



A Merry Perambulation

*following William Hogarth & friends Kentish peregrination of 1732
by Carol Donaldson*



Mr Nobody

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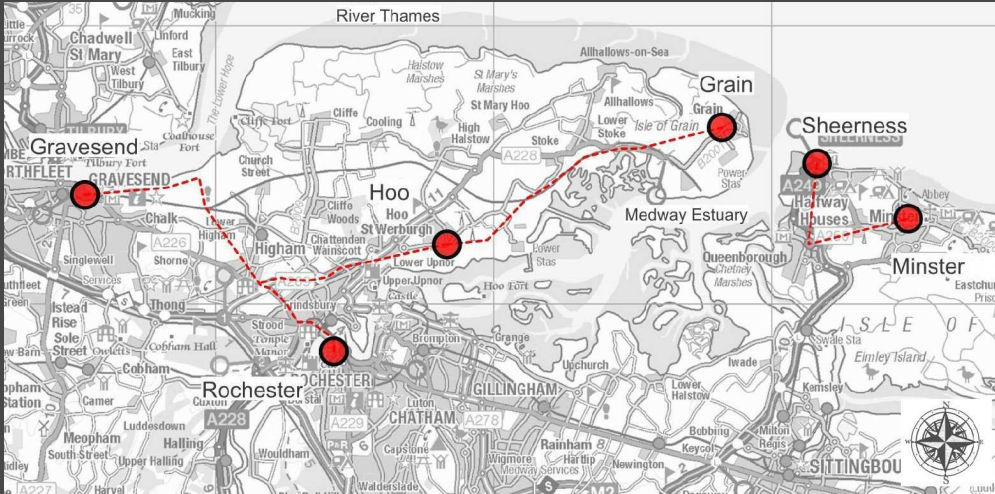
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AN ACCOUNT
of what seem'd most remarkable
in following the footsteps of
Messieurs Hogarth, Tothall,
Scott, Thornhill & Forrest
and their five days peregrination
across north Kent in 1732.

Abi tu et fac Similiter

(Go though and do likewise)



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In 1732, the artist William Hogarth and four friends set out from London and travelled to North Kent by sea and land passing through Gravesend, Rochester, the Hoo Peninsula and onto the Isle of Sheppey. It was not a journey long in the planning. They had dreamed the trip up in the pub on a Friday night and set out on Saturday morning. On their return one of the party, Ebenezer Forrest, wrote an account of their travels which they printed and bound with the addition of drawings by Hogarth and the artist Samuel Scott, a map created by John Thornhill (Hogarth's brother in law) and accounts by the businessmen William Tothall. Upon their return, they read their diary to the regulars in the Bedford Arms, Covent Garden, from where they had set out. The book then stayed with Forrest. Finally 14 years after Hogarth's death in 1764, the diary was published.

When I first read Mr Forrest's account of his five-day walk across the countryside of North Kent, what struck me was not how the countryside had changed, but how little people had changed. Here were five lads on holiday and they were doing what five lads do. Yes they walked and drew and spent a lot of time looking at church memorials, but they also ate and drank and chatted up women, got in with the locals and had a lot of mock fights. This was a jolly ramble, a reward for a period of hard work and success for the men in question, notably the acclaim Hogarth had received on publication of his series of paintings *The Harlot's Progress*. This was a boy's holiday, so when I was asked to repeat the journey, it seemed obvious that I couldn't do the walk alone. Wandering the countryside in Hogarth's footsteps having deep solitary thoughts would be totally out of keeping with the spirit of the trip

