlike world. Their difficult neighbourhood extended far north and featured the assortment which would later produce the Scots: the Picts, the kingdom of Strathclyde, and in particular the Irish-Hebridean maritime domain of Dál Riada. The East Saxons were a bit further out on their radar, but not far enough to stop them installing one of their missionaries, Cedd, as Essex's bishop. This arrangement did not last long either. The East Saxons killed their king Siegbert who they blamed for letting it happen, and a devastating plague in 664 did little to sway them toward the idea of an all-powerful and benevolent god.

The next contenders found more durable success. They were the Mercians, who from then on rose to dominate most of England for some two centuries. Emerging in shadowy circumstances out of peoples from Angeln who settled around the river Trent and the Midlands, Mercia had spent these decades ballooning in all directions under their warrior-king Penda and by the end of the seventh century was so strongly poised that nationalist mythmakers a millennium later were tempted to see it as a prototype for a united England. Bede wrote as one of their Northumbrian arch-rivals and disliked them intensely, not least for killing one of his favourite Northumbrian kings; he damned Penda and all his people as 'idol-worshippers ignorant of the name of Christ', but still grudgingly acknowledged his 'varying success'.

The Mercians knew a thing or two about borders. Their name derives from Old English *mearc*, meaning a borderland. This probably referred to their position facing west onto the domains of the Welsh, formidable Celtic rivals the Mercians fought with often. It was likely to stabilise that frontier that Offa, their mightiest king, put down this land's first known translation of imaginary lines on maps into geophysical reality in the form of the earthwork called Offa's Dyke, which still runs roughly along the present English-Welsh frontier. Even centuries later those

* Most notably the Synod of Whitby in 664, which confirmed the primacy of Roman Christian practices over the Celtic Christianity popularised by Irish missionaries. This had immense and lasting significance. It is a simplification, but one not without basis, to read it as a triumph of an authoritarian Christianity of bishops and hierarchies, over a gentler Christianity of wandering monks who still listened for the animistic whispers of the winds and waves. Do the English still pay the price today?

provinces, which are still known as the *Marches*, were ruled for a time by semi-autonomous *Marcher Lords*, and the Welsh along with Northumbria to the north limited the Mercians' expansion that way. Instead they found easier pickings in the south. In 676 they laid waste to Kent and sent that kingdom into decline.

This was the juggernaut that now found the East Saxons weakened and riven by political squabbles. Taking advantage, the Mercians managed to prise away London and Middlesex for themselves, with the Lea the likely limit of their annexation. To its west, Mercian overlordship held sway for over a century and a half, reaching a peak under Offa, incidentally another entry for that tradition of independent-minded Christians who quarrelled with the official church; in 787, with Kent still furiously resisting Mercian control, he planted a seat for his own archbishop in Lichfield to rival Canterbury. To the Lea's east, the East Saxons straggled on in Essex proper, although the Mercian kings, now controlling the London mint and its coinage – always a powerful conveyor of political imagery – pressed them into something close to a satellite.

As Offa exhibits, by this time the Mercians had gone over to Christianity too. For Bede this was a matter of great delight. It meant the Mercians, hitherto repugnant, were now merely dislikeable. They duly took their turn feeding the religion into Essex, and this time it seems to have put down robust roots. Essex's king towards the end of the seventh century, Sæbbi, joins the list of Bede's favourite rulers for his Christian devotion. Bede writes that at the end of his life this fellow gave up his kingly majesty for life in a monastery, and at his death everyone knew God approved because his sarcophagus, having been built too short for him and frustrating all attempts to bend his body into it, magically became the correct length – indeed, even allowed the introduction of a pillow. Around the same time the East Saxons' bishop put the district east of here, Barking, on the map by building an abbey there, and it must have been of some repute because Bede spends four chapters describing the incredible miracles he claims to have taken place there. Barking would later grow into one of the wealthiest monasteries in England till it was eaten by Henry VIII, but one of its towers survives, and tellingly still tops the official crest of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

On the other side Essex had neighbours in the East Angles, another set of early arrivals from Angeln and Jutland who settled the eastern fens. Resilient, well-organised, committed Christian converts and allies of the Northumbrians, they must have interacted regularly with their East Saxon neighbours, but any conflicts

with them were overshadowed by their own position right in the Mercian warpath. Submerged under Mercia's hegemony from Penda onwards, the East Angles nonetheless re-asserted their independence often and with tenacity. It would take the coming of a later, more fearsome tide to sink them.

That was further than the East Saxons made it. In 825 their Mercian caretakers, made vulnerable by their own civil strife, suffered a shattering defeat on the plains of Wiltshire. It was inflicted by the final and ultimately abiding Anglo-Saxon power, the kingdom of Wessex, which had taken root in highly disputed circumstances high up the Thames valley. Despite making only so much headway west, as attested by Cornwall's extremely un-Saxon place names today, in the 680s their brutal king Cædwalla crushed the South Saxons and molested Kent, thereby focusing the West Saxons' attentions north and east. After a prolonged struggle with Mercia their victory under king Ecgberht (or Egbert) in 825 marked a turning point in the balance of power, which they consolidated by bringing Sussex and Kent, both diminished by Mercian subjection, into their permanent control as *scir* – that is, *shires*, for this is where that term, now so romanticised and clambered around on by hobbits, originates. That done, their sights fell on Essex across the Lea. The East Saxons were in no condition for some climactic final stand and duly surrendered to Ecgberht's authority.

Merged thereon into the West Saxon domains, the kingdom of Essex came to an end. With it concluded Essex's most recent experience as an independent state. In the decades that followed the idea of a united England began to grow from a fantasy to a real prospect under Wessex's renowned reformer and war leader Alfred. But let us first give the East Saxons their due. For all the gaps in the record, theirs was surely one of the most interesting of the Anglo-Saxon states. They had a peculiar system of joint kingship, where two or more people from the ruling house often held power at the same time. On top of that, their long influence over London invites us to consider their role in sustaining and developing the eventual capital, a part of its life usually overlooked in favour of what the Wessex kings made of it afterwards. And let us not forget: the East Saxons *did* preserve their independence for some two hundred years in spite of their situation, hemmed in by larger, stronger and better-connected powers with a constant predatory interest in their holdings. Despite having to accommodate their constant interference, Essex seems to have got away without the scale of slaughters, ransacks and repressive occupations for which the worst of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms' contests are infamous. That suggests a certain skill at making well-

placed alliances and playing their enemies off against each other, as countries in such positions often learn to do.

One final sign of this was that their royal line survived the end of its kingdom. There is evidence that the last recorded king of the East Saxons, Sigeric II, resurfaced soon after as a minister in Hertfordshire, part of this contested middle area still controlled by Mercia. Who knows how long the East Saxons continued to play this game, perhaps with a view to orchestrating their way back to independence? The idea might even have been more sensible than hindsight makes it look, if not for a new set of strangers whose boats came crashing out of the mists and rammed the story of England-before-England in a new direction completely.

But that was still some years away. For now at least, the Lea had won a short break from rival powers facing off across its banks.



There are still boats here, though these appear uninterested in rearranging political borders. It is our old friends the narrowboats that populate the Lea of today, and a gregarious assembly of theirs has packed into the Springfield Marina.

Each a unique shape and combination of colours, they overflow the basin and range down the riverbanks, moored tight on each side like festive water buffalos.

Here we turn south to follow the river. To the east the swampy expanse of its valley sweeps all else aside. They call these reaches the Walthamstow marshes, a nature reserve of grass, sedge, ditches, reeds and those brown-sausage bulrushes that tell you you have come to a proper wetland.

The valley floor is devoid of buildings. Crossing points are rare. The human presence arrows straight across on railway lines or lingers back at the horizon. The boatyards give way to housing blocks, packed thick and fast as close to the floodplain as they dare. Some must go back a few ages, like the little Anchor and Hope pub, peeling but proud on the waterside, originating perhaps in service of the working canal people whose coal-stacked barges once thronged this channel. Other buildings are crawling up through swarms of scaffolding; the clangs of hammers and grind of pneumatic drills echo across the valley, always from somewhere, while more sinister incomplete tower blocks loom from their nests of towering cranes in the distant murk. Beyond the eastern limits rise the church steeple and warehouse roofs of Walthamstow, once likely a place of rest or refuge on the way into the Essex forests; Waltham is cognate with *welcome*. In another direction lie still more aged warehouses and leftover factories; what look like silos peer through the foliage. Pylons lace their cables across the sky, while an arched brick viaduct offers the trains their only means of passage. A blue plaque harks back to the story of English flight: apparently the pioneer Alliott Verdon Roe assembled his planes in these very arches, testing them over these springy, crash-friendly marshes till he achieved the first all-British flight in 1909.

The taste of these marshes is tinged with rust. There is no shaking off that derelict industrial tint, even as it frames a bunch of cows who lounge languidly in the long grass, half-concealed as chunky furry hillocks. On another patch of silted meadow a woman throws a ball around for her dog. Aside from the occasional express for Stansted Airport that hurtles across the viaduct, nothing here moves faster than the rowers who come nosing up the river. Even these are without the megaphone-toting totalitarians in motor boats who by English custom follow in their wake, superintending their every motion to public humiliation. Theirs is a different slice of the riverine world from the narrowboats', whose owners occasionally clamber onto the towpath to service their craft. A handful have had their roofs and decks lined with artificial lawns, atop one of which a young lady

sits in pensive melancholy, cuddling a chubby guinea pig who looks rather perplexed at his situation.

A strange place. So quiet, so slow – yet too languid to call it dreamlike. Industry, nature and recreation all take strides into this valley, but not one stamps its dominance; they cannot, or at least are unbothered to try. It is as though a frontier essence infuses the Lea's very wind and water, so that anything raised here will sooner or later sink or blow away. It is a no-man's-land, a long-obsolete power cable plugged into London's back which it has never really felt sure what to do with.

Yet which it has never been able to do without. In fact the Lea river valley has been a worked environment for hundreds of years, and by now must be one of the most artificially modified rivers in the country. This boundary between worlds has spawned an eventful world of its own.

Those three cows over there are the current round of a tradition that goes back at least as far as those Anglo-Saxons and reminds us that for all the arguments over imaginary lines on maps, a lot of those shifts would have passed over the heads of the ordinary people on the land. Their societies' land management systems gave rise to an antecedent of the commons: the system of *Lammas land*, named after the wheat harvest festival of Lammas Day, which in turn comes from the Anglo-Saxon English for 'loaf mass'. The idea was that from spring to the Lammas harvest, freeholders grew hay on their allotted pieces of land, but that after Lammas Day, any locals, even those who did not own land, could put their animals to pasture on it. This practice lasted here in some form all the way to the 1900s, when the locals superseded them with open public access rights, but grazing has since been re-introduced in the form of these fine bovines to help manage the marshland ecology.

While rivers remained the best ways to travel, the Lea served as a vital artery for people, goods and information. But its rich alluvial soils also brought them to it as opposed to up, down or across. As early as a thousand years ago flour mills had started to pop up along it. The Domesday Book of 1086 records eight, their waterwheels borrowing the river's power to operate their machinery. As they grew more sophisticated, the millers engineered channels, cuts and weirs to better harness this power. Then the Londoners came for its earths to build their city, opening gravel pits and brick fields to transmute its bounteous clay to the muscle and bone of their capital. They could not be relied on to be respectful. Just far enough out of London's back door, they repaid the Lea by dumping across it

the industries too toxic and foul-smelling to keep in the city: tanneries, breweries, piggeries, gin distilleries, whose stench and effluents turned the water undrinkable. They built the New River in part to bypass all this. Nor can it have been much more pleasant to travel on, but travel on it they did, ever more, to carry their grain, then the gunpowder from the Waltham Abbey factories to fight everyone from the Dutch to Napoleon and the Russians in the Crimea, and finally lots and lots of coal and raw materials for London's industrialisation. The more they came to rely on this transport, the more they dredged the river wide, dug cuts, and installed locks to improve its navigability, until in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries long stretches were canalised into the Lee Navigation. That meant negotiating not only its valley but the arguments between barge captains who wanted the water open, millers who wanted the water dammed, and water companies who just wanted the water.

The result is mercurial. No fixture they place here is permanent. As river and society move on each other, their friction morphs any activity from one form to another till it sinks into the marsh and nature rises to reclaim its place. Beyond the Walthamstow Marshes, beyond a corrugated half-cylinder that houses the Lee Valley Ice Centre skating rink, beyond a clump of fancy curvy apartments that have colonised the Lea Bridge crossing, a beguiling installation will stand for them all.

At a complex weir apparatus the river splits. The true Lea runs off to the other side of its valley, while the Hackney Cut, part of the Lee Navigation, continues down the western edge. From the middle island's plant growth an old brick wall emerges, strewn with graffiti. It comes to a gate, where the words 'MIDDLESEX FILTER BEDS NATURE RESERVE' are carved into one of its stone pillars.

To enter is to believe it. This is an enclosed corner of crowded green of a thousand shades and shapes, intersected with paths for professional dog walkers with their ten animals or hordes of primary school children on field trips to run you over. At first sight there is no mistaking this for anything other than a local nature park. Yet it does not take long to spot irregularities. The paths fall in organised lines, and here is an open circular dais. It was not walkers or rangers but large-scale integrated machinery that set the shape of this terrain. Relics of that apparatus still stick from the paths, the trees, the waterways: incongruous brick walls, huge pipes, stone conduits with receptacles for putting stuff in, and

black iron frames, some with cranks and serrated cogwheels or parts that want to connect with other parts but cannot find them. In patches the grass exposes ruined foundations. Something proletarian used to happen here.

In 1707, waterworks sprang up amidst the Lammas lands on this site to supply the local people. A sequence of these works jostled upon this confluence of the Lea's channels with an agglomeration of massive flour mills which gave their name to the Millfields area to the west. These mills were consumed in a calamitous fire in 1796, mountains of wheat and all. They were rebuilt, but by the 1820s had been taken over, demolished, and replaced with a new pump house for the waterworks, by then under the control of the East London Waterworks Company.

This was not ordinary. A project like this attests to the high quality of housing expected by the new industrial rich as they moved to suburbanise Hackney. The English had never been great when it came to clean drinking water, and in the industrial nineteenth century developed it into as appalling a state as at any time in their history as they choked on filthy polluted rivers and murderous cholera epidemics. Waterworks like these arose as a flagship *technology-will-deliver-us* response, proclaiming to overcome these problems with state-of-the-art mechanical pumping, filtration, and delivery straight into people's houses. East London Waterworks installed this site's first filter beds in 1852-3. These relics lying around today formed part of this system to trickle the water through layers of sand and gravel, thus trapping and removing impurities.

But if you want a case study in how human arrogance hobbles science and technology, look no further than the story of how the physician John Snow struggled to convince the scientific establishment of that time that cholera was spread by water-borne microorganisms, not the miasmatic mists they committed to believing in. Even after his groundbreaking study of the Broad Street outbreak of 1854 they stuck to the theories in which they had vested their careers, and sure enough, another cholera outbreak struck East London in 1866 and killed nearly four thousand people. This time no heel-dragging by the miasmatic mainstream shielded the East London Waterworks Company from exposure as the culprit to all-round public fury, with its high-tech structures like these found to have pumped contaminated water from the Lea into people's homes. The Company only made matters worse by categorically denying it only to admit they had lied four months later.

A case in its defence can also be made, in that as the medical science improved, its treatment facilities like these were at the vanguard of testing and

implementing its findings to deliver safer drinking water to London's residents. There must have been at least some honest scientists, engineers, and of course labourers associated with this site who deserve credit for their efforts and real contributions. But by the twentieth century the pressure was against the Company. Private water supplies went from a luxury to a right, while works like these came under fire for encroaching on those ancient grazing grounds and access ways. Both currents gave rise to voices that the Company's power over water should be brought under public control, and in 1903 East London Waterworks was nationalised along with London's other water companies under the Metropolitan Water Board. It would remain in public hands until 1989, when it was privatised again under our dodgy old friends Thames Water.

By then the works here were long outdated, abandoned in the 1960s in favour of a flashier treatment plant up at Walthamstow. By the time Thames Water got round to deciding what to do with this site the plants and animals were busily eating it back up, so they turned it over to the recently-created Lee Valley Regional Park Authority to manage it as a wildlife reserve. The former filter beds are now lush fen habitats that teem with water birds and silt-loving plants, as well as a heartier miasma of creeping, crawling and buzzing things that spin the revived habitat's ecological cogwheels.

Perhaps because it is Hackney, the locals have placed a creative biscuit upon this oddly-assorted ice cream. From the granite foundation blocks of the old waterworks engine house, a local sculptor, Paula Haughney, has assembled a great stone seat. More blocks stand surrounding it in a manner that evokes the stone circles of civilisations long gone by, whose mysterious monuments across the countryside have excited generations of walkers and archaeologists. Hence the name of this one, 'Nature's Throne', or in the local dialect the 'Ackney 'Enge (after Stonehenge).

Stone. That robust and enduring material, here in the centre of a valley where things come and go. It outlasts civilisations, is hard to break and does not burn down, hence why the likes of Stonehenge and other stone structures, memorably the Neolithic dwellings on the Orkney Islands, are some of the oldest human objects on this archipelago. But it is not unchanging, rather it absorbs and stores all events it bears witness to. The industrial age is recorded in this new stone circle, whose blocks still display the holes and dents of their service to the waterworks' great steam engine. They also carry engravings of nature: some fish in a river; what look like prehistoric fern fronds; a sun with a face that resembles the Incas'

Sun of May, more familiar today from the flags of Argentina and Uruguay. These were apparently carved by their sculptor, though it is easy to suppose they were part of the original architecture. The obvious suggestion is that they represent nature, but these are far-reaching symbolisms, and their wavy style, carved in stone, must take us to more unsettling places. It does not help that we explore contemporaneously with the appearance of the Tidesages of Stormsong Valley in *World of Warcraft*: priests who bless ships with their water magic but have fallen to a sinister corruption from the deep with an imagery of disturbing eyes and tentacular creatures – often carved in ancient stone – drawn from the cosmic horrors of H. P. Lovecraft. And thus we are called to wonder: what really lurks in the dark, forgotten waters where these fish swim? Is this sun-with-a-face the actual sun, or in fact some eldritch octopus, or rather decapus?

Do you, too, feel a disconcerting chill in the air? This “sun” is looking right at us. If stone absorbs history, surely it also absorbs things outside it.

Magic, for instance. Old magic. The spriggan’s laugh.

It would be best to hurry on. Now.

We have had a narrow escape. Or, it may be that exploring those filter beds has got us marked by nightmare beings beyond our comprehension, which will come and exact their inevitable due later in your life. Sorry about that.

Your best defence is to continue engaging with history. The wider you push its boundaries, the stronger you shore up the gaps within, the better equipped you are to face any sneering forces, cosmic or otherwise, who would make this a world where you do not matter. Stories make you matter. They connect you to the matter of others. Walk in this history, make it yours, and turn the tentacles of indifference into seafood.

Here are the Hackney Marshes, where another set of English tribes has sought to sink its stories into the Lea: their sporting types. The Hackney Marshes are no longer marshes but a vast green sea of football pitches, nearly one hundred in all, bobbing with goal-frames that could double as a high-intensity gymnastics course for extremely tall people.

This, too, is not a modern annihilation of the Lea’s story but part of an ever-changing recreational tradition that has always been present. The growth of East London in the eighteenth century brought its residents spilling out onto the common Lammas plots for fun and exercise. Some of it, like bird-shooting and

bull-baiting, fit into the objectionable English blood sport tales, whereas others were more innocuous like swimming, running, and eventually that working-class favourite, football. These sporty people added a complicating factor to the Lea Valley's land use disputes, likely pressuring the Lammas land's transition into more general open public land. Football pitches began to take over the marshes, all the more after German bombing in World War II decimated the East End; unexploded bombs were brought out here to be detonated, and rubble from destroyed buildings dumped into the marshes, raising the ground level.

And so since the war's end, every Sunday thousands of people descend on Hackney Marshes to put footballs through these goals and yell at referees. This will not go on forever. One day these pitches, too, will be changed by the River Lea. Perhaps by then they will play at different sports; who is to tell? Even this, after all, is not the largest sporting presence on the borderland of the Lea. That status goes to a far mightier set of monoliths downriver which we will have to confront before this day is done.

The river itself drifts on, unworried if not unconcerned. Across it are the frontier apartments of Homerton, once another popular haunt for the Dissenters of Hackney with its roots in an older rural estate – in the tongue of the Anglo-Saxons, the farmstead of a woman called Hūnburh. That is not a name you hear so often these days, and brings us back to that time when England had yet to arise from the shift of immigrant cultures. Beware, though, a more recent immigrant community which has seized control of the world at our feet: the fearsome *Heraclium mantegazzianum* or Giant Hogweed plant, which like marauding hordes of old arrived from Central Asia in the nineteenth century and whose oppression has set the locals so trembling with fear that they have erected a bright orange fence against its legions of hungry leaves, along with a sign: WARNING – DO NOT TOUCH – Treatment in progress'. Technically they call it a monocarpic perennial herbaceous relative of the carrot, which probably means it wants to eat anyone who touches it.

But it is a different East London settler plant that sends us back to the Lea's time as an international border: an older arrival with diarrhoea-inducing black berries by the name of *Sambucus ebulus*. It is better known as the Danewort, because in English folk legend it only grows on battlefields rich in the blood of Danish people.

Denmark. They too have a case to answer for their share in Europe's present hostility to refugees, what with laws to seize their valuables and drag their own

citizens to court for assisting them. Let us invite them to pause and remember a time when they, the Danes, were the migrants, and not consistently respectful ones either.

We are on their border here. In a nearby alternate timeline, everything to the east of the Lea is Danish sovereign territory. Should the English respect it? Should their Anglo-Saxon ancestors have? They did not draw it here by asking nicely and making contributions to society, at least not initially.

In the year 793, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that ‘terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people’. It speaks of ‘immense flashes of lightning’ and claims that ‘fiery dragons were seen flying in the air’, followed immediately by a ‘great famine’. But the worst was yet to come. As if out of nowhere, ‘the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God’s church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter’.

Heathen, in the context at hand, is a generic term by which Christians of this land referred to non-Christians. There was nothing generic about these raiders. Out of the chilly North Sea fog hurtled an axe, to lodge bloodily into the unsuspecting backs of this island’s Anglo-Saxon settlers who had been too busy fighting each other to have a clue what was coming.

The Lindisfarne monastery off Northumbria was at the cutting edge of Anglo-Saxon civilisation: the sacred engine of their aspiring Christianity and old stomping ground of their pioneer St. Cuthbert, a treasure house and unrivalled foundry of literature – and they had left it utterly unprotected. Its bloody destruction in 793 sent shockwaves to the far ends of Europe, unnerving even Charlemagne’s Frankish court as they looked up in long, hard reassessment of this terror from the icy north. Soon they too would have to pay it its due. But for now, it was the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic kingdoms of the British Isles that would feel the burn as Scandinavia exploded onto the world stage.

Lindisfarne had been the most destructive event so far in a fast-multiplying pattern of violent incursions. Typically the raiders did not come to settle but rather to kill, to burn, to plunder treasures and take people off as slaves. In 795 they hit Britain’s other fabled island monastery, Iona in the Scottish western isles, where they slaughtered over eight hundred monks. As libraries burned and blood soaked into stone, the record of the following decades in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* begins to fill with references to the violence of these ‘heathen men’, at

times identifying them specifically as the Danish. From 865 on it gives them its undivided attention. They had landed in force, and this time were here to stay.

So began England's experience of a phenomenon usually abstracted as a storm of beards, axe blades and baying berserkers known as the Vikings. Where that name comes from is the subject of many theories, but its very mention opens up a world of dramatic stereotypes in which the horned helmets, which they likely did not wear, are only the first of many elements that deserve healthy scepticism. The real history is every bit as startling as the romance. These were people who got on their longships and launched across an astonishing breadth of territory, and by a mix of blades, trade and ideas made landfall upon faraway realms and imaginations which they have never really left. Few peoples have shown such staying power as these Scandinavians whose warrior mythos resounds a thousand years later even as the world they sailed from moved on in favour of an image of compassionate social welfare and international peacebuilding (with a bit of whale blood and embarrassing xenophobia rushed under the carpet). The epic sagas and myths of giants, world trees, ancient runes and overflowing horns of mead thunder through the literature and popular culture of today with a power to excite, even in long and glorious civilisational undeath, which surely must set living religions drooling with envy.

That might be heartwarming news for any Viking spectres around, but it is a pain when it comes to trying to understand who they actually were. Contrasting pictures of these people replace each other in accordance with the interests and fashions of the day. The major tension is between their portrayal as raiding-and-pillaging terrors on the one hand; and the revisionist rendition of gentler, peace-loving Vikings on the other, who did Europe a favour by liberating the capital hoarded by greedy Bible-pushing Christians in their monasteries, farmed and traded alongside the peoples they discovered, enriched them with furs and ivories and marvellous stories, and whose warriors and settlers, male or female or otherwise, of course obtained consent before the sex with the locals that produced the many peoples of part-Viking descent that went on to shape a great arc of the world.

That arc at least is fact, and its range is remarkable. The Danes' arrival in England was only part of the opening stage of the great Scandinavian odyssey. Other Vikings from Norway clashed with the Gaelic peoples north of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and settled right around the British archipelago in Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man; it would be some half a millennium

before their *jarls* (cognate with the English *earls*) gave up those islands to a unified Scotland. Others settled on Ireland, most of whose major cities, including Dublin, originated as Viking harbours. They arrived in northern France and turned it into the 'Land of the Northmen' – Normandy – which enters this story later. But why stop there? They raided and traded along the French, Spanish and Portuguese coastlines and right up the Mediterranean under its Islamic ascendancy, making it all the way to the Byzantine Empire and Muslim Arabia. In the other direction, Swedish Vikings penetrated into Eastern Europe and sailed down the great rivers of the Eurasian steppe as far as the Black Sea and the Caspian; there they were called Varangians, and became integral to the life of the rich Slav trading cities like Kiev and of those who would later be called the Russians. Most tantalisingly of all, and in circumstances still not entirely clear, they crossed the unforgiving Atlantic Ocean, settling Iceland, where they stayed; Greenland, where they struggled and eventually left (but went back for in the eighteenth century); ultimately getting as far as what their sages called *Vinland* – most likely Newfoundland in what is now Canada – where they encountered indigenous people, probably ancient Inuit, whom they called *Skræling*. Anyone with a reach like that is going to be complicated, and it is likely that most portrayals, from the cuddliest to the bloodiest, contain at least some traces of truth.

The least necessity is to seek the Scandinavians' own perspective on who they were and why they set forth across the world, and to recognise them for the complex societies they were. What drove their raids and explorations is much debated. Population pressures, cultural norms and hunger for trade all figure in the theories, which remind us that all the lamentation of the terrors they wrought in England come from Christian, Anglo-Saxon perspectives, and it may in fact not have been so one-sided if they were getting provoked by aggressive Christians like Charlemagne invading their lands and trying to force a foreign religion on them. A story in one of their sagas, the *Tale of Ragnar's Sons*, tells of their invasion of Northumbria as a revenge drama, wherein their warrior hero Ragnar was brutally murdered in a snake pit by the Northumbrian king, compelling his sons to attack that kingdom to avenge him.

We should consider the political situation in the Viking homelands. Both Denmark and Norway were beginning to coalesce into unified states at this time, catalysed by Christian military and cultural pressures from the south (the irony being that it was the Vikings' very sallies forth, and the European immersion it put them in, that brought Christianity back in the other way: both the Danes and

Norwegians converted, with considerable bloodshed, over the tenth and eleventh centuries.) Their fragmented and bellicose mini-states often held only theoretical loyalty to central governments which, like imperial Britain a few ages later, might have preferred to see their peoples' raiding and plundering energies hurled out against the world rather than shut in to ransack their own national house. For the raiders themselves, foreign shores might have offered a chance to get away from it all, or to build up resources, followers or power bases that could strengthen their influence back home. The raiding armies that fell upon the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were thus not a monochrome blob of beards, but a diverse mix of people from different homelands, with different loyalties, in search of different things. Many would have already spent many seasons campaigning here or elsewhere in Europe, perhaps even spending more time outside Scandinavia than in it.

Back on the eighth-century Lea, the kingdom of Essex had fallen. If the East Saxons were unhappy about this, it soon might have looked like the best thing that ever happened to them. They were no longer a power centre on the east coast. That meant they would be spared the main attentions of the new and enlarged Viking fleets now bearing down on this island. The great Anglo-Saxon powerhouses would not.

In 851, according to the *Chronicle*, a massive Norse force of three hundred and fifty ships struck up the Thames. They seized Canterbury and London for the first time and sent the Mercian king who had clung to the area fleeing for his life, before the Wessex armies swung by and drove them out in the bloodiest Anglo-Saxon-versus-Viking clash yet. Subsequent Scandinavian raiding crews began to winter in Kent, staying ever longer periods. They made peace with the locals by promising not to raid and pillage them in exchange for bribes, then raided and pillaged them anyway. This was a prelude to the Scandinavian storm which finally broke out in 865 when the Danish-dominated coalition of what their trembling enemies would call the Great Heathen Army made landfall in East Anglia.

At first they were friendly to the locals, and were granted (or bought off with) horses by the East Anglian king, Edmund. This let them move through his territory to their true target, Northumbria, which they caught off guard in its own regional rivalries and utterly tore to pieces. Over 865-6 they killed both its claimant kings, slaughtered an uncounted number of people, conquered the great fortress of York, and proceeded to carve up the fallen kingdom between their *jarls*.

From there the Danes moved on Nottingham to have a go at Mercia, but changed their minds and wheeled back to attack East Anglia. Edmund, perhaps

sensing that these were not reliable partners in peace, had turned his kingdom against his former guests and in 869 they brutally murdered him for his trouble. The only contemporary source, the *Chronicle*, provides no further details, though later accounts suggest the killers to have been the Viking commanders Ivar the Boneless and his brother Ubba. But the Christians made Edmund a saint and a martyr for it, so in best martyrological tradition, legends took shape of him suffering some combination of getting tied to a tree, beaten, whipped, shot at with spears till he resembled a hedgehog, beheaded, dragged to death, and called discourteous names, if not necessarily in that order. The monastery town where his body was taken was renamed after him and is still called Bury St. Edmunds. Whatever the truth of his fate, the kingdom of East Anglia soon followed Northumbria into political oblivion beneath the flames of its burning monasteries. In its centres like Peterborough, says the *Chronicle*, the invaders ‘brought it about so that what was earlier very rich was as it were nothing’.

The entire eastern slice of the country had now been swallowed into the Danish sphere of influence. This brought it to the doorstep of Wessex, so recently the Anglo-Saxon world’s ascendant unifier-in-waiting. The West Saxons had dodged the worst of the invasions so far but all of a sudden the Thames was an ice-crusting blade directed straight at their heart. Their doom was inevitable, to follow the rest of their kin into the ground beneath the remorseless Scandinavian steamroller, all the more so when in 874 it rolled over once-mighty Mercia to leave Wessex the last of the Anglo-Saxon powers in its way. Steadily reduced to peasant guerrillas floundering through the far swamps of Somerset, all their remaining hopes were placed in their new king, Alfred, a bookish little man who spent much of his time racked by pain from chronic illness (a study from the 1990s has suggested Crohn’s disease). Hardly, it seemed, the invincible warrior-hero type who could halt the bearding rampage to victory.

Perhaps in another universe he and his kingdom were swept aside like all the others, and we are now having this conversation in the premier international language of Danish. But in this timeline, Alfred would administer the Saxons and Vikings alike a lesson in the stuff of leadership. We cannot say for sure, through the glare of the English’s adoration, how much is true of their legends of one of the only two kings on this island they have ever called ‘the Great’ – that he proved a divinely-inspired visionary, master strategist, shrewd political operator and nation-builder, a rigorous and open-minded reformer of the laws, the justice system, education, taxation, religion and the English language, a magnificent

hunter, and on top of it all, that rarest of things at that level: an all-round decent and gentle human being.

Consider that. Whatever their image of Alfred says about him, what does it say about *them*, the English, that they afford him an aura of friendly warmth like no other of their leaders since? And why is his profile, as supposedly their national founder for goodness's sake, so much humbler in the English memory than the harder, noisier, more bellicose likes of Tudors, Victorias and Churchills?

The story goes that after years of horrendous fighting left Wessex teetering on the brink of annihilation, Alfred pulled a makeshift army out of the swamps and in 878 delivered a shocking and total defeat to the forces of the Viking leader Guthrum upon the Salisbury Plain. To be fair, this was a reduced opponent. By now large sections of the Great Heathen Army had satisfied themselves with settling down in their conquered territories or going home with their spoils. Nonetheless the West Saxons' victory put the pendulum into reverse. Guthrum himself was so astonished by whatever war-god of Alfred's had proved superior to his own – or perhaps more to the point, found political advantage in accepting said war-god to gain Anglo-Saxon trust in the ensuing peace settlement – that as part of that settlement he agreed to become a Christian, allowing Alfred to baptise him in person and become his godfather.

That is one reason that if you type 'Scandinavia' into Wikipedia today, the highlighted part of the map does not include the British Isles. It might have. And there was still every chance it would. Not-yet-England was now partitioned into Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian halves, and the arm-wrestle between them had only begun. It would go on for two hundred years.

At times they would hold to a negotiated peace, such as at the outset when both Alfred and Guthrum honoured their peace treaty and fell back to consolidate their territories. The Danes' half became known as the *Danelaw*, and to give the raiders' children their due, much of it experienced a healthy revival. They often relied on the existing administrative structures and respected the existing Anglo-Saxon and Christian culture, much as the Anglo-Saxons had had to with those left by Rome, mixing in their own rather than burying all beneath it. Northumbria in particular experienced a flourish in trade and literature centred around a bustling York, known in this period as *Yorvik* and plugged by the Vikings into their vast international trade network; its other end reached into Byzantine and Islamic lands and up the Silk Road to China.

But too much was at stake for this arrangement to last. On one side, political ambitions in the Danelaw, and the increasingly powerful kings in Scandinavia who inherited it, set sights on renewing their conquests. On the other, Alfred made use of the time he had bought to reorganise the West Saxon army and administration, assemble a navy, and put up garrisoned fortifications – the *burhs* – to prepare for the inevitable next round. Many of these *burhs* were resurrected towns which became thrumming centres of diverse manufacturing and trading, intellectual pursuits, and royal politics, most notably Wessex's core city of Winchester. In 886 Alfred came to reawaken London, and in the words of the *Chronicle*, 'all the English race turned to him'.

For those English who look to this period, this is a narrative juncture. 'All the English' – that is, not just Wessex. Alfred was the first king of the first unified Anglo-Saxon political entity with a claim to descent into the kingdom of England, and he dug his claim to this office not simply out of military power but a far robuster social base by developing justice, education, widespread literacy and the English language, a programme he seems to have considered of the utmost importance. He recruited scholars, made the pursuit of wisdom a condition for holding noble office, distributed books and study materials, and translated and wrote a great deal himself, with the original *Chronicle* one likely output of his reign – that is, an attempt to fashion a shared history for all the peoples under Wessex rule. This was nation-building literally by the pen (or rather stylus) over the sword, slowly writing an imagined English people and territory into reality.

Yet make no mistake: across the Lea was an alternative England, a Danish one, and in the 880s there was no reason one or the other might be more legitimate or likely to prevail. After Guthrum passed into peaceful rural retirement his Scandinavian successors launched new attacks on Alfred's kingdom, and in 894-5 their ships sailed right by where we stand. A detachment of Viking raiders fresh from a bout of harrying the Welsh kingdoms 'pulled their ships up the Thames and then up the Lea', says the *Chronicle*, and 'made a fortification by the Lea, 20 miles above London stronghold', where they killed four *thegns* or Anglo-Saxon officers who led forces to try and dislodge them. Getting wind of this, Alfred sent reinforcements who dug themselves in around the Viking position so the raiders could not disrupt the locals from gathering in their corn harvest. 'Then one day', the story goes, 'the king rode up along the river and looked to see where the river might be obstructed so that [the Vikings] could not bring out their ships. And then they did so: made two fortifications on the two sides of the river'.

The *Chronicle* does not elaborate, but we can suppose these works involved the cutting of drainage channels to lower the Lea's water level, thus making it unnavigable to the Danish ships. If so it would have been a stroke of tactical genius worthy of that later legend of the English they call Doctor Who, as well as another entry in their long tradition of modifications to the Lea valley. The *Chronicle* is unambiguous about the outcome: just as Alfred intended, the Danes found their ships stranded upriver and were forced to abandon them, backing off over land with Alfred's army in hot pursuit and eventually scattering back into the Danelaw. The discarded vessels made an excellent prize for the Londoners, who took for themselves those still seaworthy and broke up the rest for parts.

Encounters like this would recur in the long back-and-forth that followed. We need not concern ourselves with its details now, for we have obtained what we sought from these people: a sense of an England that was not yet England, that might as easily have become any of innumerable possible Englands or no England at all, as peoples of multiple origins, cultures, religions and identity groups near and far contested its ingredients. If the Lea is not imaginable as a frontier between such parties today, hopefully it is again, now, after this detour through its past. The ability to imagine it like that is valuable, whether you aspire to hold England together or split it apart once more.

Over the tenth and eleventh centuries the pendulum swung both ways as ferocious warfare alternated with breathers of relative peace. At no point was the outcome predictable; both the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian blocs came close to permanent dominance over the island only to let it slip again.

Alfred's immediate descendants got the better of the Vikings. His son Edward absorbed the remnants of Mercia off them, which landed in the capable hands of his (Alfred's) daughter Æthelflæd. When his grandson Æthelstan pushed on into Danish Northumbria, it was the closest anyone had yet come to unifying the island, minus its Celtic parts, into an English kingdom – and significantly, the first time a southerner had taken control of the northern powerhouses. Some English therefore see Æthelstan rather than his grandfather Alfred as the first true English king, and indeed he was the first to adopt the title of *rex Anglorum*, 'King of the English'. But it was not to last. Repeat invasions re-established Scandinavian rule in parts of Northumbria and Mercia, whose ambitious local interest groups, power bases, and recent memories of independence made the contest far more complex

than one ethno-cultural group against another. Though the rulers of Wessex often reconquered them, the same forces were liable to break that kingdom into divided spheres of authority. This was political Brownian motion; there was no English destiny yet.

Then in the 990s the Vikings returned with a vengeance, not so much raiders on their own initiative this time but government-sponsored forces of the emerging Danish and Norwegian states, whose ambitions for England were as much about a tangled contest with each other as anything else. The upshot was a surging Danish empire under Sweyn Forkbeard which assumed control of Norway after the Battle of Svolder in 1000, in the process unifying the Norwegians for the first time. It also drew in parts of Sweden, then crossed the North Sea and set about battering the Anglo-Saxons back across England. Now it was the turn of a Scandinavian England to peak under Sweyn's son Cnut – also 'the Great' and 'King of England'. Having succeeded to power Cnut got hold of the weakened but by no means supine Wessex lands and set about building this Danish England as his favoured part of a sprawling North Sea Empire which, had it lasted, might have sent the story of all Europe in a radically different direction. But this too fell apart after Cnut's death, the centrifugal pressures of disgruntled Norwegians and political manoeuvring by powerful Wessex families being too energetic to hold together. The Anglo-Saxons had a final period in the sun under Edward the Confessor, but by now it was a blotted, blistering sun which flashed with murderous intrigues and power struggles among families newly risen to influence under Cnut. The king had often been on the other side of the North Sea and thus relied on them to hold together what was by then such a mess of Germanic and Viking cultural inheritances, wrapped around Roman and Celtic frameworks, that we can barely disentangle these parts from the whole they became.

Still, that whole was now a real thing, a durable core of institutions and rituals that people could attach their lives to, with a name, *England*. What that name signified had become robust enough to pass reasonably intact through this revolving door of ownership. Still unresolved, by the 1060s there were four claimants to it. Two were Scandinavians: Sveyn II of Denmark and Harald III 'Hardrada' of Norway. In a turning of tables Norway now controlled Denmark, but after the two patched up and recognised each other's independence – for now – Sweyn held back to allow his Norwegian rival, a brutal military genius hardened by warfare across Eastern Europe who had well earned his epithet of 'Hard Ruler', to stake his claim to England. The third claimant was Harold Godwinson of

Wessex, and despite his fate to go down as the loser in the most famous battle in English history, this man was no mug. An earl from the ambitious Godwine family, the first among those to whom the office of king was now haemorrhaging power (with the ever-defiant earls of Northumbria and Mercia among the others), Harold made his name as a ruthless yet capable general by bloodying the Welsh in their impregnable snowy mountains and emerged as a hard-as-nails figure at the top of a precarious balancing act of assertive regional nobilities and unvanquished Celtic bad neighbours. But it was the fourth claimant, not the Anglo-Saxons or Scandinavians, who would seal the English story in his own culture's image.

