

VARC Guided Walks – Thoughts and Musings Vaguely Connected to the River and the Sections Walked

Overall Impressions/Thoughts:

Chiffchaff, the money/penny-counter - who knows the worth and the value of everything - followed us from by the river's mouth, from the parks of South Shields, all the way up to the Thorneyburn.

- Travelling through time, in reverse, from the industrialised mouth of the river, the recent past, to the rural idyll of the pastoral past, of the upper vale; against the flow of water, reeling in the flow of time

The seasonally sequenced umbellifers (umbrella-like members of the carrot family) were ever-present attendants, through the journey, from South Shields to the garden of the pastel palace: starting with sweet cicely (anise for the people), followed by cow parsley (Queen Anne's Lace), piggy-smelling hogweed and finally, too late for us, at the elevations reached-to high for this - upright hedge parsley.

Salt marshes from the Tyne and on upstream, beyond those at the mouth of the Team, and all the way to Ryton and beyond – plants like scurvy-grass, sea aster, sea club-rush, hemlock water drop-wort and wild celery.

- Birds following us up-river, changing their faces and complement: terns, cormorant, shelduck, kittiwake, grey wagtail, grey heron, dipper, kingfisher, goosander and common sandpiper

Musing from Walk 1

- An iodine-tinged sand-dune starter, with a three-tern species side-dish in the estuary, at the point where the river loses itself to the sea's salty embrace, where its journey ends and ours begins
- Hidden and low-lying, wildlife pearls, recumbent pearl-wort, in turn pock-mark and punctuate the ribbon of the river's course that we follow. Poking out from under Comical Corner's mocking gaze, proudly posturing on the decaying facades of those days of dead commerce. From days drifted by, flowed past, like time's tide, which turned on a sixpence. The sixpences long since spent but bought, with sweat, at Redhead's Landing; where the Kittiwakes now onomatopoeically announce their ownership of this forgotten but not forsaken real estate – the penny counter knows their worth (KB's whole family worked in the ship-building industry in this area - my father, grandfather and various uncles - Bill, Bob and Alex - all worked at Redheads Shipyard; therefore, I got my long-since spent sixpences - my pocket money - courtesy of my dad, from the pay office of Redheads, where my mum worked as a young woman – and met my dad!)
- Beautiful church at Hebbun, dingy skipper in a dingy landscape at Hebbun

Musing from Walk 2

Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff in the scrubland to the west of Bill Quay

- Wide the river, the distance travelled further through time than through geography

Kittiwakes were a 'thematic' along this stretch of the river, starting with the colony on the river frontage of the International Paint buildings, via the Kittiwake Tower, the Baltic and to the Tyne bridge and some birds flying west of here, over the river.

- Hot and blowy, warm and windy. Hidden gems of history, hiding playfully amongst the houses and river frontages, and up through the cracks, grow stories and plants, whilst towering overhead, the Kittiwakes, craving culture, perhaps, call it back for themselves
- Tripping in Bewick's footsteps, between Rabbit Banks (the slopes next to the Tyne Bridge - the place John Hancock shot the area's first Tree Sparrow) and his Cherryburn bank sides with rabbits
- In our faces, the westerly wind pushing the river down steam, under the bridges, through the bridges, past the bridges, in an effort to speed it on its way? Who knows where, to a salty embrace in the terns' domain? An effort that was neither needed, nor appreciated much less acknowledged, the river, was doing fine by itself

Shelduck on the river accompanied by ducklings

- The piebald parents parade, their patchwork charges, ducklings, offspring; across the mud they go, an array of ridiculously affecting youngsters that defy the ability of even the least impassioned, not to say "Ah!".

Post-industrial grassland and scrub habitats along the riverside (upstream of Timber Beach) with extensive developing birch scrub and grasslands

Musing from Walk 3

- Shelduck following the walkers upstream – from South Shields, to Jarrow Slake, to Teams, Dunston and Blaydon Haughs

Lemington Gut part of the old course of the river. The current main river channel, just one of the meandering channels engineered from where the river split into various options this area in the past

- Salt marsh strands, strips, all strung-out along the stricken shores of a river reclaiming from itself, with nature's guide, from the reckoning of its post-industrial process, the wreckage of a cultural resurgence. The green racks of wrack draped over the rocks and rip-rap, that cloaking, protected these shores against the wash of transient travellers, carrying coal, coal and coal – all away from Newcastle; all gone. Dredgings that re-configured the river's coarse course, ballast that brought visitors from afar, and took it, and them, elsewhere on journeys to the sea; it will though, through time, tide, flood and favour, have its own way

Coconut Gorse and yellow broom scrub at Ryton Willows, abundant breeding Linnet, the miners canary, yellowhammer tinkling their pleas for 'plain bread', and reed buntings not mention other species of scrub birdlife.

The end-point, Wylam, the upper limit of the tidal influence upon the river Tyne – leaving behind the sea, "*The river flows, it flows to the sea, wherever that river goes, that's where I want to be, flow river flow, let your waters wash down.*" - The Ballad of Easy Rider (by Roger McGuinn) performed by the Byrds

Musing from Walk 4

Goosander on the river upstream from here – from Wylam Bridge upstream this species was seen on all of the walks?

- Garden escapes joining the journey, jogging upstream; are they following or leading the walkers wending their way as the shoals grow, the gravel collects and the meanders begin, to make, their, mark

The Spetchells this is the name of the huge pile of calcium carbonate dumped between the River Tyne and the railway, by ICI as the result of manufacturing of ammonium sulphate for fertiliser and explosives during World War II.

- Off-stage, and off-stream, the spoil-heaps, heaped by the spoils of war, remnants of martial times, yet greened by the fringing of nature's nurture; like chalk and cheese - two and a half million tons, on dead men's chests

According to 'Northumberland Words' by Richard Oliver Heslop (1894), a *spetchel* or *spatchel* was the thin layer of turf laid between horizontal rows of stones used in building a wall ('a stone and spetchel dike')

KB not on walks 5 and 6

Musing from Walk 7

- Water, water - everywhere - pluvial, fluvial, alluvial, convivially riparian, from church to bridge, wet, wet, wet; a walk to Wark; in the rain

Musing from Walk 8

Languid and lazy, the river is in no hurry here; it will get where it is going – in its own time.

- Tempered by experience of the weary way, dried by the sun, commencing a journey that like the water-cycle, returned to water. Cyclical, elemental, washing away the heat of the day, a dripping drumbeat of rain drops dappling in déjà-vu, a memory of walks gone before

Musing from Walk 9

- From green through grey, tinged blue in reflection, to humic brown, an echo of the peat from nearby hills, once far away, now so close. These hues, hewn from the landscape, singing a sprightly song of bubbling moorland stream; they know their time, their place and perhaps, where they are going. Down, down, down. Down to the sea, down to the waves, waiving their obligations to colour the lives of those met on the way, perhaps left by the wayside, yet refreshing those who would drink from the pastel depths. Those who would seek, the searchers, in its musings, follow it in its meanderings, be transported upon its flows, tarry on its shoals and hove-to on its islands. Effortlessly subsumed into a world that is alive with colour, and coloured by the living;

east to west we went, west to east it goes,
against the grain,
to the rising sun;
the saturated colours of blood's red pigment flows.

Keith Bowey, June 2011