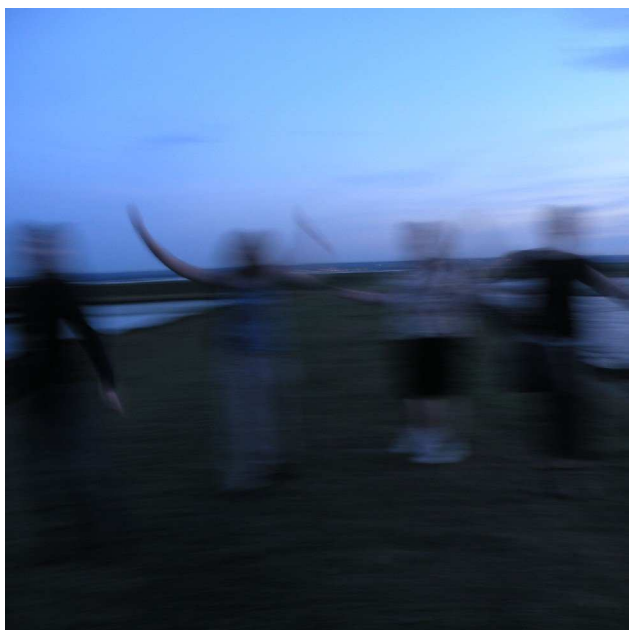
and so I set out to acquire a gang of fellow walkers. I also wanted to turn the 'lads on tour' thing on its head and see how things would be different with a group of women.

Nowadays no one thinks of walking from Gravesend to Grain and around the Isle of Sheppey as tourists, so I wasn't sure, when I put out a call to all the women I knew in the vicinity, who would join me, but in the end, I wasn't short of people who wanted to come along, some to walk and visit parts of the county they would never have ventured to under normal circumstances, some to draw and take photographs, some to discover the delights of flinging cow dung and indulging in water fights. Whatever reason they joined me for, I am glad that each and every one of them did.

CJ Donaldson, Rainham 2012

For joining in the spirit of the adventure, I would like to thank

Angie Murray
Debbie Powell
Rachel Bull
Hilary Clayden
Katie Zurakovsky
Karen Phillips
Jenny Cotteril
Mr Nobody



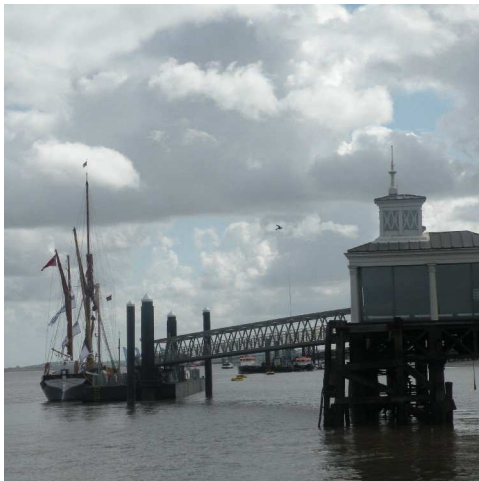
Wee soon arriv'd at Gravesend and found some Difficulty in getting Ashore occasion'd by an Unlucky Boy's having plac'd his Boat Between us and the Landing place and refusing us passage over his Vessell, But as Virtue Surmounts all Obstacle's wee happily accomplish'd this Adventure an Arriv'd at Mrs Bramble's at Six. There wee wash'd our Faces and hands & had our Wiggs powder'd, then drank Coffee Eat Toast and Butter; paid our Reckoning and sett out at Eight.

Wee took a View of ye Building of the New Church, The unknown person's Tomb and epitaph, and the Markett Place, And then proceeded on foot to Rochester.

Saturday May ye 27th

I ate mussels for tea last night; mussels, bread, butter and homemade nettle beer. This seemed a suitable meal to immerse myself in 18th century cuisine. Shellfish, it seems, were big in the 1700's (at least they were along the north Kent coast). Hogarth and companions bought them regularly from half blind women and roadside stalls. My shellfish, mussels in garlic butter, were on special in Tesco's for 75p but they seem to be sitting ok. My companions today are Rachel Bull, Debbie Powell, Angie Murray and Katie Zurakovsky, all pretty normal 21st century women with stories and histories and internal battles and ages ranging from their 20's to..oh, somewhere in their 70's. Our plan today is to walk the not inconsiderable distance from Gravesend to Rochester. Amazingly this only took Hogarth and pals two hours, but we have rejected their route, which, nowadays is not the