The Normans of William the Conqueror were no more a random horde than the Vikings or Anglo-Saxons. They too had their story, the product – not the sum – of a Scandinavian and French equation. At the time the Great Heathen Army was setting off on its rampage round England, another Viking army had got to work on France, where they sacked towns, took slaves, and plundered treasure from the grandchildren of Charlemagne's Frankish empire. Extorting huge payoffs only to keep returning for more, by the turn of the tenth century they were besieging Paris, at which point the Franks had enough and worked out a peace with them. They granted these Vikings permanent settlement around their north coast, henceforth the Duchy of Normandy – again, 'Land of the Northmen'. The theory was that they would submit to the French as vassals, to be "their" Vikings parked in the way of the unrulier Northmen beyond. What actually happened was that the reaction between settlers and French inhabitants produced a new culture in its own right. The Normans were a militaristic, French-speaking, feudally administered, politically driven society of horse-riding warriors and priests who built daunting castles and churches, sometimes indistinguishable, and swiftly surpassed their French suzerains in power.

It was out of this intimidating structured chaos that people like 'William the Bastard'* emerged, and in case the English tell that story as though it is all about themselves, we should remember that the Normans reached far beyond Britain. Drawing perhaps on the explorative impulse of their Viking forebears, the Normans plunged into the Islamised Mediterranean. They crusaded in the Middle East, participating in the blood-spattered establishment of the Crusader States

* 'Bastard' in this period's usage meant he was born to parents not in a socially-recognised marriage relationship. Yet its modern colloquial sense might as well have applied because nothing less was required of him to tear through the murderous conspiracies and power struggles that surrounded him in youth.

and the conquest of Cyprus. They also took southern Italy and Malta off the Muslims, and created a lasting Norman kingdom in Sicily and North Africa which at its best, for a short-lived but serious few years before politics and prejudice overtook it, grew into a thriving multicultural crossroads with unique and magnificent architecture and cutting-edge scholarship to show for it. More darkly, in 1402-5 Normans began the colonisation of the Canary Islands, later completed by the Spanish. This was the first European colonial extermination of indigenous peoples outside their continent and the beginning of the genocidal tradition that has shaped the world of today.

That these lords and knights were still identifying as Normans, long after the French reabsorbed their homeland, signifies the pride and distinction of the culture which by the 1060s had set its sights squarely on England. The manoeuvrings of Wessex kings and nobles had already drawn the Normans deep into their affairs for quite some time. Their leader William was quite possibly sincere then when he manipulated an oath by Harold to make the case that he, the Duke of Normandy, was the one with the legitimate claim to rule the land and people of England – that is, not the ‘Conqueror’ that the English prefer to call him.

This was never a dispute that would be settled with handshakes, so we can let the *Chronicle* bring us to its conclusion, starting with the obligatory omens that people always seem to decide they noticed in years that turn out important. In this case it was ‘a sign such as men never saw before...(and) which some men call the ‘haired’ star’ – or as it is known today, Halley’s Comet. A subplot then built up between Harold, now king, his estranged brother Tostig and the earls of Northumbria and Mercia, which came to a head when ‘King Harald [III, a.k.a. Hardrada] from Norway then came by surprise north into the Tyne with a very great raiding ship-army’. There ensued an atrocious war between the raiding, slaughtering Norwegians and Harold’s pair of obstinate northern earls, till Harold himself ‘came upon the Northmen by surprise, and encountered them beyond York at Stamford Bridge with a great raiding-army of English people; and there was that day a very hard fight on both sides. There were killed Harald [Hardrada] and Earl Tostig, and the Northmen who remained there were put to flight...and thus variously perished, so that there were few survivors, and the English had possession of the place of slaughter’. The last best chance for a Scandinavian future for this island had gone. Harald’s old rival Sweyn II in Denmark would give it a few more attempts, but after that the Scandinavians turned away to fight out

their own civil strife over Christianity, politics, and the shapes and relationships of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Sorting that out took until 1905.

Yet by drawing Harold's army north, the Norwegians had by chance left England's southern flank exposed just as 'William came from Normandy...and as soon as they were fit, made a castle at Hastings market-town'. The exhausted Anglo-Saxon warriors, having been pulverised through the fight of their lives by the Norwegian master warmonger, were force-marched back down the country to face down William's Normans on the Senlac ridge. Shattered as they were they would surely not last long, but 'Nevertheless the king fought very hard against [William] with those men who wanted to support him, and there was a great slaughter on either side'. It lasted all day, with respectable tactical exchanges of shield walls and cavalry charges which really looked as though they could have taken the outcome either way. However, 'There were killed King Harold, and Earl Leofwine his brother, and Earl Gyrth his brother, and many good men. And the French had possession of the place of slaughter, just as God granted them because of the people's sins'.

This is what has gone down in English convention as the true birthday of their nation. A contradictory England, somehow of Anglo-Saxon stock yet only truly born when that stock was drenched in a Norman tide.

In unmissable ways, the Normans left their mark. They hammered in place their massive castles and churches, colonial instruments in both symbol and function; national icons like Windsor Castle, the Tower of London and Durham Cathedral are all poster cases. They injected the Old English language with a transforming infusion of Norman French, joining its Germanic and Scandinavian components in patterns that persist into English today.* French names became popular, like Henry, Eleanor, and of course William. And they made drastic reforms to the governance and land ownership structure, not merely seizing land and offices, political or religious, and parcelling them out for hereditary ownership to William's loyal minions from Normandy, but also crushing that hierarchy from the sides, turning it into a much more narrowly regimented ladder of relationships locked tight to the king. It would be too much to say that *all* the English's miserable problems of class are therefore the Normans' fault, but their land grab was

* For example: why is it that livestock animals have one name as living creatures – *chicken, cow, sheep* – but another as meat – *poultry, beef, mutton*? The former words are from Old English (i.e. Germanic or Norse) and the latter from French, perhaps reflecting how they were farmed on the English side of this Norman state and shipped over to dinner tables on the French side.

certainly brutal and oppressive and provides an easy target for those who want a juncture to point at for where it all went wrong.

Except, it was not a clean break. No reset button had been pressed. Norman French rearranged the Old English language, rather than replacing it. A church rebuilding movement had been underway anyway, including with Norman architectural influence, as in the most obvious case of Edward the Confessor's Westminster Abbey. And for the small farmers who made up the vast majority of the population, perhaps even the very individuals who worked this Lammas land on the Lea, little probably changed. Far more change was yet to come. This wasn't yet the England the English know.

The Normans controlled an ill-defined mess of territories on both sides of the Channel, theoretically united but in practice a minefield of alternative visions and rebellions regional interests. William's response covered them in so much gore that perhaps the Norman conquest's most enduring legacy would be that culture of violence as the first answer to problems. He also set the tone for England's rivalries – both within, as when his nigh-genocidal 'Harrying of the North' sealed in place the long-lasting tradition of stubborn and assertive northerners getting fucked by southern centres of power (if you want to feel a chill up your spine, look at a map of the distribution of estates labelled as 'waste' in the Normans' famous Domesday land survey); and without, in that his and his heirs' encounters with the Norse, Cornish, Welsh, now-unified Scots and supposed overlords the French went little better and set confrontations with neighbours as a defining mechanism of Englishness for centuries to come.

In doing this they dragged England back onto the continent, a European peninsula once more. Within a further hundred years a chaos of civil strife and dynastic dealings brought the Angevins of what is now western France into the Anglo-Norman nation, which a marriage alliance engorged even further into an obviously unsustainable mass as large south of the Channel as north of it. What might have come of its inherent tensions is anyone's guess had it not set the Norman-English off on their historic rivalry with the French, who were by no means entitled by destiny to what are now their western *départements* any more than the English were to their own borders. Notably even the Umayyad Caliphate, the second Muslim empire, governed from Syria, had made it up into Aquitaine from North Africa before being stopped by the Franks in Bede's time, and would dominate al-Andalus – now known as Spain – for hundreds of years yet. It took further centuries of on-and-off warfare and constant border changes before in

short, the French drove the English back across the Channel, ending all prospect of an English geographic identity which straddled both sides of it and propelling their shattered consciousness in the opposite direction: that of the *island country*, which only begins to make sense from then on. That conflict, in other words, was the excruciating crucible from which both countries' sense of nationhood was forged, so volatile that there was no telling what shape it would leave either of them in. As it happened, out of infinite possibilities, it was roughly the shapes they have kept since.

Infinite possibilities. That is why all this matters now. How imaginary, how contingent on uncontrolled gusts of history these borders are, and yet how many people imagine them to be absolute, as though the sun itself soldered them into the soil? Behold the Lea valley, as perfect a shape for an international border as any river, and which if not for the dice rolls of history, they might as well think of today as a bitter frontier like the Amur or the Rio Grande. No – no state's territory is pre-ordained. Each is worked out. None is entitled to it. None is permanent.

Think of all the alternative Englands its people might know today if one or another skirmish or rebellion had worked out differently, or for a different policy decision about what language to write a textbook in, what bribes to pay, or which royal family's heirs to sleep with. Think of all those alternative Englands it did go through before settling, still uncertainly, still in contest with itself, for this one.

By keeping our cameras at the top end of that political process, we have skipped over the most important thing. Countless lives were ruined by these conflicts, abuses, and dodgy dealings that went into deciding who should control England and where it begins and ends. Most of those victims would have been people too busy with living day to day to feel much difference, or frankly give much of a damn, about whether a Norman, a Scandinavian or an Anglo-Saxon sat atop the network of magistrates and tax collectors who injected the same nuisance into their lives whatever the language they did it in. England's current persecutions based on ideas of immigration status, though noxiously charged with the later invention of race, are a distant perpetuation of this same process: the destruction of real lives for the sake of imaginary lines on maps. And that can only suggest one thing: that today's English feel just as insecure as their Norman, Norse and Anglo-Saxon forebears about who they are.



The Lea, then, both is and is not an international border. It has been both, and borders are at any rate all in the mind. But people act upon their minds, and so their borders' inherent impermanence has sunk deep through the silt and clay of the riverbed. Even now, different Englishnesses phase in and out here.

By a footbridge two young men are testing a drone, flying it up to annoy a woman walking across with her bicycle. Smiling smugly down at them all from its perch by the B112 Homerton Road bridge is another cluster of high-end apartment boxes, ritzy in the red and yellow cladding of what we might call Gentrification Classic style. This too is a new master which has replaced the old but repurposed what it left. A sign identifies it as Matchmakers Wharf, and just as England's name makes a claim to continuity with the Angles, this one claims these apartments as spiritual successors to the Matchbox miniature vehicle toys that rolled out of the Lesney Products factory on this site. The destruction of English industry in the 1980s swept its production far away to Chinese shores, but the present incumbent builds on its memory. Who will these apartments give way to in turn?

The tinge of rust sharpens on the tongue. Under the industrial revolution the Lea valley became a hotbed of factories like Lesney's, drawn to London's Wild East where land was flat and cheap, workers could be plonked into waterlogged slums,

and coal for fuel supplied by canal barge with not a toll, regulation or maintenance requirement to worry about. Never mind that they were operating right outside the City's back door; the tycoons might well have understood the Chinese proverb that 'heaven is high and the emperor is far away'. The workers and their families paid the price by choking on a Lea clogged with their pollutants: sulphur, solvents, oils, inks, paints and animal fats. As late as 1901 these were killing one in every five babies born in this area before the age of one.

The river swallowed these toxins till the sectors secreting them ran out of steam. The corroded frames of industrial England buckled, fell and sank beneath its reeds. In their place came new unsavoury types: property speculators and amenable local authorities, wiggling their claws behind the busloads of football and water sports enthusiasts as they calculated what profits might come from quarrying out the Lea's gravel and putting down huge sports facilities, as well as people who saw in the valley a convenient dumping ground for bombed rubble from World War II or superfluous railway ballast. In response to such threats the Save the Marshes Campaign materialised to fight them. Once more it was local activism which forced reins on the exploitation of the natural landscape, with the result that much of the Lea's marshes are now protected as nature reserves. Even these habitats – the Walthamstow Marshes, the Middlesex Filter Beds, and here the Wick Woodland in the shadow of Matchmakers Wharf – are a managed interplay of human hands with the will of the river. Their cherished biodiversity does not come easily to stability in a zone in such constant flux, and would be overwhelmed by the robuster trees if left unchecked.

The A12 trunk road soars northeast on a pair of flyovers, binding into the city's orbit the fallen kingdom of East Anglia. Its underbelly has been taken over as the makeshift studios and workshops of what seems a subset of barge people of a creative bent, or if not, the lair of some evil genius in the process of building a golem out of the chairs, shelves, shopping trolleys, ladders, paint cans, knickknacks and miscellaneous everythings that pack this space to the ceiling. Gaudy graffiti splashes across what stretches of wall and pillar have not been smothered out of sight by the fastening of batteries, drinks cans, spray canisters, circuit boards and woofer speakers, in whose depths drowns a forlorn little sign, placed by the Canal and River Trust, which begs the locals to 'Keep it tidy' as it is devoured whole.

From the gaps in the bootheel of class oppression surge the springs of dissent, invention and self-expression, and this hideaway is still in Hackney's sphere of

influence. Do all the machines that found no place in the dystopias of industrial England, or the aftermath of its dismantling, escape down the Lea to wash up here and await their chance for revenge? What plots are hatched and gadgets fashioned beneath this subterranean mountain range of furniture when the sky is dark and the searchlights veer elsewhere? As so often occurs in Japanese mythology, might each of these articles, from the grandiosest peeling sofa to the meekest cracked LED, have its own soul, made vengeful or mischievous by its callous discarding? How cold must seethe the rage of real matter reduced to the meaninglessness of a commodity, then for added insult, never consumed, or consumed too fast and thereafter dead to that usurper universe, the economy? Perhaps in the dead of night an unearthly haze dots the skies above the Lea valley as they return to life, a phantasmagorical parade of objects that bound and cackle up the river to rattle the bones of the City businesspeople, then at the break of dawn, settle back in this underpass as their spirits return to the other side.

Is the Lea then a passage between the worlds of matter and spirit? Like nations, those, too, are of each other, not so much separate things. Perhaps the best we can call it is a boundary of possibilities, realised or not. The boundary between this reality and others: those that have passed, those yet to come, and those that could have, or still could; the realities of memory and imagination, places which would still rank quite a way higher than England on any respectable freedom index.

Those realms are not wisely scoffed at. This border is quite permeable.

Even drawn into the City's irresistible pull, the Lea has resisted, indeed dissuaded, attempts to turn it into part of the centre. It is not a place Chinese tourists come to see ministries, museums, cathedrals or wonders of the world. The Lea knows the power of the frontier role it found itself in, and remains doggedly at the edges of things: of the geology, of the administration, of the economy, and of time. Is that where it has grown to be most comfortable?

Everything built on it is tentative, impermanent, must disappear with the next coming of the mists, to become something else when they lift, and eventually, to subside altogether into the marsh. So it must be with its present occupants, most of all the brash and confident constructs of the market age. It is hard to imagine its luxury apartments, built from the barren vapours of entrepreneurial catchphrases, withstanding more than a swerve or dozen of these winds of creative destruction, which blow from sources far deeper than capitalism's own.

A permeable border between reality and imagination, where all may pass, but none may lay final claim. But that has not stopped them from trying.

Before us, edifice by flabbergasting edifice, their most epic imaginative exercise monsters up from the valley floor. It is so vast there is nowhere we can stand to capture the entire development in one field of view. Yet you know at once it all belongs to the same operation because its buildings are colossal architectural UFOs like nothing else on the floodplain they have chosen to land in. And from the distance, like the iron-frame lips of a maw in the earth, yawns out the nexus that draws the whole thing together: the stadium of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, named after the present English monarch and built in 2012 to host the Games of the Thirtieth Olympiad.

The English's dabbles in sport on the Lea have culminated in no less than to bring down into its valley the principal international sporting event in the world. Every instance of the Olympic Games holds up a mirror to the country that hosts it, so it is fitting that here, close to the end of our long journey, we come to the Summer Olympics and Paralympics of 2012, where the English of our era gazed into their reflections and dwelt on what all these stories, assembled together, have made them. That, though, is not a picture for tired eyes. We have travelled far today, in poor visibility through distant worlds. Better to rest and recharge, so as to better hear the voices that wait in the final stretches.

Where to shelter? Not anywhere on the Olympic development, which is probably owned by some unaccountable corporate behemoth and subject to rules they don't tell you, such that they are allowed to kill us with sniper rifles and not be prosecuted because their yachts in some tax haven are outside the law. A safer bet would be the nearest settlement which is Hackney Wick, back across the Lea.

On the way we must pass some of the outlying Olympic entrepreneur-dens. First is a spreading aluminium box with walls fashioned like the half-open shutters of Venetian blinds, with extra neo-industrial liveliness afforded by an array of banana-yellow pipes that look like chimneys but probably aren't. This was a part – just a part – of the Press and Broadcast Centre, from where twenty thousand journalists, far outnumbering the athletes, funnelled the Games out through the tubes of world media. Listen real close and you can just about hear the bark-groans of the ghost it was built on, a greyhound-racing track. After the Olympics most of the media crews left, but this was an event where they talked up 'Legacy' as though they actually believed in it, and some effort seems to have been made in planning its afterlife. It now has the name *Here East*, a 'commercial space' as

they call it, in which the digital infrastructure left by the broadcasters plugs into whatever tech-based enterprises can afford a piece of its techno-futuristic nirvana. High-profile behemoths like BT Sport and Loughborough University have nests here, while the canalside wing has been bestowed unto a bourgeois cascade of start-up retailers and restaurateurs.

To stand like a microbe on the hide of this development is to get a sense of what motivated the 'Legacy' discussions. Sinking in such monumental investment for the sake of one event would have been to bankrupt this city into the lowest levels of whichever culture's hell has most of them, an experience not far from what the Olympics has done to some of its other host cities. So they had to plan for the long term, creating a hope that this complex might continue to pay for itself long after the athletes went home. That would mean making the place important, keeping the people coming. In other words, turning the borderland into a centre.

The Lea might have something to say about that. The Olympic Park, so fresh, so impregnable, already dances to the frontier's tune. Having outstayed its original purpose it gropes its way into new existences. How long can they keep those going? As with Here East, so too its other outlying installations like the Copper Box Arena, which looks like it sounds: once the Olympic ball sports and pentathlon venue, now exploring a more generic range of sporting destinies. Here too is the King's Yard Energy Centre, a retro-modern dreamscape of industrial steel that gleams proud beneath a sunlit sky, perhaps the child of a partnership between Battersea Power Station and the Tate Modern over some marriage contract full of small print about low carbon emissions. Its cutting-edge bio-boilers, cooling towers and high-efficiency generators fed the electrical power needs of the Games and now sustain the facilities it left behind, though also appear set to re-route its juice to new residential developments. But few things change so fast as the meaning of 'cutting-edge', not least in these times of energy crisis.

How long will these giants persist before they, too, are recycled by the marshes? It is too soon to answer, for much depends on whether the society around them can resolve its insecurities. They are not without brilliance, and should last at least the lifetimes of their architects. Yet what eyes can look on them and draw out a life-force of relative permanence, as strikes so insistently from those on more central ground such as, say, the dome of St. Paul's or even the granite middle-finger that is Nelson's Column, whatever befalls the man who currently stands on it?

Back across the Lee Navigation, too, everything replaces itself. Hackney Wick likely began as a specialised farming or trading settlement – in Anglo-Saxon parlance a *wīc*, like Woolwich – which blossomed into a workshop of industry and invention from the seventeenth century on. A silk factory arrived, followed by the Clarnico confectionary mammoth and – hopefully not too close to where it made its sweets – chemical works which pioneered synthetic plastics, natural polymers, and in the 1870s a solvent, later a fuel, on whose label appeared the first usage of the word *petrol*. This full-scale industrial commitment meant proportionally full-scale pollution and poverty, as well as an unrecoverable crash when the industries failed. Now Hackney Wick is one massive construction site, its industrial spirit clambering atop the old brick ruins to leap for clear blue skies from where it beckons intrepid businesses, barkeepers and design studios to come resurrect it that they might bask in the glow of Olympic money.

Do those ruins want to be banished though? People still live in those shells and run their little eateries and garages out of them. The graffiti is colourful here: irritated monster faces, a spraycan-toting Pinky and the Brain, the vanguard perhaps of a guerrilla army that lives within the walls, determined that this outpost of working-class London should never forget itself. ‘Meanwhile in East London, lunatics decorate a building...’ runs commentary along the top of one derelict, a news ticker frozen in time. ‘This ship is sinking’, declares another. Does it mean that particular building? Hackney Wick? Or English civilisation itself, that unbalanced and stricken vessel with Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings at one end and these stadium-imaginers and construction workers at the other?

Here’s a way to sink a ship: make sure all its builders are men, like these construction workers. Now that is not to suggest these fellows are no good at it, bless them. But where are the women construction workers? How can a society expect anything but to sink if it so carelessly discounts its female strength?

In a gendered society like this, a common practice is to take binary notions of men and women, especially those that pose the former as superior to the latter, and to project them on history, thus believing it was the same or worse for women all the way through the past and back to original nature. So to this complaint about gendered construction crews, they might retort with platitudes about how much worse it was for women under the regimes of England-before-England. In fact the evidence is of a considerably more complex picture: not one uncorrupted by

gendered prejudices by any means, but one with Viking women warriors, powerful female Anglo-Saxon landowners and monastery administrators, and crucially the absence of the reprehensible ‘coverture’ laws, a much later invention, by which the English degraded women to the status of their husbands’ property.

Questions of Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Norman socio-economic arrangements, cultural practices and ways of life like these are every bit as important as the lines on maps for which our forays down the Lea have neglected them. They offer contrasts to those of the present-day English and possible clues as to what went wrong. Yet the lines matter too because they are lines not on the land, but in the mind, and thus carry some of the weightiest messages the Lea can impart about Englishness in the minds of these people today.

It is tempting to think their ancestors in those days would have been uncomplicated farmers or warriors, more concerned with where the next meal or blow to the head would come from than big abstract notions of identity, culture or symbolism – just as some might say of these hard-hatted labourers in Hackney Wick. Let us do that disrespect to neither. Whatever their struggles, these were and are people with a sense of themselves, believing in and arguing over sophisticated ideas of how their world and universe works, and their relationships with it and each other, surrounded by spirits, stories and magic and expressing it all through creations and rituals that resound in the deep imagination of a nation that in one case did not yet exist, in the other experiences existential nervous breakdown. At whatever level it lands in their consciousness, England was and is, for them all, a work in progress.

If there is a difference, it might be these guys here can imagine England as a singular political and cultural concept, which takes form as maps in their heads and may be supported by media the likes of the Anglo-Saxons did not have - the Ordnance Survey, Google Earth, the TV weather forecast. These maps vastly oversimplify England’s fluid boundaries, diversities and disputes, but also give us a big-picture view which in the case of people whose names began with Æ would have been stuck at much more restricted angles (though not, of course, outright missing).

Looked at from the back end, there was nothing inevitable about the unification of their country. Generations of English might have believed in a destiny of liberty, unity and glory writ from in their Anglo-Saxon heritage, but the truth could not be further distant. No-one, at any point, could have predicted the territorial image England would end up in, still less its ethnic or cultural image. The most accurate

forecast could only have been a necessarily vague guess that it would be some mixture of them all – Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and Norman. How ironic, in that light, that the conquering, colonising diaspora that mix later sent forth now gets lumped under the heading of *Anglo-Saxon*, after those people who put down some of the most visible English ingredients – the language, the place names, the texts – but in whose vanquishing the others put down theirs. It could so easily have gone down a different route, and its people today might be none the wiser for it, as though those alternatives, too, thought themselves the only English possible. One such possibility was a far more concentrated Anglo-Saxon result, if their kingdoms had seen off the Vikings and Normans – say, if Hardrada had invaded a few weeks earlier, or a compelling unifying figure or ideology emerged to bring the warring states together sooner. Then again, this confederation might as easily have torn itself apart. Or consider if the Scandinavians rolled over the lot, had they attacked the kingdoms in a different order, say, or had Wessex had today's stigmas about the expression of pain and refused to listen to Alfred, if not shame him to death by insisting his chronic illness was all in his head. Might the Vikings then have built something more stable here than they managed in their own restive homelands, or kept them all together in some lasting version of Cnut's North Sea Empire? Or perhaps these contests would have kept everything in an almighty shambles long enough for the Scottish, Welsh or Irish kingdoms to consolidate, sweep it all up, and bequeath the world a Celtic England instead.

We can never know for sure what these alternatives might have produced here, still less what gifts and curses they might have loosed upon the world in the thousand years since. What we can know is that we would either not be calling it England, or, if we were, would mean by it something completely different.

What does England-before-England mean then for this allegedly united England they *did* end up with?

Well, that *allegedly* is a good place to start. Did the rivalries of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the Viking Danelaw and the Norman conquests, set down patterns which in some ways prefigure the cracks in the English national fabric that so trouble it today?

It is easy to reject this for purely modern explanations. Its plainest divide, for example, that between south and north – or more precisely, London and everyone

else – cannot be understood outside the more recent phenomena of the north's industrialisation, that industry's traumatic collapse, and then the meteoric up-up-and-away of the London financial head-squid. But does the division end there? Or is there something deeper-seated in that trope most English know, of nonsense northerners with hard fists, unceremonious regional dialects, unrepentant drinking habits, a masochistic joy in the cold, wet misery of their climate, a disinclination to mince their words, and yet, nonetheless, warm hearts and hospitable attitudes whose honesty mystifies the Londoners to whom it is foreign? It is a stereotype of course, but one tacked onto serious differences in regional identity which for many who hold them are at least as important, or more so, than their English or British ones. Do these identities owe something, however diminished by now, to the ancient peoples who first drew up so many of their names and shapes; who once looked poised to win their regions authorship over the decadent south under Mercian or Northumbrian banners?

The last of those banners, the very names, still fly on establishments like Northumbria University and the West Mercia Constabulary, a cultural memory perhaps of the last time this island's power balance was weighted to the north. Do they remember that day, even if London does not? It bears mentioning that Geordie, the regional dialect of the Newcastle area, survives as the closest English dialect to the original Anglo-Saxon Old English language in structure and word origin (that is, the least altered by Latin or Norman French), so much so that some of the poems of Bede reportedly translate more readily into it than to today's standardised English. Someone very wise once pointed out that the difference between a language and a dialect is an army. Might these words you read now have been written in Geordie had Northumbria, rather than Wessex, emerged as the unifying kingdom and fixed the English centre of power on the Tyne rather than the Thames? The Mercians balk just as much at London's arrogance; and that is to say nothing of the East Anglian fen culture devastated by their draining under Enclosure, and still less of the East Saxons' holdout across the river, crushed into the shadows under London's armpit.

These are not idle counterfactuals. England is not guaranteed its unity. Just as it relied on historical processes, it relies on those to come – or not to come. There is no reason that suitably divisive disputes might not heave these faultlines back open, widening cultural and linguistic differences into serious political contests. A single constitutional crisis like the civil wars or Brexit, too complex to be reduced to region versus region, might not do it alone, but such things have been

known to plunge the English into a climate of unreasoning recrimination and bile loosed in anger which, if ignited with a symbolic act of south-on-north violence – the Harrowing, the Pilgrimage of Grace, Marston Moor, Peterloo, Orgreave, Hillsborough – might terminally demolish the legitimacy of the London government in the eyes of those furthest from a share in its wealth and power and yet abused by it with the smuggest impunity. Might not, then, alternative governing institutions take shape in the footsteps of contenders like Penda or Oswiu, especially if the Celts next door have by then abandoned the English union's still less watertight umbrella of Britain?

Those English who call themselves patriots might find such speculation ridiculous. Some might be aghast. That is alright – it is the insecurity of their Englishness that is panicking. But they need not. The real significance of neither unity's nor fragmentation's guarantee is that it is down to them. As characters in this story, they have agency. Whether they long for the breakup of England or would prevent it at all costs, there is value in the capacity to imagine the circumstances that might bring about either. Nothing builds that capacity better than looking at those that did.

So, the non-inevitability of England: that is one lesson from the Lea. Let's have one other: England's changing meaning for its people. *Nationality* is taken for granted today, placed at the top of people's identification documents and assumed as almost organic to who they are. Today's English nationality is one that presupposes a fixed territorial unit called England, which in the timeframe we have visited here did not exist, had never existed, and which not even the most imaginative visionaries could have guessed would exist as it does now.

But that is not all there is to it. Let us make one last dive beneath the rust and scaffolding of Hackney Wick, wade across the marsh, and approach an East Saxon as she takes her cows out to munch on the Lammas land. We might first ask her name, so as not to be rude. Then we can ask: 'Who are you?'

What would she reply? Certainly not 'English'. Would she answer instead: 'East Saxon'?

Even that invites doubt. Perhaps other aspects of her personhood – 'a farmer', 'a woman', a member of such-and-such a kinship group or so on, each to be understood against the specific class and gender cosmologies of the Kingdom of Essex – might be more important to her, give her a stronger sense of belonging, than any attachment to that political unit. Would she even feel such an attachment in any meaningful sense? Surely her bovines would feature much

bigger in her experience of life than kings, nobles, and the majority of other East Saxon people who are unlikely ever to cross her path. Yet that alone tells us little, because it is the same for people today, like this random Hackney Wick construction guy we might drag out here for a moment to help the argument. He is like all English people in that not one of them is ever going to meet more than a fraction of those people who call themselves ‘English’, and yet still imagines a sense of belonging to a community he shares with them, equal to or above more concrete commitments such as to his construction team, his nuclear family, or the intrepid Hackney Wick Football Club.

Maybe the same logic holds for our farmer, who then might well tell us she is an *East Saxon*. But supposing it does, she does not mean it in the same sense as our construction worker says he is *English*. The ideas and relationships that build those national togethernesses are different and constantly changing: different rights, different burdens, different voices, different scents, different songs, and different out-groups for the contrast. Different conditions of membership. How would her identity as an *East Saxon* compare with the people further east of the Lea, deep in their Essex heartland? How might it change – would it change? – on the day she brings her cattle out to the announcement that the hay they chew is now under the protection of the Mercian or West Sussex kings? What would *East Saxon* mean to her when she starts to hear other farmers on the Lammas land speaking in Danish?

We might know better than to put a bit of this-land-is-my-land territorial argy-bargy beyond her. But it is unlikely that, behind her outstretched pointy farming implements, she would refer in her arguments to some nation of Essex as a space belonging to one ethno-cultural group and defined by permanent borders, like they imagine England today – not when she is the great-to-the-nth granddaughter of recent immigrants, living on a vaguely-defined and ever-shifting boundary, in an age of states whose glue was networks of social relationships rather than territorial claims.

To this day, Englishness’s terms of membership are even less settled than its territory. Are the English citizens or subjects? English by ancestors, English by actions, English by accent, or English by the colour of your skin? Can you be English at the same time as British, European, or a citizen of the world? With whom or what does rightful power in England lie? How is your Englishness affected by leaving the EU, or by a Home Office that decides it can strip you of your citizenship on a whim? There is no settlement on questions like these, only

continuing contestation, of which the Brexit debacle is but the latest instalment. They are still having it out with each other and it is hurting people just as it has for centuries. We saw what a mess it entailed on the western side of the city: the bloody, pain-stricken dramas of how even with their overall territory sorted out, the English struggled to assemble their nation into a functioning political and spiritual whole. That helps us see in their present distress how incomplete, how tentative, that project remains.

Might they one day need a passport to cross the Lea, as we have just done?

In a few hundred years?

One hundred?

Fifty?

Hard border.

14. Dreams



I wanted the sensation of instability, something that was continually in movement.

Anish Kapoor, sculptor of the ArcelorMittal Orbit, 2012

The village of Stratford, the first in this county from London, is not only increased, but, I believe, more than doubled in that time...Nor is this increase of building the case only, (but) of the value and rent of the houses formerly standing, has, in that compass of years above-mentioned, advanced to a very great degree...

Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 1724-7

It comes, like life itself, from the water.

It bursts from the surface, overleaping a stone that marks the source of the Thames. It flitters its way down the valley over the woods, streams and meadows of a green and pleasant land. Stone bridges in villages stand as though they have for a thousand years. Children frolic. The river grows wide. There are the narrowboats, the viaducts shot across by trains, the umbrellas in pub gardens. Then all is London. Battersea Power Station, the Palace of Westminster, the London Eye, Tower Bridge – industry, politics, recreation, history. Soaring through the Thames Barrier, the soul of England arrives. It zooms into the bowels of the infrastructure – the London Underground, road tunnels, canals – to make its entrance amidst bursting balloons and roaring anticipation where we now stand, a patch of marsh on the lower Lea valley which for just a few hours, one Friday evening in July 2012, held the gaze of a billion pairs of eyes across the Earth.

Now with their undivided attention, it transforms. First it is a cyclist, in the Tour de France champion's yellow jersey. Then it is a giant bronze bell, the last hurrah of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry, birthplace of Big Ben and the American Liberty Bell. Its toll heralds a change to musical form – *Jerusalem*, of course, England in song, which bathes an arcadian dreamscape of waterwheels, maypoles and cricket. Not England alone, however. This is a British England, and its tune flows without seam into the Irish *Danny Boy*, the *Flower of Scotland*, and the Welsh *Cwm Rhondda* – all, significantly, in English. Under this melodious cover the carriages and black top hats of the Victorian industrialists troop on scene, to converge around a humble oak – a World Tree? – upon the mound of Arthurian legend, Glastonbury Tor.

The foremost of these figures stands upon it. 'Be not afraid', he proclaims. The engineer-hero of engineer-heroes, Isambard Kingdom Brunel – but his voice is that of Caliban, the half-man half-beast, destined for all manner of colonial loadings, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. 'The isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not', he counsels; 'and then in dreaming, the clouds methought would open, and show riches ready to drop upon me, that when I awaked, I cried to dream again!'

And was Jerusalem builded here, among these dark Satanic Mills?

A drumbeat, rattling. A shadow is cast across the land. Crashes. Shouts. The tree is hoisted up in a cloud of steam, and from its roots spills a soot-stained

gloom of factory labourers. By the bidding of the dour top hats, the proletarian herd dismantles the green and pleasant land it stands on, fence by fence, patch by patch, and levers up in its place the smokestacks, foundries, grinding gears and dismal toil of the first industrial hell, that which set the model for them all.

The stage is set, but a thousand Englands for which it has no place walk in to seize it, their very footsteps welding new narrative channels for this unleashed eruption of energy: Suffragettes, Jarrow Marchers, *Windrush* immigrants, Chelsea Pensioners, Pearly Kings and Queens, the Beatles. A poppy flickers, and on faraway fields, millions die. This at last detaches the top hats from the industrialists' heads, and together with all the other Englands they share a minute's silence for those their country lost to humankind's plague of tribal death – for all this power, far from delivering them from it, has only blown its pit wide open. Yet on they work to cast five iron rings (for who needs gold?): strong, burning, glowing, fresh from the forge. Industry, that core and frame for all their stories: England's gift to the world, and England's curse upon it.

Cut to a different England, one not so known for work. Buckingham Palace. The Queen's Guard. Corgis. Enter another anthropomorphic personification: Bond, James Bond. The master spy (but they put foreign spies to death, remember) is ushered into the presence of the reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II of the disguised Saxe-Coburg and Gotha dynasty. Together they walk outside and board a helicopter. Do we see here a reformed, redeemed tradition of monarchy, a lovable essence at last hauled from the autocratic abyss? In the long line of epoch-turning royal set-pieces, Elizabeth is given one for modernity. Their kings and queens used to take people's heads off; this queen is dropped from the sky in a Union Jack parachute.

She lands and takes position. So does the flag, carried in and hoisted by service personnel from the Royal Army, Royal Navy and RAF. The national anthem, *God Save the Queen*, is sung by the Kaos Singing Choir for Deaf and Hearing Children. Here is an England with two faces, one atop the other. Some eyes see only the ceremonial outer face. Others, especially those beyond England's borders, see the face beneath. Empire. But in the England of today, Empire lurks, rather than flaunts. Once itself the mask, now it inhabits the smile behind it. Only the first and third verses of the anthem are sung – the second, with its bellicose condescension ('...confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks...'), is left to the subconscious. Even when Churchill in statue form smiles and raises his cane as

the royal aircraft whirls over Parliament Square, Bond chooses not to acknowledge him. Sometimes what is unsaid speaks loudest of all.

Instead they hear the cosmic chimes of Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells, as the haunting blue of the realm of deep archetypes sweeps us to an England between the waking and sleeping worlds. To the surface, to the high consternation of the market fundamentalists, floats one of its proudest dreams-made-real: the National Health Service (NHS), built to provide quality healthcare free at the point of use to all people. Here to represent it are the nurses and beds of the Great Ormond Street children's hospital. Yet to spoil their dreams, *this* dream, glide in towering English nightmares: Captain Hook, the Queen of Hearts, Cruella de Vil, Lord Voldemort, the Child Catcher. English cruelty, English authoritarianism, English privilege, English bigotry, English child abuse – we have met them all in many costumes (Hook went to Eton remember). Nothing short of an umbrella-toting army of Mary Poppinses can drive these terrors away, clearing space for, of all things, a giant baby. Is that an England too? Or a reference to those Scots who pioneered the use of ultrasound in pregnancy, one case where technology quite literally delivers us? This is a puzzle to everyone.

But there is no time to ponder it, for when the lights come back on it is to England the festival, with none better to welcome the world through its gates than the face of the English comedic tradition, Rowan Atkinson's legend of comical ungainliness, Mr. Bean. He escorts the nations of the Earth into a raucous party with many more English legends of our day, too many to count: legends of comedy, of music, of television, of cinema and the digital age, an exultant euphony of popular culture to whose wild creativity the only shackle, it seems, is a plot thread framed in the unbending grip of the monogamous relationship ladder. The last word, however, belongs to the one who brought all legends together: Sir Tim Berners-Lee, whose World Wide Web discharges from his desk in a new World Tree, its branches connecting all with all as they carry forth the message: 'THIS IS FOR EVERYBODY'.

Is England for everybody? For this moment, at least, the strings of the puppets in the English play had been seized by the hands of those who dreamed of a Yes more than a No. A deep England, a complex England, a British England that sought to do good in the world: that was the England they invited the world to believe in at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics of 2012.

Behold, then, the Stadium. The morning sun burns bright as though that very presentation put it into the sky through the oval hole in its roof, where it has hung ever since to bathe these lands in optimism.

Like every Olympic Games, this was not just a sporting event but something more. It was the chance for England to answer to a question – the same question the world comes to ask of every Olympic host country in turn. *Who are you?*

Who is England? It is the question we have put to it all the way round its metropole, and from each of its mouths heard different answers. But in 2012 they were asked together, and that was their answer together: ‘Be not afeard’. ‘This is for everybody’. Who would have guessed that within three years, the country that answered so would crumple into a national neurosis in which, shrieking at its own guts, clutching and clawing at its scalp, it would lurch for the opposite answer? ‘Go back to where you came from’, it now tells all those it sees as different, foreign, inferior. ‘England is only for us. Be afeard.’ Or rather, reflecting the decay in its quality of discourse: ‘Be fucking afeard’.

Or did that vision presented by Danny Boyle, the opening ceremony’s director, portend this all along? It was a marvellous carnival of Englishnesses, with some sense of organisation by theme or by time but otherwise bewilderingly random. We might call that freedom, its spontaneous adrenaline rush all the more refreshing in the wake of the totalitarian drill of fifteen thousand Chinese at Beijing 2008. But freedom is not the absence of order. Rather it functions on a set of shared stories and reference points, and while most English may have been party to enough of these to make sense of it – *Jerusalem*, Shakespeare, Glastonbury Tor, the NHS – who would not forgive one foreign to those symbols for feeling lost at sea? Or on fire, if you happen to have a darker experience of hospitals or RAF bombers.

In other words, though this country faced a world asking ‘Who is England?’, it was as though its answer was directed at itself. The English, themselves, were still trying to work out what kind of country they are. They sought to answer boldly, warmly, with confidence, but even in this their best attempt, the demons were lying in wait all along. They dwelt in the factory chimneys; in the soot in the workers’ lungs; in the pockets of military uniforms; in the pained awareness in black, brown and female faces that those who looked like them have been so long barred from the scenes they now represented. The demons’ frontal assault, in the form of Voldemort and Co., was only a distraction. In England the demons are systemic. Camouflaged institutions. Guerrilla thought systems. They lurk, waiting

for lowered defences and comfortable complacency, for the wells of arrogance, insecurity, and poisoned impulse to run full, and then, on the fire of those sentiments, they strike. Now the dream has become a nightmare. ‘This is for everybody’ is now ‘GO HOME OR FACE ARREST’.

Is the sun above the Olympic Stadium in fact an evening sun, straining to shine the last light of hope into a clamorous English chasm? Or could it be a midnight sun, a beacon of belief that even when the compass is broken and deep fiends come crawling through the cracks in the hull, they can still remember, or *imagine*, good light, miraculous light, by which to steer?

It could be both, it could be neither. Because when this Stadium dreamed in the summer of 2012, not coincidentally upon the borderlands of the Lea, it drew open the gates between fantasy and reality so wide that for a time the two realms were one. There was no distinction between flesh-and-bone Englands like Brunel and Elizabeth Windsor, and make-believe ones like Bond, Hook and Bean. Places like Glastonbury Tor and Great Ormond Street Hospital were at once physical locations and castles in a mythical sky. All were imagined, and all were real. All were England.

Like the English and German soldiers who broke from the trenches of World War I on Christmas 1914 and played football, all was merry tonight as these Englands danced for the watching world. When the world moved on, they went back to war.

