

The Allure of the Edgelands

A summer evening and that insatiable itch to break free, to abscond, to fugue. I allow my feet to guide me and find myself turning off Blackhorse Lane into Folly Lane - right in the north east corner of London. It opens up a portal into another city, one that is denied - cascades of rubble, pylons stretch into the distance where they straddle the motorway flyover. Shipping containers arranged in colourful stacks. The flames of a bonfire flick through the rusted carcass of an abandoned car dangerously close to the North London Vehicle Pound. A field of flytipping so vast the scattered trash appears like a First World War battlefield. Tall chimneys puke up fumes in the near distance. The walk has begun.

The vista is so perfect a rendition of the classical idea of 'edgelands' that I start to wonder if it is in fact an elaborate art installation, or the set for a photoshoot. There's a semi-derelict office block nearby as you approach the River Lea that now stands alone on a plain of pulverised concrete that I fantasised about making the HQ for my psychogeographical forays across the London region.

Dropping beneath the flyover a barge lists in the River Lea. A couple of fellas dismount their bikes and disappear into the hawthorn thicket where I can just make out a series of temporary dwellings made from an assortment of foraged building materials. The sign for a Samba bar props up one of the walls.

The great London magus, Iain Sinclair, has said that, 'The appeal of the edgeland is that it's unofficial, it's between permitted territories'. Hence perhaps the allure of the edgelands for artists of all stripes - painters, potters, poets, writers, sculptors, filmmakers, musicians. Edgelands can be a state of mind. These debatable quarters possess a kind of honesty that the manufactured town centres and worked farmland have long since shed.

The writer Will Self described these uncanny spaces as 'Interzones, after the Burroughsian term liminal places, places that existed, particularly the border between the urban and the rural'. A porous membrane through which the supposedly conflicting spaces of the country and the city can merge. In reality the idea of the 'natural' countryside and the 'constructed' town and city is often a fallacy. Field

systems and hedgerows are designed and built, woodlands constructed as hunting grounds and factories for the production of fuel. You're as likely to find the wilderness along an urban waterway as on the rolling hills.

Patrick Keiller's film *Robinson in Ruins* used road signs, lay-bys and roundabouts as the setting where his character Robinson communicates with 'non-human intelligences' living in marginal places. Robinson is a surrealist who has encounters with flowers. He'd previously appeared in Keiller's film *London* haunting Brent Cross Shopping Centre and canalside parks as locales for 'exercises in free association and psychic landscaping'. Robinson eventually disappears while undertaking his edgeland investigations, his research discovered by a recycling worker in 'a derelict caravan in the corner of a field', another classic trope of the interzone.

It can feel as if the imaginative space of the forest and field and the city centres has been sucked dry. So it's into the spaces passed by and overlooked that we must venture in order the prospect for inspiration. This is the field work. Scouring foreshores and curbsides for the fine details - the hidden patterns in discarded caches of nitrous oxides canisters, the runic messages in crushed lager cans (Becks-Tsykie-Fosters). I once discovered an arrangement of scrunched up Stella Artois cans, some condom wrappers and a discarded pair of shorts on the section of Wanstead Flats that'd been used to house Italian POWs in the Second World War. Was this the debris of some sort of strange ritual in honour of the site's former life? Nearby to this offering, recent works to lay new cables across this waste on the edge of Epping Forest, unearthed the remains of what was believed to be a neolithic enclosure, possibly used for ceremonial purposes. Such mysteries surround us buried beneath the everyday. We just need to open our senses to detect them.

We rely on artists to report back from the Interzone. George Shaw's slightly unnerving paintings of draped tarps and abandoned camps. Laura Oldfield Ford's ballpoint landscapes. Esther Kinsky's riverside scourings. It's where you'll find ceramicists and sculptors toiling away in repurposed industrial units like Maud Milton magicking her incredible mosaic roundels at the confluence of the Lea and the Thames where pylons kiss the elevated A13.

Field work is the work. What follows is the echo. I sit in this very chair skimming through video clips of expeditions through the West London Industrial Belt, the newbuilds colonising Albert Island, the looming transformation of Thamesmead, the freakzone on Orford Ness, the point in Essex where the shimmering sand tempts you to do a death walk along the Broomway. All of England, both real and imagined crumbles into the North Sea off the Suffolk and Norfolk coast. This is edgeland in its most literal sense. The ghost church bells of the lost city Dunwich tolling beneath the waves. W.G. Sebald striding through the East Anglian landscape, walking away from a gnawing melancholy yapping at his heels. 'Read Sebald and you can never look at the landscape in the same way again', wrote Suffolk resident Roger Deakin.

Sebald was a great walker. The edgeland speaks to those who walk. The plod of foot releases the voices. The voices might be your own or those of others. Visionary filmmaker Andrew Köttling talked of the 'noise of memory' as we passed through his old stomping grounds around Rotherhithe.

On that summer evening edgeland wander I noted the phases as I passed through the outer rings of the city – London Waste, Ponders End, Brimsdown Power Station, the confluence of the Lea with the Turkey Brook, Enfield Dry Dock and Enfield Lock, then Rammey Marsh and the final release of passing beneath the M25 and into the beyond.

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