'merry perambulation' described by Forrest, but a noisy boring slog along the A226. We will join their footsteps outside of Rochester, but the A226 is not conducive to having a chat, as we are women after all. Everyone arrives at my house and we spend some time repacking Debbie's bag which contains a several changes of clothes, 10 pieces of fruit, a mega sized bag of savoury crunches, a pack of chocolate biscuits, at least 6 pints of juice and a library book. We convince Debbie to leave some of this ballast behind, but still the bag weighs a ton. We catch the train to Gravesend, full of excited people heading off to the Olympics for what is to prove one of the best days for British athletics ever, but we leave them to it and head out into Gravesend and following in Hogarth's footsteps, visit the market place. Stepping beneath the columns into a busy courtyard we accost Roy, a local



man outside, to take photos of us and head through the railway tunnel entrance to find that, nowadays, the market sells mobile phone covers, leopard print shopping baskets and racy undies which we are tempted by but ultimately feel will be a little bit restrictive for walking in.

Heading down to the water we visit the Pier where Hogarth landed in May 1732 having spent the night in a boat sleeping on a bed of straw. The pier is an elegant building made of

metal to replace an earlier wooden one on which the watermen of Gravesend rioted over the loss of their monopoly on transporting visitors to the town from boats moored in the Thames to the land. The building of the pier made this service unnecessary and the boatmen repeatedly burnt the pier to the ground until the current one was built in 1834. Today the Town Pier is a fancy restaurant and the boats land at a decidedly more workaday walkway a little further on.

The Gravesend Ferry from Tilbury is just heading across the water, a local watches us pass, staring openly.

"Tourists?" he enquires

"Going for a walk" I tell him

"The ferry used to run 7 days a week until they cut it," he laments.

I watch as the ferry arrives.

"Now it's only 6 days" he says sorrowfully.

Heading away from the dock we walk up to St George's church. Forrest diary tells us of a visit to '*the New Church*' and '*the unknown person's Tomb.*' Now the church is 280 years old and Pocahontas, a rather hippy chick in suede skirt and braids, stands arms out in the churchyard.

It's time we got to walking. We have chosen a route along the river to Shornemead Fort and then inland past farms, oast houses and orchards, joining up with the ghosts of our pioneering brothers outside of Rochester. Our path takes us through the industrial alleys which link Gravesend with the marshes. One day these back ways, full of buddleia, rotting mattresses and piles of burnt out rubbish, worthy of Arts Council sponsorship, will be swept away and gentrified. The industrial smells and clankings and suspicious looking poisonous puddles will



vanish and Gravesend will be poorer for it.

At the Ship and Lobster pub we hear the national anthem playing. I stick my head in through an open window, which seems to surprise no one sitting at the bar and get an update on the latest gold.

“The men's rowing team” one punter says. “It's almost getting boring now”



We stop on the sea wall for biscuits (ginger nuts seemed to me to be the kind that would have been on sale in 1732) and then head on past saltmarsh full of golden samphire. A barge called Daybreak is moored out from the shore, having raced its way along the river as part of a regatta the previous weekend. Now the sails are down and two giant wings are folded against its sides making it look like a moth which has fallen into the water and failed to escape.

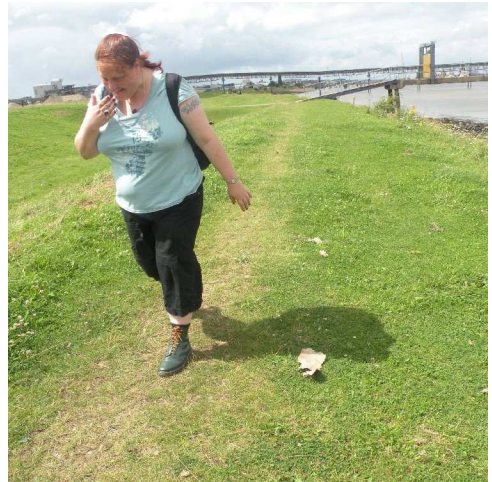
Finally we hit the River Thames and break out from the concrete and industrial squalor onto the sea wall. The police shooting range stretching out across Shornemead marshes is quiet today and several fishermen are nestled beside pop up tents. We stop to chat. The fisherman have caught several flounders already, but thrown them back “Too small to bother with,” they tell me. They seem amazed when we tell them where we are headed.