All is silent now on the Olympic front. Indeed, this is no longer the Olympic Stadium. Everything changes here, even this centrepiece: it is now the home ground of West Ham Football Club. As we approach down the Lee Navigation there is no mistaking its claret and sky-blue livery on those soundless white walls, which on match days must resound with the strikes of its crossed golden hammers. West Ham have fallen from the peak of the Premier League yet are weighty enough in the story of English football that it cannot be told without them. It was they that produced Bobby Moore, captain of England’s sole World Cup-winning team in 1966 and perhaps this nation’s most celebrated football hero.

Their victory might not be just around the corner, but a better view of England’s Olympic dream-into-reality is. A wander round to the south side presents the wider dreams and realities it built its nest in.

The Stadium's piece of the Lea valley still bears itself like a work in progress. Empty fields; construction sites; a notice that apologises for any inconvenience while 'we are busy growing new plants ready for you to enjoy soon'. The buildingscape across the Lee Navigation is more instructive. There are the shells and skeletons of derelict warehouses, factories with zigzag roofs, rising with a groan into luxury apartments under the unrepentant necromancy of the cranes. Some buildings retain the shapes or girder-frames of their previous lives, only now as decorative elements; it can be hard to tell where scaffolding ends and an attempt to invent a retro-industrial art form begins. Others linger still, brick or iron ghouls perplexed, unsure if they should continue to wait their turn or otherwise give up and find a pit to crumble in. Some have attracted graffiti-writers to tattoo their sentiments upon their wasted hides – 'HUH', 'HORROR', 'DARK TIMES'.

Through a gap in their feet escapes the Hertford Union Canal, which shoots through the East End to link the Lea to the Regent's Canal, and from there to the Grand Union and the nationwide network. We could get on a boat here and be in Liverpool in a few days without ever leaving the water, provided we can commandeer someone to work the locks.

The Stadium looks across at Fish Island, an appendage of Hackney Wick and a textbook instance of its metamorphosis. Fish Island was committedly industrial – peanuts and eyeglass frames were claims to fame – till it all collapsed into disrepair, and now undergoes reincarnation as gentrified housing developments, digital and commercial spaces and trendy art studios, with the usual controversies about profiteering and social cleansing. But one facility has made the transition intact: the salmon-pink smokehouse of Forman and Sons, which proclaims with pride to be 'the world's oldest producer of smoked Scottish salmon' beneath its new adaptations as a 'RESTAURANT' and 'ART GALLERY'. It used to be on this side, till the Olympic dream ushered them across the water. Construction cranes tower across it, but here, on our side of the water, iron tracks set in the towpath are the last traces of a different species of crane: the winches of the working Lee Navigation which used to load industrial cargoes onto its barges.

The Navigation rejoins the Lea's main channel at a lock and weir, where a rusting Water Bus sign stands in memory of public water transport on this most navigable of the Thames's tributaries. That was one Olympic dream that sank in a reality of greedy price hikes and consequent ruin. Older promises too have faded. They call this place the Old Ford: Old as in the lowest point on the Lea where they

could cross it – no easy task – since pre-Roman times. The ford got an upgrade when the Romans paved it on their way to Colchester, their first provincial capital on this island, and it served in that role for over a thousand years till Matilda, the queen of Henry I, contrived to fall in the river on her way to the Barking abbey some time around 1100. The story goes that she ordered a new and safer causeway to be built to the south, whether in calm pragmatism or a dripping and furious rage is not recorded, and it is that new bridge that forms today's crossing of Stratford High Street. But the water, which wants to get people wet, never forgave this, and it flowed out to the Thames, and from there to the Channel, where in 1120 it drowned Matilda's son in the *White Ship* disaster and so caused a succession crisis that plunged the country into turmoil.

It is here that we, too, will cross the valley on a bridge of Olympic dreams. It takes us into the *burh* of New Ham, which they spell as one word, *Newham*, but it actually should be two. It is the final English territory we shall explore.

Here that dream-bridge carries a second bridge, one that looks smaller but in fact provides us passage deep into those New Hams. It calls itself the Greenway, and aside from its paved track it is indeed green. If you sniff hard at it, you can smell stories that precede the Olympic ones, and they smell suspiciously of – well, there's no polite way to put it – crap. Hmm.

Let's hold that thought, and for now fix our attention on the dream that wants it. The dream that even did up this part of the Greenway, widening it to serve those crowds of spectators. A neat cobbled line demarks the pedestrian lane and the cycle lane, while lamp posts line the fringe at regular intervals. As it rises from the trees, there to the south are the fields where the athletes trained, now turned inside out into a small mountain of unearthed soil, a hill with a yellow king in the form of a caterpillared Volvo excavator. But behind that peak, too close for comfort, loom the plonked-down watchtowers of an alien occupation: the financial titans of Canary Wharf, keeping an ever-watchful eye on these upstarts across the Lea.

Then turn around, and right there in our faces is the Stadium, a colossus asleep in its nest. Still it dreams. But of what?

London is the natural habitat of the White Elephant: that species of project that is imagined up full of prestigious symbolism and promises of a better future, only

for its monumental and costly uselessness, visible from everywhere, to sink it amidst the tattered reputations of those who paid for it.

The largest beast in the London herd is a close neighbour of the Olympic Park. The twelve golden antennae of the Millennium Dome, on the opposite bank of the Thames, broadcast its exercise in vain banality all across the country. The Dome in its turn was an attempt to evoke the 1951 Festival of Britain, featuring the Skylon: some manner of vertical aluminium cigar they suspended as though hovering above the ground for no reason. No, I don't know what they were thinking either, and it achieved little other than to devour thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money and worry people about lightning strikes, and so they took it down the following year. All this of course carries more than a whisper of the Great Exhibition of 1851, from some angles the largest skeleton in London's elephant graveyard.

Such form was bound to hang over London's proposal to host the 2012 Olympics, not least with that event's own record of decimating the budgets of host cities, violently displacing anyone caught in the path of the Olympic stampede, and leaving them crushed in the aftermath beneath the unworkable ruins of its facilities. And if they wanted to be extra sure they would sink into that oblivion where all farces meld into one, what better building site could they have chosen than this frontier valley of the Lea, where all is consumed by its shifting reeds?

All the omens spoke of hubris. Beneath them however some might have spotted another pattern: that the most decorated white elephants always seem to burst from the imagination in times of crisis and uncertainty. In 1851, as we saw at Crystal Palace, it was an attempt to shine a confident industrial light on a Britain and Europe that seethed in revolutionary resentment. In 1951 it was the spent, bombed-out, food-rationing England that had crawled by its nails out of World War II, and for whose smashed economy the Skylon, with 'no visible means of support', was said to be the perfect metaphor. Read in this tradition, England's letter of encouragement to itself that was the 2012 opening ceremony makes much sense. The preparatory years were a time when the sunlit confidence of the rise of New Labour, which had buoyed the English into the new millennium, had dived headfirst into an Iraqi hellmouth and never returned. The very day after London won the hosting rights in July 2005, Islamist terrorists blew up three Underground trains and a bus in the city, killing fifty-eight people, and from there England staggered from blow to confidence-breaking blow: the financial crisis and Great Recession, the riots of 2011, and the launch of the Conservative Party's

austerity programme, whose spending cuts only swelled the question marks over the splurge of billions of pounds on the Olympic Games.

Not that they let that stop them before. London had hosted the Olympics twice already, most recently in 1948 in the same post-conflict wreck of a country as the Festival of Britain, and in similar vein, an opportunity, its organisers thought, to signal its revival. By comparison to 2012 those ‘Austerity Games’ were a muted affair: no purpose-built sports facilities or athlete accommodation (they got billeted in RAF camps instead); supplies and equipment begged or scavenged off foreign governments; an opening ceremony featuring pigeons, royal handshakes and a 21-gun salute rather than fireworks and epic visual spectacles. Yet the chief organiser still felt confidence enough to claim before the king, after the athletes’ parade, that ‘a visionary dream has today become a glorious reality’. English historiography chalks down London 1948 as a success. Did that influence their grandchildren’s belief that they could do it again?

But theirs was a different world. It was not just that the sums of money involved, as well as architecture, crowds, pretty much everything in fact, had swelled to a scale unimaginable to the post-war generation. It was also the scale-up in structures of political abuse, to which the Olympic establishment, ever pretending to be strictly apolitical, has been reprehensibly supine. Like all sports the Olympics are intrinsically political, and its claims otherwise are regularly exposed as a paper-thin disguise for pampering the wealthiest and nastiest authoritarian panjandrums of the era. On the shoulder of London 1948 rested the hand of the spectre of the Games’ most notorious disgrace, the 1936 Olympics in Hitler’s Berlin. They had no qualms accommodating the Nazi salute on that occasion, but when two black American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their fists on the podium at Mexico City 1968 to protest the atrocities of racism, the International Olympic Committee broke into a hysterical tantrum at them for being ‘political’ and threatened the U.S. team till they banned the pair from the Games. This is typical of an effective pattern of Olympic endorsement of dictators, warmongers, colonisers, racists, misogynists and in general the most deleterious elements of humankind, and disdain for its most vulnerable, that has clouded one set of Games after another to this day, and which ahead of London 2012 had perched, overlooking its forehead, on the almighty mastodon of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, that tremendous but oh-so-tainted showpiece of the Chinese Communist Party. Its burden on London was twofold. First, it passed on expectations in both budget and special effects that looked impossible to meet.

Second and more serious, it splashed that authoritarian tradition onward to a London which, in its turn, seemed all too ready to oblige as the organisers grew fanatical to the point of censorship in protection of overpowered big-brand sponsors, or fumbled over questions of women's participation and attire in the cases of certain misogynistic countries.

And what, too, of the working-class East Londoners who lived where they meant to build all this stuff? Were they, too, to be got out of the way at gunpoint, as were concerns both at Beijing four years before and Rio four years after? Well, having paid attention to Beijing's image problems, as well as the shambolic desolation left by Athens 2004 before it, the English sought to put fears to rest by turning their entire Olympic project on its relationship with its East London landing site. Throughout their plans and preparations one word recurred again and again, its meaning subjected to endless interrogation. *Legacy*.

By staging the Games in this part of the city, the most enduring legacy of the Olympics will be the regeneration of an entire community for the direct benefit of everyone who lives there.

Such was the declaration made in London's bid, and it was a bold one. The Games' *most enduring legacy*. The *direct benefit of everyone who lives there*. And note the verb, *regenerate*, which implicitly turns the Olympics from a subject in its own right, to an instrument in a larger equation whose true subject was the struggling post-industrial lands of the Lea. The Olympics would not be the story after all. They and their pricey facilities would merely be catalysts in a more important story: the transformation of the most forsaken and dilapidated quarter of the old city, and its overspill into Essex, into 'a hub', 'a model for social inclusion, opening up opportunities for education, cultural and skills development and jobs for people across the UK and London, but especially in the Lea Valley and surrounding areas.'

That was the vision, and the promise, the organisers of London 2012 purported to offer the people of this country. *Legacy, legacy, legacy*. The Olympic Games not for their own sake, not even for the sake of waggling the national genitalia for the world to see, but as a means to the greater end of transforming, improving, *rescuing* a nation sinking in doubt and deprivation.

Hence the siting of this project in the Lea valley, right where the nightmares of the industrial rise-and-fall had gouged their capital city's deepest wounds. It

would be a springboard, a turning point, a city of the future, a glittering Jerusalem just like the industrialists in 1851 and the socialists in 1951 had claimed to chart, linked up by smooth roads and bridges with not a pothole in sight, as well as pedestrian paths and cycle lanes because they care about your health and the climate in the future too. A new world where East London creativity, simmering anguished so long beneath the husks of derelict factories, would at last have cutting-edge studios, showrooms and decent internet connections to support them. Where the Great Exhibition left its permanent signature in the museums of South Kensington, the Games would leave them Olympicopolis, a future-perfect buzzing hive of university campuses, museum extensions, theatres, dance academies and science labs. And seemingly learning from the planet-destroying lessons of their predecessors, all this would nest in a green, clean, fresh and physically beautiful paradise of parklands, waterways, rare birds and furry creatures in the bushes, with not a carbon emission in sight to remind you of a yesterday left far behind.

We know what this world tends to do to dreams like that. We know the inclination of projects like these, when led by governments and businesses of the age of market religion, to be subverted by incorrigible profit-hungry bastards with no intent to fulfil the lies they told desperate populations.

And yet, let us pause to land some respect where it is due. The saga is too large, and the cast of characters too long, to cleanly demark where such respect should and should not go, but that London 2012 grew up on the sweat of large numbers of people who sincerely believed in this dream, and dared put their shoulders into heaving it into reality, is not in doubt. Some of these honest folk stood perhaps among the organisers, but certainly they numbered tens of thousands among the local and national grassroots. The will to believe the world can be better and to work together inclusively to make it so is a precious thing and warrants salutation where we find it.

And yet, we have glimpsed the dark side of the *regeneration* narrative on our descent over East London, which too often clots into a solid abyss of predatory developers, high-caste colonisation, and the driving out of those who have lived and struggled in these areas for generations – their culture, heart and spontaneity banished to the winds, leaving behind a soulless labyrinth of glass and plastic money-temples. From the start, those who knew the sensation of those winds saw that as the true and inevitable Olympic legacy. Iain Sinclair, that fluent chronicler and ‘psychogeographer’ of London and a Hackney local, went to town on the

project in *Ghost Milk*, a seething deconstruction of it as the epitome of London's existential plight of today: the sweeping away of real people, of walkers, joggers, rowers, pilgrims and rights to roam, an entire ecology of free and authentic geocultural ways of life, barred from a homeland re-cast as a wasteland of fences, construction barriers, security cameras and surveillance drones, of multibillion-pound private ownership arrangements policed by unaccountable armed guards according to rules the public is forbidden even to know, all driven by the delusions of grandeur of men in suits whose greed is neverending. Sinclair unleashed this assault the year before the games, but here in the aftermath you need not dig far to find grievances that one aspect or other of the dream has in fact transpired as a nightmare.

It is beyond us, passers-by on a journey, to reach a fair conclusion on this matter. That is for the local people to give and everyone else to listen. Yet it is necessary that all who wander these Olympian grounds be aware of these dreams and nightmares that swirl around them, lest they be taken in uninformed by the structures' opulence.

There is the Stadium itself, built to a capacity of 80,000 people. But for all its magnitude it does at least look like a stadium, whereas some of the other buildings are probably of a like never before seen on this planet and in some cases might as well have flown here off a different one. Case in point: the Aquatics Centre, the late architect Zaha Hadid's dolphin-and-breaching-blue-whale hybrid thing that served as the venue for the swimming events. So it goes for the great concave eyebrow that is the Lee Valley VeloPark, which hosted the cycling. A more politically problematic body is the East Village, formerly accommodation for the athletes but now under conversion to housing, with all the usual rows about the meaning of 'affordable' and why they are not it.

But if there is one edifice among this lot that strives to hold aloft the torch of the Olympic vision, it is a soaring, twisting galaxy of bright red steel that thrusts from the Stadium grounds with an observation capsule in its grasp. This ArcelorMittal Orbit was named after the giant Euro-Indian steel company that supplied the material to build it, and conceived to stand as a feather in the crown of the Olympic development, a lasting image of everything it represents. Naturally that image has divided the English, with some parties praising the Orbit's forward-looking magnificence, and others – the seeming majority – lamenting it as a

ruinously expensive red mini-elephant on the back of the Olympic white elephant, existing for no further purpose than to glorify the egos that created it.

Is it possible to separate the Orbit as an Olympic creature from the Orbit as a piece of art? Perhaps not, and the latter aspect helpfully shields it from a conclusion, for opinions on art are necessarily subjective: judge for yourself. The facts of it are that it was designed by two prominent artists with links to both England and the Indian subcontinent, Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond, both men with relatively cerebral approaches to architectural art that straddle aesthetic sensation and the hard equations of engineering. They sought to create an icon for London's Olympic dream, so looked for inspiration to two icons of icons – the Eiffel Tower and the Tower of Babel. That would explain why it looks like what would happen if an extremely large person twisted the Eiffel Tower into knots, dunked it in a lake of red paint and planted it like a stick in the earth, but the influence of the Babel tower is more profound. According to Kapoor, it 'cannot be perceived as having a singular image, from any one perspective. You need to journey round the object, and through it', and so like Babel 'requires real participation from the public'. Only to be expected then that when an affronted god smashed the Babel tower and scattered its builders into a confusion of different languages, a great many of those tongues, being confused, would criticise it.

If you do journey through it, stories and statistics fly off the walls at you. Some of these celebrate the Olympic Park as a whole: the largest urban space to be established in Europe for 150 years; over 5 million visitors a year; 3,000 jobs created, projected to rise to 40,000 by 2025; 111 acres of wildlife habitats, 6.5 kilometres of waterways and 26 permanent artworks on display. Step into the lift and the Orbit itself becomes the story: 2,000 tonnes of steel, 60% of it recycled, courtesy of ArcelorMittal's plants around the world; 19,000 litres of paint; a height of 114.5 metres, taller than the Statue of Liberty, or 954 drinks cans for those people who can no longer afford books because of austerity so do not know what that is – all held together by 35,000 bolts.

Many of the staff who run this place appear to be Newham locals, so what happens if we gently, and with every appreciation for them sparing the time out of their busy routines, ambush one or two for interrogation? Well, the picture they paint is mixed. Some are positive, in the most eager cases bubblingly so, telling of how the project has not only invigorated the area but visibly brought people together in this the most culturally and ethnically diverse borough of London.

Others' assessments are more reserved. The Olympic Park has still by and large operated as a bubble, they say. It has not done enough for the local people, and their daily lives give them little reason to come here.

One thing the Orbit does offer is likely unprecedented in the history of the Lea valley: a panoramic view across the English capital. It is fitting that after the view from Severndroog Castle at the opening of this journey we now, so close to the end, get the chance to survey it once more. Is it coincidence that the former was built for someone who went to India, and the latter, this Orbit, by someone who came from it? Severndroog is just about discernible through the haze across the river, over Woolwich, the arsenal town where we began. That quintessential white elephant, the Millennium Dome, lounges close by in early retirement on the waterfront. On the ridge beyond poke the two towers of the Crystal Palace heights, though the rest of our route is lost beyond the mania of shapes and shades of green and grey presently squatted on by the City skyscrapers. Only where the battery of pillars that is Alexandra Palace overlooks the haunted railway from Highgate can we pick up our path again as the Lea comes forth, the wooded secrets of the Kingdom of Essex and the Danelaw encroach, and the old dwellings of East London transform, as at the wand of a magician on mind-altering substances, into the parked UFOs of the Olympic reverie.

The haze seems thickest over the final stage of our exploration: the stretch from here to the Thames, where are buried the remnants of London's fallen docklands. We are almost there.

There are two ways down. The fastest calls itself 'the world's longest and tallest tunnel slide', a 178-metre winding tube added to the Orbit in 2016 in hope that a dash of adrenaline might convince more people to come here. Patrons are fed to the tube on the lower level of the observation deck, having been done up in protective headgear and elbow pads so they are not killed as it sucks them round and round to the bottom in less than a minute. Being a tube, their sounds, typically of the screaming variety, can only escape this corkscrew two ways: out the top, to the awkward petrification of the next people in the queue; or from the bottom, where an assistant stands ready to check each rider is still alive when they emerge and, if so, to help them to their feet. Every few minutes the slide funnels out the next rider's wails upon this individual, which as well as serving as handy notification that it is about to disgorge someone, must be quite therapeutic to get paid to listen to all day.

For those with better ideas of fun than being swallowed whole by a stainless-steel anaconda, there is also a mellower, chunkier serpent with 455 steps you can descend at leisure on your own feet. It is still not ideal for those who fear heights or harbour anxieties about rickety nuts and bolts coming apart at a hundred metres in the air, but has the added bonus of little speakers that echo with a soundscape of London life, perhaps from the souls of those people it has digested. That would explain why the majority seem to be of construction sounds from the building of the Olympic Park, but there are enough sports fields, markets and congested traffic in there to suggest a suitably varied diet.

Clearly the Olympic vision's ground zero, the cradle where it was birthed, has been arranged to impress. In the presence of its colossi it is easy to get washed away in these seas of inspiration that now saturate its launchpad, and to *want* to believe, to long to feel hope that it speaks its dreams out of love, even if experience demands we know better.

At worst it cannot be totally without merit. On this site in 2012 they did manage to pull off something which, however limited, however problematic, did succeed in making a lot of people feel good. More importantly, they felt good *together*, in a healthier and heartier way than any rush of satisfaction promised by the dreams of the nationalists, whose inevitable lapse into disappointment demands their constant refuelling on violence. Here they proved they can find ways to feel good that do not involve being horrible to foreigners. That says something both because of where they have come from as a country and where they have ended up.

However, grim questions remain about how inclusive of the people of this area this dream actually was. How much decision-making power was afforded to their voices? How much space behind the Legacy's steering wheel was given their hands, that they might drive it to solve their problems on their own terms? How many people were left behind, or violated then forgotten? And what about the vision itself, of a new future for London and England? Did the forces of free-market greed and political recklessness come to corrupt it, or did those seeds creep within it from the beginning?

There is a paradox at its heart, and it finds its best expression in one man – the elephant in the room, to keep with the pachydermic analogies – who stood at the helm of both the Olympic dream and the national psychosis that followed. As the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson co-chaired the city's Olympic board, overseeing its preparation for the 2012 Games and the legacy plans to transform this area. Four years later, as a Conservative Party MP, the same Boris became the

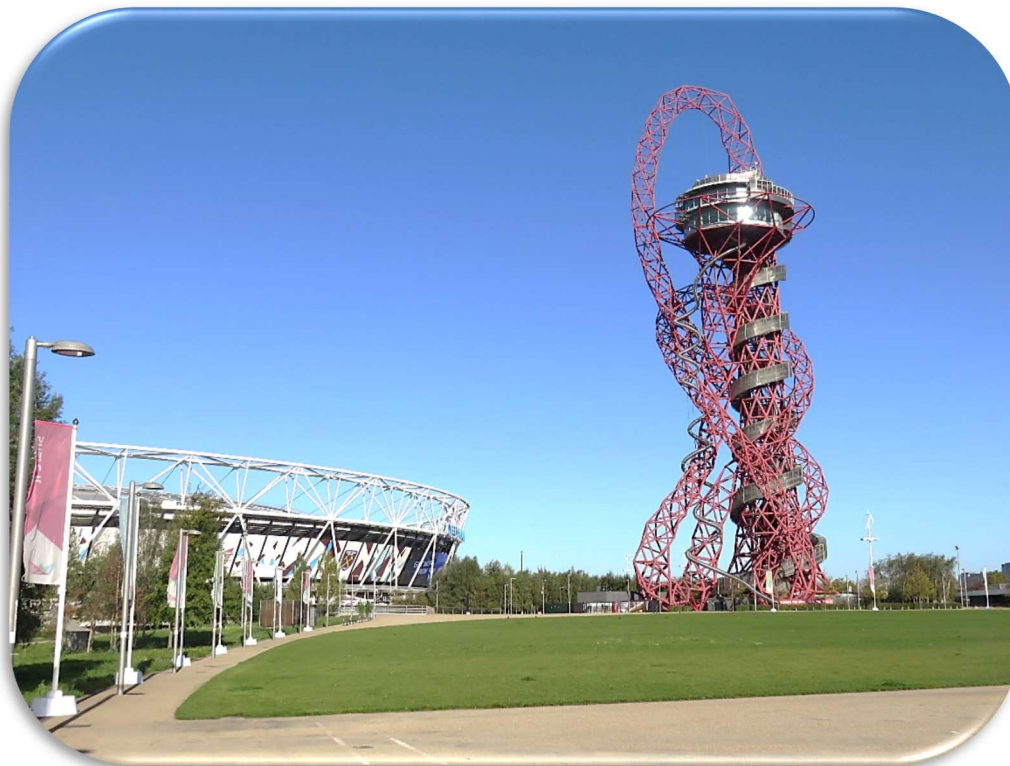
recognisable face of the movement to bring forth a dream that much of the nation, and still more those looking in from outside, prefer to call a disastrous delusion: an England nostalgic for imperial glories, revived anew as a superpower for the age of the market, which in practice, in the form of Brexit, has meant indulging racist persecutions, scissoring the nation out of Europe's post-World War II peace and security framework at its most precarious time, and dragging its Celtic partners in Britain out by their ears, Northern Ireland peace process and all.

Did the dream of inclusion and the nightmare of exclusion dwell in this same mind, beneath that trademark mop that has stood furthest among all hair in this country from the touch of a comb? What exactly is the relationship between Olympic Boris and Brexiteer Boris? Is it that the dream of a 'This is for everybody' England was but an illusion, or worse, a lie, just one of so many to spill from a tongue with no concept of truth, orchestrated to erect the nightmare of England the Hostile Environment all along? Or is it plausible that even in the imagination of Boris Johnson, a man whom a great number of his own fellow English, in the politest terms, find very difficult to respect, there might, perhaps in an alternate timeline, have been something constructive to be salvaged from beneath that dark Etonian void, with its ruthless instincts and imperial fairy-tale history, to channel their country away from its present crisis? Is the problem that Boris Johnson exists? Or that they put him in the wrong place, with too much attention, too much power, and not enough to control and counter-balance his imaginings? In the great pageant of Englishnesses that opened the Games of 2012, he was the most confounding England of all.

Dreams and realities need each other to survive. Dreams that burn their bridges to reality and soar off amidst trumpets and impossible promises (perhaps on the sides of buses) only invite reality to teach them painful lessons. But equally, any reality arrogant enough to ignore its alternatives is undone by them. Here at the Olympic Park, they saw through one negotiation between dreams and reality and reached a settlement. It is a flawed settlement. It may or may not be a lasting settlement. But it is a settlement nonetheless, one which few would call an irredeemable catastrophe and with complex outcomes enough to offer lessons for the English to dream their way forward. Instead of total praise or damnation, perhaps a better question is: how much of what they did here was good, and how much was not? Of the former, what factors came together to give rise to good outcomes, that could offer replicable benefits in future? Of the latter, what can best be done to acknowledge the harms done, to make heard the voices of those

who suffered by it, and to learn from their experience so as not to make those errors again?

It was not a weakness that when asked by the world, ‘Who is England?’, they answered with a mess of contradictions. With a wary eye to Beijing, always be cautious of those who believe they have The Answers. The English showed that it was still in their power to ask and discuss the question. The danger is that plenty of them now seem ready to bellow the answer, bury the question, and mock and threaten those who feel it still requires discussion. Now more than ever, the discussion is necessary. So are the dreams, whose power is that they let you try out different answers and imagine their consequences before choosing which to commit to. But if they are imposed by one part of the population on another, rather than chosen together, dreams become night terrors. At the least, it furthers one to wake between dreams and study history.



The thing about building a future, any future, is that it involves negotiation with the past. That negotiation can be cooperative. It can be confrontational. It can take place in the pretence that they can ignore each other, but even there it is happening in the background. Whether you would develop or repudiate past works, those works are still your future’s frame of reference.

The past with which the Olympic developments had to negotiate belonged to the River Lea. That most important fact determined their underlying name: *Hamm*. This is not the *ham* that means a homestead, but *hamm*, a land hemmed in by marshes or water. By the Domesday Book of 1086 it had become *Hame*, and within a hundred years had already received the subdivision it carries today. The difference between West Ham and East Ham is old and substantial.

The western Ham grew into a more populated and prosperous hamlet, thanks perhaps to Queen Matilda's bridge over the Lea and connections to important monasteries like Barking, while the East remained a scattered, wooded, predominantly agricultural village. Here in the Essex countryside they petered down the ages, regularly drenched by the floods to which their wetland situation imperilled them till centuries of reclamation work drained the earth to solidity. Then came industrialisation and the insertion of railways, which turned both Hams upside down. Still beyond London's limits, their exemption from regulations on polluting trades within the City dumped on West Ham the full gamut of noxious industries we have sighted along this river, turning it into one of the most blighted and swollen towns in England. East Ham got an enormous gasworks and found its destiny drawn south, into the docklands. Thus was this outcrop of Essex absorbed into London as a clutter of overcrowded slums, each housing workers attached to one particular industry, with some dense clumps of terraced housing arriving later for the next layers up on the skills hierarchy. By the 1960s London's tentacles had coiled around these tight enough to pull them into the metropolitan area as a merged Borough with a merged new name: *Newham*.

Newham has been a landing pad for immigrants since before industrialisation, with a large potato-growing Irish community already evident in East Ham on its eve. The successive arrivals of people from a wide range of nations and backgrounds, driven by a multitude of factors, has turned Newham, in particular its Plaistow neighbourhood, into not only one of the most diverse parts of the country but also one of the most mixed. That is, relationships are formed and lives lived out across ethnic and cultural boundaries here, rather than segregated into separate communities. It is one of the youngest English realms in terms of the ages of people in it, but its industrial legacies have also kept it one of the most impoverished. Hence its bombardment in the post-war decades with a shower of missiles in the shape of social housing tower blocks, and its fears of young people abandoning it to seek better lives elsewhere.

This is the question to which the suspect answer that is the middle-class 'regeneration' brigade has come trumpeting in, with the Olympic project bearing the standard at the front of their parade. And it is in its wake we follow down the Greenway, into an area changing faster than we can record it.

The first thing we come to is an assemblage of shipping containers painted yellowy-green like a lemon gone wrong. These have been recycled to house a community space with a café, design studios and garden, together known as the View Tube, effectively a quest hub at the edge of the Olympic Park. Unlike the Park's cursive mega-structures redolent of extraterrestrial empires, the View Tube interprets a future built on a resourceful awareness of its industrial past.

Cheerful argumentations emanate from within, and entering to investigate, we walk in on the natives just as they are in the course of negotiating that future. The café this afternoon happens to be the venue for a public consultation, held by people proposing to build a concrete plant over this southern belt of the Olympic site. On a central table is a three-dimensional model of the proposed works, around which a company representative assuages the concerns of local passers-by and promises them that the HGV traffic will enter and leave by roads placed exactly where they will least disrupt the local life, and certainly not steamroll through their schools and parks as seems to be their main fear. Laid out along the windows are attractive user-friendly information panels outlining why a cement factory is needed, why this particular proposal would be better than alternative schemes, the layout and timeframe to which it would be built, and of course the certainty that its carbon emissions and impact on air quality would be kept to an unnoticeable minimum. They even tie in a mention of the local pottery heritage, providing an artist's impression of the facilities in which the coolant towers and cement mixers come decorated in the fresh blue-and-white patterns of Bow porcelain beneath a clean and sparkling sky.

These all seem such sunny conversations, conducted, astonishingly, in English, rather than the managerial-speak of market liturgy that is attempting to supplant it as England's first language. Amongst the lively chatter we overhear a professional archaeologist introduce himself to the gathered representatives, then proceed to the information displays with much smiling and impressed clicking of the tongue. It would be wonderful if this were everything it seems – democracy in action, with a socially and environmentally concerned corporate leadership making a genuine effort to include local residents in decision-making – but a bit of digging reminds us never to drop our alertness to the power of a

well-funded, well-oiled PR machine in the market age. Newspaper articles, online forums and petitions reverberate to local uproar about profiteering interests who, hand-in-hand with the custodians of the Olympic Legacy, seek to once more turn the hamlets of the Lea into the dumping ground for industries out of which London thirsts for riches but refuses to let in to foul its city. Told this way, the story is of a promised land of thriving parks with perhaps a theatre and university or two, withered instead into an inferno of choking fumes and the perpetual roar of machinery, prowled upon by herds of monstrous HGVs with the tears of traumatised schoolchildren watering their tyres, hundreds on hundreds per day. In other words, a blatant betrayal of everything the Olympic dream pledged to the people of Newham.

Dream or nightmare, whether they will build it or not comes down to processes happening here and now. History is alive in this area, and straight past the View Tube the landscape has been chopped to bits by one of its chunkiest pieces: the Crossrail works, the latest, sleekest and priciest stick they are trying to slot through London's railway Jenga. It means we are going to get our own tongues dragged through a helping of this construction dust, for the works cut off the Greenway and necessitate a detour through the metamorphic zombies of the lower Lea.

The zombies are few in number now, and those still there stand dazed. Their work is recorded by a revamped Docklands Light Railway station which, no longer channelling Olympic crowds, serves on as a prime destination for anyone excited by huge random construction sites. It is Pudding Mill Lane, after a water-mill that was probably named for its appearance rather than for actually producing puddings. It would have been one of a great cluster of mills that populated these fords of the Lea. The river itself splits again to push through here in a network of channels together known as the Bow Back Rivers, over whose flow the millers used to squabble for control, the more unscrupulous ones installing illegal dams or cuts to favour their waterwheels over the others.

Some of the mills went back centuries, having serviced West Ham's own monastery of Stratford Langthorne. It appears to have been prestigious, founded with the gift of its estate of land, mills and woods from a powerful lord in 1135 and thereafter a self-sufficient community and bustling nucleus of farming, crafting and thinking. It grew popular, attracting monarchs and nobles to its strategic perch outside London as a conference venue or rural retreat. Yet its spot on the marshes also exposed it to devastating flooding, and in 1538 its high profile earned

it a position high up the target list of a certain monastery-wrecking bully who smashed it, stripped it of its treasures, and sold off the pieces of what remained.

Today the monastery and most mills are long gone; the Bow Back Rivers themselves are the only constant. They carry onward the authority of the Lea, clogged with silent bright green weeds, through a landscape where any given site is one moment a derelict workshop, the next a construction site, the next a luxury apartment block on the waterfront. It is pointless to identify anything because it will probably be something else by the next time you come here. The water does however call up a more solid moment in the English story nearby. The name Bow Back Rivers comes, presumably, because they trickle down the back of the historic East End zone of Bow to the west. It was there that in 1888, a group of women and teenage girls went on strike – which took guts in those days – to protest the appalling working conditions in their Bryant and May match factory. Crushed by the bad publicity, the owners were forced into concessions. It was a pivotal set-piece in the rise of the English labour and feminist movements.

Across the Lea, we at last climb from the valley over Queen Matilda's bridge. Today it is Stratford High Street, connecting the old East End with the new Olympic dreamworld on the Essex side. Ahead of us, up that road, the hub of that Legacy-Land monsters into the future: Stratford, back from the dead, an aerodynamic city of lights which launches its sleek new species of skyscrapers into the sky and pounds through the elevator shafts with an energy no-one who has lived here could ever have imagined might await it.

Imagine the shock that would overtake the faces of any inhabitants of this land prior to the generation that built this, were they to stand where we stand now. Towers like these have never risen in England before, and absolutely never here, on the Lea frontier, this side of which we must remember belongs to a different heart: not London's, but Essex's. To look up this road is to see what surely declares itself a Third London, a potential power centre just waiting for those of Westminster and the Old City to wither. Yet it evokes a Babel-esque hubris, its title of the International Quarter ironic for a country turning its back on the world. Is this a dream too far? If a reminder of where it stands is needed, we find it not in Stratford's residential rocket-ships but a sneakier presence which snickers in the shadows of those colossi. It rises only forty metres: the latticed and torch-shaped Strand East Tower, which marks the promised redevelopment, still decked in scaffolding, of a patch they call Dane's Yard. We are in Danelaw here, though perhaps we should call it the Swedelaw now, for the kings in charge of this

redevelopment are none other than the modern face of the Swedish Empire, IKEA. More than a thousand years after Alfred's treaty with Guthrum secured the land east of the Lea for the Scandinavians, their claims to it have yet to subside.

That makes Stratford's challenge audacious, but its fundamental character is more so. It couches its dreams in a certain type of language: technology and future-proofing, connectivity, retail destinations, the balanced lifestyle, the global workplace – work, work, work, but this is not work as in the physical creation of things that improve the world or sustain people's livelihoods, but a more abstract definition unique to this age. The dream is a holy one, a spiritual mission as much as those of the industrial age's self-appointed moral uplifters or the Jerusalem-building post-war socialists, and in this case the religion is the New Age market faith. Hence Stratford's dream is articulated in its liturgical language, which for all its promises make little mention of actual human beings. Rather the beneficiary is to be the Way of the market itself, or rather the priestly class that surfs upon its highest layers. This is a future designed to order and spun off 3D-printers upon an ethos of business as usual, of *technology will deliver us*, of an all-is-well comfort with the charted course to salvation.

That is why, fall apart as things might, if Stratford one day serves as a power centre in London it will not be on terms like those there at present imagine. What it believes to be absolute, the water beneath knows to be relative; temporary; frail.

Where the Greenway crosses the Stratford road, a humbler residence in curvilinear black and white holds up a warning. It faces away from the skyscrapers, knowing they will flatten it if they see it; instead it is those who come from the City who witness this painted mural of a peasant woman and two children carrying baskets of vegetables. The old farming folk of this valley might have believed, like those who now inhabit these skyscrapers, that their reality was permanent.

Realities rarely are.

Like an escape chute, the Greenway slips from that nest of dreams into the part of Newham people actually live in. East, always to the east – a line in tarmac, sheathed in grass, black fences along the borders and lamp-posts all the way down, from here to the horizon then on to the next. No-one can count how many horizons it crosses.

It is a cable. The inside is insulated from the houses, trees and run-down factories through which it has been laid. Path, grass, fence. Across it is engraved the Meridian Line, that made-up longitude we crossed the other way at the lower latitudes of Downham, but that aside there seems little sign of imagination here.

Is this then a ladder, down from those high clouds of Olympian imagination and back to the stricken realities of mundane life? It is as though this neverending trail symbolises the tedium of a world corrupted by anti-dreams, by cynical belief systems that have convinced all who live in them that that is life, that is *reality*, there is no escape, no other way but to follow the norms, obey the powerful, curl up on the floor in tearful acceptance of the job centre clerks and Department of Work and Pensions bureaucrats sticking you to death with their harpoons of contempt and condescension, and struggle on towards that death you long for, you can't wait for, but must pretend to fear lest they punish you even more. A world where stories don't matter, where each of us is of no significance; where every person we have met on this journey, of all shapes and sizes, of all political beliefs, is nothing more than an animated lump of flesh, desperate to survive, in competition with all others, and with no more in common than the need of all human beings to piss and pass faeces.

Speaking of which, do you smell something?

They came, like life itself, from the water. And every few hours, they give part of themselves back to it. The part in their bowels.

The stuff that comes out of people's lower orifices offers delicious metaphorical value for philosophically-minded types who peddle tainted, bestial models of human nature. But when it comes to keeping a city of nine million people afloat the problem is a more literal one. Left unaddressed, the consequences are noticeable to everyone and enjoyed by none except a small minority located just beyond the fringes of healthy sexual diversity. To everyone else that material presents a serious public health hazard whose unpleasantness might explain why most books, films and video games, with a few brave exceptions like *Theme Hospital*, omit the characters' periodic need to deposit it. But the characters themselves cannot ignore it, so neither should those who journey through history indulge this taboo – especially not on long treks like these with not a public toilet in sight.

One person who attempted to rectify this silence was the French psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte, who in 1978 published *Histoire de la merde* – ‘The History of Shit’. More than a mere tale of sanitation, this was an iconoclastic tempest of history and political philosophy streaming with the post-Marxist, post-modern, post-everything-else theoretical currents of the late twentieth century in that way that the French seem uniquely passionate to arrange, drawing on Nietzsche, Freud and Foucault to explore how human beings’ relationships with their own excreta have shaped individualism, capitalism, urbanisation, the nation-state, the use of language; pretty much everything, in fact, that they are as a species.

Now if that might leave anyone at a loss as to what to call it – ‘wonderful’ is hard to resist – it at least places it out in the open that bodily waste is important. There is, as for all things, a politics of shit. But if we leave it to people like Laporte to make sense of its wider significance, there remains the basic question of how we get rid of it, and the question became all the more urgent as people took to living in ridiculous urbanised concentrations.

It was a challenge that demanded a great deal of imaginative energy, and if you do not feel up to imagining the stuff in your toilet then remember that if not for someone doing that imagining, there wouldn’t be a toilet to put it in for a start. The English in their turn struggled to focus their minds that way and for many generations suffered with scatological realities they no doubt told each other to just accept as part of life – until, that is, their own poo literally began to kill them. Only when they had had enough of that did they finally reject that reality and get their best minds to dream of better ones. When they did, the answers they came up with changed the world.

Look again at the Greenway, not with your eyes but with your nose. Smell it now? If the faint ambience of crap does not assail you, stop and sniff at the next set of manhole covers because there it graduates to a stench. And it should. Swimming beneath our feet is the literal crap of London, and that there crap is the stuff of the Greenway’s dreams, for who says that dreams belong in the clouds? Absolutely, the Greenway is a ladder back down from the celestial visions of Stratford, but rather than get off at ground level we must climb on down, deep into the bowels of the earth, for it is there, in Newham’s churning dark, that a grand vision of flowing crap was realised over a hundred years before the Olympians gave their own visions a go on the surface. And one may think what one likes about the poo that slogs through the earth, let alone of people who choose it as their dream-building material, but theirs was a dream that deserves

at least a tip of the hat. For the English it was one of their proudest and most important dreams of all, and one they would all be terribly sorry to lose.

The Greenway's true identity is the Northern Outfall Sewage Embankment, which knowing these people they named on purpose to produce the acronym NOSE. It runs atop one of the London sewer system's two outer arms, the other being the Southern Outfall Sewer, whose purpose is to remove its noxious contents to where they can safely be treated and dumped. More than a functioning piece of infrastructure – they still work today – London's sewers acquired a mythology as the pride and joy of this country's Victorian engineer-heroes, and that might explain why the Greenway looks out on arguably the most majestic palace this side of the City wall.

