

From *Coastlines* by Patrick Barkham

My first memory of the sea is sitting on a varnished wooden bench in an orange life jacket that was far too big for me and listening to a medley of unfamiliar noises: shrieks of wading birds and the chink-chink-slap of the rigging on the sailing boats clustered in the small creek. The exotic tang of oilskins, salt and muddy marsh was overpowered by the blue-smoked stench of the boat's engine and then we were on our way: my family, in a small boat, with a big, swaggering sort of man, curly haired and deeply tanned, at the helm. I was two, although in truth I could've been three, four or five, because for four successive May half-terms at the end of the 1970s we holidayed on Scolt Head Island. A remote and rarely visited hump of dune on the Norfolk coast, Scolt is separated from the mainland at low tide by a modest, albeit treacherous creek; at high tide, it appears truly adrift from the coast; from the air, its four miles of sand dunes and salt marsh can sometimes look like a human embryo. The only island on the east coast between the Farne Islands and Essex, Scolt's value was quickly recognised by geologists and early naturalists as a sanctuary for birds and a breeding ground for terns, those swallows of the sea. It was one of the first pieces of coast acquired by the National Trust, in 1923, for £500.

Population: one; amenities: a wooden shack called the Hut which eschews electricity, toilets and running water – it may be the finest example of an offshore barrier island in Britain but a bleak, treeless place is not an obvious choice for a seaside holiday except for lovers of bracing solitude, as my parents were. Plenty of us covet wilderness today, and places such as Scolt are cherished as rare wild corners of crowded southern England, but it's hard to imagine that the island would instil in a young child an unbreakable attachment to the beach. I was certainly alarmed by our choppy little trip in the boat manned by Scolt's sole summer inhabitant, its wind-bronzed warden, Bob Chestney, and discombobulated by life on the island. The wide horizons of the Norfolk coast are an uncomfortable fit for the low horizons of a child. And so my early memories of the coast are not snapshots of a picture-postcard idyll but epic struggles up mountainous dunes, sand blowing in my eyes, marram grass whipping my legs. The beach was a wind-blasted horror and the salt marsh was where Daddy dug big holes in which to deposit our smelly buckets of poo. Children are conservative adherents to routine and security and my one happy memory is of playing with my Matchbox cars on the cobbled area outside the Hut, which faced south and was mercifully sheltered from the north wind.

If children open a door into forgotten memories, so do places. Scolt Head Island was a visible memorial of a time in my life that had almost vanished from view. I realised now that one of the reasons why our holidays there remained so hazy in my memory was because my parents had erased the island from our family's mental map of Norfolk. Something happened on Scolt in the Whitsun holiday of 1980 and we never stayed in the Hut again. Mum and Dad seemed almost traumatised by this loss, and occasionally spoke of Scolt wistfully, as one might of a lost love. Our exit from this Arcadia was painful, and I had never properly understood why. What caused us to leave and why had we never gone back? By returning, I hoped to understand why I adored the seaside, despite rather unpromising beginnings. And, if I was going in search of childhood feelings, it seemed that Scolt was the perfect place to recapture it. In a brilliant essay about his visit to the island, Caspar Henderson described it as a