We pass a gang of gypsy ponies. Angie scurries on. Angie only ever seems to encounter horses which rear and plunge, so is more than a little wary, however, despite my best efforts to baby talk and make friends with the chunky, multi coloured ponies and their brush tailed foal, these equines just eye me warily and carry on ripping away at the wiry grass.

A pile of dried horse dung attracts

our attention. Animal droppings of all kinds seemed to hold an endless fascination for men in the 18th Century. They hurled the stuff at each other with abandon. We waded in gamely, kicking the dung at each other with little accuracy, but we all draw the line at picking the stuff up and declaring full scale war. After all, 280 years of improved hygiene and greater life expectancy should have taught us something.

We reach Shornemead fort, one of a series of derelict outposts that line the river left behind from the Napoleonic wars. The wall sweeps away in a series of bulbous windows with narrow slots that once housed the guns. Now the fort is the domain of oystercatchers and local biker gangs whose mopeds whine around the ramparts like demented mosquitoes. The boys are happy to pose for a picture. “I’m not the law,” I tell them.



They hide their faces anyway. Debbie heads off behind the fortifications to commune with nature and we settle down for lunch. Two walkers arrive and head over to explore the fort. I call them back, fearing the site of Debbie’s behind, complete with frog and hedgehog tattoos, may scar all parties for life. The men are walking to Gillingham to watch Charlton Athletic play.



Debbie re-emerges, tattoos covered and dignity intact and I unpack my 1700's lunch; beef, beer and biscuits which turns out to be a cracking feast. The beer is Old Tom, an award winning brew, which goes straight to my head as I weave inland past banks of wild carrot and sweet pea.

We reach the old Thames and Medway Canal, now a swampy

everglade and breeding ground of a zillion gnats. We are all beginning to flag a little, but the site of a field of pink hemp agrimony with a mysterious memorial rising from it's midst sparks our interest. We peer through Debbie's £5 binoculars trying to read the inscription, but the view is so blurred we are forced to give up.

Reaching Lower Higham we collapse on a bench. If any of us are to turn back, then this is our last chance. We could nip on the train and be in Rochester in minutes, but we all agree to carry on. Angie produces some boiled sweets, which give us the energy to find the next footpath, which leads past fields of flax and a beautiful old barn, with a roller coaster roof. We head up through fields of uncut corn and reach the shade of an old oak tree, undoubtedly a sapling in a hedgerow when Hogarth passed close by. The

view back to the Thames is a stunner. Of course it has changed immeasurably since our fellow walkers viewed it in the 1700's. Today huge container ships are chugging along the central channel but, compared to Hogarth's day, the river is silent and, where as their eyes would have been drawn to the distant hills of Essex, then ours are guided along the river by the pillars of power stations to the distant high rises of Southend. But still, there is something unchanging in the Thames and what's left of the marshes and fields. It is easy to strip away the layers of modern life here, the past is always visible like a wash under oil paint and I am beginning to notice that I am viewing everyone I meet differently. The slightly crazy men hanging around the docks, kindly gentlemen in the market, fishermen on the sea wall, men who spend all day in the pub have all become classic Gravesend characters. These

people have always been here, dressing differently, talking differently but the same nonetheless. It's a never ending revolving of genes and types, with nothing other than cosmetic change. Culture changes, I'm thinking, but people do not, we just adapt.

Emerging from a trackway we head onto Dillywood Lane across a motorway bridge. Debbie clings to Angie in horror, not liking bridges of any type or height. Finally we fall in with Hogarth on the A226 and are hit by the sound of sirens and traffic. It is a shock and we collapse on a wall with a view of Rochester Castle and Cathedral in the distance. Katie produces chocolate, I love Katie.

We walk on through Strood looking for a suitably 'Evil House' as Hogarth and friends described The Dover Castle where they stopped for a drink.



I had several Evil Houses in mind, having once lived not far from Strood, but to my distress they have all closed, boarded up or swept away to make way for Tesco expresses and blocks of flats. At last we settle on The Prince of Wales, nestled below Rochester Bridge. The pub is resisting the need to modernise, it is big and cavenous and sells ancient looking sandwiches on the counter but the staff are friendly, as are the perenial bar propers.