Domes, pinnacles, pillars, elaborate tiles and coloured brickwork – it has to be a religious building, either a temple to some river god, or a command centre to house that god and his or her thousand attendants on those occasions they rise forth from the reeds to take over London. Those English not attuned to such latent spirits, especially those who read certain tabloid newspapers, might instead panic at the sight of its indisputably Islamic architectural style and snarl that it is actually an enormous mosque that proves the Muslim invasion has been going on all along, with a Caliphate secretly controlling the government from beneath these pointy minarets and red-and-white arches which bear such striking resemblance to those an earlier Caliphate, the Umayyads, put up at the great Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain. Obviously their London base's name of Abbey Mills Pumping Station is only a cover-up by 'liberals', the Mayor (or Sultan) Sadiq Khan and probably George Soros.

In fact it was and is an honest pumping station. Its name is a throwback to one of those Lea mills which appeared in the Domesday Book, and it was erected by that generation of Victorian architects whose fashion was to make any old public works look grand enough for unemployed gods to squat in or imperial armies to withstand a siege in – recall the 'Castle' by the Stoke Newington reservoirs, as well as the smaller fancy pumping station in Streatham. Like the latter the exterior of Abbey Mills appears to have drawn inspiration from the pearls of Islamic architecture, whether the mosques of Istanbul or the Moorish masterpieces of North Africa and Muslim Spain.

Was this cultural appropriation, from a time when the English were just setting out on their long-term colonial humiliation of the Muslim world? Or the sincerest form of flattery from cultured individuals who sincerely admired the architectural

mastery of Islamic civilisations? Either way, the outcome was indeed a religious building which has earned from the English the nickname of ‘Cathedral of Sewage’. They might mean it as a joke, but they are more serious than they realise. The very act of raising it in such awesome grandeur has charged it with spiritual credentials in excess of its function of shifting their excreta.

For most of their existence English settlements have been filthy. If you were not privileged enough to have your own outhouse or access to the better-equipped towns’ ‘houses of easement’ – they like their euphemisms in stories like this – the customary practice was simply to toss your deposits into the nearest hole in the ground. If this embarrassed you in front of anthropologists you could dignify it by calling it a ‘cesspool’.

At night, if you kept extremely still and peeked out of the window, you might have witnessed some mystical fairy appear to collect your donated material. This was a ‘nightman’ or ‘gong farmer’: a downtrodden working-class fellow handed a shovel and a sole purpose in life to stop the cesspools from overflowing. In other words, the English were no different from societies their empire looked down on in that they, too, clung to the margins of sanitation by relying on an underclass who spent most of their nights literally covered in shit and who might or might not have been children. On the other hand, if you were one of the small minority who found this to resemble your idea of a good time, you could make quite a nice income out of it in better periods by charging the locals for your service or selling their waste to farmers as fertiliser.

What they didn’t take away eventually drained off into the natural sewers, that is, the rivers. When London was a reasonable size for a human settlement the Thames was generous enough to tolerate this, but some of its tributaries paid an ugly price which they of course reciprocated to their faecal abusers. The blighted Fleet, for example, inspired what the scholar Richard Helgerson called one of the ‘filthiest, most deliberately and insistently disgusting poems in the (English) language’: Ben Jonson’s *On the Famous Voyage*, in which the poet presents his journey up that river in 1616 as an Odyssey through a Greco-Roman underworld of horrors:

*Thorough her womb they make their famous road,
Between two walls; where, on one side, to scar men,*

*Were seen your ugly centaurs, ye call car-men,
Gorgonian scolds, and harpies; on the other
Hung stench, diseases, and old filth, their mother,
With famine, wants, and sorrows many a dozen,
The least of which was to the plague a cousin.*

This is the gentlest of over a hundred lines of hydras, chimeras, ghosts, flayed cats and considerable quantities of more repellent matter for which this was not metaphorical imagery.

We see here a foreshadowing of why their shit became such an important part of their history. Their failure to manage it would deal a near-fatal blow to the very heart of their society: its rivers like the Thames, which after two thousand years of service they would corrupt into a sewer of solid, stinking death.

As again and again, industrialisation changed everything. In London's case, the problematic change was going in the space of fifty years from a million people dumping their waste in the ground to three million people dumping their waste in the ground. Many of these people, and thus their deposits, ended up concentrated in the East End slums where sanitation was as hilarious a concept as rule of law – that is, the filthiest part of an already filthy city utterly unprepared for such a population explosion. To make matters worse, English and Scottish engineers had just invented the modern flush-toilet. Naturally this was for privileged types who could afford decent housing and not the poor sods working the riverside industries in places like West Ham, but the latter still shouldered the consequences. Along with the innovations in water supply technology like the installations we found up the Lea, the new toilets meant unheard-of volumes of water getting pumped at high pressure through cast-iron pipes at the whim of a bourgeois finger, thus whisking away new mountains of middle-class poo to make it the problem of those living by the rivers where it was dumped.

And so the politics of English excreta was a class politics. What left the lower orifices of the industrial revolution's beneficiaries went into the upper orifices of its victims. The latter complained, the former ignored them and smiled at their marvellous world of newfound hygiene. They also ignored those who crossed into that world bearing warnings: that growing swell of activists and reformers who pointed out that not only was this an immoral way to treat their workers, but that they had merely displaced their sanitation problem, not solved it, and that sooner or later it would grow into a menace and return to consume them all. Some, like

Charles Dickens, attempted to shock the ruling classes out of complacency with all-too-real fictional portrayals of London's slums. Others made scientific investigations and slammed the results onto policymakers' desks. The journalist and founder of *Punch* magazine Henry Mayhew unleashed *London Labour and the London Poor*, four volumes of explorations and interviews in down-and-out London in the 1840s in which its perfunctory rudiments of a sewer system, the composition of the stuff it contained, and the accounts of the nightmen, rat-catchers, 'toshers', 'flushers' and so forth who keep it moving featured in their full wretched complexion. The situation was alarming enough for a certain reformer called Edwin Chadwick to make sanitation his central mission, punching through the taboos of cultured society to explain all the ways it represented a public health emergency in need of government action.

Finding the city's ears closed to these portents, the rivers put the consequences through its mouths and noses instead. Their excrement-clogged water became the medium for that great plague of industrial England, cholera, which descended in wave after wave of epidemics that swept away thousands of lives at a time – regardless of class. The Thames, which had given London its life, was taking it back with a vengeance. To look at newspapers and journals from this period is to come face to face with an outburst of remarkable visual metaphors for what they had done to their water. Death, our skeletal friend with his cloak and scythe, rowing between appointments amidst belly-up animal carcasses; old Father Thames, hair and beard and hanging weeds clogged to solidity with shit, receiving a business card from top-hatted scientist Michael Faraday, the latter holding his nostrils shut; what might be ghouls, zombies, skeletal children or all of the above crawling up onto the riverbanks; or a Thames droplet, zoomed in to show what clawed, beaked and hairy monstrosities, their faces bearing uncanny resemblances to certain politicians, now inhabited its water at microscopic level.

That many of these appeared in Mayhew's humour magazine *Punch* did not make them jokes. As has been the case with disastrous plagues in many human societies, these cartoon gremlins had at least some tendrils in deep narratives of punishment from the gods. England's failure at the politics of shit would have left its people not only physically upset but shaken at a spiritual level, all the more so in those insecure years when the struggle between science and religious tradition was at its most heated. When better for all those spirits to come out to play? Death and Father Thames must be among the most ancient characters in this

population's collective soul, and their emergence to comment are surely a sign of the metaphysical depths to which their bodily waste problem had sunk them.

Its logical conclusion and turning point was the 'Great Stink' of 1858. Left unattended for so many years, the crap of London in alliance with industrial effluents now wafted its retribution into the very corridors of Parliament. Sent fleeing for their lives upriver, the English political class decided to do something.

Those who had argued for doing something sooner had not been idle. In 1848, ten years before the 'Great Stink', the City had managed to cobble together its first central authority on sanitation in the form of the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers. One of its commissioners was Mr. Sanitation himself, Edwin Chadwick, who drove it in pursuit of a new vision: replacing the rotting calamity of London's makeshift excuse for a sewer system with a unified network that would actually work before the existing arrangement burst from the seams with disease and killed them all.

It must have looked a laughable fantasy. The sheer scale of the task would surely defeat this body with next to no power, money, or path through London's administrative shambles in that day. And how could they even contemplate building sewers when they had no idea what they would be building them on? London's surface had simply never been mapped with the topographic precision needed for such a scheme, to say nothing of its subterranean innards.

Undaunted, Chadwick saw that putting that right was the first challenge and set about getting the city surveyed. The result was not only the 901 sheets of the first Ordnance Survey map of London, completed in 1850, but the first systematic chart of its guts. This was hazardous work for the survey team, who were asphyxiated by the fetid air or had the skin torn off their faces in gas explosions, confirming by experience that these horrible tunnels were on the point of falling to pieces. Among those to brave them with his notebook was an engineer in his thirties who had worked too hard on the railways at the peak of railway mania and crumbled into a mental breakdown, and whose road to recovery lay fittingly through these terrors of the faecal dark. His name was Joseph Bazalgette, and Chadwick's surveys were his first encounter with the sewage that would propel him to a position on the English engineer-hero pantheon second only to his good friend Brunel.

Mapping the terrain was only the first step. Besides the indifference in the soon-to-be-taught corridors of power, the sewer-builders also disagreed among themselves as to what the new system should look like. Chadwick was one of several who strongly believed in Londoners' defecations as a resource to be recycled for the public good – say, to fertilise agriculture to support the booming population, or create new land in the Thames's marshy estuary. On the other side of the argument stood an increasingly prominent Bazalgette, who insisted that the larger concern was to get rid of the stuff, far away, right now, and solve London's sanitation crisis. There was much banging together of the heads that hosted these competing visions, but by the time the 'Great Stink' finally won them government backing in 1858 to the tune of £3 million, Bazalgette's scheme had prevailed as the working plan.

A sewer system to take the waste out of the city might have been more practical than Chadwick's dreams to transform said waste into magical things, but it was still one heck of a daydream. It required dividing the map of London into colour-coded catchment zones based on the shape of its land: that is, on whether removal of the sewage could be entrusted to gravity or required machinery to pump it. Those pumping stations would be sited at strategic locations on the network, Abbey Mills being one of four. Each area's waste would drain into an intercepting sewer and these would meet east of the city, with one junction north of the river, the other south. From there two outfalls, the Northern and the Southern, would rush their contents away to the lower Thames where they could be dumped far enough to not get washed back in by the tide.

One does not simply pick up a shovel and dig something like that. Bazalgette's scheme might have found favourable political circumstances and a public health emergency that made something, anything, necessary, but the engineer knew that when the moment passed there might never be another opportunity to pile such massive dreams – and the funds and workers to build them – into London's entrails again. They had exactly one chance to get it right. What raises him in English memory as a true engineer-hero is that he appears to have had the foresight worthy of such a moment. His intercepting sewers reached far beneath the fast-expanding suburbs west of the old city. In calculating their shapes and dimensions he took in mind the city's population, its rate of growth, and the volume of matter it was depositing – and then doubled these figures, making his sewers wide enough to cope with not only the current expected flow but that of a still more vastly expanded population. Even that would turn out a serious

underestimate – he predicted four million people, in fact it got over eight – but it was good enough for this preposterously expanding megacity to get by with adding bits onto his network rather than replacing it, or to stack hundreds of people in tower blocks a century later without fear of their shit erupting out of the earth.

With the plans approved, a whirlwind of contracts and blueprints broke from the fumes of the Great Stink. The first phase to build the more than 130 kilometres of the core sewer network required 27 construction contracts, mostly with prestigious contractors bringing experience off railway-laying. The actual work was left to working-class navvies, thousands of them, digging and laying bricks and concrete under the supervision of Bazalgette and his team of clerks and engineers. Because of the nature of this country's caste system the navvies' experiences are not recorded nearly so well as the directors', so if you run into Mr. Bazalgette somewhere in future then this is something to ask him about. How did he respond, for example, when they stormed out on the great bricklayers' strike of 1859 – another milestone in the growth of English trade unionism – to demand their working hours be reduced to a mere nine a day?

Labour unrest was a logical obstacle in a country that failed to treat its workers like human beings, but other setbacks were out of the dreamers' control. One was the English climate with its bucketing rains and winter frosts. Others came out of relying on such a crowded maze of contractors, of which it was perhaps inevitable that some would fall bankrupt or struggle to source enough brick and stone. That enough of them delivered nevertheless might attest to Bazalgette's insistence on sticking with contractors he considered reliable, a favouritism which blemished his reputation and would eventually bury the Metropolitan Board of Works in a raft of corruption scandals.

Then there were the accidents. In May 1862 the digging for this Northern Outfall Sewer hit a gas main in Shoreditch, causing it to explode and kill a passer-by. Three weeks later heavy rains overwhelmed the Fleet sewer, which catastrophically burst and flooded a large section of Clerkenwell. The next year in Deptford six navvies had a tunnel collapse on them; only three made it out alive. The work went on anyway, it had to be done, but one cannot help but wonder if it could have managed without normalising that kind of sacrifice, such that big construction projects worldwide a century and a half later continue to treat individual workers and local residents as expendable.

Not that any of this was secret. On the contrary this was urban construction on a scale never before seen in this country, and there was no way they were going to dig it up end to end in anything other than full glare of awestruck crowds and print media. Awe is not of course a typical human response to annoying construction work, least of all when it blocks your road or the hairy builders swear at your children. The response was to cast those builders and their task as not just work to put up with, but indeed, a dream: something to believe in, to find hope in as a path to their society's spiritual self-improvement. *Technology will deliver us.* And alongside striking illustrations of all the pipes, beams, tunnels, mills, embankments and panoramic workscapes, it was as much the stuff of manual labour – 318 million bricks, more than half a million cubic metres of concrete, two and a half million of excavated earth – that now replaced the scary poo-spirits in the pages of London's newspapers. Through ingenuity, sheer hard work and willing taxpayers' money, the English were invited to believe, they would build into the very bones of their capital city a modern-day wonder of the world, and through its tunnels escape their age-old curse of filth for a bright and sanitary future. Cleaner bodies meant civilised souls.

While overseeing the sewer system Bazalgette had his hand in other projects which in some cases, notably the underground railways, overlapped with the drains. One nexus of these works would come to define the dream of London. The Victoria Embankment along the north bank of the Thames was built to house one of the intercepting sewers as well as gas pipes, telegraph cables, and what has since become the District and Circle Lines, so its need was extremely practical. Yet after the industries and livelihoods there had been turfed down the river and the waterfront transformed, its new look became a shining symbol of a people engineering their way to a heaven of prestige. The Embankment's formal opening in 1870 was an affair of much grandiose solemnity and royal and political name-checking, and to this day the Embankment slides, understated but essential, through a planetful of romantic images of London.

Funny that. In the Roman republic, at about the time Caesar's warriors were floundering about in these Thames marshes, Cicero is known to have poked fun at senators speaking as though they lived in Plato's Republic rather than the crap of Romulus. The reference was to the criminals and fugitives supposedly brought together by Rome's mythic founder to build it, but the English might do well for a dose of like humility. That entire walkway from the Houses of Parliament to Blackfriars Bridge has been done up in the noblest of the imperial techno-pomp

that so wows foreign tourists today: gas lamps, stylish public gardens, a string of retired warships and stone monuments and statues to national heroes, including Bazalgette's own, right next to Embankment station – the irony being that this dreamscape literally exists because of English shit. The Embankment's projected vision of national glory is fertilised by its practical task of moving the national defecations.

Back out here the low-lying marshlands of West and East Ham presented a different problem. Unable to sink the Northern Outfall Sewer beneath them like the rest of the network, they were forced instead to lay it over the surface. Having done so, and perhaps knowing posterity would scream at them if they left it exposed, they coated it in its own embankment with a footpath along the top and grassy banks. Hence, the Greenway. We're standing on it.

By the late 1860s the system was nearing completion. As with the Olympics, the coming-to-life of a spectacular dream needed a spectacular opening ceremony to match it. In the event they got two, because the northern and southern portions were finished separately and each had its own perfect showpiece: the system's two largest pumping temple-stations. The southern one at Crossness, east of Woolwich in the Erith marshes, opened first before hundreds of guests in 1865 with an engine-starting ritual, a explanatory sermon from Bazalgette, an underground pilgrimage into the sewage reservoir and a sumptuous banquet, with many royals, officials and journalists among the congregation. Three years later they came here to Abbey Mills and did it all again.

If you have never seen anything like this before, these crowds wouldn't have either. By no coincidence would actual palaces and cathedrals have been the closest things in their memories to these so-called pumping stations, of which Abbey Mills was the more stylistically developed and thus extravagant of the pair. Bazalgette had combined his designs for its functional engineering with those of an architect, Charles Henry Driver, for its visual impact, and in both aspects the visions it had realised were staggering. The function alone was akin to borrowing the muscle of the gods: its purpose may have been to lift up tons of sewage so gravity could drain it away to the outfalls at Barking, but it did so by means of state-of-the-art Cornish steam engines, so named because they were based on earlier models built to pump water out of tin mines in Cornwall. These were enormous contraptions, in need of suitably large structures to house them. And they got them: a lavish cast-iron octagon set in the template of a Greek cross with a Russian Orthodox lantern in the roof, Celtic floral motifs in brass erupting off

door hinges, Italian Gothic windows, and of course the Byzantine ironwork and Moorish spires that give it such potent Islamic character. It used to be even more Islamic: the original structure came with two minaret-style steam chimneys, but these became redundant when the steam engines were replaced by electric motors in the 1930s, then were demolished out of fear they offered an easy target to the *Luftwaffe*.

The reporters drooled all over it, writing and sketching their wonderment into their newspapers. There was much religious analogising about shrines of machinery, engine cylinder pulpits and subterranean sewage crypts, as well as comparison with actual places of worship and competitive digs at the expense of Paris, then undertaking its own sewer revolution under the massive urban reconstruction programmes of Baron Haussmann. Nor was it lost on anyone that all this was most basically a supreme architectural masturbation with poo, and amidst the amazement there was also unease about the unheard-of volumes of it chuntering through the earth right next to them, all still destined of course to be plonked in their sacred river.

Why go to all this dignifying trouble? It could be parsed as a boast of English development: if they could spend so much on and raise so high the towers of something as banal as processing crap, then what limits were there when it came to the stuff that really mattered for projecting imperial glory? At a more personal level, there might also have been an understandable frustration on Bazalgette's part that for all these labours, virtually all of his sewer system was to be sealed forever underground, out of the sight and mind of people for whom its vital but smelly service was best performed invisibly. Shouldn't then the few bits above the surface be done up in a majesty befitting the accomplishment they stood for, as something for people to see and so remember it – remember *him*?

But there was more to it than that. More, in the sense of Abbey Mills as a spiritual experience, a message about what the English were going through. On the surface, this appeared to be a society which had found science and was turning its back on the spirit. Who needs the gods when *technology will deliver us*? This pumping station was a physical embodiment of that creation, by technological means, of all the heaven they needed. But Abbey Mills's decorations reveal it, intended or not, for what it is: a *temple* of science, not just a facility. Something of English spirituality, of how they sensed their place in the universe, carried over into the engineering works that had done so much to raise that place in their imaginations. They had harnessed power on a scale hitherto considered

divine, and with it changed the ways they lived. They hadn't turned their backs on religion after all – only found new gods. That is the message of the architecture of the Abbey Mills Pumping Station: *there is something here worth worshipping*.

But what?

Themselves? That is one answer, and through it their imperial misadventures make much sense. As far as the English were concerned, they had the power, so they were the gods. They came to see the rest of the world as beneath them, thus their mission to show the barbarians the way, to crash upon their lands as a force of righteous spiritual terror in the senses of those who lived there – to strike in them a cosmic fear, not just a physical one, at the steamships and bombers of the new gods.

That of course has not ended well for them. But was there then a more lasting object of worship here – *capital?* The machines themselves, which soaked power from the universe and translated it into power over people's physical realities. They are not so different in that sense from traditional gods and spirits, whose names in some hands might be used to steer loyalties, behaviours and resources for a better society, but in the hands of more cunning or prejudiced priesthods have oft been diverted to personal gain and public ruin. Bazalgette might have meant Abbey Mills's project in the spirit of social betterment, but was it just the other side of a coin which, here minted, foreshadowed the English's full-scale plunge into market theology in the 1980s? These are prayers they have yet to stand up from.

If we would prefer a more hopeful third answer, there might yet be something for us here. In its railings, its friezes, indeed pretty much all its ornamentations all the way around, Abbey Mills Pumping Station erupts in a profusion of plant matter. Those cast-iron lily leaves and engraved berry bushes whisper with Chadwick's abandoned hope to recycle sewage as manure to grow plants like these. But beneath that, might this artistic union of industrial material and ecological subject matter stand for a deeper spiritual vision? An interdependence between humans and the natural world, that is to say, in which excreta, for all its maligning, is after all a pivotal link in the cycle.

Bazalgette's sewers were one of the English's most striking examples yet that dreams can be made realities. And of how when the dream-reality relationship goes wrong, it produces nightmares.

The sewer system had to be constantly managed and improved if it was to provide a lasting service. Most urgently, its contents were still piling into the Thames downstream, far enough to no longer drown the city in filth but not so far as to placate the river itself. The scandalous death-in-crap of over six hundred people in the *Princess Alice* steamship disaster of 1878, followed by renewed fears of a second ‘Great Stink’, impelled the Metropolitan Board of Works to come up with better ways of purifying the sewage before it reached the water, thus developing the treatment works that now stand at the northern and southern outfalls. Even so treated, the residual sludge continued to find its way to the North Sea until as late as 1998, when the EU made dumping it illegal and forced them to burn it instead, producing toxic ash which they are still wondering how to get rid of. This is a story still in progress today.

Even after the core infrastructure was in place much work remained to connect smaller streets and individual houses to the intercepting sewers. As London’s population swelled these began to struggle, and new branches had to be added. Nonetheless the city’s growth has outstripped even Bazalgette’s far-sighted calculations, leading to occasions when, especially under intense rainfall, the sewers fail and give up their contents to the streets – or more often, as a failsafe measure, dump the overflow straight into the Thames to resounding condemnation and multimillion-pound pollution fines for its present custodians, the ubiquitous Thames Water.

After a study in 2001, a solution was proposed which represents this people’s most ambitious water infrastructure project since the sewers’ inception. The Thames Tideway Tunnel is supposed to be a level-two upgrade for Bazalgette’s scheme, a kind of super-interceptor sewer to capture some of the most polluted outflows and bring them here to Abbey Mills then on to the treatment works. True to modern form, it is forecast to be brutally expensive and has stirred up controversies over its human and environmental impact and whether it is needed at all. How far would these have paralleled the concerns over the original work of Bazalgette and his navvies? At the least, it has an imposing standard to live up to.

While the city planners have had to deal with these practical headaches, for everyone else the spirits and scary prowlers of the mind have found a perfect habitat in these dark and slimy tunnels. Bazalgette and his navvies had unwittingly created a new archetype: the secret city-under-the-city, which played on ancient myths of underworlds and labyrinths but now gave their criminals, mutants, skittering horrors, lost civilisations and escaped genetic experiments a real

physical space to inhabit – and one which sprawled everywhere, with nothing to stop them creeping up toilets into any house in the city. In 1996, to give just one example, Neil Gaiman filled them with a universe of such entities in *Neverwhere*. Bazalgette's work had laid the ground for a full-scale mythology of sewer systems and the plumbing profession that sprawls like pipes through the hidden strata of international imagination, as far and wide as New York's legends of sewer alligators, the green pipes of Super Mario, the monsters of Stephen King, the *Pokémon* Grimer and Muk, and the Undercity of *World of Warcraft*'s political undead. Indeed for any video game that involves an exploration of urban settings, a sewer level is virtually obligatory.

It is perhaps as this sort of myth-space as much as as a physical marvel that the sewers have drawn generations of real and usually illegal explorers into the English capital's own Undercity. And there in 2017, in the tunnels beneath the East End, they ran into a real monster.

The Whitechapel Monster was 250 metres long – longer than Tower Bridge or two football pitches – and at 130 tonnes had the mass of nineteen elephants. Videos surfaced on YouTube of inspectors' flashlights delving through the slippery dark to fall on a portion of its hide, a hideous congealed and calcified ash-white corpulence of waste, fat and cooking oil. Lurching through the sewers, shaking off wet wipes and nappies as it went, it had swelled so large as to clog the tunnel from floor to ceiling and now sat there consolidating its contents, shrugging off the shovels and high-powered jet hoses of the reinforcements sent to dislodge it.

Soon reports emerged of similar creatures infesting other parts of the sewer system, including a 750-metre abomination under Southwark. Before they knew it they were discovering these horrors in the sewers of more than twenty cities up and down the country. The species was given a name: *fatberg*. The sewers had incubated a new bugbear into the core of present-day English mythology, an embodiment of all its sins of modernity now set to bring down – or rather bring up – a public health calamity for our age.

An intrepid investigation team managed to wrestle off a piece of the Southwark fatberg and drag it here to Abbey Mills for an autopsy. Its bodily structure, they found, comprised a litany of all the irresponsibilities built into the modern English way of life. Its bulk was formed of cosmetic wet wipes, flushed down the lavatory despite labels warning not to or lies from their makers that they were biodegradable. These had stuck together, and to the sewer walls, by means of prodigious gallons of cooking oil poured down the sinks of restaurants and private

households. The combination had caught within it a devilish junkheap of hazardous and contaminated objects, some dubiously used, all rashly disposed of; these included condoms, of course, but also used needles and syringes. An agglomeration of Englishnesses, in other words, which now threatens their cities with their worst blockage and flooding-in-shit risk since the sewers were built.

To remove these beasts is costing more than £80 million a year, and rising, on top of whatever traumatic price is borne by those who go down there to do it. But beneath the obvious troubles lurks a far more sinister menace: nothing less than a revival of the nightmares of plague and pestilence whose banishment was the sewers' purpose in the first place.

The researchers ran a chemical analysis of their chunk of fatberg and found a range of disturbing substances beneath the oleic acid: medicines and painkillers, caffeine, tobacco smoke, the components of (ironically) cleaning products, and drugs – not only the likes of cocaine and heroin but horse tranquilisers too. Gorging on this chemical feast was a thriving, teeming community of living organisms. Some, like the worms, were huge, but there were also parasitic microbes and bacteria like *Campylobacter* and *E. coli*, familiar friends bearing tidings of diarrhoea. It got worse. Testing these fellows, they discovered that some of their number qualified as 'superbugs', or as they are more formally known, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, classed by the World Health Organization as one of the fastest-emerging and most dangerous threats to public health in the world.

Is that to be the sewers' ultimate irony? Nearly two hundred years after they promised the triumph of the English people over water-borne disease, they themselves are become the laboratory for a new plague, and one all the more apocalyptic for winning its arms race against modern medicine. Picture them even now, biding their time in the pipes beneath our feet, waiting for climate change to supply them the signal – the rainfall, the storm surge, the flood – at which they will burst from the concrete and reap English souls in their millions. The tunnels dreamt up to deliver the English from filthy doom may yet funnel them straight into its jaws.

This is not the only way the story can go. But there is a reason these plagues, like the cholera epidemics of Bazalgette's time, strike such disarray in the spirit as well as the body. These microbes, humanity's smallest enemies, have proven themselves the greatest down a calendar of millennia, laughing at the arrogance of the hierarchies and class structures they have levelled as they overturned societies that claimed to stand at the pinnacles of civilisation. Like all clever

operators they learn to capture their opponents' technology and turn it against them, with neither the sewer system nor modern medicine free of vulnerabilities they can exploit. Facing them down demands humility, cooperation, and an informed public discourse – challenging perhaps for a country proud of itself, turning its back on the world, and losing its grip on fact-based conversation. But whether in the form of bubonic plague, smallpox, cholera, the Spanish flu, or indeed, as they are learning now, COVID-19, catastrophic pandemics swarm on gashes in the English memory within reach of each of its generations, and make this as meaningful a reason as any to rectify their course.

But do not take my word for it: go and meet their ambassadors for yourself. In a move which invites us not to think too hard about certain large wooden horses, still less pale horses, a piece of the Whitechapel fatberg was allowed to come riding into the Museum of London. There it was enthroned for some months, 'teeming with bacteria and releasing small amounts of toxic gases' as their website promoted, to all the wonder and excitement of an adoring public. They have since put it in storage, but you can still watch it pustulate with yellow mould via live webcam. If you are keen enough to meet this monster, I am sure they could help you arrange an audience.



Nearly two centuries on, Bazalgette's dream holds together the daily lives of more than eight million Londoners. Every time one of them flushes the toilet or washes ketchup down the sink, they are participating in that sanitation system which they rarely stop to imagine, but which if it were to suddenly disappear, would leave their city uninhabitable in less than a day. Had it not been for that dream, their schoolkids today might instead study an empire that decayed into the background of history after being choked out of its capital by its own crap.

Abbey Mills Pumping Station still plays its part in warding off that fate. It is no longer the main pump on this site, that honour having been conceded in the 1990s to the nondescript aluminium-grey facility over its shoulder. But it still works, and they keep its electric pumps on standby, just in case.

Remember where they began. The sewers were not a before-and-after threshold, but a continuation of their oldest story of all: the relationship with the river, in which their opening here of a chapter of high-tech negotiation would bring them at last to the Thames Barrier. Its story too is unfinished, but our journey which started there is almost complete. It is time to close the circle.

The Greenway bridges the last of the Bow Back Rivers to drive a straight line east and south through the Newham dormitories. Once more we have escaped London's asteroid belt. Plaistow surrounds us. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons gathered here for games and sports – from Old English *pleg* comes *play* – or in a contrary theory, it got its name off the Norman knight Hugh de Plaiz. We will not get to ask it, for the Greenway makes no contact other than where it crosses its roads. That was by design. The industrial slums here were outside London and not a priority for connection to Bazalgette's sewer network, their own cesspools shut out from the tunnel that sliced their communities in half. Not until around 1900 did West Ham get its own little pumping station to raise its proletarian poo to full participation, and in so doing grant rightful scatological citizenship to its donors.

From there the NOSE crosses a couple of railways. First is the Jubilee Line, whose southern extension was pushed through here in the 1990s during the dockland regeneration. The idea was to boost transport capacity for the salaried hordes of Canary Wharf, but coincidentally they dangled its tail right where its tip could later sprout a tongue to lick up the riches of Olympic Stratford. Beyond it comes the infinitely longer tail of the District Line, which for more than a hundred years has trailed deep into the forbidden wilds of Essex, where in the mists beyond the edge of the map, they say, lies a fabled land called Upminster. More immediately tangible is an A4 sign on the Greenway fence, hand-written in marker

pen and dated July 2018, that reminds us we are still in Violent England and doubles as unfortunate lesson in why punctuation matters. 'ARMED ATTACKERS ARE TARGETING CYCLISTS ON THE GREENWAY', it reads. 'BE EXTRA VIGILANT ROBBING CYCLISTS AT KNIFEPOINT'.

From there the sewer grows spiritual as the dead of the East London Cemetery peek through the bushes. The English put a lot of business Death's way in these parts. Many of the victims of the *Princess Alice* disaster queued up at his desk here, as did those who died when a stage collapsed at the launch of the battleship *HMS Albion* in 1898, dropping two hundred relatives of the workers who built it into the river. A single grave also speaks of the English ritual of ceremonial killing of political prisoners: it houses Carl Hans Lody, a German spy they caught in Ireland in World War I. One of the last prisoners they put to death at the Tower, his dignified conduct at his trial troubled English consciences, exuding a sense of calm patriotism they would have celebrated in their own operatives and which perhaps made them feel their hypocrisy in damning it when nothing differed but its flag. Thirty years later this area paid the price for their failure to learn the lessons of that war when its industrial activity drew the attentions of the Nazi bombers. West and East Ham were among the most mercilessly targeted districts in the capital region: their docks and gasworks were set aflame, swathes of their housing wiped out, and the NOSE burst to spill its sewage over the neighbourhood.

At the junction with one of the Plaistow roads, a restored church is conspicuous by its done-up-ness. Named after St. Andrew, it was a Church of England matter until it got taken over by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – a name with an obvious Dissenter ring, in this case an Evangelical movement, and a dodgy one in the extreme, which took shape in Brazil in the 1970s. Soon afterward the landscape gives way to the bright white headquarters of a secondary school, Brampton Manor Academy, whose name and crest shine forth over the Greenway and may or may not indicate it to be a secret military order or front for whatever conspiratorial world-conquering organisation is popular this week. And in the distance, rising like the turreted gates of a stairway to the sky, stands the Barking Creek Flood Barrier, a weir they built on its namesake tributary as part of the flood defence system that supports the Thames Barrier.

The river, and thus our journey's end, are in sight. Rather than follow the outfall sewer to meet it where they feed it all their nitrogenous waste, let us descend from the Greenway into the gaslands of Beckton, a place for one last rest before the final push into the docks.

We escape the outfall sewer via some terraced residential back streets – basic, none too fancy, but at least potentially liveable – out of which the most interesting name is Roman Road. This is not an actual Roman road, but refers to the discovery of dozens of skeletons and cremation urns from a Roman cemetery round here while they were digging to build the sewer. These streets then put us over a footbridge across the A13 trunk road to the Tilbury port, known here as the Newham Way, from where to the east the local mountain range, the Beckton Alps, is in plain sight. Alas they are not true Alps but the English variant, better identified as a lump with trees on it.

Beckton got its name from Simon Adams Beck, governor of the Gas Light and Coke Company which built a five-hundred-acre coal gas plant here in the 1870s. It was the most enormous in the world for its time and effectively a city in itself, hence this marshy piece of the East Ham jigsaw puzzle grew up to house its workers, who lived out their toil enveloped in the fog of the roaring gas furnaces. Those too shared in the East End tradition of spawning rebels and reformers to stand up to class injustice. When one of their stokers, Will Thorne, entered parliament in 1906 as the member for West Ham South, he became one of the nascent Labour Party's first MPs and represented England's first socialist-run local authority. One of the adjacent streets, Jack Dash Way, points to a full-blown communist, surprisingly called Jack Dash, who rose from the nearby docks as a firebrand trade union leader and mainstay of the picket lines in a sector right on the vicious rearguard of England's industrial decline.

For the Beckton gasworks that moment came when natural gas was discovered in the North Sea. Left redundant, Beck's coal-gas city fell apart and had shut by the end of the 1960s. Its derelicts have been gradually swallowed up by the dockland redevelopment movement, but trickier to monetise was the accumulation of toxic by-products it had dumped in a pile by the Newham Way. It is this pile, aggrandised by English humour as the Beckton Alps, that we are looking at now. They covered it in a cape of green in the 1980s and disguised it as a dry ski slope, and with astonishing irony, enough creatures have made their homes in it to get it protected as a nature conservation site.

Closer to hand is a more appealing natural oasis, the Beckton District Park. Wishable as it may be that this was placed for the relief of the labourers of West and East Ham, it is a much more recent 1980s arrival. Though no refuge from the rumbling of the Newham Way or the massive construction site next door, landscape redeems soundscape. There is a lake with all the obligatory water birds,

undulating hillocks for children to roll down, and a trail of trees with representatives from all over the world: Hungarian Oak, Algerian Fir, arboreal multiculturalism in diverse Newham.

For thousands of years the Thames has brought those cultures in and out. Yet it always warned them about settling in its own domain, whose dark forests, flood-prone plains and malarial swamps threatened to swallow all who dared think to make them home. The seaman Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* reflected as much from his boat in the Thames – ‘imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate’. Why then was it here, out in the most unworkable corner of those marshes, where the Lea ploughs in to signal obviously that they should go away, that the English sought to implement some of their most ambitious dreams?

We have crossed two of those dream-bubbles today: the sewer dream of the 1860s, and the Olympic dream of the 2010s. Both sought to change the way the English of London live forever. The first largely succeeded, though not without problems, limits and unforeseen consequences. The second, it is too soon to tell. Yet they have in common what is most important: that they began *in* the imagination, crawled *from* the imagination upon the landscapes of reality, and *changed it* into different realities.

Both sets of designers intended their dreamed realities to be future-proof: to withstand changes from unpredictable directions and still continue their service. Both offer case studies in how difficult that is. Reality is constantly changing, whether at the behest of other dreams or in ways imagined by nobody. Bazalgette had it easier there: the dream of the sewers was meant to carry out one specific task, rather than transform an area’s life in complex ways, and one reality that will always be constant, probably – dare we say, hopefully – is that humans will need somewhere to deposit their shit. Future-proofing such a somewhere meant wider tunnels for ever-greater quantities of it. But even Bazalgette could not predict the true obesity to which urban London would bloat, nor the materials that people of the wet-wipe age would put down his drains to make of them a fatberg disease-reservoir. For the Olympic redevelopments, couched in the ways of the market and relying on values, habits and directions in far more perpetual change than the need to pass crap, the steering wheel is shakier still. Will its inhabitants always be living, working, buying and selling in the ways its designers assume? Time will tell, but there are plenty of ghost cities sitting around in this world, particularly in the

colossal dreamscapes of China, that warn of what can happen when urban planners allow the dream-balloon to over-inflate.

But these giants of the marshes are not the English's only dreams. It is possible, on the contrary, to read the entire script of schemes and stories that has lined our circuit as a collection of imaginary futures which, acted upon, have jumbled together into that box of imagined realities called England.

Seen that way, a spectrum emerges. At one end are those Englands that began with a bold imaginary vision, laid on reality tile by tile, such as the Great Exhibition or Hampstead Garden Suburb. At the other are those which took shape spontaneously, say when someone tried to link up their business concerns with a watercourse or come up with a sport anyone could play, but which then took on an imaginary agency of their own like the canal network or the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club. And yet all these dreams are troubled, spreading out into the space in between where the emergent reality did not match the dreamed intention – the Garden Suburb's upper-middle-class destiny, the racial and gendered controversies of Wimbledon, and perhaps the starkest example, the hundred-and-eighty-degree mutation of Harrow School from a vision of inclusive education to a reality and emergent mythos of public-school elitism.

At the edges, these troubles glow hot where the dreams' very nature was and remains contested. Do prisons like Wandsworth dream of a city free of crime, or a nightmare in which privilege and power keep the poor and the different in eternal torment? Is the RAF a dream of flying the world in defence of freedom, or a night terror of death in exploding chunks, delivered out of the blue to roast peoples with different gods and skin colours into compliance? And what of the guns of Woolwich, which we soon face again across the river?

Those take us up to England's overarching dreams and nightmares, those that define it at existential level but are also its most contentious of all. England: an empire of good intentions, or one of the worst tides of suffering to ever spread across the Earth? A democracy with rule of law and accountable institutions, or a tyranny where those institutions, from the parliament to the police, serve the interests that control them? A green and pleasant land of fresh air, clean rivers and public spaces for everyone, or of private claims parcelled out between Encloser landlords and ravenous developers in a war of all against all? A proud, hard-working people that make marvellous things, or a pile of expendable slaves whose sweat is ground out to drench the champagne glasses of a clutch of bankers, politicians and CEOs in a capsule in the sky with scarcely a revolving door to

separate them? A nation which believes a home is more than a house, or which burns its residents to death in tower blocks? ‘This is for everybody’, or ‘GO HOME OR FACE ARREST’?

Malice is not the only thing that bars good dreams from reality. But it is an unignorable truth that so many of England’s best dreams have washed aground on the reefs of the same old demons that ruthlessly patrol its imagination-space: its prejudice systems of class, race and gender, each with its own dark designs for English reality. These are longings for violent, authoritarian Englands of superiors and inferiors, where the people at the top thrive on the suffering of the less-than-people at the bottom; where diverse human beings are cast into simplified groups, each to be policed into the correct ways of being white or black, male or female, straight or gay, cis or trans, rich or poor, wherein for the latter all ways are wrong. English hells, with a permanent supply of slaves, dissidents and cannon fodder to be shot to pieces in the trenches, ground to dust in the factories, abused in the newspapers, tortured in the prisons, hanged or beheaded in the killing ritual, or, like Stephen Lawrence and the lengthening list of names scratched out by the present knife-violence epidemic, simply done to death on the street at random. These are dreams the English together have not awakened from, and which till they do, will drag all their other dreams to oblivion with pitiless gravity.

To acknowledge this, then to give undivided attention to taking apart these prejudice systems, abusive power structures and myths of civilisational superiority, must now be England’s number one priority if it is to build a better future and create a worthwhile place for itself in a changing world. It must lay down those hellish dreams that in the hands of all nations time and again have corrupted historical memory to cast futures of ruin. And to contemplate what it means to lay down dreams, we come at the end to London’s fallen docklands, where their boldest and most troubled dreams of all, industry and empire, went to die.

15. Docks



In no single spot of London, not even at the Bank, could so vivid an impression of the vast wealth of England be obtained as at the Docks.

Walter Thornbury, journalist and author, in *Old and New London*, 1873

...the immense tracts of dereliction I now observed...crumbling infrastructure...vast tracts of polluted land...The place was a tip: 6,000 acres of forgotten wasteland.