place for something better than dreaming – hypnagogia, the transitional state between sleep and wakefulness. ‘Psychologists suggest that this state of mind is typical of very young children, who have little sense of the past and future but live intensely in the present and thereby experience it in a way that adults seldom do,’ wrote Henderson. ‘But hypnagogia, or something like it, can be important for adults too, allowing us to differently imagine the past and future as well the dimensions of the present moment.’ Not long after our Crackington vacation, I headed to Scolt, alone. Although it was owned by the National Trust, Scolt was leased to Natural England, the government body responsible for conservation, and Scolt’s only residence was still the Hut where we had stayed those four half-terms. The Hut was barred to holidaymakers these days, and the only people permitted to stay on the island were bona fide academics such as the Cambridge don who was a world leading expert in mud snails. Luckily, Scolt’s warden agreed that this book might qualify as a form of coastal research, and I was kindly granted a week in the Hut. This time, there was no Bob Chestney, the old warden, to take me to Scolt in his boat. So I walked across the maze of marshes and creeks at low tide. Parking at Burnham Deepdale, I set out early one morning in July, following footprints in the mud to the edge of Norton Creek, which made Scolt an island. I had waded across similar tidal creeks at nearby Wells-next-the-Sea and Thornham and they could be surprisingly intimidating. The water was brown, the bottom not visible and the tidal currents felt like they could take you off your feet if they chose. Norton Creek was barely 50 metres wide at low tide but my heart still beat a little faster as I sank into the mud and stubbed a toe on a mussel bed that showed up as a dark line in the water. Although the waves barely covered my knees on this crossing, I still stopped on far bank and looked back to the mainland with a sense of exhilaration. I had made it back to my childhood island. In geological terms, Scolt was a babe in arms, perhaps only 800 years old, constantly growing and dissolving, and made of sand and shingle. Originally a ridge of stones lying in the shallow North Sea, it was pushed landwards by north winds and westwards by longshore drift. The sea’s ceaseless workings were constantly adding shingle ridges to the end of the island, which reached out westwards and were then pushed south, inland. Sand dunes formed on these ridges and the accretion of mud and small channels in between became salt marsh, an intricate web of capillaries that inhaled and exhaled sea water at high and low tide. Each ridge and marsh bore a name: Wire Hills, Long Hills, Plantago Marsh, Plover Marsh. A 1954 map showed the island ending at Bight Hills but there was now a kilometre of new vegetated land to the west: Scolt was still growing with the vigour of a child. The North Sea could be many things – including a surprising cobalt blue – but it could never be turquoise, and my childhood beach, Scolt Head Island, was an enormous contrast to our Crackington holiday: instead of the monumental black cliffs of North Cornwall and the vivid rolling Atlantic I found a muddy smudge of marsh and a flimsy sea washed with a muted palette of olives, duns and pewters. For the first couple of hours trudging across Scolt, I was underwhelmed. This empty island of tawny sand dunes and flat grey-green marsh seemed bereft of anything alive or arresting. Why would people come here if they could visit Cornwall? But North Norfolk has a subtle charm that seeps into you like the trickle of the incoming tide, less bombastic than awesome cliffs but both soothing and strangely uncompromising.

‘Our landscape is seven-eighths sky,’ wrote the children’s author Kevin Crossley-Holland, who lives on the North Norfolk coast, ‘a vast inverted arena, a sky-dome in which there are often several simultaneous theatres of action. It’s a landscape of

horizontals – skyline, ribbed fields, decaying ribs of boats – in which verticals, including human beings, often look arresting.’ I climbed Scolt’s steepest dune, Norfolk’s highest, its sheltered hollows filled with the delicate pink triangles of pyramidal orchids, and down onto the beach. Scuttering footsteps like a skipping child sounded on the sand behind me – an empty case of whelk eggs scudding on the breeze. Ruby-red-eyed oystercatchers and brilliantly camouflaged ringed plovers, known locally as stone-runners, sidled away from their nests above the strandline. The ringed plover is a squat, timid and extremely personable bird with its white breast, black neck and bright yellow legs and beak. We may spend childhoods on the beach but we are rarely born there. Nesting on a beach is a hazardous lifestyle choice and the ringed plover has an impressive array of defences against predators such as gulls and stoats. Its colouring makes it virtually invisible when it is sitting among Norfolk’s flint pebbles; its eggs are even more so, a dainty speckled grey and almost impossible for a novice to find for they resemble small stones; its long-legged young can scoot along the beach as soon as they are born; and, most cunning of all, the female will hold a wing limply in the air, drag it on the ground or collapse as if fatally wounded to convince predators to stop searching for her nest and pursue her instead. None of these wiles, however, was any use against the egg thieves.

The early naturalists persuaded the National Trust to buy Scolt because of its colonies of terns, the chalk-winged creatures that nest in their thousands on the island’s sandbanks, and a warden has protected these birds – from foxes, and human thieves – ever since. Emma Turner, the nature reserve’s first ‘Watcher’, caused a sensation in 1924 when she took up residence in the newly built Hut. A gentleman of Fleet Street visited and dubbed the spinster ornithologist ‘The Loneliest Woman in England’ for her solitary vocation to protect the island’s tern colonies. Other journalists ‘followed in a bewildering stream’, recalled Miss Turner in her memoirs, ‘till in desperation I said to the ferry-man, “Drown the next.”’ Whatever the ferry-man did, it worked, for the unwelcome visits ceased.

It was an unusual job for a woman and Miss Turner was a singular person. Alfred Steers, a Cambridge professor who studied Scolt for sixty-five years and wrote the authoritative account of its natural riches, once found Miss Turner in the sand dunes, engaged in pistol practice, apparently so she could protect herself from unsavoury characters. Egg collecting was pursued with a mania by the Victorians but became frowned upon as birds became rarer. Collecting tern eggs had been made illegal in 1924, the year Miss Turner arrived on Scolt, with later laws strengthening the protection for nesting birds, but collectors continued to slip onto the island and seek out the eggs of its seabirds. They particularly coveted the eggs of Sandwich terns because of their intricate markings; like clouds, their eggs sketched butterflies, ducks, even an elephant, and could fetch £20 each in the 1950s, the equivalent of more than £450 today.