Michael Heseltine, founder of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC), 2000

The Thames marshes are not the natural habitat of the alpaca. Like their heftier cousins the llamas, alpacas are more usually spotted in the Andes Mountains of South America. They are fully domesticated, having been bred over thousands of years for their wool-like fibre, and hold immense cultural significance for the peoples who rely on them. They are also extremely fluffy.

But Newham is known for its diversity, and at least two of these creatures, one black, one white, have settled here as nth-generation immigrants. Now established citizens, they munch bemused at the socio-economic forces transforming their borough and might or might not approach to let you touch the cottony bundles on their heads. Further bolstering the local diversity are their neighbours: gobbling turkeys, numerous equine representatives including the ever-lovable Shetland ponies, some strikingly rotund pigs, plus cattle, chickens, geese, bunnies, ferrets, peafowl, various other birds and a miscellany of chubby furry things to warm the hearts of the nature-starved Londonese, as well as reduce the chance that their children will grow up to panic at the brush of a leaf.

This is the Newham City Farm, one of a string of community-led slices of rural life to crop up in the English capital zone in recent decades. People can go in for free, though a small donation is advised, to learn about life on the farms, interact with friendly animals, and purchase their fresh contributions: honey from the beehives, eggs from the chickens. The latter are accompanied by a massive rooster who will fix his imperious eye on you and follow you around.

We can observe a heartwarming novelty to these encounters; that much is clear from the glee of the little children attempting to climb the animals' faces. Their excitement would likely perplex the majority of people who have lived on this island-peninsula for six thousand largely agricultural years. It is hard to imagine that getting neighed or quacked at would have registered as a memorable experience for them. It is hard to imagine it would not for most English today.

Only at that level can we begin to grasp just what industrialisation did to these people. Four fifths of the English population now live crammed into cities, wholly divorced from the sights, smells and sounds that bring them their food, their clothes, and the raw materials for the gadgets they use every day. A person who trembles at the hiss of a goose, complains at the stench of manure, or stands awestruck at a sky they believe is ripping itself apart till they realise that is what stars look like – until very recently, such a human being could barely have been

dreamed up. Now such a human is the English standard. In the permanent glow of cities like London they no longer know the stars that birthed all life. They are estranged from their universe.

The fundamental shift was not, then, in their social and economic statistics. It was deeply psychological. The changes they have engineered in themselves in the last two centuries have put them in existential shock; have challenged their core assumptions of what it means to be a human on Earth. Have challenged, above all, their relationships. The ways they look at one another, and at the living world around them. The meanings, for them, of plants, animals, stars, soil, and other human beings. Their exchanges. Their duties and obligations. Their power.

It takes more than a mere six or seven generations to adjust when such vital relationships are capsized. But they were not allowed even that. No sooner had the industrial energy storm broken over England than it passed. It thundered on to the lands of other peoples. It caught some, like the Americans, at just the right time to oil the spin of their productive gears with the blood of global wars that clogged England's to breaking point. It energised others like the Chinese and Indians who had shaken off European colonial straitjackets and were staggering to their feet, determined never to be caught off balance again and no strangers to colossal and bitter sacrifice to survive the wrath of the oppressors, so what cost yet more sacrifices to the industrial furnaces to cast that survival in iron and steel?

But for the exhausted English, that cost had caught up with them. Their sacrifices had had enough and were clambering off the altars onto the picket lines. In the rust of old machines, they watched the promises of steam come apart; in the glint of new ones, they saw their futures erased. The higher they build, the harder they fall, and for the English it was a very long way down.

Modern England, its greatest cities, indeed its very notion of modernity, were living products of industrialisation. The crumbling of that foundation has set it scabbling for a new purpose for its existence, a panic that even now sets fire to tower blocks here and international alliances there. Even as its factories fell still, the migrations they had first set off, from the farm fields to the ever-expanding concrete bubbles, continued unabated. How then to occupy and provide for those newcomers? And what of those so devotedly bound to their industries, left clutching their tools in the debris of their production lines? If the English could no longer make stuff, no longer had colonies to dump that stuff on and seize from in turn, then what were they meant to do now?

The pain of the question was all the more acute for one segment of the Thames's world: the docklands, which in England's metropolitan core had served as the fulcrum for this whole operation. The docks had grown up to occupy a long stretch of riverbank from the old city deep into the Newham marshes. They were a series of airlocks between two worlds – between this new power, of industry and colonial empire, and the ancient power of the water. Through them they borrowed that old power, the power that built their story from the start, to unleash the ships, soldiers, materials, notions and names of the new power upon all humankind.

Nowhere was so essential as the London docks to deliver the English choice of national meaning at the height of its power. Nowhere felt so distressingly the anguish of loss when that power collapsed, a pain this city had grown more used to shrugging off its shoulders onto a forgettable English interior. And nowhere has so buckled and twisted with transformations as they have struggled to decide what next to be – for on the fallen docks they would model a future for them all, and that future would quake, awakening ghosts that now distress their nation to its foundations.

It is tempting to turn away with a shudder, to shelter instead in the furry company of the animals of the City Farm and wait for the convulsions to pass. Alas, to reach an understanding of these people we must hurry on to our journey's end. Let us see what is left of where England used to happen.

To continue south from the City Farm would be to plunge into the docks and not make it back to the river, which would be unfortunate only half a kilometre from the end. So instead we cross east over the bottom of Beckton District Park, where we find the fabric of urban spacetime is changing.

There is no sign of another vanished railway we trace, which served the Beckton gasworks till it was brought down with them in the 1970s. Instead, a placeholder image: green field, red houses, blue sky, some clumps of trees, electric cables strung across on pylons. Opposite, the gargantuan cubes of the Newham Council offices growl behind the treeline like giant blocks of Lego possessed by some grey and grievous Orwellian spectre. Squint at any of this and it is as though you can see this space's 2D placement grid.

The trail winds through adolescent woods, the gaps in their boughs wide to the sky, colouring but not quite carpeting the tarmac in golden leaves. Then it snakes

between dwellings – terraced with two or three stories, bright red bricks, dark red tiles, fresh in face enough to suggest recent construction. Are they affordable? Two supermarket trolleys, similarly young, have been left by the path, one penetrating the other from behind, as though plotting to reproduce a population of trolleys to compete the humans off this terrain.

By the next batch of housing is the New Beckton Park. Someone has clicked, dragged and released: this shall be the residential area, and this shall be open space. The result is a basic green field with a path around it, plus a pavilion, of course padlocked shut. The council has at least seen fit to supply some of those public exercise machines, likewise recent and in good condition.

It is so quiet here. The only signs of non-vegetable life are a few crows flapping about as well as the occasional individual deep in thought on a bench. A fellow in a hoodie is considering the exercise devices but glares at us till we move on, then takes a few rounds on the pull-down machine when he thinks we're not looking.

Then we arrive in Cyprus.

This is confusing, because Cyprus is supposed to be three thousand kilometres away in the eastern Mediterranean. Further investigation clears up the matter by revealing that this is not the Republic of Cyprus but a residential area created to house dock workers in 1881, three years after the British negotiated Cyprus off the Ottoman Empire and named in honour of that colonial feat.

From the other perspectives it was not so honourable. The Ottoman Turks gave it over to British administration on the basis that the British would use it to help ward off Russian expansionism. Instead, they – the Turks and British – ended up fighting each other in World War I. British rule also alienated Cypriots themselves with high taxes and authoritarian governance which rejected demands for independence or, in Greek Cypriots' case, for unification of the island with Greece. Anger and frustration fermented over the decades, hardening under British intransigence, till in the 1950s it blew up into violent political struggle. This gave rise, after independence in 1960, to a Greek coup, a Turkish invasion, and a quarrel that has continued ever since across a Cyprus divided into Greek and Turkish halves. Even now they are still negotiating a way out of this strife, while the British look after themselves in two of the last little areas marked pink on the world map: their military bases in Akrotiri and Dhekelia, final relics of their empire's once-global reach.

Now if this were a country that teaches history properly, we could expect every person who lives in Cyprus or Newham to have some awareness of that mess in

the Mediterranean, made in England, for which their district is named. But the locals look grumpy this morning so let's spare them a cross-examination.

Cyprus is a long way out in the marshes. Beyond there is only the river. A string, painted turquoise, tethers this residential balloon to the city: the Docklands Light Railway (DLR), which has cropped up late in the day in the corner of the London Underground rail map like some distant returning cousin, with none of the others knowing quite where it came from or where in the family tree it fits. And well they might wonder. The other lines are bequests of an industrial past, but the DLR comes from a vision of the future and arose to carry people to the laboratories where that vision is under construction. It might belong. It might not. It is too soon to tell.

Look at its map. Its station names are not like the others. Some are not supposed to be in this part of the world at all, such as Cyprus here, or more blatantly East India, for which one might gape at the scale of English pretensions in the claim to have extended their rail network all the way to India. Others have an unabashedly regal air: Prince Regent, Royal Albert, King George V. Sadly these no more indicate that the zombies of these individuals have their current addresses there for your visiting pleasure than is East India station actually in East India. Most, in fact, were the names of docks.

Let's meet one. If we jink south we will collide with it close enough to its end to get round it to the riverbank. Oh yes – the docks are not actually on the river. We are not talking here of docks as in a clutter of wooden piers sticking out. Docks, in London, are where the river has been invited onto the land. A constellation of deep-blue rectangles, confrontational in their regularity, still more in how their sheer scale and number create a zone that is neither land nor water but a sort of formalised meeting place for both, the effect reminiscent of the cabins on the Korean demilitarised zone. The Thames has entered the urban area not as a flood, but as a welcomed and formally escorted equal party – causing the place it did so to become a liminal new world in its own right.

Here that world has a glossy new gate: Cyprus station on the DLR. Its platforms nest in a ring of gleaming white tiles, as well as those sheets of glass that are the new-age bricks of the Kingdom of Modernity. The railway runs west to east through the middle, creating a shape not unlike the London Underground roundel. It would work very well as a videogame transport hub, especially if it can rotate like a turntable or open up on a secret area underneath with something draconic in it. On the upper level a glossy footbridge crosses north to south, that being our

gate to the docks, or rather the surprising occupant of this patch of their quaysides: the University of East London (UEL).

At last the silence is filled, immediately and out of nowhere, by a student bustle familiar to any university in the world. The young adults are conversationally vigorous, numerous but not overwhelmingly so, as they buzz between the immaculate white hives of what we might guess to be future-buildings made of pure energy. At the least they are supposedly energy-efficient, and built upon recycled soil, the realisation of a fearless vision for this the first university campus to be put up in this country for more than fifty years. Beneath their aluminium roofs, folded as though to evoke alighting butterflies, the students of UEL flitter about a broad menu of courses from the science and technology end of the intellectual spectrum: architecture, engineering, computing, bioscience. We are still in Newham and one can observe a great number of African and Asian faces among them, suggestive, perhaps, of just what a debt these modern sciences owe to the prior works of people in their ancestral homes, from the mathematics of ancient India to the flourish of innovations and discoveries during the Islamic Golden Age. When they teach these sciences in a place like this, do they first take the time to pay their respects to those who opened them up for exploration – especially those later suppressed in public memory by a racist Europe?

Past the campus buildings are some grassy embankments, where students munch on the harvest of street-food stalls or smoke cigarettes while gazing across the water. The waterfront runs far, west to east, perpendicular to the UEL campus and hosting beyond it a string of colourful salt-and-pepper shakers with their own butterfly roofs – the UEL's idea of student accommodation.

A stranger would be forgiven for thinking this is the river. But with a double-take its shape is far too regular, its water too high and not nearly so choppy as the temperamental Thames. Moreover, the air periodically roars apart. This is because the opposite bank is the runway of the London City Airport, where passenger planes on take-off or landing deafen everyone on this side of the water at ten- to fifteen-minute intervals. Lurking deeper in the background is the hulking Tate & Lyle sugar refinery we caught sight of dominating the riverscape in Woolwich, while round to the west, the hodgepodge of London's skyscrapers line up like a bunch of unscrupulous gangsters in mismatched coats and hats, squinting mistrustfully at whatever is happening out in these marshes.

What is happening? How is it that such vibrant patches of future can bob in what is supposed to be a muddy malarial quagmire, a place which for so long

appeared on maps as empty space, the Plaistow Levels, the Essex bush, London's back of beyond?

The answers, as so often, are in the water. And this water, which now looks like it was landscaped merely to provide a nice expensive water feature for the university and airport, made its mightiest mark on the English under a special name: the Royal Albert Dock. It is one of three docks named after heavyweights of the English royal family that together form the Royal Docks, themselves just one asterism in a dockland galaxy whose cosmic waves, time and again, have surged across the world and back.

Waves are powerful. They can change civilisations, or at least leave lasting marks on them, from the Japanese and Indian Ocean tsunamis in recent memory to those set off by the Storegga Slides which committed England to eight thousand years and counting as a potential island country. But here the wisdom of the owl statues from *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* has pertinence.

Sea bears foam, sleep bears dreams. Both end in the same way. CRAAASH!

The Port of London is not a place, but a concept: the collective function of all the sites in and around the capital where people and objects move between land and water. If the Romans settled for this site in part for its convenience for berthing their ships, that means the concept preceded the city, indeed helped give rise to it. Then came the bridge, the roads, the guards and maintenance workers, then the houses, stores and workshops to provide for them: so far so Londinium.

As it grew into a proper city its settlers demanded food, raw materials and trade with the Roman metropole, but even at this stage London's destiny as a port was not confirmed. Getting up the Thames, wider than it is today, was a bother for sailing ships which often found its sandbanks and prevailing wind against them, so the preference was to drop stuff off at the coastal ports and bring them inland on more manoeuvrable vessels or by road. Then Boudica came and burnt it all down, and they built it back bigger. Only thereafter did it burgeon with permanent berths to benefit its long-term potential as a trade and supply hub.

Londinium never compared in scale with Rome's Italian harbours like Portus or Ostia. Nonetheless it was plugged into an international network which drew in bronzes and household goods from Rome, wine from Gaul, Spanish olive oil, and a panoply of textiles, timber, stone, crafted wares, lamps, jewellery and quality foods like fruit and honey from all the rivers of the empire. Though the crates and

barrels carrying these would have rotted away, the ceramic amphora which held liquids like wine and olive oil are even now dug up from the river's sands. The port expanded to process it all. Warehouses, harbours and wooden quays multiplied along the waterfront. Running them would have required a workforce, to be housed nearby, and new shops and services to support it.

When the empire went into decline, so did the wharves of Londinium. Wealthy Romans and sub-Romans abandoned the area; the winds of trade subsided and blew on to ports better positioned for a changing world. The quays and piers began to rot. The warehouses were converted to housing. By the fourth century London's function as a port had virtually disappeared.

When the Anglo-Saxons built the local trading centre of Lundenwic around what is now Westminster, it was not at first important enough to warrant a port. Yet these were people of the sea, so it was only a matter of time till traders were punting their produce there, sometimes to sell it right there on the beach. But it too declined as West Saxons, Mercians and Vikings contested this middle distance, so the lower Thames port passed away for a second time. It was only when Alfred rode in and re-founded the old city as a border fort that its rotten quays were salvaged and repaired.

As a result, it got a third attempt. This one would last until one generation's touching distance of today.

Alfred personally arranged that points be set up for trade vessels to load and unload their goods and have tolls taken off them. In time these grew into London's first permanent quays: Queenhithe (originally *Ætheldredshithe*)*, Billingsgate and St. Botolph's Wharf. Trade thereon rose and fell in step with political developments and leaves a record in coins and goods dug up from the Thames. Cnut's integration of England into his North Sea Empire strengthened its connections with Scandinavian and Baltic ports; trade with Normandy and what is now Germany and the Netherlands, as in the Roman period, is also attested; and the rise of the Angevin Empire brought in a French ruling class who just couldn't do without their wine shipped up from Bordeaux. Up the Thames came ever-larger ships which found their way blocked by London Bridge, as today, and grew

* *-hithe*, which also occurs in Rotherhithe, is from Anglo-Saxon Old English *hȳth* for an artificial landing place.

too big to berth on the beaches, too full of stuff to sell straight off the riverside. They needed more suitable settings to unload, store, and protect their cargoes.

As this trade filled wallets and reached specialist levels of complexity, so did the merchants and shipowners running it swell into the prosperous, clout-wielding mafia which now runs the City of London, garlanded in fineries and archaic titles no-one younger than a giant tortoise understands. Successive royal governments responded with regulation, either to fleece them into line or to put a stop to strife-provoking unsavoury business practices. Much class conflict at the top of English society ensued, with kings and queens aggravating the riverside godfathers by claiming huge tolls and import taxes, confiscating goods, and dictating where the traders could land them. Power struggles flared then subsided in handshakes and signatures, such as in 1197 when Richard I, the 'Lionheart', who spent little of his reign in England, agreed to let the City merchants exercise authority over the river in exchange for a wad of funds for his Crusading. All this back-and-forth wrangling over the port underlined its importance and fed it resources, further boosting its reach and status. Important trades it enabled, such as in French wine or the wool and cloth that became England's primary export, unfurled into huge economic and geopolitical dramas that fill books of their own.

By the thirteenth century Arabian gold and incense, Egyptian precious stones, Russian furs and even Chinese silks were making it up the Thames to these wharves. These imports were often carried by foreign merchants who got into conflicts with London's own, and in some cases, like the Italians and those from the German Hanseatic League, at times became targets of violence. Down from the other direction meanwhile came food from the English interior to feed a growing capital.

For all this the London port was marginal by international standards. It had nothing on the heaving trade of the Mediterranean or Indian Ocean highways that were turning the realms along their coasts into some of the richest in the world. That began to change under the Tudors. Here we will see that as much as for their political impact, it was for reorganising London's port into a launchpad for commercial adventure, propelling it to supremacy over the international economy and the destinies of a worldwide population, that the Tudors went down as the authors of English modernity.

Arguably the most important in that capacity was the first, Henry VII, who we bumped into at Richmond Palace. For the founder of the Tudor dynasty, commerce was not only a matter of getting rich. Henry VII understood commerce

as a *political* opportunity to strengthen his kingdom, not to mention his wobbly claim to power in violent times, and was prepared to actively use government policy to reshape the English economic base to that end. This meant treaties and trade agreements but also more aggressive measures like tariffs, trade wars, and the luring of foreign high-tech artisans to England, especially the Flemish wool producers. Today's economic priesthoods grossly disfavour this kind of protectionism and political intervention, but it was precisely because Henry VII fostered English textile exports that they would later bring in the wealth to buy the food and raw materials that fuelled the industrial revolution. England would be far from the only country to build its fortunes in that manner. Indeed, the economist Ha-Joon Chang locates Henry VII early in what he calls the tradition of Developmentalism, by which governments have got involved in guiding, protecting and diversifying their industries to build a more powerful economy, and thus society, than market forces would allow. Arguably this approach runs right through to the Asian Tigers – South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore – who stood up in the late twentieth century by similar means in the face of furious finger-wagging from the market fundamentalists.

If this is a bit much for you, take comfort in that it was also too much for Henry's son. We can ignore him because he was far more interested in warships than trade ships. So let us proceed straight through to Elizabeth I, under whose reign the port really got going.

It started ominously, because the London wharves were struggling to shift out wool and cloth with Europe's religious wars disrupting their export markets. But the politicians and merchants watched as Europe cast a wider net for civilisations to overwhelm and precious goods to plunder. The Spanish had been barbarising their way across South America and bringing back silver, while the Portuguese sailed round Africa to the east, returning with Indonesian spices and wrecking the aforementioned Indian Ocean trade networks in the process.

The English decided they wanted in on that too. They had a foundation for it because Elizabeth's government had reformed the London port. The long regulatory arm-wrestle between politicians and merchants was resolved into a rigorous system of customs duties (taxes on imports). On top of that, in 1559 laws were passed so that ships carrying goods for which those duties had to be paid were only allowed to unload where the customs officials sat waiting with their weights and measures, twenty or so fixed spots in the case of the London wharves

which now became known as the *Legal Quays*. The Port of London now had coherent administration and a formally-defined pyramid of bureaucrats to run it.

From these and other English ports sailed the English contribution to the Age of Piracy, Exploration, with all its famous big names like John Cabot (actually Zuan Chabotto from Venice), Hugh Willoughby, and Walter Raleigh along with a miscellany of adventure companies looking for magical paradises made of gold or pepper or sugar which they could dismantle and bring back to fill English treasure chests, except when it was simpler to ambush Spanish ships and re-plunder theirs. Many of these bands of treasure-hunters and – yes, let's call them what they were – state-sponsored pirates found their paradises embarrassingly non-existent, but over time a small few managed to accumulate enough booty, prestige, and footholds in promising lands to grow into buccaneers on an altogether different scale.

Two sets in particular. One was the notorious bunch of companies that began to enslave West Africans and ship them across the Atlantic to work the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and North American colonies. On their account would unfold one of the worst crimes against humanity in history, and though on this journey we have not had occasion to give it the treatment it deserves, do not think you have understood a thing about the English until you have made a dedicated journey through that abyss, preferably with a wise guide like David Olusoga or Sathnam Sanghera. The other set of pirates went the opposite way, failed to dislodge the Dutch from their Indonesian spice plunder-wonderland, and washed up instead on what they saw as the mythical treasure mountains of India and China. This, of course, was the East India Company.

Piracy, then, was a divided and warlike England's ticket to a real future, and the quays of London launched them on their way. Notably these two gangs began to get themselves sorted far out on their respective oceans just as their homeland tore itself apart in the civil wars; it emerged on the other side to find them still there and ready for more. As we saw, it was with the first return of a modicum of stability under Cromwell's Protectorate that they began to lay meat on the bones of their colonial adventure, cementing their Caribbean conquests and drawing up a proper army and navy. They were all the hungrier now because they had watched the Dutch supplanting Spain and Portugal as the global master of maritime trade, developing their shipping and colonising the places they were importing from to feed unspeakable riches into Amsterdam. Steadily out-competing them, the English pirates unfolded their wings and matured as colonial

capitalists, trafficking human beings, their labour and their land and melting it all down to cast England's name in a coat of coins.

And then, back home, they found the machines.

The English industrialised. Suddenly these wharves, already handling four fifths of this island's imports and nearly as many of its exports, were supporting a different city. A city with many times more people than had ever been concentrated upon this river, each with a mouth to feed. A city where said people were engaged in a never-before-seen range of activities, requiring ungodly quantities of coal and timber. London was only the latest in a sequence of ports round the world that could be called the centre of a trading empire, but it was the first to become the centre of an *industrial* trading empire.

The Thames swelled with more ships than it had ever known, a fabled sea of masts. By now the wharves stretched across the city's entire waterfront, but still it was not nearly enough. As ships sat waiting for days to unload, the river congested to gridlock. If their goods had not spoiled by the time they got them on shore, they would decompose on the quayside as they waited for warehouse space which did not exist. That mattered because as befitting the piracy that had long issued forth from them, these quays were hornets' nests. The sheer mass of waiting ships and crates piled up on the riverbank amounted to a £75-million ice cream for cargo thieves to dig their spoons in, and they became such a sophisticated assortment of connoisseurs that a unique criminological taxonomy emerged to make sense of them, differentiating between 'Night Plunderers', 'Light Horsemen', 'Heavy Horsemen' and 'Scuffle Hunters' among others.

They dug in all the more spoonfuls because since Elizabeth I's reforms the riverside bureaucracy had ballooned in scale and complexity, and there is a reason that when 'bureaucracy' enters the ear it tends to arrive in the brain as 'corruption'. The Legal Quays were corrupt to their splinters. Port operations involved so many types of people – *lumpers* unloading cargo, porters, customs and revenues officials, guard crews, *watermen* who ran ferries, *lightermen* who piloted barges, *coopers* who built and repaired the barrels, and each contingent was not above taking bribes from or lending a hand to the robbers, assuming they were not one and the same. Not a day went by without information passing along on where the good stuff was kept, or its mysterious disappearance getting magically cooked out of the account books. The rot spread right down to the rat-catchers, some of whom removed the rats off ships, brought them back on board in the night, then caught the same rats again the next day for a cheeky boost to their income.

Many of these people would have been desperate rather than greedy. This was now a nation high on the abuse of property-ideology to mistreat the dispossessed, who could only resort to every available means to get by. They might have known, too, that what they were lifting was already stolen property, wrung off foreign civilisations and the bodies of enslaved human beings. Less easy to forgive were the parasites on higher perches: the Corporation of London big fish who licensed many of these little fish and guarded their monopoly over the Legal Quays with unflinching jealousy. Their owners' vested interests and lobbying power in Parliament frustrated any attempt by irate shippers, merchants and government officials (whom it was costing customs money) to change this situation, to the point that the West India slavers, alone losing a ruinous £500,000 a year to it, threatened to take their shipping to other ports like Bristol and Liverpool.

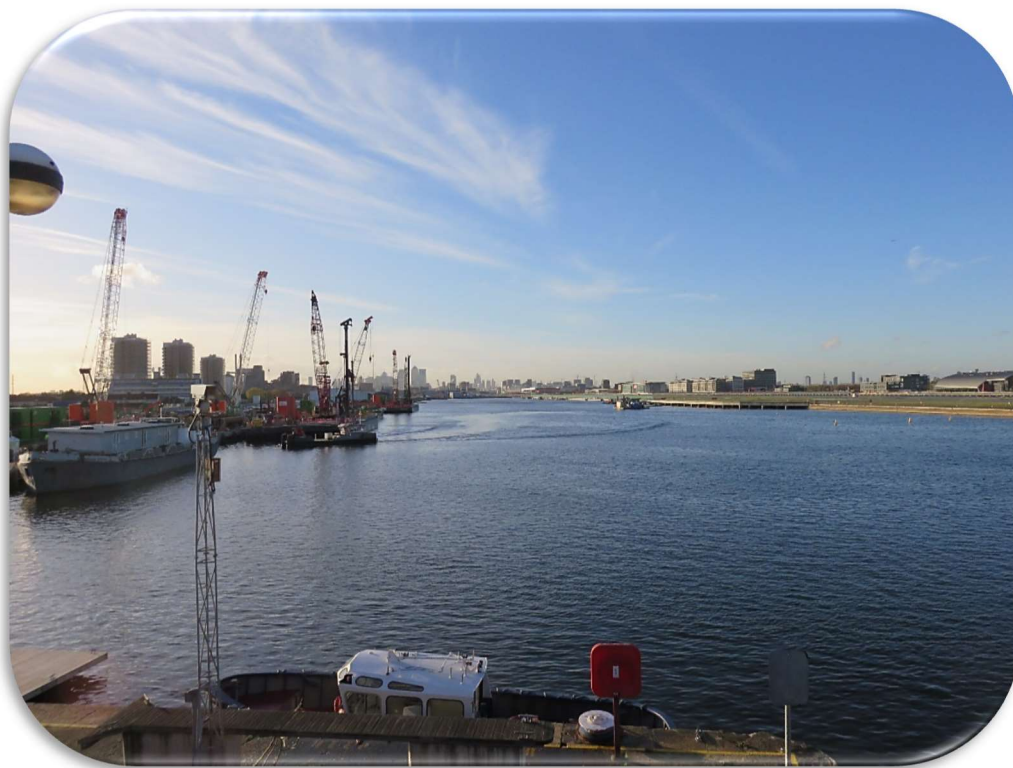
The authorities scrambled for solutions. One answer was the River Police, which on creation in 1798 was England's first formal police force and would inspire the Metropolitan Police that absorbed it a few decades later. This is itself a prism of the struggle in England's heart. The police, supposedly fashioned for the ethical and principled defence of the law, in fact have their origins in a private security force for the richest and cruellest colonial business interests of their day. This might have gone some way in setting up its lasting problems of abusive power and public illegitimacy, as seen in the story of Stephen Lawrence, their institutional misogyny, and their violent treatment of peaceful protesters in recent times.

There was another fateful suggestion. Docks. Wet ones. Cut out of the land, enclosed in defensive walls, with space for many ships.

Docks of that kind had already started appearing. The oldest was the Greenland Dock, on the south side at Rotherhithe, then still a part of rural Surrey, which went right back to 1699 and had grown up in service of the whaling industry. Its present-day Norwegian and Japanese variants sail in red-hot unethical waters, but in those days it could hang on to at least some claim to traditional economic reliance in that the blubber of Bowhead whales that its ships brought in from Greenland's waters, which gave this dock its name, was used to make soap, paint, varnishes, and oil for lamps and cooking. Still, the dock was only for sheltering and repairing those ships, not for unloading cargo. That had to be done at the Legal Quays, else the City's riverside gang would scream illegality.

Yet if London was to become the capital of a global empire, it would not do to let those screams strand its ships, its very red blood cells, in the artery of the Thames till they clogged it shut and leaked all their nutrients to inconsequential

poor people. If they couldn't force the City to reform the Legal Quays, they had to bring it on board by other means. And so in the 1790s they did, in a blast of Parliamentary Select Committees on how to improve the Port of London. Parliament had at last come round to giving this its full attention, courtesy of one William Vaughan who presented a thorough investigation into just what an economy-breaking catastrophe these problems were. Evidence was heard. Plans and schemes were drawn up, each designed to best serve the interests of those offering them, but it all came back to one thing. London needed Docks, Docks, Docks.



When they say London was built on slavery, this is what they mean.

It was the West India slavers, planters, and traders in sugar and rum who broke from discussions first with the go-ahead for their dock proposal (West India as in the West Indies i.e. Caribbean, not actual India). Of all their deeds their enslavement of human beings was the most important, so it is as slavers that we shall refer to them. Having at last won round the City authorities and secured parliamentary backing, they assembled into the West India Dock Company and marched their navvies into the Isle of Dogs. That peninsula, which dangles like a pouch in the U-shaped meander of the Thames between the City and the mouth

of the Lea, had long been a marshy waste with a smattering of grazing fields and windmills. Now it would be the launchpad for an England that mattered.

It was not plain sailing. Though the City was on side, the racketeering ecosystem of the Legal Quays frothed with rage at the prospect of losing their pickings and sued the West India Dock Company through the roof. Paying them off took twenty years and some £650 million in today's money. The company also had to buy the land from the disparate crafters, merchants and herders who held it, then face up to the engineering challenges of actually building the thing, for which they turned to a certain William Jessop of Grand Union Canal fame. Time and money were lost to supplier competition and attacks from implacable watermen, and a dam breakage cost eight builders their lives. And yet, inexorably, water and earth were reshaped to the slavers' desires. Two enormous basins, side by side, 30 acres to unload imports and 24 to load exports; locks and cuts to get in and out and shield the docks from the tide; a monstrous wall, nine metres high and invincibly strong, plus a moat as if that were not enough; and of course, more than a kilometre of massive warehouses, nine in all, to lock up more sugar and rum than had ever been gathered in any one spot in the world.

Canals were one thing, but now they had built an artificial working *lake*, two in fact, like a god placing his or her fingertip on a map on a screen to turn a green square blue. The West India Docks were born. When they opened in 1802, it was to a party as if on the corpse of a vanquished enemy. A ship decked in the flags of all nations – those of white people, presumably – paraded into the basin, to the satisfaction of the prime minister and awe of assembled journalists and spectators, and there was no mistaking the symbolism. The English took to the water believing themselves not just emperors of Britain but rulers of the world. And if they were, it was because theirs was now the power to take and move the world's *stuff* – which meant these docks, where it happened, were their throne.

In sailed the first sugar shipments, disappearing at once into the West India security labyrinth. A dock in name it may have been, but this was first and foremost a fortress. More than a maze of walls and security doors, its rules and procedures ran to military strictness. Loading and unloading schedules, staff access and goods-handling protocols were regimented to the letter. There were sentry boxes, armouries, special police. Safe at last from the scavenging of destitute Londoners trying to scrape past another sunrise, the merchants now had their very own treasure house to process their takings from African bodies and Caribbean soil.

And the legal privileges to do so. The monopoly of the Legal Quays was over. Now it was the traders themselves who held the monopolies, in the West India Dock Company's case over all goods to or from the Caribbean for twenty-one years with the sole exception of tobacco. Anyone breaking this monopoly could be punished to the tune of £500 and the forfeiting of their ships.

The West Indies slavers profited beyond their wildest dreams. Their docks made them into some of the wealthiest individuals in the country. And of course, these were the same people who after slavery was theoretically abolished thirty years later, the government agreed to compensate with more than £16 billion in today's figures out of taxpayers' money, which it paid – never forget it – until 2015.

Watching all this with unease was the other colonial big beast, the East India Company. By now well into its breaking open of India and poised to chisel a fatal crack into China, they too relied on the Thames to bring home their bloodstained plunder. But unlike the slavers they were a unified body, and their ships, at 750 tons the largest on the Thames, carried the priciest and most coveted loots in the imperial bloodstream: tea, silk, spices, porcelain, precious jewels. It troubled them that now the Caribbean spoils were stashed behind the fortifications of the West India Docks, the cargo thieves would come after their stuff instead. They knew the only solution was a dock of their own.

Till now they had unloaded their booty at Blackwall, on the eastern shoulder of the Isle of Dogs. There was an old shipbuilding facility at that site, which the East India merchants' dock company opted to convert into their own answer to the West India Docks. So rose the East India Docks, opened in 1806 to another lush and colourful nationalist outpouring where 20,000 spectators thumped their chests at *Rule Britannia* for having just won the Battle of Trafalgar. On the ship of flags, they hung the French one at the very bottom.

Mirroring the West India arrangement, the East India Docks got their own twenty-one-year monopoly on dealing with all cargoes from their East Asian sphere of influence. What they lacked were warehouses, because the grasping Company rushed all its swag to its own secure lockups deep in the City. But that presented another problem. Through City eyes Blackwall was the middle of nowhere, and the muddy country lanes that linked its scattered villages were not up to bearing the docks' bulk cargo traffic. Commercial Road, the east-west highway linking them to the City, was their expensive answer.

There were also merchants unaffiliated with these two giants. They dealt in a wide range of worldwide imports which together added up to a significant chunk

of trade, but could not match the political clout of the Caribbean slavers or the East India Company. When they pressed ahead with a dock of their own this put them in a lot more trouble. So did the site they proposed, Wapping. East of the City but not so far out as the Isle of Dogs, Wapping's closeness to their seat of commerce was its main draw, hence the chosen name, London Docks. But its marshes had been drained three centuries earlier and grown to host a poor but inconveniently tough-minded and bustling community, as well as a Restoration-period waterworks at Shadwell. All of it had to be cleared, inflaming fierce controversy into which both the West India and East India interests were happy to lay on the fuel. The poisonous atmosphere corroded the new dock's construction. The war with Napoleon's French made matters worse, as workers were dragged off to fight and die by the English practice of impressment: that is, sending armed press-gangs to summarily seize people – from their families, their workplaces – and force them into the military, in particular the brutal navy. Because of the informality of the thugs and the dehumanised working-class status of the victims, English leaders found it instinctive to wave away this callous practice and carry on the pretence that conscription was beneath them as a civilised country. For the London Dock Company what it meant was not enough builders, so they got the ones they held onto working on Sundays, which drew the thunder and lightning of angry religious types.

The London Dock began operations in 1805, vastly over budget. In time however it recouped its investments, for it had its own twenty-one-year monopoly on all handling of wine, rice, brandy and tobacco except that from the West or East India traders' areas. Tobacco proved especially lucrative, and in 1814 they herded in prisoners of war to build an extension called the Tobacco Dock, with state-of-the-art warehouse capacity and walls, locks and barriers. Yet these were not quite as impermeable as the others to thieves allured by their heady scents of alcohol and tobacco.

One last set of docks rounded off this opening wave of dock mania. It was the result of wealthy traders and shippers returning their attentions to the old Greenland Dock across the river, where a band of canal-builders had since moved in with bold but quite marooned ambitions to canalise their way to the south coast. A tussle broke out for control of these waterways which at its height involved four separate companies. Their competitive skulduggery dug the Rotherhithe peninsula into a patchy network together known as the Surrey Commercial Docks, which specialised in importing timber from the Baltic countries and Scandinavia.

These were the oddballs of the dock family, building their warehouses out of the frosty woods they imported and sprouting a specialist work culture to handle their cumbersome baulks.

So were the docklands born. Engines that launched the English roaring across the seas, or gated forts to defend the exclusive privileges of a tiny elite of pirates and slave-traders at the top of society? This was the two-faced spirit that inhabited this necklace of working lakes. When the docks eventually died, it would live on. It is still here.

Still, not all the other 99.9% of English society was taking it sitting down. The immediate losers were all those watermen and lightermen who had made their livings off the old Legal Quay system, who to do fairness to them were not cargo sharks one and all, but people who had invested lifetimes into their facilities and quite reasonably objected to getting shunted into obsolescence by the docks. The authorities could not ignore their powerful representation in the City, and so it threw them a meaty concession: the 'free water' clause. This was a legal provision that allowed their light barges to enter and use the new docks' facilities for free, without having to pay what was charged to other ships.

At first the big dock companies had little reason to worry about this insect of a nicety, invisible at the foot of their mountainous monopoly profits. But all the while, the free water clause allowed the little barge operators to bubble on underneath, taking advantage of the ever-expanding trade that came through these waters till in the 1820s, just as they were waiting for, the monopolies expired.

Naturally the dock companies wanted to extend them. But, and here was the snag, only their own – not all the other dock companies', those of course could stay down so one could snatch away their business. Isn't the free market wonderful so long as it only happens to other people? So in a classic capitalist's paradox they all challenged one another's appeals for monopoly renewal, with the result that all the authorities could do was slam their fists on the desk and hurl the whole crowd of them into the waves of open competition. Grinning from their lifeboats of the free water clause, the children of the Legal Quays were ready for them.

The English were splaying the world out at their feet. All the stuff they squeezed from its internal organs was pouring into their ports, most of all the Port of London. Together with their own national tissue, most of which was coal from

Newcastle and South Wales, this amounted to tens of thousands of ships every year which even with four sets of docks continued to overflow into the river. And the ships were evolving. The old sailing ships were steadily supplanted by massive steam-powered iron-hulled vessels which boasted far more cargo capacity, telegraph communications, and the incredible ability to come and go without a bother for which way the wind was blowing. These not only took up more river space, growing too large to enter or even reach the oldest docks, but provoked new conflicts with the lightermen they were running over, demanded new facilities like ironworks and coaling stations (with more collier boats to supply those in turn) and spawned new river activities like recreational cruising and travel on huge international passenger ships.

It was hectic, it was chaos, and it created major angst for the authorities who shuffled ever closer towards bringing river traffic under centralised administration. But from an entrepreneur's perspective, now that the monopolies had gone this shipping boom offered delectable dock business for any comers with the wherewithal up their sleeves. The nation-builder's headache was the dock tycoon's opportunity.

Newcomers rushed in for the pieces that fell through the big dock companies' fumbling arms. Many landed in the scramble of old Legal Quays and new wharfingers who sprang up along the riverside, benefiting from official sanctioning and shortening customs duties lists. Among the little fish swam heftier toothy piranhas. London needs a fifth dock, said one called John Hall, and why not put it in St. Katherine's, right next to the City and across the road from the Tower? It is the national interest and good for consumers, so never mind if it pisses off the London Dock Company next door, they said. Never mind too that on its proposed site stood the houses of 12,000 people including veteran artisan crafters and traders, as well as the St. Katherine Hospital that had been there since 1148 and survived both Henry VIII's sledgehammer and the Great Fire of 1666. They demolished the lot, casting the residents as destitute ne'er-do-wells scurrying round a shanty town of brothels and opium dens to make it easier to make them all homeless, then in sailed the *Elizabeth* in 1828, rigged up with flags and laden with foreign treasure as the Royal Artillery band trumpeted another jubilant *Rule Britannia* to open the St. Katherine Dock. This one went after imports of Indian tea, wool from Australia, New Zealand and the Falkland Islands, and a scattering of rare and extraordinary luxuries, but proved too small for the ever-widening iron hulls to enter and would spend most of its life buckling under the competition.

The pioneers were also in trouble. Both the East and West India Dock Companies' profits were slipping. With business escaping elsewhere, West India's massive warehouse space was languishing empty. East India had the opposite problem: better capacity for big beasts of the sea but no warehouses to catch their stuff. The obvious answer was to merge, which they did in 1838 to become, unimaginatively, the East and West India Dock Company.

Across the river the four amoebas squabbling over the Surrey Docks reached the same conclusion, absorbing each other one by one till they stood as the singular Surrey Commercial Docks Company. They expanded into Canadian grain, which they were now allowed to do because of the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, which had blocked cheap grain imports and starved lots of English poor people by keeping food prices artificially high. To process this new grain the Surrey company opened another dock and huge warehouse.

Others seized on the same chance. Pressuring them from across the river was yet another new dock company, Millwall Freehold Land and Dock. This group sank a new L-shaped basin into the bottom of the Isle of Dogs, till then still farmland munched on by cows and whose windmills along the river wall gave it its Millwall name. They ended up focused on Baltic grain, as well as annoying the Surrey Docks into a retaliatory £940,000 expansion of the Greenland Dock by trying to eat into their timber trade. This in turn circulated high blood pressure back to the India Docks, who had recently dug a new Poplar Dock in an effort to link their basins to the new big thing: the railways.

It was a bit late for that though, for into the free-for-all had dived a new strain of dock-creators. Entrepreneurs like Samuel Morton Peto, Edward Ladd Betts and Thomas Brassey were not shippers or traders but railway engineers, their stomachs rumbling with experience as they turned their imaginations on the river. They dreamed of docks more majestic than any before, vast enough to accommodate the massive new iron steamships, decked in state-of-the-art hydraulic lifting equipment, and most importantly, integrated directly into their railways, so their trains could whisk cargoes straight to their final destinations without wasting time or money on storage.

To the agitation of the train-less dock companies upstream, these railwaymen tramped out to build their experiments in the desolate and crime-ridden marshes of what is now Newham, right here on this bleak hump of riverbank opposite Woolwich. It was all the cheaper for the laws relegating dirty industries to this side of the Lea, and if it had been too remote for the earlier companies, that hardly

mattered now you had trains. Also in their party was a figure known as the ‘calculating boy’ from Devon, whose actual name was George Parker Bidder and whose famous brain, capable of cracking the most difficult mathematical problems in an instant, had made him a distinguished number-cruncher in the cockpit of many a great engineering scheme. By 1847 they had plugged in a railway line, and proceeded to build at its end a mighty £4-million leviathan of a dock. And what better name for the hugest dock than Victoria, the hugest queen of the hugest empire? They brought in her consort Prince Albert to open the Victoria Dock in 1855 and straight away it was a bellowing success. It handled a frightening 850,000 tons of cargo per year, much of it dragged away from its competitors, and rained dividends into its creators’ pockets.

But they had only begun. These railwaymen had had the foresight to buy up marshland east of the Victoria Dock for future expansion. They had meant to put a canal through it as a shortcut, but the ships were only getting larger, so this blew up into plans for a second mammoth dock. To bring it to fruition would come the London Dock Company and the struggling St. Katherine Dock Company, who combined in 1864 into the (guess what) London and St. Katherine Dock Company and bought the thriving Victoria Dock in hopes it would be an escape rope from their financial hole. They steered in high-tech steam machines and paid three thousand labourers sod all to make the concrete out of gravel dug up on-site, and in 1880 their handiwork entered service as the 87-acre Royal Albert Dock – this one – whose namesake had by now passed away to the queen’s all-consuming grief. Accessible to ships up to a whopping 12,000 tons and furnished with the very latest in hydraulic cranes, refrigeration and electric lighting, the Royal Albert was linked to the Victoria, now the *Royal Victoria*, and hand in hand they propelled one another to prosperity as the Royal Docks, the overflowing nexus of global trade on a scale never experienced in human history.

Naturally this sight was too much for the original dock companies, whose envy now drove them to recklessness. From their now primitive basins the chairs of the East and West India Dock Company flipped over their desks and rushed forty kilometres downriver to an ancient riverside market town whose name should be familiar: Gravesend, where just a few years later the first human character we encountered on this journey, Captain Marlow, is said to have bobbed on a yacht and yarned of dark rivers in the evening gloom. North on the opposite bank lurked the swamps of Tilbury, deep in the old Kingdom of Essex. Strategic on the Thames’s mouth but scarcely liveable, the English had tramped in and out of them

many times. Cedd, sent by the Northumbrians to be the East Saxons' bishop, had put up a church on them. They had known military fortification, possibly by the Romans, definitely by Henry the Go Away, and it was there in 1588 that Elizabeth I had given her rousing but jarringly gendered* address to the soldiers defending England from the Spanish Armada. But after they came, they always went, and in high industrial England it remained a squelchy mosquito-infested backwater closer to the prehistoric Thames than the present one. To hell with London, said the Company. Let us build here a dock to end all docks. They can hand us their cargo here without even bothering to push their way up to the city.

It was a disaster. The Company blundered its sums to the effect of £2.8 million, nearly three times over budget, and got mired in a punishing legal battle with the contractors after throwing them out in a cost dispute concerning the type of clay in the ground. The Tilbury dock complex was completed in 1886, all fantastically massive of course, except it was much too far away for the light craft of the teeming London wharves to use, so they all boycotted it. It was also forced to run at a loss to attract shipping through low prices, which in turn pressed down on the upriver docks and wharves and put several pointlessly out of business.

Tilbury had been a dock too far. The East and West India Dock Company had by now outlasted the once-mighty East India Company, made obsolete after the British government took over in India, and in 1888, having smashed its own finances and upset the entire sector, it caved into receivership. Frantic and complex negotiations ensued which dragged on for over a decade until finally, in 1901, they arrived at a solution. What else? An amalgamation with the London and St. Katherine Dock Company, who still ran the booming Royal Docks, to produce a single almighty mega-amalgamation called The London and India Docks.

But it didn't matter anymore. This was industrial capitalism gone mad, and worsening rivalries between the Royal Docks and the Surrey group suggested no-one was learning any lessons. By the turn of the century the authorities thought as much too. It was time to take control.

* Famously: 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king'. 'Weak' and 'feeble' do not describe women or their bodies, and certainly not the body of one of the most alarming matriarchs in English history – a body which vanquished foes so fearsome as smallpox and, worse still, the English marriage-and-children obsession which so undid her father. Are we to believe that she felt her womanhood, having proved a match for these horrors, was rather negated by them? Disappointing.

If you have ever watched boats on the Thames, you will likely have noticed some vessels with the acronym PLA, perhaps carrying people in high-vis overalls or chasing some suspicious interloper. It makes an interesting thought that the People's Liberation Army of China has arrived, but perhaps fortunately, this is not that PLA but an organisation probably closer to communism than that one these days: the *Port of London Authority*. These were the comrades mustered to wrest control of the Thames port system from the capitalists, and whose bloodshot regulatory eye has since pinned every river user with its gaze.

Public control was clearly in everyone's interest. But was the concern that the port was too strong, or too weak? On the one hand it boasted the largest dock system in the world, handled a third of the nation's trade, and accounted for the largest share of employment in London, with some 20,000 people working either in the docks and wharves or in the belt of industries that had followed them out through the east gates. It could bring through nine million tons of foreign cargo per year to a value of hundreds of millions of pounds, the very blood and lymph of the empire. On the other hand it was unprofitable, disappointing its shareholders, exploiting its workers, and frustrating shippers with not just its flaws but the dock companies' short-sighted, tight-fisted disinterest in fixing them. Ships began to desert London for better ports like Liverpool, and on the eve of World War I both Hamburg and New York surpassed it.

The government had been keeping an eye on things since it first okayed the docks a century earlier, and had made interventionist noises at the companies before, for example in 1857, when it created the Thames Conservancy to regulate buoys, dredging and speed limits. But the turmoil of corporate buccaneering that decked the sector in the 1890s was the final straw. A Royal Commission was formed and its investigations drew up a damning list of defects: too many docks of different kinds with no coordination; outdated facilities; insufficient investment; poor access for large ships; slow turnaround times; inadequate railway links; high docking charges; confusing divisions of responsibilities. Conclusively, it decided these failings were 'not due to any physical circumstances, but to causes which may easily be removed by a better organisation of administration and financial powers'.

The London and India Dock Company bosses knew a nationalisation threat when they smelled it. They fell into panic, slashing spending at the expense of workers' wages and safety and proposing a brand new dock south of the Royal

Albert, as though that would make everything okay again. But the government was having none of it. They may have been the Conservative Party but this was too important, and in 1903 they proceeded to ram the law to create the PLA through parliament in the faces of outraged claims that this was socialism, as well as more reasoned questions about what in fact this PLA should do. The wrangling carried over into the Liberal Party government that swept to power in 1906. David Lloyd George, then Board of Trade president, had a wander round European ports to see how things were done there and came back fully behind the idea of the PLA as a singular public authority for the port. By 1908 enough people had been persuaded. The Port of London Act entered law, and in the new year the PLA, answerable to the government's Board of Trade, gathered in its talons all the docks, wharves, moorings, shipwrecks and miscellaneous human activity on the tidal Thames.

Actually that isn't quite true – a lot of the little fish in particular, like individual wharves and tugboat companies, remained in private hands. Nonetheless the PLA held imposing powers. Everything on the urban river fell under its registration, traffic and cargo toll regimes. From the start it employed over 10,000 people, including the dock workers, and had the authority and resources to carry out long-term management work on the port, including maintenance, dredging, and handling labour disputes. Perhaps for the latter, in keeping with the finest traditions in English class oppression, it had its own police force and ambulances. And in case any doubt remained as to who was in charge, it capped its arrival by getting a monumental £2-million headquarters built for itself on the traditional killing fields of Tower Hill, featuring a rotunda larger than St. Paul's and, in prime position, a marble statue of Father Thames: trident in one hand, the other outstretched in get-off-my-river posture.

You've been paying attention so will get the message. The PLA were laying claim to nothing less than the authority of the river spirit: the oldest authority of all in these parts, ancient when the English were young. From now on, dip so much as one toe in these waters and you no longer answered to your wispy fetishes like Christ, the King or the Market, none of which existed since the river's equivalent of five minutes ago. You answered to Old Man PLA.

Father Thames's self-styled avatars got straight to work to fix up the docks, shunning the Tilbury mistake to focus on those close to London. Ship sizes were now surpassing imagination, so in a move that must have mortified the vanquished London and India Dock Company the PLA implemented their plans for

a third Royal Dock anyway. They got started in 1912, but work was interrupted by World War I and only resumed in the traumatised world that crawled out the other side. By 1921 it was ready. Fast to shrug off the lessons that had just chewed the bones of a million of their children, they opened the £4.5 million King George V Dock to another fanfare of nationalist anthems and cannon salutes from Woolwich's Royal Arsenal across the way. Then they set to work on ships up to a ludicrous 30,000 in tonnage.

We will meet this dock too – it parallels the Royal Albert between here and the river so will be almost the final feature on our journey. It was also the final dock to burst to life in the London galaxy, and the last in the Royal Docks trio which with a total area of over 230 acres and nearly 18 kilometres of quay was now the largest artificial body of lakes on Earth.

A 'vast emporium of all nations', then, or the biggest pirates' den in the world?

Either way, it was the ridiculous riches the docks pulled in that gave London that status. Now if the capitalist clergy is to be believed, such enrichment of the most enterprising individuals then trickles down to enrich everyone else. Surely then we can expect that the dock workers, whose arms spun the gears of these richest of enterprises, enjoyed the highest salaries and most comfortable working conditions from employers who could afford it better than anyone?

Not for one moment. This was English capitalism. Dock workers' lives were horrid.

We saw it in Woolwich, we saw it in Hackney, and now we shall see it here. Dock work fit the general pattern of English proletarianism in that it was gruelling, repetitive, mortally dangerous, and performed by people clinging to the poverty line by their fingernails. Our recent acquaintance Henry Mayhew, the journalist who exposed the misery of the old sewers in *London Labour and the London Poor*, strolled down to the docks as part of the same investigation and was struck by the sheer physicality of their work, remarking that 'this class of labour is as unskilled as the power of a hurricane. Mere muscle is all that is needed...the power of moving heavy bodies from one place to another'. This being a gendered country with suppressive prejudices against female strength, virtually all of these labourers were men. Their world was a very different one from the magic treasure rooms their bosses dreamed of.

When the docks first arose at the expense of the Legal Quays, they also disrupted their traditional labour arrangements. The quays' porters had been organised into exclusive guild-like brotherhoods, which got into frequent clashes over who got to do what work but fielded staunch collective resistance to the rise of the dock companies through their clout in the City. They straggled on in the docks' shadows, taking advantage of the growing need for lightermen as the cargo business swelled on a congested river. A few did give up and join the docks, but the bulk of the docks' new workforce of thousands was new to the sector. They came from the ragged and destitute mass of London's overcrowding population, desperate for income, any income, to rescue their mouths with food: redundant soldiers, bankrupted entrepreneurs, the same navvies who built the docks in the first place, even elderly people with no-one to care for them. Many of these people were Irish immigrants escaping the English wrecking of their country, especially after the Great Famine of the 1840s.

As the docks grew into massive operations bound by a web of complex tasks, so too did the people doing them rarefy into a complicated hierarchy of roles. At the bottom of the pecking order came ordinary dockers who unloaded and warehoused goods. Theirs were some of the most hazardous ordeals, with next to no compensation or support for their families if they got crushed by cargo or crane machinery. Loaders, on the other hand, had a more skilled commitment so came in at a level above them. They had to put stuff on board so as to make best use of space and not unbalance the ship, and in thoughtful order for optimal unloading later. Because of this they got the fancy job description of *stevedores* with relative prestige, higher pay, and housing in the less objectionable segments of East London. Other employees carried out vital side-tasks. Some were common to most docks, such as coopers who built or repaired cargo barrels or the ubiquitous customs inspectors, but some specific cargoes demanded specialist handlers, such as 'coal-whippers' who unloaded coal, 'deal porters' who did timber at the Surrey Docks, or the 'meat porters' who steered meats into the Royal Docks' refrigerators. Supervising the whole operation from the top was the dockmaster, who got to feel important with his swanky company house on the dockside.

Most of these dockers were informal labourers. On any given day the availability of work for them was random tending to non-existent. The underlying problem was the market's fault: dock work was irregular because trade was irregular. All those primary goods like grain, sugar and tea were only grown in certain seasons, and until steamships became a thing their shipments got delayed at the whim of

the wind. That meant the demand for cargo-handling fluctuated wildly from week to week, so that most of the time there were too many dockers and not enough dock work to go round.

Now a responsible company, not to mention one raking it in from the richest trades in the world, would have explored ways to support these people. Instead, the bosses' profit-hungry ways left them to the mercy of the *call on*.

There is a scene in *Bioshock Infinite* that memorably captures the archetype of this, fisticuffs and all. But for those yet to realise that video games count as proper culture, here is Henry Mayhew again.

He who wishes to behold one of the most extraordinary and least-known scenes of this metropolis, should wend his way to the London Dock gates at half-past seven in the morning. There he will see congregated within the principal entrance masses of men of all grades, looks, and kinds...Presently you know, by the stream pouring through the gates and the rush towards particular spots, that the "calling foremen" have made their appearance. Then begins the scuffling and scrambling forth of countless hands high in the air, to catch the eye of him whose voice may give them work. As the foreman calls from a book the names, some men jump up on the backs of the others, so as to lift themselves high above the rest, and attract the notice of him who hires them. All are shouting...Indeed, it is a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling for only one day's hire; the scuffle being made the fiercer by the knowledge that hundreds out of the number there assembled must be left to idle the day out in want. To look in the faces of that hungry crowd is to see a sight that must be ever remembered...For weeks many have gone there, and gone through the same struggle—the same cries; and have gone away, after all, without the work they had screamed for.

In their grinding poverty, failure at this game meant not enough money to feed their families or keep up with rent. Starvation, eviction, disease – sound familiar?

Nowadays they have telephones and e-mail, so they can reduce their irregular workers to this wretchedness while keeping their distress conveniently out of sight behind the walls of their parents' houses, homeless shelters, or social media echo chambers. Yet there is no disguising the continuity of then and now. Today's gig economy did not come out of nowhere.

Here is another account, this time from a foreman reminiscing about one of his colleagues called ‘Sanders’.

There'd be hundred of blokes shaping up trying to get work, and he'd get hold of the tickets and throw them on the floor, they were brass tickets, and they'd all be diving around, fighting one another you know, kicking one another, and punching one another to get hold of a ticket. And he would stand there laughing. He thought it was the greatest joke in the world, and he wasn't even on his own because there was lots of others like him.

This fellow gave his account in 1987. Yes. The same system carried on all the way past World War II. There must be plenty of elderly dockers still around who remember it.

To make matters worse, the company minions administering the call on had a tendency to be corrupt to the nostrils. These foremen were not necessarily arbitrary in who they chose for a few hours' work. A man might buy them a few pints in the pub the previous night, for example, then in the morning the finger would just happen to land in his direction. If it was bad enough under the company 'gangsters', the companies soon took to replacing them with outsourced middlemen who were as accountable and scrupulous as you would expect.

When the dockers went home, it was typically to slums of new industrial housing that surfaced in the surrounding marshes. Around the Isle of Dogs, districts like Limehouse, Shadwell, Poplar and Blackwall shed their pastures and crafting workshops to accommodate the new workforce, with a specially painful impact on already well-established communities like Wapping. Most of the neighbourhoods on the marshes of today's lower Newham also originated in this way, either from the docks or the big industrial ventures drawn by their magnetism: Beckton for the gasworks, Cyprus for the Royal Albert Dock, Silvertown for rubber then the Tate & Lyle sugar refinery. These were seedy neighbourhoods whose shops and services carried a distinctly maritime flavour: rope-makers, carpenters, biscuit-makers, parrot-sellers, moneylenders, pawnshops, pubs, grog purveyors, and inevitably brothels and opium dens, like the one visited by Oscar Wilde's Dorian Grey and probably not run in mind of the human rights of the people in them. Robberies, riots and all kinds of deeds too nasty for language were routine, and hunger and illness rife, inviting the zeal of Victorian social reformers and dissection by the cutting pen of Charles Dickens.

But in that darkness too was fostered the cultural grit of East London. Relationships were strong and communities tight-knit: everyone knew everyone in these closed-off worlds which at the same time were some of the most cosmopolitan on the planet. Crews, cargoes, travellers, migrants and stories came in from all over the world – Irish, Scandinavians, Mediterraneans, Jews, Indians, Chinese, Caribbean ex-slaves – giving rise to not only the mix but the fusion of diverse humanity the area is known for today. Some of it found expression in that mainstay of working-class belonging, football. It was in Canning Town, the dormitory of the Victoria Dock, that in 1895 a foreman organised his ironworkers into Thames Ironworks F.C., which five years later changed its name to West Ham United, hence their nickname of *Hammers* and logo of crossed golden hammers. And on the Isle of Dogs, workers at a food processing plant at Millwall Dock organised into what is now Millwall F.C., cherished in English football for their fans' violent hooliganism and signature chant of 'No-one likes us, we don't care'.

Or they could organise politically. English relationships between workers and their employers, *industrial relations* as their academics call them, are not known for warm embraces and shared jokes over cups of tea. The ruthless way this country industrialised made conflict inevitable, and those English above a certain age will remember the climactic round of that conflict in the 1980s when the labourers were violently undone by the rising tide of the market faith. They might also remember the vociferous profile of the London dockers at the front of those picket lines. This prominence went right back to the eighteenth century, where dockers fed up of their browbeaten lives poured their liquid rage into the furnaces that forged the labour movement.

Strikes broke out at the docks from the beginning. The 1810s however were the Peterloo era, when there was no-one a repressive and paranoid state was not prepared to beat to death to stop the French Revolution from crossing to English shores. Company obstinacy and the summoning of armed troops forced them back to work, and for a generation or two this tyranny was their lot, with no-one to represent them and their daily grind just too desperate, too hungry, too exhausting to set aside energy for the fight.

In 1871 however trade unions were legalised, opening the valves for half a century's pent-up retribution. Under wage-crushing pressure, dock workers held meetings and organised into a union, the Labour Protection League. In 1872 they went on strike at the West India Docks to demand better pay – six pence an hour rather than four. They managed to blindside the company at a rare moment when

there were no spare workers to replace them, and the compromise they extracted – five pence per hour – brought jubilant celebrations along both banks of the river. But in the following years trade hit a slump, available work fell away, and the hated call on descended into farce, hiring the chosen few for *one hour* rather than the previous half a day. By 1889 the dockers had had enough. Inspired by the success of the Bow match girls' strike up the Lea and that of the Beckton gas workers, both the West and East India Docks ground to a halt as the entire workforce of tens of thousands took to the streets.

This was no longer piecemeal protest against one or another abuse but an organised mass confrontation to an abusive system, led by charismatic and well-dressed figureheads like Ben Tillett who knew one end of a fiery oration from the other. Tillett wrote to the management demanding better and more transparent pay as well as restrictions on the call on and corrupt contracted gangers. The company ignored him. The dockers' marches down Commercial Road swelled with each passing day. They were joined by respected stevedores, workers from other industries and sympathetic members of the public, some handing out food to sustain the unpaid strikers. Soon their numbers exceeded 100,000, and within a week the stoppage had spread to the entire docklands, including the Royals and Tilbury.

This was the raw power of trade unions unleashed in England for the first time, and the government, companies and public were awestruck. Much of their shock was genuine: the docks had sealed the world of the port behind their fortress walls, and it was only now those outside learnt of the workers' suffering. The employers prevaricated, tried to bring in outside labourers to break the strike. Newspapers clamoured for the strike leaders' arrest, but some like *The Times* came round and published their grievances further. The 'dockers' tanner', that wage they demanded of six pence per hour, became a clarion call. Dockers in Liverpool, Glasgow, Hull and other ports threatened solidarity strikes. At last a veteran social justice warrior in the form of Cardinal Henry Manning, the 81-year-old Archbishop of Westminster, got involved. He approached the company bosses ('never in my life have I preached to so impenitent a congregation') and muscled them and the strike committee through weeks of gristly negotiations, mediating with sharp argument and winning empathy to reach a resolution that saw, incredibly, the satisfaction of almost all the dockers' demands.

Cue all the triumphant parades and speeches you would imagine – but this was new. These celebrations heralded a new force in the English industrial habitat,

one most unwelcome to its apex predators who would now spend the best part of a hundred years wrestling it back into hell. The Great Strike of 1889 signalled the arrival of England's labourers, those who had delivered their people the industrial revolution but suffered the most from it, as a real and serious political force. In the century to follow they would use that presence to reshape the corridors of power by means of the Labour Party and create a welfare state, challenging fundamentally the values and systems of English modernity. Today much of that challenge lies in ruins, picked apart by the priests of the market while the Labour Party flounders in disarray, in part at the tensions riven in it from the beginning – workers versus intellectuals versus politicians versus revolutionaries – and in part because Tony Blair threw its compass into the sea. Yet it is still there to be drawn on in English memory, a precedent which stood in the path of an unstoppable historical phenomenon and forced it to swerve to real improvements in the English journey. The docks were this movement's crucible.

Prosperous industry or abusive industry? Glorious empire or atrocious empire? The docks entered the twentieth century with the tensions of both strands of English modernity dissolved in their waters. Both projects would overload till they fell in on themselves and brought the docks down with them.

If the dockers hoped the toppling of their corporate overlords by the PLA would improve their lives, their disappointment was bitter. The call on remained and their basic status as informal labourers did not change. When talks over another campaign for better pay and conditions broke down in 1911 there was another massive strike in which the union leaders, now part of the National Transport Workers' Federation (NTWF) along with over a dozen other unions, got caught between the PLA bosses and their own members. The PLA's first chair, Lord Devonport, wrote his name in eternal infamy in the annals of the labour movement with his threat to starve the dockers back to work. This round ended in a bad defeat for the strikers, but they were soon on the picket lines again over docker registration, and it was in this conflicting mode that the first reckoning of European nationalist folly, World War I, hit them all.

In fact the docks steamed through the war largely intact. They were critical to the fight, processing and storing imported food as the PLA put much of its river improvement work on hold. But aside from an ugly case when a shrapnel bomb hit a school in Poplar and killed 18 children, the German zeppelins and nascent

bombers found little ability to strike at them. The docks' most devastating event of these years was pulled off on their own, and it is still not clear exactly how: a fire in 1917 at a chemical works in Silvertown, repurposed to produce TNT for the war, produced a terrible explosion which killed 73 people, injured 94, and levelled 1,000 houses as well as facilities at the Victoria Dock. The war ended the following year and trade with the German and Low Countries ports returned, joined in due course by a new boom of goods from the United States.

The PLA returned to work, expanding the docks and heavily dredging the river. By the 1930s the Port of London had reached peak size, heaving with tens of millions of tons of loot from more partners and colonies than ever and employing more than 100,000 people. Meanwhile the workers battled on for their rights, and they had found a new champion. The inter-war years saw the emergence of that new generation of working-class leaders who would end up at the helm of the labour movement when it came of age after World War II in the Labour government of Clement Attlee, and it was on the struggles of the dockers that one of the politically and physically hugest, Attlee's foreign minister Ernest Bevin, built his credentials. When in 1922 the dockers joined with workers in other sectors to form the Transport and General Workers' Union – later one of the largest in the world – Bevin was a founder and its first general secretary. Two years earlier at a public inquiry over dockers' demands for better pay and conditions, he had won their case with a display worthy of lasting study. After an eleven-hour opening speech, delivered over three days, he was rebuffed with claims that a docker with a family of five could live on wages of a paltry figure. His reaction was to go to Canning Town, buy as much food as he could with that money, cook it up in the union office, divide it onto five plates, then present those dishes to the inquiry as evidence, asking them to 'examine the dinner which (the employers' advocate) considers adequate to sustain the strength of a docker handling seventy-one tons of wheat a day on his back'. They couldn't argue with that and the workers got their pay rise, only to lose it again when the post-war boom receded. Their struggle continued through the darker days of the General Strike of 1926 and the Great Depression, when paradoxically a collapse in worker numbers made flexibility and compromise easier.

And then their whole world burned.

The docks had been founded on the darkest atrocities of colonial racism: slavery to the west, plunder and conquest to the east. The universe required a reckoning for Europe. But when it came with the consummation of authoritarian violence in World War II, it was not the authoritarians that took the hits, but Europe's already most persecuted and downtrodden. In the London docks, that meant these workers on the ground.

The course of our journey has taken us beneath many skies infected by the Nazi *Luftwaffe*. Some districts survived largely unscathed; others sustained damaging blows. The docklands suffered worst of them all. Their strategic importance sent them right to the top of Hitler's hit list. The function and prestige not just of Britain but its entire imperial circulation depended on the stuff going in and out of these harbours; to reduce them would bring this kingdom to its knees. And against a modern air force, they were helpless. *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance planes had photographed and picked out the key locations. The docks and wharves were easy to make out from a cockpit, an irresistible platter of targets of opportunity spread out over a hundred kilometres. The fascists would feast.

The calm before the storm was the magnetic mines, scattered by air into the Thames estuary in late 1939 to cripple the port's shipping. As the Nazis rampaged over Europe, the docks pulled together all the vessels they could to aid the evacuation of troops from Dunkirk in the summer of 1940. Then came the bombs.

First came a sprinkling of hits on a shipyard here, a fuel depot there. Next, apocalypse. On the bright and sunny afternoon of Saturday 7th September, 348 bombers with an escort of 617 fighters snarled up the Thames. They choked off the sky. They had come for the port. A tempest of high explosives and firebombs ripped the docks into hell. Quays, warehouses, factories, homes – all were devoured by the flames. Ships in the West India and Royal Victoria Docks were popped like fairground targets. Another was blown up as it passed through the entrance of the King George V, taking the lock down with it. Some 60 vessels altogether were done for, their lifeless husks left to drift ablaze downriver. The flour mills at the Royal Victoria went up in ashes, as did the piles of timber at the Surrey group, hundreds of thousands of tons of it. Barrels of rum detonated. Spices, oils and especially rubber burned with a chemical ferocity of their own. Mountains of sugar melted into rivers which boiled and cracked into toffee (and if ever the English defend what they did to their colonies because they gave them a few railways, tell them the Blitz was alright because some lucky workers got to mine this toffee and take it home at a time when rationing and shortages meant

people had no sweets). Then a second wave of bombers passed. Some bombs missed and wiped out swathes of the docks' residential districts. Everything burned, and burned for days. It was the most destructive fire in the history of this land and the timber-laden Surrey Docks swallowed the worst of it, compelling one fire officer, who we must hope they will forgive, to abandon their cultural commitment to a stiff upper lip with a call to 'send all the bloody pumps you've got, the whole bloody world is on fire'. On that one night alone, 'Black Saturday', more than 400 people were devoured by fascist flames.

And they kept coming. For two and a half months they rained the logical conclusion of all authoritarianism on the city, always with the port facilities as priority targets. The mighty West India fortress lost seven of its nine great warehouses. Its Poplar basin was bombed to within an inch of its life and never recovered. St. Katherine's became a lake of fire. Even the PLA headquarters on Tower Hill had its rotunda blown off by a direct hit, though Father Thames, being above such things, was naturally alright and forbade any staff inside from dying. By the time the *Luftwaffe* turned its attention on other ports, Prime Minister Churchill estimated gravely in the House of Commons that the Port of London had been reduced to a quarter of its capacity. After that the attacks were beaten down as the RAF reclaimed the skies, though a final round of suffering was to come in 1944 when V1 and V2 rockets pounded the Millwall Dock's entrance lock out of commission and terrorised the neighbourhoods of West and East Ham.

Were the docks a legitimate target? They were certainly pivotal infrastructure in the British ability to make war, which has been good enough for those who have sought to justify the far more cataclysmic firebombing of German and Japanese populations, let alone the likes of "Bomber" Harris for whom cooking civilians alive – hundreds of thousands, as opposed to the Blitz's tens of thousands – was the entire point. But on the other, we have held the English to task for their atrocities so it is only fair to give them their due when it happens the other way round. Even if the docklands held military significance, their targeting must be considered a war crime on account of the noncombatants working in them with no means of self-defence, the horrific manner of their deaths, and the reliance of the civilian populace on their supplies. If everyone Ifs and Buts on cases like this and casts the norms of war into ambiguity, then everyone else will follow in their own interests, arguing that others do it too, and then it will be atrocities all the way down. The only recourse is that each party must hold itself to the highest standards and insist on setting an example even if others do not.

The docks fought back. The PLA shifted gears into war mode, extending its operations to firefighting and clearing wrecks. Ernest Bevin, now Minister for Labour in the wartime coalition cabinet, paid, fed and coaxed the workers to show up and keep the war effort alive through the port's crucial supply work. As the war was thrown back onto Germany, the docks became laboratories, factories and staging areas for the forces that would carry out the Normandy Landings. They experimented with technologies like an undersea fuel pipeline, and constructed the famed 'Mulberry' harbours in secret at Surrey, East India, the Royals and Tilbury. After the Allies landed, the docks supplied them all the way to Berlin.

The war was done, but the liquid thrones of English modernity were in little condition to celebrate. They had been smashed. Half the port's storage facilities were gone, wharves and riverside factories knocked out like teeth and acres of housing deleted. Thousands of people had died and many more had fled, some never to return, their seasoned communities splintered. The same was true of manufacturers and port equipment, rushed away for safety or military need. The infrastructure they left behind began to rise from the dead as offices or temporary housing for the bomb-displaced. The rest fell to the PLA to revive, which was easier said than done with a bankrupt and distracted government behind it.

They had never been in this situation before. Neither had England. It stood in a world remade, a world which had learned the hard way what happens when its chosen ladders to modernity – the power to make stuff and the power to take other people's – are built too high. At any rate, other ladders were swinging up alongside theirs, from where they were waved at by Americans, Indians, Egyptians, Japanese and many others, whose own paths to salvation required that the English slip down a few rungs. They and their docks were forced to look down, and saw at their heels an old friend they thought they had left forever. Mortality.

People can behave in surprising ways when they know they must die. They might seek to make the most of their time that remains. They might cover their ears in denial. Or they might reincarnate, rejoining the cycle in new bodies.

What would the English do? What would their docks?

Denial was certainly part of it. Quite impressive denial at first. In the 1950s and early 60s the Port of London clambered back to prosperity with the Royal Docks leading the way. Grain, meat, fruit, vegetables, tea, wine, tobacco – all of it came

back. In 1963 the port handled 64 million tons of cargo. For a time it must have appeared as though they would trade their way back to the glory days.

Death, however, chuckled. He takes many currencies, but this is one debt you can't self-aggrandise your way out of.

Numerous phenomena played a part in shunting the docks into yesterday, including the shrinkage of British merchant fleets in the face of foreign competition, the independence of the colonies and their loss as a source of plunder, the decline of shipbuilding, and travellers' desertion of passenger liners for the speed and excitement of air travel. But the big one arrived on a whisper the English were well familiar with by now. *Technology will deliver us.*

The machines were on the march once more. They assembled in the ports of North America. They seeped into Europe and across the world. And in 1963, on the PLA's invitation, they crashed down in Tilbury.

Like all good armies the machines had a diverse force composition. Some were cranes and storage units with a capacity far in excess of anything the English had ever imagined, but others had names utterly alien to them: intermodal freight transport, forklift trucks, LASH vessels, pallets, and a terrifying doctrine coded 'ro-ro'. These cleared a path through the docks for their ultimate weapon: the shipping container. They loomed in in their tens of thousands, monumental icons of a new age of trade. They transported cargo in impossible bulk, overwhelming the equipment of the imperial imagination and in a fraction of the time too, for each and every container was standardised to pass from machine to machine with no need for human interaction beyond the handful it took to drive them. They were coming and nothing could stop them, nor the ships which brought them forth, now genuine sea monsters carrying their cargoes in bellies ten times hungrier than the vastest conventional vessels. To watch them cramming their bulk up the river was to look on the dawn of a new world.

And for a docker, to look on your doom. Your world quite simply no longer needed you. Your world, the world of the docks, where for a hundred and fifty years arms like yours had pumped the physical stuff of industry and empire into circulation. You were a cell in the beating heart of the English economy, a living organ with its own culture, stories, flavours, scents and sensations – a locus of English belonging. But now they no longer needed a heart. A mechanical pacemaker would do.

They owed their every success to you. Your sacrifice had decked their lives in iron, silk and sugar. Your return day after day through the burning door-frames

of your blitzed-out warehouses had powered their drills into the nucleus of the Nazi abomination. Surely now they would not simply toss you out the window?

Any honest historian could have told you the answer. A society run for its people, especially one that knows so well what strife comes out of betraying them, would have looked at once for ways to soften the dockers' landing. This society, run for its capital, allowed the machines to sweep them away overnight.

It should have remembered that heart cells die hard.

Labourers were a political force now. This wasn't going to happen if they could help it. After the war they had regrouped and continued their struggle against the same backbreaking terms of work that petered on from the old days even as they hoisted the docks to their final grand performance of the early 1960s. That meant that when the writing on the wall became clear to them, it found them organised and ready for a fight. At their forefront was a new generation of leaders, aflame in their veins and confrontational to the marrow. None so exemplified them as Jack Dash of the Royal Docks: a committed communist, rousing speaker, the one-man backbone of every dock strike for over two decades and bane of all who opposed him. Time and again they brought the Port of London to a standstill, scoring historic hits including at long last the demise of the abhorred call on, denounced by Dash as 'a flock of seagulls converging on a morsel'. For the first time the dockers were permanent workers. Yet by agitating the docks into chronic paralysis, they drove frustrated shippers to stabler ports where workers and employers got on better, speeding the sector deeper into trouble.

The PLA now stared into the same bleak future as the dock companies they had usurped so long ago. Once more the authorities came together to decide what to do, this time under the Rochdale Committee. Its advice was portentous. 'Port activity should be moved away from the centre of London', they said, to Tilbury and the coastal ports. And the docks? '...filled in, or otherwise developed...'

And with those words, the English signed the death warrant for their industry of industries.

The dock workers resisted with all their might, demanding a ban on the Tilbury container terminal and changes to wage structures to keep them afloat on the sea of machines. But now they were turning in on themselves. Dockers began to quarrel with lorry drivers. In a nuance with present-day relevance to zero-hours contracts, some dockers objected to the end of the call on, having grown used to its casual workload and finding the new fixed working hours uncomfortable. As the mood soured, some dockers, Jack Dash first among them, became suspicious

of their own unions, believing them too friendly to the employers. Instead they set up unofficial unions and staged unofficial strikes. The situation turned ugly. In 1972 shop stewards forced a depot shut; their leaders were thrown in prison, bringing dockers out on strike nationwide till they were released. More strikes followed, year after year, but by now these were death spasms, each feebler than the last as shipping fled across the horizon and spent workers leaked through the docklands' wounds – tired, given up, or coaxed away by voluntary severance schemes. By 1985, as Margaret Thatcher rampaged across the country finishing off the final stands of England's totems of industry, the tens of thousands of dockers who drove the post-war boom had dwindled to a moribund 3,000. It was over.

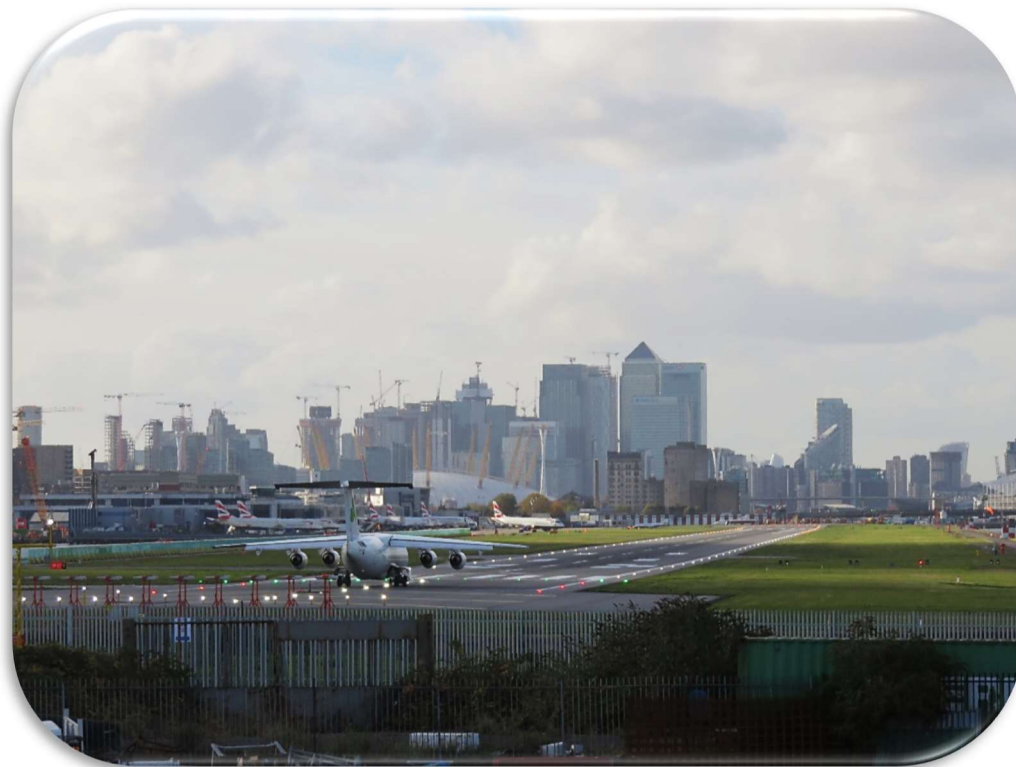
As trade at the docks and wharves went into freefall, smaller lighterage and stevedoring firms went bust. The PLA took some over, pressing its budgets deeper into misery. The independent wharves collapsed one by one, their centuries of inherited skills washed away on the tides. Then the docks themselves were done in. First to go was the East India Dock. Its export basin had been a casualty of the war and its import dock shut in 1967, the cream of shipping no longer interested. The following year the London Dock, once fragrant with wine, and St. Katherine's, always ailing, followed it into oblivion. In 1970 the Surrey Docks folded – the giant bulk timber ships could no longer reach them. The West India Docks straggled on for another decade, but by 1980 they too, the originals, had been slain. Millwall went with them, last-minute improvements to its facilities to no avail. And at the end of 1981, these titanic Royal Docks – Victoria, Albert and George V – bade farewell to their final cargo vessel as they, too, gave up their grip on this life.

Only Tilbury survived. In a final twist, for a hundred years that failure of competitive folly had been waiting all along and having outlasted its London rivals would now have its day, the sole Thames dock to survive assimilation into the new order of machine cargo-handling. Now it reigns, the diamond in a necklace of the new wharves and industries they call the Thames Gateway, handling the stuff it took off the old docks as well as the fuels of a new generation of English life: oil, steel, cars, construction materials, and as always, food. Tilbury remains indispensable. Definitely capture it if you have to conquer England.

The PLA too of course endures and will mess you up if you make trouble on its river. But the death of the docks left a lacerated gash across the physical and human landscape of East London, already festering in trauma from the effects of wartime bombing. Only now was it clear how these docks had held up the City's

long-suffering inner solar system. Their corpses were anchors, tangled round its ankles and dragging it down into an abyss of depopulation, job losses, business collapses and shattered communities, a purgatory of socio-economic dereliction.

This was not the Midlands, Yorkshire or Liverpool. They couldn't just ignore it as though it was far in the north with its power broken by William the Conqueror. City kingpins could see it when they looked out their skyscraper windows. That made it a political problem – and an opportunity. So the English returned. On the graves of the docks, of the industrial revolution, of the British Empire, they would fight their final battle of the millennium over how to be born again.



A single acronym looms like a spectre over the docklands' reincarnation: LDDC. For their fate, all love and all hate, all gratitude and all opprobrium, is funnelled upon the *London Docklands Development Corporation*, set up in 1981 to raise their remains in the service of a new modernity.

It took that long because they lost the 1970s arguing about what to do. There was no shortage of proposals, but nor of self-interest and acrimonious alienation between the parties involved – the government, the property developers, the local borough authorities, the communities, the PLA. Consensus could never be

reached and schemes were swatted down like flies, while in the meantime life continued to bleed from the fallen land.

Enter Michael Heseltine, environment minister under the Conservative Party regime which swept to power in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher. Hers was the administration that would complete in blood and broken bones the death of industrial England and usher in in its place the market theocracy. But Heseltine never seemed so neat a fit in that mission. He arguably stood closer to England's small-c conservative tradition, out of which it is still possible, in theory if not always in practice, to profess an honest concern for people, communities and the health of the nation.* It was Thatcher's actions as a market *revolutionary* that broke the big-c Conservative Party from this traditional conservatism which in the Party of today has become unrecognisable. By the twilight of her rule Heseltine had emerged as her bitterest rival, and has more recently returned to the spotlight as a forceful critic of Brexit.

In the early 1980s Heseltine was involved in several urban restoration and social peace initiatives, whose accomplishments were divisive at best but have made him perhaps the only Tory politician to be regarded with anything other than universal odium in Liverpool. In this capacity he looked aghast upon the '6,000 acres of forgotten wasteland', as he called all that remained of the rotting, crumbling, polluted London docks. All of that territory he now gave over to the LDDC. The new body was vested with government funding and sweeping powers: to buy up land (by force if need be), build infrastructure, and grant planning permission to private developers – over the heads of the local borough authorities and the PLA.

The Conservatives may have controlled the central government, but the local councils like Newham remained in the hands of the Labour Party, then embroiled in a fractious internal war but still committedly socialist. Their opposition was ferocious from the start. They railed against the undemocratic nature of the LDDC and demanded investment in housing and suitable jobs for the languishing dock communities. At their most furious they refused to even talk to the LDDC, leaving it to action groups set up by frustrated locals and grassroots activists to voice their objections. A battle was brewing along lines of antagonism which might have been familiar anywhere, but the location and timing of this one raised it to paramount significance. Modern England was dying. The ruined docks were both

* This important topic sheds much light on the present fate of England but is too large to enter into here. If you want to explore further this way, go to Beaconsfield in the province of Buckinghamshire and ask for an Irishman called Edmund Burke.

symbol and embodiment of that expiry: this nation's factories and colonial palaces would never have existed without them, but that relationship ran both ways, so now they were nothing, or almost nothing. Sure, the English still grasped the loosening Union and a residue of overseas outposts like the Cyprus bases or Hong Kong, and they could still make stuff – or get others to make stuff in them, like Tate & Lyle over there, now owned by Americans – but both ways of being had taken an unrecoverable beating to the erasure of countless livelihoods and identities, and what remained no longer made them *special*. It seemed anyone could make stuff or bully their occupied territories now, or indeed build docks, usually better than theirs. Without them the English knew not what to do, nor what to be. And if they looked back for answers, all the way past industrialisation, past empire, all they would have seen was a crater of internecine bloodying.

Two Englands, each with one foot in tradition and the other in revolution, now competed for the right to resurrect the scraps of their docks and thus their country. One believed the way to salvation lay in unleashing the power of the richest and strongest, unfettering them from all restraint. This England, the England of the dock companies, had brought its people the riches of industry and empire but in so doing drenched them in cosmic crimes against humanity. The other England believed modernity lay in supporting the downtrodden, holding abusive power to account and leaving no-one behind. It had punctured the fabric of English authoritarianism, at critical moments forcing the hands of kings, parliaments and corporations to sign off strips of their power – had built a welfare state! – and this alternative England, too, had found its mightiest fuel in the docks, but at this pivotal juncture had alienated much of the population through dramatic misgovernment and ideological zeal. So it wasn't quite good versus evil; neither side was free of unpleasantness, nor of honest folk sincere in their desire to improve the world. Nevertheless, the vision which won the docks would win the country.

The LDDC fanned out across the battlefield, terraforming it into favourable ground by getting the Isle of Dogs declared an 'Enterprise Zone' to attract private developers with regulatory concessions: cheap rents, no development land tax, no tax of certain kinds at all for ten years, and negligible planning restrictions – a free-market paradise. Previous redevelopment hopefuls had started to fill in the docks themselves, and at the London Dock and East India Dock the iconic blue rectangles had been wiped off the map. The LDDC put a halt to this, reasoning that as water features they could yet be turned to new service. And because wars

are won by solid supply lines, they added roads and began construction on a new blue-green bloodstream whose capillaries would re-oxygenate the entire area with monied blood: the Docklands Light Railway.

The Isle of Dogs now offered the freedom to eat as many dogs as a dog could eat. Voracious businesses wheeled down to plant their offices in this jungle. Billingsgate Fish Market, grown up on one of London's oldest original wharves, came over to Poplar. TV studios, event spaces, shopping centres, artists' studios, luxury apartments and five-star hotels crowded round St. Katherine's and the Surrey Docks. War-torn Poplar Dock became a marina. A dirty subplot saw Rupert Murdoch's News International break the traditional newspaper-publishing centre on Fleet Street by moving its production to Wapping, putting almost all its staff out of work. In the decisive conflict that followed, the news company, government and police violently crushed the workers and their unions in one of the final fatal blows to the English labour movement. News International got its high-tech perch on the forehead of the political establishment, from where its dangling tubes chug inflammatory bile into millions of households to this day. The five and a half thousand sacked workers got nothing.

As Thatcher took her sledgehammer to their movement's spine, earning her the joyous admiration of the upper echelons of English society and the abiding hatred of the rest, she was also ripping up the rulebook that chained beneath the City its most uncontrollable beast. This was an industry that is not an industry because what it makes exists only in the mind: Finance. Long had it thrashed there, a mass of bankers, stockbrokers and insurers sweating imaginary promises that investing in those railways would make you better at plundering Indians, or that if the slaves rose up and burnt your plantation you could disperse the cost by sharing it out to other planters. These were make-believe "products" of an incredible mental energy, and had driven the dreams of riches that built industry and empire in the first place – but, when the promises became too big to believe, as they had in the 1720 South Sea Bubble or the panic of 1866, had also brought realities crashing to splinters. In other words, finance was kept chained for a reason.

By the 1980s the beast was drowsy but shambling along, muttering most of its promises in foreign languages. Then came Thatcher's revolutionaries, for whom capital was not a means to improve society but an end in itself. The beast promised infinite capital. The beast had to be set loose. The beast was salvation. The new England *was* the beast, a return to the glories of the old: no limits, no restraints. One by one, huge pliers snapped off the shackles. Exchange controls were

abolished. Barriers separating different types of financial institutions were yanked out. The blistering blood of American finance culture was injected into its veins, intoxicating it in a salivating thirst for riches to sate its sweat of ever wilder and riskier promises, convoluted beyond the understanding even of those who conjured them. With a Big Bang it leapt free of the City walls, and on its hide, the market priests believed, the English would ride back to heaven.

Never mind there was only space on it for their select few. It would all trickle down, they called out reassuringly as they waved back. Just as it had with the docks.

No coincidence, then, that on the dead docks they would build its launchpad. And where more apt than the docks where it all began, with the Caribbean planters and slavers? Forget the City's marble ornaments, the beast's scales oozed and popped with flashing computer screens and open-plan trading floors. It needed space. It needed *skyscrapers*. The West India Docks had space. So the beast let loose a gurgle of summoning and down wheeled the skyscraper-builders, most notably Olympia & York who brought over from Canada the resources to cap the capture of the docklands with a battery of the most towering towers ever to stand on the British Isles. Its 250-metre mothership, No.1 Canada Square, landed on Canary Wharf, whose name had come from its handling of fruit from the Canary Islands – the first victim of European colonial genocide, recall – but from now on it meant the great glass rockets that rule the imagery of anyone who has ever looked out on the contemporary London skyline. Canary Wharf is a temple city of finance, crashed down into a story whose over two thousand years of pages offer no guidance on what the heck to do about it.

Out unfolded its landing gear, flattening with a gruesome smash the slums of the Tower Hamlets, so named because in ages past their taxes served *The Tower*. But now there was no more *The Tower*, because the dread dungeon-on-a-hill which since the Norman conquest had stood as the capstone to London's violent rule was suddenly but a painted pebble at the foot of these Towers of Towers, a piece of merchandise shoved away in the city's lowest drawer. The Normans were history, history was the past, and in the world of the market the past no longer exists, only the now-and-forever ladder of cash and glass. The West India slavers, in their own little bubble of affluence, must once have thought so too, and their true successors on the Isle of Dogs out-swagger even the venerable avarice of the old City which grumbles at and attempts to imitate them from across the East End.

Those plunged into darkness by the mothership's shadow fought back. They were the leftovers from the world of the docks, the local families and communities with more experience than anyone, two centuries' worth, of the lies of the trickle-down priests. These new developments were not for them. They were for outsiders with different skills and wardrobes, people who didn't know their port from their starboard and who hadn't lifted a crate in their lives, let alone scrambled for tokens of life and death in a call on. People who had sauntered in, kicked the debris of the old world aside, piled their own wealth upon it and now sat flaunting it over their slums from fifty storeys up, laughing maniacally through the windows.

It could not stand. Not without one last show of defiance.

Protesters massed onto the streets, chanting 'kill the canary and save the island' and carrying coffins to symbolise the death of the community. They condemned their exclusion from the new jobs, the new housing, even from consultation. They set up action groups with acronyms of their own to slam into the LDDC. 'They are throwing shit at us and now they can have some of it back', someone cried, cueing a heap of manure dumped at the gates of the LDDC headquarters. Soon manure graduated to petrol bombs. But nothing lived up to the commotion of the Canary Wharf Development's opening pageant, when as the Governor of the Bank of England prepared to symbolically turn the first clod of soil, protesters released a flock of sheep and thousands of bumble bees upon the assembled dignitaries. Chairs were sent flying as the sheep stampeded to eat the ceremonial flowers, while the bees plunged their stingers into American bankers fleeing in terror.

None of this was going to stop the capitalisation of the docklands. It was no longer a project but a historical shift: England reborn, the figurehead of a flagship on a rising tide of market revolution. Arguably the strength of opposition forced a softening in the LDDC's approach to local people and a greater concern for community issues from some of the corporations, yet mere mortal flesh had no business standing in their way. But if the titans of capital had made themselves impervious to the wrath of the people, the more capricious wrath of their own market god was another matter.

The promises had grown too large, had deceived too many. Too many offices. Too much space. Not enough business to fill them. The recession of the 1990s smashed into the dockland enterprises and construction projects, including Canary Wharf – especially Canary Wharf. Among its victims were Olympia & York, tower-builders impaled by a £12 billion tower of debt. But a panicky round of

selloffs and reorganisations saved most of it and in the new millennium it continued to grow, sprouting new battlements, turrets and nests for more international beasts of banking to come join the hive. To bring them in, the DLR was joined by the Jubilee Line extension and the incoming Crossrail or Elizabeth Line, each station a controversial palace of the new modernity in its own right. Business as usual then. Crisis, what crisis?

As it turned out, the worst material crisis in living memory.

The 2007-8 financial crash was an obvious outcome of cutting the finance beast free of its fetters. Eyes delirious with greed, it had leapt off a cliff. Governments, including England's, poured colossal volumes of public money into the dazed and tottering banks to stop them bringing down the entire structure of international finance, but it was too late to stop real societies and real economies crunching into recession. That in its turn required vast government spending to soften the blow to the public, which drove Gordon Brown's Labour Party regime deeper into debt while also costing it the political price any government pays for being in charge at a time of economic crisis. The stage was set for a new generation of Tories to scramble back to power at their expense – individuals much the product of Thatcher's market revolution, but also of the expulsion of values and principles from politics by Tony Blair's New Labour. Together these had shaped a new class of political opportunists. Unlike Thatcher's core of market clerics who had reshaped England with (however injurious) conviction, for these people conviction did not exist. Their ideology of subordinating society and state to market forces was to most of them no more than a cloak for unrelenting naked greed and a willingness to pander to the vilest tendencies of human impulse if they thought they saw a political advantage in it. They re-framed the crisis as the fault of foreign manipulators and lazy scrounging parasites at the bottom, rather than unaccountable capital and highfaluting recklessness at the top, and prescribed their austerity programme as the remedy: a full-scale redistribution of wealth, out of the hands of the bulk of the population and up to the cockpit, by corrupting the institutions of the post-World War II welfare settlement – the NHS, the education system, social housing, disability and unemployment benefits – into tools for punishing the vulnerable out of their means and lives.

Had the blanketing of the cockpit windows with misleading statistics so blinded them from any real sense of the suffering of the population? Or did they simply not care? Either way, the English now live with the consequences: poverty, squalor, ignorance, disease, and if not idleness, then the waste of countless lives,

full of potential, to an engineered culture of cruelty. The ‘five giants’ William Beveridge sought to slay with the welfare state, always a work in process, have smacked away their weakened enemies and struck back with a vengeance. As they stomp, they tilt this island such that ever more people, their minds, hearts and stomachs riven to breaking point by this violence, roll into the hungry maws of England’s demons of authoritarianism, prejudice and the abuse of power, lurking immense beneath their land’s darkest pits all along. Once more they bellow from the depths and rear up onto the surface, as those who turn their ears to them heed not their true character of death and destruction, only their irresistible promises to break the system that so remorselessly breaks the people. This story continues as we speak.

In other words, the new England, the substitute modernity raised on the ruins of the docks, has failed. It found these people astray and promised them the wealth and power of England’s first, lost modernity. But finance was a red herring all along – it belongs in a heat-resistant casing in the engine room, not on the bridge. Willingly or not, they followed, and are now left twice as lost as before.

Might history have alerted them to this? There is no small irony in the fact this hollow attempt at a future was built on the West India Docks. A financial fortress replaced a mercantile one. Is piracy by the computer so different from piracy by the cannon? Its digital explorers have breathed the same air as those who reduced living and loving human beings to chattel, then wrung their bodies to the last drop of sugar, rum and tobacco to pile high on that ground, so when the fortress fell, that matter, converted from the energy of the enslaved, leached into the water and soil to fertilise the second fortress’s growth. The curse of slavery runs in Canary Wharf’s glass arteries. Go to the Isle of Dogs, especially on a foggy day when the tops of the skyscrapers vanish in cloud, and a chill will crawl up your spine. That land is haunted.

Perhaps only a full transfusion will do. There are those attempting it. The West India Dock Company’s No.1 sugar warehouse now houses the Museum of London Docklands. There you will find one of the bravest attempts to come to terms with the triangular slave trade as you are likely to find in the English lands.

The crime was of interstellar magnitude. Redemption, if it is possible – that is not for us to decide – will take them millennia. But perhaps in time, they will get at least far enough to allow the spirits of the West India Dock to rest and lift the curse on whatever remains, by then, of its temples to a misleading future. Will a

third fortress of prosperity then rise to make up, in humanity and inclusiveness, for where the first two failed? They must decide.

By now the LDDC had long bowed out. Its work done, it released its powers back to the borough authorities and disbanded in 1998.

By conventional measures what it had done was astonishing. It had achieved rises in population, employment, road mileage and houses built all in the tens of thousands. But the concern of the storyteller, most of all the historian, must be for people more than numbers. For whom exactly are these roads, these houses, these offices, these shops? Is this work that benefits or harms the world and the people who carry it out? If the docks reborn have soared, then why are so many of their old neighbourhoods like Canning Town still national hotspots of poverty, homelessness, debt and violent crime?

And what about here, where the Royal Docks sank back into the marshes of Plaistow? Their communities, as well, watched the spires and lights go up on the Isle of Dogs with apprehension. Theirs had been the triple jewel that shone in the crown of the dock system, but when it collapsed, along with the Beckton Gasworks, those gems too sank into the muddy wastes of what had in all other eras been the fringe of the fringe, and now, again, were the last to be reached by the LDDR. What would it do to them?

Well the strip of land between the Royal Albert Dock and George V was long, flat and narrow: the perfect shape for a runway, as it happened, so the space between the great basins was taken over for a new airport to serve the temple city of finance. The London City Airport over there now handles more than four and a half million passengers per year, and as we might figure from the sleek silver private jet taking off in front of us, it has a more exclusive clientele than the big international airports like Heathrow and Gatwick and comes with stricter regulations on noise and permitted aircraft. Meanwhile, over on the north quay of Victoria Dock, a mammoth exhibition centre called ExCel was opened in 2000 for the new modernity's Great Exhibitions of trade and sport. And here on the north flank of the Royal Albert, there came in 1999 the architectural toadstools and butterflies of the UEL, while the Regatta Centre further west uses the dock itself for rowing. In 2010 a cable car was roped across to Victoria Dock from the Greenwich Peninsula courtesy of the Emirates airline and Transport for London, offering fun and expensive views for those who like it and yet another new target

in London's white elephant safari for those who don't. And finally, to look east to the end of the Royal Docks is to watch the march of the high-end housing developers continue as we speak, a march we shall have to break through to reach our journey's conclusion.

The ancient Greeks have a thing called a *palimpsest*: a writing tablet, originally made of wax, whose contents they can erase and write on again so as to not waste money on animal-skin parchment pages. The surreal atmosphere of the Royal Albert Dock today is that of a palimpsest, or to use a related analogy, that of SimCity. The game has run too long and your dock section is a mess, so wipe it all away, start a new game on the same map, and start dragging and dropping the zone boxes: a residential area here, a park there, a university, a train station, an airport; a water feature. Leave it to run for three days and it would look something like this. Best save your game before the UFO attacks.

Walk around in it however and we already find stories taking shape – from the water, from the tarmac, from the windows of the student dormitories, a patchwork that might or might not last long enough to turn this part of the city organic. Organic also means mortal, and in a society made unfair that has sad implications. The quayside, now an extended walkway and viewing platform, carries a white stone bench with a tribute of pink peonies and a poignant inscription: *For every joy that passes, something beautiful remains*. It is a memorial to Paawan Purba, a twenty-year-old student at the UEL who in 2016 was struck down out of nowhere by meningitis. There is a vaccine, but a technological solution is only as effective as everyone's access to and informed awareness of it. Even here in the Royal Docks' cutting-edge paradise of tomorrow, we are reminded how thin the armour of modernity, any modernity, covers the fragile flesh beneath.

Ever east, towards the Royal Albert's end, the Sir Steve Redgrave Bridge, named after their Olympic rowing champion, carries traffic over the dock to the strip between the King George V and the river. That way lies our journey's end – but not yet. There is one more thing we must see.

∞ Water



‘Britain may be a small island but I would challenge anyone to find a country with a prouder history, a bigger heart or greater resilience...an island that helped to abolish slavery, that has invented most of the things worth inventing, including every sport currently played around the world...(and has) one of the best records for art and literature and contribution to philosophy and world civilisation’.

Prime Minister David Cameron at the G20 summit, 2013

‘...But, by what I have gathered by your own Relation, and the Answers I have with much Pains wringed and extorted from you, I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.’

The king of Brobdingnag to Gulliver in *Gulliver’s Travels*, by Jonathan Swift, 1726

A concrete filament edges round George V's elbow. Our goal is south, to cross the dock and close the circle; but first, we are beckoned east. There awaits the most important encounter of all.

Hear its call as we break through the outer shell of the palimpsest, the SimCity template. From here it is all construction sites, or spaces taken over by the girders and lorries that feed them. A handful of their creations are complete, crowding proud round the end of the Royal Albert Dock as though this deceased behemoth of impounded water, once the mightiest in the world, was by design a pond to prettify their gates all along.

These days the safety barriers they put up round their building sites tend to double as advertising space to big up both the construction company and whatever dreamworld they are supposedly magicking out of rainbows behind it. Here they show off stylised maps on which the old sailing ships chug along beneath DLR trains, while the black rectangles (docks) and circles (gas cylinders) of a 2D antiquity transform into three-dimensional waterside apartments.

London is moving east, one barrier proclaims. Should it have added, 'We mean it this time'?

These are mammoth housing blocks, box-shaped with rows of regular windows. They retain nothing of the docks' original character save their resemblance to oversized cargo crates. Their streets, deserted aside from service vehicles, strive to retain the memory with names like Armada Way and Atlantis Avenue, but it doesn't quite work, because those memories cannot be road. These roads could not have existed in their present forms while this place had a maritime personality.

Another street name, Gallions Road, sounds like part of the same effort but isn't. It comes not from the galleon ship, but the Galyon family. The name is Norman French and crops up in property records here from the fourteenth century. It passes down to the most impressive local survivor of the docking age, if selling its soul to a gastropub doesn't disqualify it: the Gallions Hotel, now stranded in a clutch of housing developments that leave it infuriatedly dwarfed. Yet its architecture still packs a punch, warding off its faceless assailants with alabaster frescoes of angelic naked people and I-am-the-empire dormer windows in a last stand of Grade II-listed red, white and sea green bravado. It was built by the London and St. Katherine's Dock Company in the 1880s just after they opened the Royal Albert Dock, the idea being that as this was still miles out in the sticks then,

would-be world travellers needed a hotel to overnight in before they steamed for tropical climes aboard P&O passenger liners.

Under publican rule, Gallions Hotel has reverted to the original spelling as Galyons Bar and Kitchen. From the same surname comes the name they call this wedge of land it sits on, Gallions Reach. But where Bars and Kitchens come and go, a Reach belongs on a timescale unfathomable to us. It is with its subject that we are due to rendezvous.

It is not far now. Round the corner and up the road we end up in the local outback, where aside from a secret corporate lair belonging to the food-processing technology conglomerate Bühler, the building sites pepper out into wasteland long given up to the plants and wildflowers. There is no-one here. And that, perhaps, is how it is supposed to be. A loneliness overpowering, but somehow right. It belongs to what countries with true wilderness call *the bush*; take your eyes off it for a few minutes and the tarmac would dissolve into it too. You could film a post-apocalyptic zombie film here, but they would have to be very unbothered zombies, squatting languid on the pavement fingering circles in the dust or flicking crumbs to the magpies.

If we ignore Tilbury for striking off on its own, this is the docklands' frontier, the very edge of the outstretched fingertips of industrial East London, which of course have long withdrawn from maximum reach. The wastes themselves are what is left of the Beckton Gasworks, gone and not coming back. Across them, far to the north, four iron-red minarets poke from the forgotten jungle like the ruined towers of a lost city – a duct of Bazalgette's NOSE, taking the excreta of half of London on its final journey to the sewage works.

Astonishingly they are setting up apartments even here. So far most are little more than concrete moulds in temporary red fences and scaffolding. But what will build their eventual dwellers into a community, here on the edge of the edge? It was another matter when the docks were nearby because the housing followed them out here, not the other way round. What will they do in the evenings? Will they come to live here at all, or is this where the flimsy membrane of another property bubble goes pop?

Never mind them. What we are looking for is a gravel path that goes right out the back, past a PLA radio mast with a swirly-whirly on top. It ends at a concrete wall with an iron railing. There is the river.

Gallions Reach. The real one.

A *reach* is a stretch of a river, originally so named for being negotiable in a single sailing manoeuvre. So upriver from Gallions Reach is the Woolwich Reach with the Thames Barrier, and beyond it the reaches of Bugsby's, Blackwall, Greenwich, Limehouse, and the city proper where it is known as the Lower and Upper Pool.

Gallions Reach is different. Gone are the palaces, the monuments, the bridges, the houses, the chiselled embankments full of tourists. Here what there is is the water.

Engorged to twice its width since the city centre, it has begun to pick up pace for its final rampage to the sea. It has cleared the Isle of Dogs, its last significant obstacle. From here its bends are gentle bumps, one at Erith, then another just before Tilbury where it whips left then right then ploughs into the North Sea to wash across the sunken plains of Doggerland.

There is no London here, and not much England either. The view downstream is of makeshift installations, come and gone on banks that were never and perhaps never will be described, outside a handful of parallel realities, as 'urban'. There is the Barking Creek Flood Barrier, holding position a few steps out from the riverbank in the fabled image of Cnut telling the sea what to do, its brave attempt at a display of permanence somewhat undermined by the iron legs of a once-great pier stranded bodiless in the foreground. The river, not the humans, decides what floats or sinks here. There are warehouses, factories, cranes, gravel pyramids, stacks of shipping containers; perhaps it is just because they are far away but they all look abandoned, fossils of activities that come and go but leave no lasting mark. Out on the water the odd vessel creaks with rust, heaving anciently through these cold lower reaches – so close to the metropole, yet so many eras fallen away from its rule. There are electrical pylons, and one or two wind turbines: the birthday candles on a stale industrial cake, whose bakers have failed to realise that time here runs backwards.

On this side the fallen gasworks have surrendered to vegetation. On the opposite bank, the abandoned testing grounds of Woolwich's Royal Arsenal have done the same. A mantle of dense green, not the fresh green of spring nor the briny green of the sea but a weary, unconcerned, bristly green that teems with impenetrable shadows. The green of a land that sleeps a sleep of deep geological time; which guards its secrets, but makes no secret of how capable and correct it is in absorbing all who set foot on it.

We have come full circle. Here, in this open-skied desolation left behind where the English capital could not sustain its reach, we see in raw, naked honesty the liquid core of their civilisation. Here was where it all became possible. Where it *moved*: all those stories, written by workers, soldiers, writers, invaders, nation-builders, enslavers, travellers, tourists, administrators, clerics, protesters, rebels, refugees, machines, minerals, manufactures, foodstuffs, weapons – a million minds and symbols carrying seismic ideas of divine rights of kings and chosen peoples; of unusual sports and world-games of public-school empire; of the dread divisions of human beings into reductive categories: all of it came and went on this water which twice a day flows in, and twice a day flows out.

It didn't write those stories for them of course. Theirs were the authors' hands, so theirs the responsibility. But the Thames was the pen, the paper and the nourishing ink, the 'good service done to the race that peopled its banks'; except now you know to raise your finger there: they are not a *race* – just people. Better not prolong their mistake.

By the river's power, they knew the world and the world knew them. It gave them their chance. Yet they do well if they remember that it is a gift, the river's to take back at any time, for hers is an authority of a planet older and wiser than every nation or economy, king or god to enter or leave its stage. Here, right here, you feel it, the timeless presence of the water. Lift off all that rusting Meccano, these iron plates and toy cranes and plastic apartments, and it is simple to imagine that the Thames at Gallions Reach would not look all that different, give or take an ice cap or a hippopotamus, to how it has looked for hundreds of thousands of years.

An ancient presence, intrinsic to this land since before cities or nations existed in a single brain cell on Earth. And yet, by the English's nature as an emergent and dependent of this river, something of that presence streams through its human efforts as well.

'And this also, has been one of the dark places of the earth.'

Marlow was right: this *has* been a dark place of the earth. But that darkness came not from the river. However treacherous its currents, however infested its marshes, darkness came from the demons that the humans who settled here made, or found somewhere, and chose to empower. The erection of an authoritarian cultural machine, infused with the violent prejudices of race, class and gender and troubled with the differences between islands and peninsulas. That was the 'heart of immense darkness' which drove the English, if far from alone, to so grievously

damage the universe. But if they are of this river too, then at least part of them, a defining part, must be made of something far older and stronger than any of the lies and norms they came up with to hate, hurt and control each other for no reason. To look into Gallions Reach is to see a world that couldn't care less whether you are male or female or nonbinary, or what colour your skin is, or how much your wallet weighs. To see a world where all are welcome on but one condition: that they respect the water's hospitality.

One condition: Humility.

Therefore hope.

Let us keep hope in our hearts, then, as we round the bend, now in the river's permanent company, to where one last creation of industrial England, a tunnel, will return us to where we began.

We set out to build an understanding of the English. What have we learnt?

We tread a narrow footpath along an iron-railed concrete wall, the very lip of the river. On the landward side a tall fence overgrows with bush, and right behind it the colossal concrete templates of those new apartments, decked in webs of scaffolding, ascend to the fashionable melodies of power tools and whistling builders on cigarette breaks.

Did the dwellings and workshops of the Royal Docks come out this far? Did this strip of riverbank bustle? Or was it always the river's own, beyond the humans' limits?

The industrial heritage, the natural heritage – it is as though these coalescing apartments are of an England trying to shed its own past, its memories. The river as a physical and spiritual part of them, the river as a place their work was done – now they would think to reduce it to a mere production factor in a world reduced to market calculus? To a piece of scenery, a thing to boost property values to compensate for the bawl of the City Airport's jet engines?

There is not one England, but many – so many. They jostle for space on its European peninsula. Some sought to connect with parts of that continent, others to seize the whole archipelago for itself. For now it has ended up with half an island, although eyes that see alternative shapes for it are always open. Other Englands contest not geographic but cultural space; at times they meld into a more complex whole, at others they pitilessly delete one another. Often they do

one while disguising it as the other with smooth words or something shiny bunged in the pocket of the storyteller. How will that contest work out here?

Woolwich has appeared across the river. Apartments have shot up there too, the crooked dentures of a newly-invented neighbourhood called Thamesmead, fitted upon the eroded stony gums of the arsenal town now it no longer needs those marshes to practice bombarding colonial populations with artillery. Shooter's Hill rises above it. All so long ago; all so ever-present.

We come to some apartments they have finished. Beige, with cars parked outside but few signs of life. Their windows overlook a narrow waterway: the entrance channel of the Royal Albert Dock, with pleasure boats moored along it. We must cross. The crossing is the lock itself: one gate, then the other, barely half a metre wide. We can disregard a sign that warns this is a 'DANGEROUS STRUCTURE: This machinery may operate without warning'. That has been the tendency of machinery in this land. It operates. The English get operated.

This channel used to be much wider, a holding area as much as an entryway, and the vessels that used it were for anything other than fun. Is this the same essential England, shifting its forms and values as the world changes around it? Or different Englands, each burying those it replaces like strata of rock in a cliff face?

Then it is back to the path down the edge of the world. Through a wire fence, the tide laps at the remnants of a wooden structure collapsed upon the riverbank, green with moss. Then it is time to cross a second dock entrance channel, this time King George V's. This one is still damn huge. Huge enough, they say, to have got in the RMS *Mauretania* in 1939, the largest ship of its day at nearly a quarter of a kilometre long and 27 metres wide. The lock's massive gates have layers, just like England: a lower wet layer, a narrow central layer with dark green algae sitting on it, and a dry section above. Along the top a thriving community of blue-green lichen has made the gates its home. They should beware the Home Office.

The land curls west. The corner belongs to the market – specifically the Galleons Point housing estate, which they have spelled with an *e* like the ship, no doubt because someone with an Excel spreadsheet calculated it would drive up demand and win them more rents. Old Englands and new – cooperation or conflict? Is it to evoke the memory of the docks or just another marketing tactic that they have named these blocks after famous British ports: Felixstowe Court, Grimsby Grove, Inverness Mews?

There are concrete slipways here, falling away into the algal embrace at the water's edge. These were the old terminus points of the Woolwich Ferry, till they replaced it with the current car-ferry whose blocky white berths, one on each bank, reach out to shake hands ahead. They are hard to make out because the sun has sunk in the western sky. Woolwich and the ferry termini are darkening to silhouettes, but the dark river itself glitters with reflected light. We, too, have come to the terminus of our voyage: North Woolwich.

A strange appellation, considering Woolwich is on the other side of the river. But that is what happens when your nation's imaginary boundary lines are ever in flux, especially as rich entitled types scramble over them trying to graft loose bits onto their manors. Geographically we are in Essex here, but geopolitically for most of the last thousand years this foothold on that forgotten realm has been a detached part of Kent ever since William the Conqueror doled it out to one of his minions, his steward Hamo who controlled the Woolwich manor on the south side. It sounds random, but would have given Hamo control of both sides of the ferry crossing, a hefty strategic asset this far down 'the river too wide to ford'. So North Woolwich stayed that way until 1965, when at last they realised they had put it on the wrong side of the river and reclaimed it for newformed Newham. That it has completed its cultural realignment is confirmed by graffiti on a wall here that reads 'FUCK THS' – most likely a West Ham football fan extending the customary courtesy to their rivals Tottenham Hotspur.

There is a little park here. In its heyday this rectangle of the Royal Pavilion Gardens – now the Royal Victoria Gardens – was apparently quite popular, a scarce breathing space in the maze of workers' housing and choking industrial workshops that lined the south flank of the Royal Docks. Now it is silent and windswept, if comfotingly green. A blacksmith's steam hammer has been parked in the corner, a lone time-traveller to escape the fall of the docks, while a young lady walking her dog and a pair of men batting a ball across a tennis court do just enough to make this area feel lived in. This too is an England: one that rests, waits, and watches the sun as it takes its light beneath the source of the Thames.

Do you now understand the English? I don't. To be honest, one doubts they understand themselves.

Perhaps some of what we have seen can be of use to them.

There are many Englands. Just as you could say that there are many Chinas, many Mexicos or many Congos. Every society is made up of diverse parts, each with as legitimate a claim as any other to define its culture.

The English are not at peace with their plurality. Their contradictions stubbornly refuse to resolve into an honest and inclusive settlement. Instead they lapse into lies and violence, physical and structural, often ugly, always painful. That much is commonplace – most of this world's societies remain battlegrounds of competing visions. No culture is uniform, and power shifts.

What makes it striking in the English case is how far it stands out for contradicting the mask they have managed to fix upon their story. *Democracy, freedom, prosperity, rule of law*: these have held little meaning for the majority of characters in it and even today do not describe its realities. To be homeless is not developed; to live under threat of sexual violence is not free; to be humiliated by a welfare assessor is not prosperous; to be traumatised by the police or dragged on a plane and deported because of your colour is not rule of law. These inhumane realities stand as shocking as in any society in this world, with Grenfell Tower the burning beacon of their shame.

Why then do the English story's writers and readers alike find the mask so compelling? Have not all peoples, in some quarters and some moments, confronted their problems with sparks of humanistic courage that are every bit as inspiring and momentous as those made in England? What is so special about the English's that they are taken to push their society's astronomical crimes out of the picture?

We have condemned them for those crimes, but the more important concern is how they might steer their national character beyond them. To do that, they must look with eyes and ears open – and masks off – at the pages they inhabit.

They made this land their home. They changed it: rolled back the forests and drained the marshes to farm; Enclosed the farms to produce more, but for fewer; laced it with strips of water, iron, and concrete, above and below, to speed themselves and their stuff across it faster. They covered it in their buildings and machines. All this changed them. It empowered them, certainly. But it also enchained them – not just to the prison but to the farm, the factory, the office, the train timetable, the starless sky, the hollowed-out memory, and the belief that any one moment's imaginations are a timeless reality, never to be changed or escaped. In no land has that delusion looked so brittle.

But as much as they changed, some things about them have stayed the same. Defining characteristics, no less.

They are a people who imagine their realities. This has stood so stark out of every Englishness in our path that it scarce needs repeating. They imagined their

nation. They imagined its borders. They imagined its political institutions and destinies in the world. They imagined up commons and private property, trains and planes, rules for their kings and rules for their sports fields, always brought forth from fantasy then acted upon to make them real. Some imaginers were just Playing the Game, for others it was dead serious. Some of what they dreamed up improved the world: kept them safe, made them think, took their bodily waste away, gave them fun games to play. Other dreams failed, incompatible with reality or overtaken by it. Others still left wounds that still gush with bloody agony: dreams of racial hierarchies, of wealth as a measure of social worth, of pleasure in animal torture, of a world where men are one way and women another. All were imagined. All changed reality.

They are a people shaped by their relationship with the world beyond them. Every English person is both an *n*th-generation immigrant and a native: one whose folks came from somewhere beyond, in relatively recent historical memory, and made their home here. This relationship is, and has long been, perhaps the fiercest conflict zone in their national soul.

So much of what has made them English has come from the outside world: people, languages, philosophies, inventions, trade goods, and ideas, so many ideas – foreign recipes, foreign gods, foreign art, foreign music, foreign construction techniques, foreign *stuff*. The foreign inspires them, makes them curious, compels them to fascinate over a map of the world then get on their ships to explore it like the Courtaulds, learn from it like Henrietta Barnett, hurtle into its battlefields like Charles Gordon – or like the Bridgettine sisters, civil war exiles and those now fleeing Brexit, to find a home in it when their own home fails them. The English are all of this, but also its abysmal opposite. They are an existential sneer at the outsider, a belief that all unlike them are beneath them, fit only to be conquered, punished, humiliated and pillaged to benefit themselves – and to call this good. Though they were of Europe, they convinced themselves they were separate from it, better than it, never mind that they shared the same stories, behaviours and landmass. Many people have made the mistake of hating the *other*, but the English took it further than any had before. They enshrined their superiority in what they honestly believed was objective science. They beat down ancient civilisations, slaughtered populations, reduced those they controlled to famine, fear and perpetual violence – even their next-door neighbours, the Irish. In a darkest hour to end darkest hours, they broke foreigners into a new scale and depth of slavery: racialised industrial capitalist slavery, which normalised the reduction of love-

capable human beings to inferior beasts and disposable inventory. The world has yet to recover from their rampage and they are still in denial.

The English as loving cosmopolitans; the English as genocidal racists. Opposite ways of being, but they fight for control of the same spectrum and it is there in everything these people do. The English *are* their relationship with the outside world.

And they are a vulnerable people. Beneath the projections of strength, the flags and chants, the solemn ceremonies, the armies and air force, the skyscrapers, the monuments, the stiff upper lip, they are as exposed as any society in the world to wounds of the flesh and the psyche. Vulnerable to the elements that freeze them on their hilltops, gnaw away at their structures, wash them away like the wrath of the Thames, or burn them down as in 1666, 1941 and 2017. Vulnerable to plagues (oh yes), to their own machines, and to violent people within and without. But most of all, like so many others, they are vulnerable to their own flaws and mistakes: their fear of death; their fear of difference; their fear of imaginary enemies swarming round their moat; their fear of a reckoning due for the terrible wrongs they have perpetrated, which even if they deny, they know in their hearts must one day catch up with them. To put it off they shore up their fortresses of the imagination by lying, punishing, oppressing and violating some more. No enemy – not floods, not cholera, not even the Nazis – has done them so much harm as they have done themselves.

The final observation is the crux of their troubles.

The English do not have a democratic tradition. They have an authoritarian tradition, in defiance of which small groups of alienated, violated and critically-minded people at the margins of society have stood up to wrestle back power and redistribute it among that tradition's victims. They failed more often than they succeeded, to immeasurable cost in blood and despair. The Levellers, the peasants on the commons and the fallen at Peterloo never knew an England where anyone apart from a tiny set of landowners could vote for their leaders. How many women lived and died in an England which mocked them for even suggesting a nation where they had the independent personhood, let alone social and political equality, that is their birthright as human beings? How many labourers, displaced farmers and homeless people starved, succumbed to disease, or were pulverised in prisons and workhouses without ever the chance to imagine an England where a caring society might catch and support them, or where a half-respectable justice system might give them a chance of holding abusive employers to account?

As the past, so the future. There is an experienced strand of their storytelling which speaks of their journey as a march of inevitable progress towards democracy. This could not be further from the truth. Nothing for most of that journey, certainly not the Magna Carta or the rise of parliament, can be called democratic. Tyrannical power was more often confronted for the interests of an alternative tyrannical power than for the sake of the tyrannised. Nothing was inevitable; everything had to be fought for; nothing won was secure. Nor is it still. There is no automatic English democratic destiny.

That is not to say their trappings of democracy are worthless. The point is that they *are* trappings, flawed and fallible experiments, not the mature democratic system of repute. Implants, held in place upon a tradition built by jealous, spiteful and punitive impulses that has had to be dragged raging, screaming and lashing through every democratising decontamination shower, and which at the first opportunity relapses to the way it knows best: silence the dissident, crush the different, insist on its own superiority, lie through its teeth, *clamp down, get tough, ban, criminalise and punish, punish, punish. Arrogance*, the pretence that they are so much better than others, than one another – that is England's original sin.

And it was never just the people at the top. When they cut down their king, they found straight away that they were the same all along. It has lodged in their prisons, their schools, their offices, their households. Authoritarian arrogance seeps from every pore of their culture.

No moment so exemplifies it as the present. For this, they say, is democracy: to hold, on a whim, an arbitrary, confrontational, in-or-out public vote on an issue so complex and lastingly consequential as their relationship with the *first respectable framework for peace in their continent's history*; to campaign on false pretences, under the influence of disreputable political interests and a brazen historical ignorance that neither their descendants nor ancestors will ever forgive; to reach a result of fifty-two to forty-eight, a clean split down the middle of the populace; and to then insist that the fifty-two represents the *will of the people*, to be implemented totally, immediately, with no further discussion nor regard for the details or consequences, and to brand anyone who utters a hint of reserve a *traitor, a saboteur, a remoaner, an enemy of the people*.

How impoverished a sense of democracy is that? That is not democracy but thuggish, brutish majoritarianism, a destructor of any society it touches. They might not see it but the watching world sure does: a world which, having long

loved and hated the English, now, for perhaps the first time ever, looks on them with pity.

Is it precisely their absence of a democratic tradition that has landed them in such disgrace? Democracy, in any meaningful sense, must mean so much more than counting slips of paper in ballot boxes. It must mean a heartfelt recognition that a society is not the majority, nor indeed the minority, but everyone: that is, a journey *together*, not an imposition of the will of some over others. It must mean a living conversation, always deliberating, always improving, never taking satisfaction in an outcome so long as anyone present finds it unbearable. It must mean meaningful public spaces for that conversation to happen, to house a genuine democratic spirit. It must mean ways of life, and of work, that give them the time and energy to participate in that conversation. And it must mean institutions, robust and well-funded, to teach people to think for themselves, critically, honestly, *caringly*, and in an informed and constructive manner – at the least, decent education and a responsible media; to keep them safe, healthy, housed, connected to the land, and feeling enough of a stake in society that they are physically and mentally able to walk in that togetherness and hold to account all forms – *all* forms – of abusive power.

Democracy, in short, must mean a *culture* capable of resolving, or at least managing, its differences while retaining a healthy sense of underlying togetherness – not, as is happening here, watching it evaporate in the flames of hatred and contempt for those who are different, or indeed fuelling those flames to get one's way. This? This is unsightly at best. For a nation that pretends to have *invented* democracy it is downright embarrassing.

Can they do better?

If so the English will have to create a new tradition, whether they wish to call it democracy or not. That will be difficult, because the weight of history is against them. It is apt that we speak of this having just climbed out of their docks, because there we saw what they did to try to bring some stability to their ceaseless divisions and conflicts.

They created a future – a modernity, if you like that word – based not on democracy, but on industry and empire. Some among them found they could become ridiculously powerful by harnessing energy and creating new machines. Power, unthinkable power, was concentrated into their hands, and they projected

it upon those in their society who did not have it, and upon the outside world. It began with their *Union* – drawing in an exhausted Scotland, settling and tyrannising Ireland, and consolidating the earlier merciless conquest of Wales, as well as historically non-English areas like Cornwall. All this was essentially coercive, the practice run for what they then set about in earnest on other continents.

But these were not a liberation from their authoritarian curse, nor from their prejudicial visions-made-real of class, race and gender – visions which strip the humanity from people, bring only suffering, belong in no time or place, and drive the failures of so many societies. Industry and empire did not lift the English out of their reach. Rather they absorbed those ideas and practices, developed them to incredible heights, hammered them into enduring shapes, gave them appalling names, and belched them upon the world to bloody and lasting consequence. Industry and empire made incredible achievements, magical achievements you might say. But they also brought forth horrors, agonies on an eldritch scale to their casualties, their sacrificial victims, and those they left behind.

And now both those futures have deserted them.

The English's imperial dominance gave them a sense of power over the world. Now it has caved to a mounting fear of powerlessness within it. Their desperation to sustain the belief that that dominance was a good thing is born in part of that fear: to keep aflame in themselves a glory whose sheer sacred righteousness might keep it burning forever. Could that account for their spittle as ever more English voices turn round and put harsher questions to their fallen empire, so penetrating as to prod at the great demon that has ever perched on its heart? But now they have punctured that far, the façade of imperial civility evaporates; now the demon works on them with urgent blatancy, stoking that fear of powerlessness into a fear of hostile outsiders clustering round their walls: immigrants, Africans, Muslims, the EU. It whispers that it is all their fault, ungrateful inferior tribes with savage alien values, and that is ointment in ears brought up on voices that England stands ensconced at the civilised top of a world-pyramid full of barbarity.

The English were the first to harness energy and make stuff on the scale that they did. But this too they have lost. Now others do it better, faster, stronger. Then in a fit of revolutionary fervour their high priests came to think they could replace their industrial engine with a financial one. But it was a false and destructive promise: a swollen hulk, hollow inside, which instead of burning its fuel to do something constructive has instead dribbled it over English society and set it

alight to devastating socio-economic and cultural tissue damage, from Grenfell Tower down, while grasping the political establishment in its tentacles to shield itself from grievance. It is temporary at best – a sticky plaster, with ugly drawings and a coarse and infected texture, over what is to all intents and purposes, both mythically and literally, an unemployed country.

In that fall lies England's challenge, its curse, and its hope.

The *challenge* is clear enough. They thought they had found their future. They had not. Without imperial and industrial meaning, England's significance in the world has drained. No longer a global power, it is back to being a middle power latched to the edge of a continent it has always been part of but in whose company it has seldom felt secure. In its wider neighbourhood are those who, once weakened and far away, are now not only stronger, but brought so much nearer by a world more interconnected than at any time in its history. Faced with common threats – climate and ecosystem disruption, the failure of the market cosmology whose example the English did so much to set, and the global authoritarian resurgence – they will rise or fall together. No people in this world has the time to shut themselves off from it to work themselves out – they are all on the same stage now. For England, a country defined in the first instance by its relationships with them, the situation is all the more urgent.

The *curse* is that those fallen futures were demon-infested from the beginning. Writ large, English industry and empire were monsters. They destroyed millions of lives and were smug about it. They became unstoppable vessels for the dehumanisations of gender, race and class, fostering these destructors and inventing much about them outright. Within England itself, industry and empire were steered by authoritarian iron fists and driven by greed for selfish gain, and thus took pleasure in breaking the faces of dissidents and misfits. The horrific cruelty of their bootheels left footprints that have been followed by a world of conquerors and capitalists since and now threaten the very ecological integrity of the planet. But for so long, they were all the English knew. At national scale they have tested few other models, save perhaps for the post-World War II welfare settlement, that they can now look back to as a basis to build something better. To find deliverance, England must first deliver itself from the demons of its own past. As it has never done this, they are alive and kicking in the present to make the task much more difficult.

And yet – *hope*. Dig through the bones and the mutilated corpses, then dive through the ocean of tears that has percolated down to the bottom. In its depths, shine a torch around and there are glinting kernels of something good. Visions which, allowed to shine, might have brought futures so much better. For many English people, these are the redeeming Englishnesses that make them proud of their country in spite of the heinousnesses it has inflicted. An industrial England that could make strong things, good things; things that unlocked the power of earth and sky to improve life for everyone. A cosmopolitan England which knew how to respect all peoples as equals and exchanged goods, ideas and stories with integrity and interdependence, for the shared betterment of them all. There were those who genuinely tried – even industrial capitalists, and even imperialists. If a thousand tycoons abandoned their workers to the slums, a few sought to build them model settlements with all they might need for a life worth living; if a thousand RAF planes bombed villages to rubble, a few delivered them food and medical supplies to see them through disaster.

There were those English who, surrounded by the heady cravings of arrogance, rejected it. They heard instead the river's recommendation of humility, and through it made and walked a path of love. If they had all so loved, how different might things have been?

Humility. That is what they must find. That is the reason we embarked on these final steps with our ears sullied by the oily tongue of David Cameron and stung by the denunciations of the king of Brobdingnag. The point is not that Cameron is simply wrong to call England's history proud. It is that only a mouth so discredited in English eyes as his could convey to the English the jarring effect that others who have suffered because of that pride feel when it is proclaimed to them. The point is not whether the king of Brobdingnag, whom they might wish to tread on the previous figure, is right in his judgement of the English as 'odious little vermin'. Though they wince at its venom, the real question is whether after they open their eyes again, they have the empathy to understand where it comes from.

Would the humility to do that have grown their projects, industry and empire, into longer-lasting modernities? It might, it might not, but they are where they are, and those projects' significance now is that to build a new future, England will still need something of both its creative and cosmopolitan spirits. Its people must find, study, and develop those lessons on how to be healthily of the world, and how to make good things for themselves and for others.

Yet it will not be enough. So long as the old demons roam its national psyche, they will yet commandeer any attempts to find a way forward till they make of this land a nightmare beyond nightmares. There are parts of the world which know what this means, right now; those war-torn ruins and murder-capitals will surface one day, but better not to fall to that in the first place, if you can help it, by having the humility to recognise it can happen to *any* human nation. The English cannot assume they are above the demons. They must act to keep them down.

There is no time to waste to reach this awakening, no room for complacency. English authoritarianism, English prejudice, English arrogance are more powerful in this land now than at any point in their living memories: over its politics, over its institutions, over its hearts and minds, and above all over its *stories*. Their violence is devouring the population alive, so much of it too blinded by self-belief to see it, or too disempowered or disinformed to fight it.

But like the eight-headed serpent Orochi of Japanese legend, they have been with the English so long. Their present victims are just the latest in a recurring circle of child sacrifices they demand, that they may feed; one day they will grow strong enough to break from their cave and eat them all. Why else do they accept as business as usual the present policies of poverty creation and the persecutions of the poor and vulnerable, even to the point where four score of their citizens are incinerated in a tower fire and their youths are carving each other with knives in the streets, if not for the prejudice of class: that to lack property is to be less than human? Why else do they allow, and participate in, the demonisation of those on whom they see the mark of otherness, the hideous cruelty of mass forced deportations and rejection of refugees, if not for the prejudice of race: that unless you have pale skin and walk with the pride they judge befits it, you are less than human? Why else do they get to pretend peace and security exists when so many women, gay people, trans people, bi people, intersex people, non-monogamous people, non-masculine men, indeed any people who otherwise do not fit a rigid model of sexual categories and relationship structures, live in fear for their lives, exhaustion in the fight, or despair that their dreams might never come true, if not because of the prejudice of gender: that unless you submit to the vision of a twisted male power fantasy, conform to the dogma by which all men are one way and all women another, you are less than human?

For every drop of English blood our voyage's log has soaked up, something of these demons inhabited the hand that spilt it. Confronting and banishing them

from their national heart, once and for all, is their first and most necessary task to redeem their past and create a worthwhile future.

That is everyone's task. Every story is a site to contest them. The contest must be won in classrooms and hospital wards, in football stadiums and railway stations, in TV studios and in living rooms. Against the demons' worst manifestations coercive methods might be necessary to keep people safe, but they must never forget that it was their authoritarian streak that landed them in the demons' laps in the first place. Force and fear ultimately feed them, will never defeat them. Only a society built strong of the care, compassion and capacity for reason they seek to annihilate, that makes them powerless, will stop the spawning of such things that should not exist.

This is true too of that most critical battle, the battle to take back their politics. Special tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions might well be required to heal the wounds of the 2010s. But it will not be enough to seize back the bridge. Once at the steering wheel of Englishness they must also chart a new course, taking it to places it has never been before through a galaxy of peoples in many cases as lost as they are.

And so the quest returns to that which makes or breaks the English: their relationship with the rest of the world. They will never rule it, and should not wish to try again. They must aspire to something better, more respectful. But that is not to merely accept the world as it is and adapt to it. An England comfortable with the corruptions of humankind, its authoritarianisms, its bigotries, settled again into the sordid *realpolitik* that has made all nations miserable would have returned to the exact barbarous values that blighted industry and empire in the first place. It would earn them only a continued share in that misery and the damnation of generations to come. Only the contrary, a sincerely humanistic path, can take them home.

That has been challenge enough for any people. Few have yet found such a path. But the English's history makes it harder still for them, because other peoples can see on their shoulders the monkey, no, the thousand-pound gorilla of colonial hypocrisy. Who can trust them while it remains in the national memories of Chinese and Indians, Iraqis and Yemenis, that while from England's mouths came shining talk of civilisation and human rights, from its hands came – still come! – bullets, bombs and fire? The only way to convince them will be to behave with integrity in the pursuit of a better world – not to pronounce soundbites, as now, about democracy and human rights while selling weapons, esteem, and money-

laundering services to the tyrants, the corporate pirates, the toxic masculinists and the ethno-supremacists who rip that world to pieces. They infest societies everywhere, yet are contested everywhere by people struggling to write better stories. The English must seek out those people as equals, and stand with them.

The first step to doing so, convincingly, will be admitting how blatantly short of that standard they have fallen till now. To never forget that their effort's greatest enemy, their own arrogance, strikes not from across the front lines, but from behind.



We have reached the end. The Woolwich foot tunnel, sunk three metres beneath the Thames in 1912, can take us back where we started. It would not be the same beginning though, because we would stand in General Gordon Square equipped with all the experience of the journey. To set out again would take us on a different one. So it must be for the English people.

Here is the derelict shell of what was once North Woolwich train station, a box of bricks, pillars and balustrades grumbling in a coat of soot. Just down its road, a cylindrical red-brick pavilion in a pointy verdigris hat, with an identical twin on the far bank, marks our goal. We face one final challenge to reach it, because the riverside path has stranded us on the wrong side of this area's roadworks. There

is no way through except to shout out to a squad of workmen strolling through the evening murk in orange high-vis vests and yellow construction helmets. The tallest and leanest calls back in a marvellous Irish accent, ‘How did you get up there?’, then bids us to cross the worksite while nobody is looking.

In the pavilion entrance hangs a sign – ‘NO CYCLING – CYCLING IS PROHIBITED AT ALL TIMES IN THE FOOT TUNNEL’. A hundred and twenty-six steps spiral down in electric light. There is a lift too, wood-panelled even, but we have walked this far so no slacking now. We step off at the bottom to enter a glazed white-tile wormhole into the bosom of the river, that which is there between the end and the beginning, beneath and all around. There is another sign here: NO CYCLING, BUSKING, ANIMAL FOULING, LITTERING, LOITERING, SKATEBOARDING, SKATING, SPITTING, DOGS TO BE KEPT ON LEADS, KEEP LEFT’. With a ‘ding!’ the lift doors open and out launches an elderly fellow on a bicycle who shoots off to infinity down the right wall.

Here we stand, in the watery ether from which the Englands come and to which the Englands return – not once, but always, for the stories we walked through continue. So does the story that frames them: the story of a people, washed up here by the tides, lost, confused, afraid, and struggling to find their place on a difficult world.

The walls of space and time are permeable here. This is where I take my leave. Perhaps we will meet again, whether in this land or others far away. If you have further business in this one, then listen closely to the water. You might hear a yacht, bobbing in the evening gloom just over twenty miles and one hundred years downstream.

‘We have lost the first of the ebb’, comes a mutter from the cabin. Then silence. Deathly silence.

They are frightened. They have heard stories. Powerful stories. Chilling stories. They need new ones to lead them out of the heart of an immense darkness.

Maybe you can help them.

IN SEARCH OF THE ENGLISH – A WALKING HISTORY
Water



Sources and Further Reading

History is both science and art – facts to organise, stories to tell. This is true many times over for a nexus of overlapping realities like the English metropole, where different people have had such different experiences of the same stories that to encompass them in a singular objective narrative is impossible. All who walk the fields of history with a notebook, moreover, by that very act become participants in the stories they describe, and thus weigh their own experiences and values upon their narrative decisions. Nonetheless, there is a shared reality and it belongs to us all, so it is important to do our best.

As such, this text draws on a range of sources to help better inform this personal journey's impressions. What follows is a selection of those that most influenced the work, which ought to provide good starting points for further exploration of its themes. Some general sources are given first, followed by chapter-by-chapter information including the origins of specific quotations or arguments. Any opinions or value judgements expressed are my own unless otherwise indicated, and responsibility for any factual errors is of course mine alone.

General Sources

The guiding framework for this text was the **Capital Ring walk** as designated by Transport for London and the office of the Mayor of London; its official website's maps and route guidance helped organise the journey. Supplementing these was Colin Saunders's **The Capital Ring** (Aurum Press, 2016) – this guidebook was extremely helpful both for navigating the route and picking out themes and stories. In that connection a debt must also be acknowledged to the Capital Ring's spiritual precursor, **The Green London Way** (1991) by Bob Gilbert, with its insightful and heartfelt historic exploration of a similar route in an earlier period; and to **Favourite London Walks** (New Holland, 2010) by Andrew Duncan, whose fifty routes gave me a roadmap out of a bad stranding and hatched the idea of this expedition in the first place. The **Museum of London** is an engrossing source of information on the English capital. Occasional consultations were made with popular heavyweights like Simon Schama's **A History of Britain** (BBC Worldwide, 2000-2) and Andrew Marr's **A History of Modern Britain** (Macmillan, 2007); and

with online resources like **British History Online** and the Natural Heritage List of **Historic England**. A.D. Mills's **A Dictionary of London Place Names** (Oxford University Press, 2010) has been an informative and often intriguing companion throughout. And for all the well-earned admonitions against it, I am obliged to acknowledge **Wikipedia**. In spite of its innate unreliability – it should never be used as a sole or main source – it still provides a convenient entryway into unfamiliar topics, and a useful observatory from which to identify and pursue constellations of more rigorous material.

O. Water

Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness** (1899) is a framing presence here. Chinua Achebe's critique was given in the lecture '**An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness**', delivered at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in February 1975. The account of the traveller Paul Hentzner is in his **Travels in England** (1797). The researcher who dubbed the prehistoric breaching of the Dover-Calais land bridge as 'Brexit 1.0' is Professor Sanjeev Gupta – see Colin Smith: '**Brexit 1.0: scientists find evidence of Britain's separation from Europe**', on Imperial College London's news website (4 April 2017). '**The Original Brexit**' in the *New Scientist* Issue 3220 (9 March 2019) goes further in exploring this parallel and is a good concise summary of this geological history on the latest evidence. Father Thames is a framing presence in Philip Pullman's **La Belle Sauvage** (David Fickling Books, 2017) and a literal one in Ben Aaronovitch's **Rivers of London** (Gollancz, 2011) – the latter offers a captivatingly original take on the spiritual politics of the Thames and its tributaries. Caesar's observations at the Thames are from Gaius Julius Caesar: *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, known in English as **Commentaries on the Gallic War** (Rome, 58-49 BCE), Book 5, Chapter 18. The etymologies of London and the Thames remain in some obscurity, but those given in the text are favoured by the Museum of London among other sources. Kenneth Grahame's **Wind in the Willows** (1908) supplies a quote from its Chapter I. On all matters concerning the Thames Barrier and flood risks, the **Thames Barrier Information Centre** is passionately informative, while the findings of the London Assembly's Environment Committee investigation into '**Flood Risks in London**' (April 2014) offer some insights into London's flood risk management strategy now and in the future.

1. Guns

Woolwich offered a comprehensive self-introduction in the **Greenwich Heritage Centre** till its sudden and unfortunate closure in 2018. Further resources can be found on the **Royal Arsenal History** website, which stands out for its wealth of information about all aspects of the story of the Royal Arsenal, with countless primary sources amongst its treasures. Charles Gordon is an almost mythic figure with a fiercely contested story; what could be made of it here was pieced together from a multitude of disparate accounts. The best account of Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Rebellion in English is probably Jonathan Spence's formidable **God's Chinese Son** (1996), which closely follows the story but also supplies immersive portraits of the circumstances in China at the time; only in that context can the Taiping be understood. Structural violence was most famously described by Johann Galtung in his article '**Violence, Peace and Peace Research**' in *Peace Research* (1969). For a more detailed exposure of Woolwich's prison hulks and convict labour, have a look at their section in **The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of London Life**, a report by Henry Mayhew and John Binny in 1862. On the 'Peace Arsenal' campaign, the website of the **Arming All Sides** research project has a case study dedicated to it. Daniel Defoe's opinion on the Charlton Horn Fair is given in his **A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain** (1724-7). Don Juan's reflections on Shooter's Hill are from Lord Byron's poem **Don Juan** (1819-24), Canto XI. I am most appreciative of the friendly and informative volunteers at **Severndroog Castle** for their explanations, as well as its well-rounded historical displays and materials, including the pamphlet **Severndroog Castle, Sir William James and Eltham** (The Eltham Society, 1984/2017) by Sally Simmons and Margaret Taylor. The history of Arsenal Football Club is charted in **Forward, Arsenal!** by the footballer Bernard Joy (The Sportsman's Book Club, 1952), and continues to be explored in great detail by **The Arsenal History Society**.

2. Kings

The circumstances of the death of Stephen Lawrence, as well as the statements quoted from his parents Doreen and Neville, are in **The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry** (Cm 4262, February 1999), a.k.a. the Macpherson Report. Aside from its historical

significance it is a masterwork of clarity and presentation and well worth reading. The BBC One documentary '**Stephen: the Murder that Changed the Nation**', which aired in three parts on 17-19th April 2018, was also a source. On English and European racism, start by reading the late Sven Lindqvist's **Exterminate All the Brutes** (1997) to get a sense of how the pseudo-scientific logic of Nazi racial extermination grew out of the same kind of thinking and practice the Europeans had been applying to non-European peoples all along. It should shatter any remaining pretensions on that subject, after which informative explorations of race and racism in today's Britain can be found, for example, in **Brit(ish)** by Afua Hirsch (Jonathan Cape, 2018); **Natives** by Akala (Two Roads, 2018); **Black and British** by David Olusoga (Pan Macmillan, 2016); and **Empireland** by Sathnam Sanghera (Penguin, 2021), among many others. For the banning of Christmas by Christians under the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, see Trevor Royle, **Civil War – The Wars of the Three Kingdoms 1638-1660** (London, Abacus, 2005), p.432 about the policing of Christmas food. The story of **Eltham Palace** comes mostly from the wealth of on-site information at the palace itself, as well as the online resources of its managers, English Heritage. Information on W. G. Grace is drawn from his profile on **ESPN Cricinfo** and various articles there and in **MCC**, the magazine of Marylebone Cricket Club, such as 'Accepting Grace' in Issue 12 (Autumn/Winter 2015). And finally a nod to the late Benedict Anderson, whose concept of imagined communities I have borrowed here and elsewhere in the text.

3. Steam

A good place to find out more about the history of meridians and timekeeping is the **Royal Observatory** in Greenwich, which now functions as a museum. **Beckenham Place** and its park are discussed on the websites of Lewisham Council, the London Parks and Gardens Trust, and the Friends of Beckenham Place Park, as well as information displays on-site. The lovingly-presented **Penge Tourist Board** website deserves your further patronage; more information on Penge history can be found on the **Penge SE20** website. The description of the Great Exhibition of 1851 owes much to the third volume of Simon Schama's **A History of Britain** (2002) and the **Victoria and Albert Museum**, with William Makepeace Thackeray quoted from his poem **May-Day Ode** (1851); meanwhile Chapter 10 of Robert Peston's **WTF?** (2017) gives a concise and accessible discussion of the

problems posed by technological changes today. If you want to equip yourself for a better broad understanding of the economics of this or other chapters' topics, I can recommend no clearer, gentler and more user-friendly text than **Economics: The User's Guide** by Ha-Joon Chang (Bloomsbury Press, 2014), who introduces the subject through a wide range of perspectives and gives a fair hearing to each of their strengths and weaknesses.

4. Land

Croydon Council's forbiddingly-titled '**Harold Road Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan – Draft Supplementary Planning Document**' (2014) might sound daunting, but in fact contains nice summaries of the area's history, geography and visual character along with detailed discussions of its buildings. On air pollution, Peter Brimblecombe's '**Attitudes and Responses Towards Air Pollution in Medieval England**' in the *Journal of the Air Pollution Control Association* 26:10 (1976) is an insightful read; John Evelyn is quoted from his *Fumifugium* (1661); Tim Hatton, in the article '**Air pollution in Victorian-era Britain – its effects on health now revealed**' in *The Conversation* (14 November 2017), and Hannah Ritchie in '**What the history of London's air pollution can tell us about the future of today's growing megacities**' in *Our World in Data* (20 June 2017) discuss coal-burning and its impacts during the industrial revolution; the **Met Office** tells the story of the Great Smog of 1952 in one of its weather phenomena case studies in the Learning section of its homepage; and the website of the **Mayor of London** and **London Assembly** contain numerous resources on the air pollution problems of the present day, including links to the cited research by King's College. On the Great North Wood, the first two chapters in the third volume of Schama's *A History of Britain* (2002), titled 'Forces of Nature', situate much of the Georgian period in the context of views on nature in the British Isles; **Samuel Pepys** refers to his companions' visit to the gypsies in his diary entry for 11th August 1668, while **John Evelyn**'s mugging is recounted in his own diary in the 11th June 1652 entry; the life of the hermit Samuel Matthews is related in touching detail in *The Life of Samuel Matthews, the Norwood Hermit* by an unknown author (London, 1802); and the case of the Norwood Builder is the second story in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905) by Arthur Conan Doyle. The history of the Wood itself is obscure; its story is assembled out of assorted bits and pieces from mostly

online sources including **Croydon Council** information, the **Norwood Society**, the **London Wildlife Trust** who are spearheading the Wood's revitalisation, and local blogs such as **Inside Croydon**. With Enclosure the problem is the opposite: it has been so massive, diverse in its impacts and loaded with centuries of controversy that no narrative is standard and no source uncontested. Instead, and under the caveat in the main text, we look for guidance to Karl Marx's **Das Kapital**, specifically Volume I, Part VIII, Chapter 27 (1867), with a cameo for Thomas More's **Utopia** (1516); Simon Fairlie's article 'A Short History of Enclosure in Britain' in *The Land* magazine (Issue 7, Summer 2009) also provides a detailed and considerate perspective. The **Charter of the Forest** (1217) can be found in full on the National Archives website. Thomas More's piece of scatological eloquence for Martin Luther is in his **Responsio ad Lutherum** (1523). For more on the clearances in Scotland, T. M. Devine's mighty **The Scottish Clearances – A History of the Dispossessed** (2018) is definitive, including on the role of racist belief systems. Excerpts appear from John Clare's poem **The Mores**, written some time around the 1810s or 1820s, and whose poignant verse is well worth exploring further. The Granny Weatherwax quote is from Terry Pratchett's Discworld novel **Carpe Jugulum** (1998). Additional information on Streatham Common and the Rookery can be found on-site. And for the relevance of Enclosure to the land privatisations of today, Brett Christophers's recent study **The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain** (Verso, 2018) is robust and formidable.

5. Chains

London to Brighton in Four Minutes (BBC, 1952) can nowadays easily be found on YouTube. The story of Wandsworth Prison draws from **Behind Bars – A History of Wandsworth Prison** by Stewart McLaughlin (2014) from which then-Shadow Secretary of State for Justice Sadiq Khan and then-Governor Stephen Rimmer are quoted; the website of the **Professional Trades Union for Prison, Correctional and Secure Psychiatric Workers (POA)**; and above all the **Wandsworth Prison Museum**, to which great thanks are due for making this chapter possible. Michel Foucault appears in an extremely simplified take on his seminal work on punishment systems and the rise of the prison, **Discipline and Punish** (1975), which is a staple for any critical perspective on the subject but like most Foucault is best attempted with the support of a strong beverage of your choice. All the Oscar

Wilde works mentioned can now be found online free of charge, but printed versions often come with biographical details; this text made use of the 2014 Alma Classics edition of ***The Picture of Dorian Gray***, and Penguin Classics's 2013 edition of ***De Profundis and Other Prison Writings***, edited by Colm Tóibín, which also contains ***The Ballad of Reading Gaol***. On Henry VIII and the Buggery Act, see for example 'Reclaiming Sodom' by Rocky O'Donovan in the book of the same name by Jonathan Goldberg (1994), or Louis Crompton's ***Homosexuality and Civilization*** (2003). A more thorough encounter with the heritage of the Wandle river is available at the **Wandle Industrial Museum** in Mitcham.

6. Sweat

An introduction to the story of tennis at Wimbledon can be found through the **Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum and Tour** on-site at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club. An additional source was ***The Original Rules of Tennis***, published by the Bodleian Library of Oxford in 2010. Sir Gawain's not-so-welcoming tennis challenge is told of in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, a version of which can be found in ***Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*** (1995), edited by Thomas Hahn. Rudyard Kipling's *If-* was first published in his ***Rewards and Fairies*** in 1910. The statistics on Wimbledon in World War II are from ***Wimbledon at War 1939-1945*** by Norman Plastow (2010), which relates the area's experience of German air raids in tremendous detail. Plastow appears to be the unrivalled authority on this area's history and also curates the splendid museum in the **Wimbledon Windmill** that is that structure's own best introduction, wherein I also owe special thanks to a certain Karen for her explanations. Likewise the book series ***The Wombles*** by Elizabeth Beresford (1968 and onward) are a treasure trove on the community of that name. Miscellaneous history for the Wimbledon and Putney Commons is in its on-site information and online presence; public records also retain the paper trail of the Fifth Earl Spencer's battle with the locals, with his 'Protection and Improvement' characterisation coming in the title of his private parliamentary bill (see the **London Gazette**, Issue 22915, Page 5834, November 1864). The video starring **Fenton** can be easily found online and is required viewing for anyone with a passing interest in Richmond Park; further sources include the Park's own material as well as the **Hearsam Collection** who work to collect and preserve its heritage. And finally the characterisation of the residents of this part

of London as the 'leisure classes' necessitates at least a nod of appreciation towards **Thorstein Veblen**.

7. Blood

Richmond Palace has been the subject of research by local resident Marcus Goringe, who discusses his findings in his National Archives blog article '**Richmond: the lost palace**' (12 July 2016); it also featured in an episode of the archaeological documentary **Time Team** in 1998, which dug up its ruins and established its exact location and composition. On the story of Syon Abbey and its community's remarkable journey after its dispossession, **England's Last Medieval Monastery – Syon Abbey 1415-2015** by E. A. Jones (Gracewing, 2015) is a rigorously researched and detailed account. On Brentford, the Brent River and their connection to the canals the **Brentford Toll House museum** was a valuable resource, wherein I am grateful to Derek for his informative commentary. The immense significance and complexity of the Civil Wars have spawned a correspondingly enormous bibliography, mastery of which is well beyond the limits of a passing soak like this, but for an immersive introduction, Trevor Royle's **Civil War – The Wars of the Three Kingdoms 1638-1660** (Abacus, 2004) offers a swashbuckling 888-page rollercoaster ride through the principal storylines.

8. Boats

On the history of the canal system I am indebted to the **London Canal Museum**, above all to Brian for so eagerly sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge. The Museum building houses the ice wells used by Swiss entrepreneur Carlo Gatti to store ice from Norway, so also offers fascinating insights into the ice trade and the rise of ice cream in England. Other sources included the Museum's historical leaflets by Dr. Michael L Stevens; '**A Brief History of English Canals**' by Mike Clarke (accessible online); the **Canal and River Trust** educational materials; and also again the **Brentford Toll House**. L.T.C. Rolt's **Narrow Boat** (1944) has never gone out of print, and his journey therein provides a flavourful cross-section of the canal world as it stared into oblivion prior to the revival the book itself did much to inspire. On the current challenges of overcrowding on London's canals, see for example '**Moor or Less: Moorings on London's Waterways**', a report by

the London Assembly in November 2013; the **London Mooring Action Group**; and a couple of articles in *The Guardian*: ‘Canal boats: the last option for affordable city-centre living?’ by James Meikle and Phil Maynard (11 Nov. 2014), and ‘Boat dwellers ‘are being priced off London’s canals’ as mooring fees soar’ by Alessia Manzoni (15 Jul 2018). Robert Macfarlane’s **The Old Ways** (2012) has some profound material about holloways and ancient routes; see also **Holloway** (2012) by the same author with Stanley Donwood and Dan Richards. **The Walker’s Guide to Outdoor Clues and Signs** (2014) by Tristan Gooley is eye-opening on the instructive qualities of lichens and a great deal else while out and about.

9. Hills

If the story of the Gruffalo is new to you, you can make up for this unpardonable shortcoming by means of **The Gruffalo**, written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler (Macmillan, 1999). For all the rich veins of history running through Horsenden Hill its sources are patchy, so we are left reliant on on-site information boards, its entry on the Historic England listings, and articles like ‘Horsenden Hill: Saxons, spies and the odd surprise’ in **Ealing News Extra** (1 Mar. 2017). The story of Harrow School comes primarily from Christopher Tyerman’s beefy **A History of Harrow School** (Oxford University Press, 2000), but exercise caution while handling this tome so as not to experience spinal injury. All quotes from Harrow’s characters come from its pages. Roxeth Common, which is not alone in having been flattened out of the hill’s memory, also appears distinct in this book’s earlier map, while **Anthony Trollope**’s comments about Harrow and Lord Northwick are in his autobiography.

10. Wings

St. Andrew’s Church in Kingsbury has a website where it tells its own story, while the old St. Andrew’s is covered in **Brent Council**’s online materials. On Hendon Aerodrome and the Royal Air Force (RAF) there is of course the **RAF Museum**, an important source for what it tells you about the English storytelling of the RAF as much as about the air force itself. For those who prefer their sources on a desk rather than looming over their heads with open bomb bays, consider **RAF Hendon – The Birthplace of Aerial Power** (2012) by Andrew Renwick for a focus on the

Aerodrome itself, and **The Royal Air Force – A Centenary of Operations** (2018) by Michael Napier. Napier is a former RAF pilot who writes from the perspective of a professional serviceman, so his book, another weighty gorilla best carried by transport helicopter, is light on political context but meticulous in charting the RAF's record of operations and comes with lots of colourful photographs showing how its aircraft have evolved over time. To balance these and imagine what it was like for those operated against, Sven Lindqvist's highly readable **A History of Bombing** (2001) is chilling yet essential. Lt. Col. David J. Dean also explores the development of the Air Control doctrine – that is, terror bombing – in 'Air Power in Small Wars – the British Air Control Experience' in *Air University Review* (July–August 1983).

11. Homes

Brent Park is described in **London Gardens Online**. Most material on Henrietta Barnett and Hampstead Garden Suburb here draws from the **Hampstead Garden Suburb Virtual Museum**; 'Only a Woman' – **Henrietta Barnett, Social Reformer and Founder of Hampstead Garden Suburb** by Alison Creedon (Phillimore & Co., 2006); and the relevant catalogue description on the website of the **National Archives**. Barnett wrote a great deal herself but on this exploration her texts have proved frustratingly elusive. For more on the wider Garden Cities movement, see for example **English Garden Cities – An introduction** by Mervyn Miller on behalf of English Heritage (2010). The website of the housing charity **Shelter** provides a basic overview of the housing crisis in England today. The 'New Homes' section in Chapter 5 of Brett Christopher's study on **The New Enclosure** (Verso, 2018), deals robustly with the evidence on the failure to build new and affordable housing in the wider context of the privatisation of public land. The three woods – Cherry Tree, Highgate and Queen's – are quite forthcoming with their own stories.

12. Hearts

A description of the Hornsey Wood Tavern is drawn from **The Every-Day Book; or, Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Manners, Customs and Events, Incident to Each of the Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Days, in Past and Present Times, Forming a Complete History of the Year,**

Months and Seasons, and a Perpetual Key to the Almanack; including Accounts of the Weather, Rules for Health and Conduct, Remarkable and Important Anecdotes, Facts, and Notices, in Chronology, Antiquity, Topography, Biography, Natural History, Art, Science and General Literature; Derived from the Most Authentic Sources, and Valuable Original Communications, with Poetical Elucidations, for Daily Use and Diversion by William Hone ('with three hundred and twenty engravings!'), published in London in 1826 when you could still get away with titles like that. On Finsbury Park, see for example '**Finsbury Park – A History of Community Empowerment**' on the *Radical History Network* blog (10th July 2013) by an individual known only as 'Hugh'. In the wake of the 2017 terror attack on the mosque a lot more material has emerged to reflect on and champion the area's diversity and history. As Woodberry Down is an ongoing redevelopment controversy, no shortage of commentary can be found in the concerned media outlets and blogosphere; as just one example of many, consider '**The truth about gentrification: regeneration or con trick?**' by Aditya Chakraborty and Sophie Robinson-Tillett in *The Guardian* (18th May 2014). The reservoirs' own redevelopment has equipped them with information boards telling their own story, but see also the blog and Woodberry Wetlands website of the **London Wildlife Trust**. Material on Stoke Newington, Clissold Park, the churches of St. Mary's and Abney Park Cemetery is drawn from a wide range of places, among them on-site information, the history sections of the **Hackney Borough** website, local newspapers and blogs. See ***Equiano's Daughter: The Life of & Times of Joanna Vassa*** by Angelina Osborne (2007) for more on the mystery of Joanna Vassa, and ***Isaac Watts – His Life and Thought*** by Graham Beynon (2013) for a Christian insider's guided tour through the depths of Isaac Watts' mind. The sheer diversity of Dissenters makes them more difficult to pin down as a group; see for example '**Dissenters and Nonconformists: Phenomena of Religious Deviance Between the British Isles and the European Continent**' by Thomas Hahn-Bruckart on *European History Online* (19th April 2017).

13. Lines

On Springfield Park and the River Lea, sources include Hackney Council's **Springfield Park Management Plan 2013-2018**, as updated January 2018 and available online; the Lea's section in '**London's Natural Signatures: The London**

Landscape Framework', produced by Alan Baxter for Natural England in January 2011; the **London Canal Museum** (from which comes the statistic about infant mortality in the industrial period); and especially '**The View from the Bridge**' at www.leabridge.org.uk, a website dedicated to the Lea's heritage. This last has the most detailed description of the battle between Octa and Erchewin in 527, with other sporadic mentions in Bob Gilbert's **The Green London Way**, and **The London Encyclopaedia** by Ben Weinreb et al. (Macmillan, 2008); a key original source appears to be a manuscript by John Thomas in 1832, the 'History of Hackney', which I have not been able to trace. On the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the outstanding primary sources are the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** – quotes here come from Michael Swanton's translation (Phoenix Press, 2000) – and Bede's **Ecclesiastical History of the English People** (c.731). Some context is useful in interpreting those, so for a full-scale and up-to-date introduction to the period that sticks close to all the evidence so far uncovered, **The Anglo-Saxon World** (Yale, 2013) by Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan is welcomingly encyclopaedic. I have also relied on Barbara Yorke's **Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England** (Routledge, 1990) for this chapter, as well as on Schama's treatment of these stories in **A History of Britain**. The British Museum's **A History of the World in 100 Objects** by Neil MacGregor (2010) contains a very accessible chapter, 47, on the Sutton Hoo findings and their implications for re-thinking the Anglo-Saxon period; chapter 61 on the Lewis Chessmen is also enthralling on the prolific material and cultural exchange up and down the maritime highways of the Viking age. The role of the East London Waterworks Company in the cholera outbreak of 1866 is considered in '**Outbreak of 1866**' by Yijin Lang on the *London's Pulse Projects* website, and in '**The Final Catastrophe – Cholera in London, 1866**' by W. Luckin in *Medical History* 21 (1977). The forensic look at King Alfred's struggle with Crohn's disease is '**Alfred the Great: a diagnosis**' by G. Craig in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Volume 84 (May 1991). On the Geordie dialect and its closeness to Anglo-Saxon English, see for example 'Roots and Origins of the Geordie Dialect' by David Simpson on the **England's North East** blog.

14. Dreams

The text of London's bid for the 2012 Olympic Games can be found online courtesy of the **National Archives**, and the opening ceremony on YouTube. I am most

grateful to those friendly staff at the **ArcelorMittal Orbit** who shared their impressions on the Olympic vision and its impact on the local area. The structure itself is keen to tell you all about its story, and has additional displays on the Olympic project and surrounding areas. A general overview of the history of Newham can be found in English Heritage's **London Borough of Newham – Archaeological Priority Areas Appraisal** (Nov. 2014). On the cement factory plans, see for example 'Plan for cement factories in London Olympic park causes uproar' by Lisa O'Carroll in *The Guardian* (11 Aug. 2016). On the London sewer system there might be no better guide than Paul Dobraszcyk's **London's Sewers** (Shire Publications, 2014) which tells the story alongside a treasure trove of the period's maps, plans and sketches. The dissection of the Southwark fatberg was covered in the '**Fatberg Autopsy**' documentary which aired on Channel 4 on 24th April 2018, and as mentioned in the text, you can probably, if that is your thing, still come face-to-face with the Museum of London's piece of the Whitechapel Monster if you badger them hard enough.

15. Docks

On the story of the docklands I recommend the superb **Museum of London Docklands**, which occupies the No.1 Warehouse of the West India Docks and presents one of the best-designed and necessarily engaging treatments of the triangular slave trade I have come across in England. If you cannot make it to the Isle of Dogs or have got yourself onto the hit list of one of its high priests of finance, consider instead **London's Docklands – An Illustrated History** by Geoff Marshall (The History Press, 2018), which has an array of flavoursome maps, illustrations and photographs; or **The History of the Port of London – A Vast Emporium of All Nations** by Peter Stone (Pen & Stone History, 2017), with thorough coverage from the port's origins to the present day. On Henry VII and the Developmentalist tradition, the go-to work is again Ha-Joon Chang's **Economics: The Users Guide** (Bloomsbury, 2014) – ideally don't read anything else on economics until this has inoculated you against ideologies masquerading as science. Henry Mayhew is quoted from Volume III of his **London Labour and the London Poor** (1851), under the section 'The Dock-Labourers'.

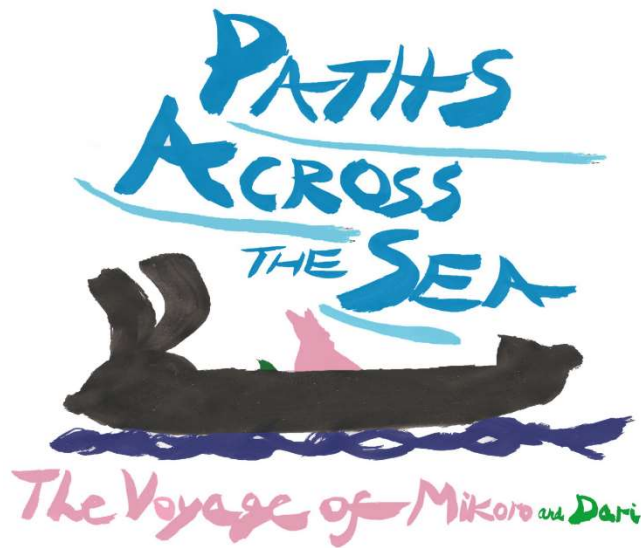
Acknowledgements

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My foremost appreciation goes to those who shall not be named here, but know exactly who they are.

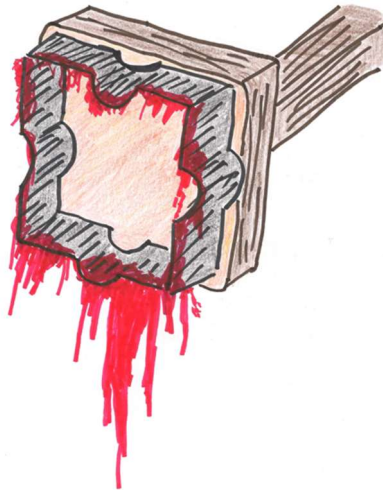
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