A woman in a pink tracksuit takes a shine to me and somehow we getting talking about the extortionate prices in charity shops these days.

"Hospice shops are the cheapest," I tell her.

"British Heart Foundation is way too expensive but the best," she sighs She reaches into her handbag and shows me a photo of herself in her wedding dress bought on ebay.

"Still married?" I enquire.

"Just," she says, nodding at a sallow looking man in acid washed jeans, a hoodie and a baseball cap. Still they leave together, blinking into the sunlight.

At last we reach Rochester and head straight for the train station, as we are back here to enjoy it's attractions tomorrow. Back at my house we all flop around drinking tea.

Later Rachel and Angie head off while Katie, Debbie and I head out



for a fish supper before returning exhausted. I make up a bed for Debbie on the couch.

*At Nine wee Breakfasted and Sett out over the
Bridge through part of Stroud, And by the Medway
side going through the fields, Wee were attack'd by
a Severe Shower of Rain, to escape which, Scott
retired under a Hedge and Lying Down had the
Misfortune to Soil the Back of his Coat with an
Ordural Moisture of a Verdant Hue, uneasy at this,
and requiring assistance to be Cleansed from such a
Filthy Daubing, he miss'd a White Cambrick
Handkerchief which (he Declared), was lent him by
his Spouse and though he soon found it, yet was his
Joy at the Success again abated by his fear that it
was Torn, But being soon convinc'd that he was
more afraid than Hurt, Wee all proceeded Merrily
to Frensbury.*

Sunday May ye 28th

Service was something Hogarth and friends had no trouble finding in 1732. In every village and windswept outpost they stayed, locals were available to feed and shave them, powder their wigs, wash and iron their clothes and generally keep them in the fine style expected of an 18th century gentlemen. I imagine what services I might find today in Frindsbury or Lower Stoke, possibly I could get a haircut but powdering my wig? No chance. Still, I do my best to play the good tavern keeper and rustle up buttered toast and coffee for Debbie and Katie this morning, before we catch the train back to Rochester.

Today we are to be joined by Karen Phillips, Hilary Clayden and Jenny Cotterill. We meet the others at the station where it is raining hard and head along the cobbled high street avoiding the temptations of charity shops just opening and coffee outlets

with suitably Dickensian names, Peggoty's, Mr Bumbles and the like to the Six Poor Travellers house. While the others go off to dutifully read labels amid the white clapboard rooms, I head out into the colourful garden, where a wall fountain splashes away somewhere hidden amid the foliage. I park myself on a bench to watch the swirling legions of desperate bees, doing the rounds of the flowers and trying to dodge the showers.

We visit the cathedral and the castle and furtively watch passing men trying to pick someone to pose as my Mr Somebody and emulate the strange, scary drawing that Hogarth made outside the castle. Mr Somebody, I later find out, is a representation of a puffed up and pretentious man, but I don't know this at the time and, anyway, I have a limited number of passing men to choose from. We try to decide



between a strapping man in shorts and a man with a fawn hat pulled tightly on his head. We choose the hat and I approach him, gabbling about Hogarth.

“What do you want to do?” He asks.

“Just photograph you outside the castle,” I say, “but you mustn’t tell me your name. You have to be Mr Somebody, see?”

He doesn’t see, but his wife looks keen, so he agrees and stands their looking embarrassed and confused as

I snap away. We head up the steps to the castle and I once again babble on about Hogarth to the man behind the desk.

“I want to visit the well in the middle wall.” I tell him. “Hogarth watched a young boy take a jackdaw from a nest there.”

“Do you want to photograph the well?” he asks.

“Well, yes, that would be nice.”

“Is it for commercial purposes?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “I just want to photograph it.”

“If it is for commercial purposes then you will have to apply to Medway Council for a form.”

“It’s not then,” I say and I am allowed inside the glass doors and am delighted to find the well that looks very narrow and dark and not at all pleasant to crawl down, even for the prize of a Jackdaw.

Hopscotch under the Guildhall (as played by Hogarth and Scott) proves

a little tricky at first, as we can't find a stone to throw, only a fag butt and can't remember the rules, but once we are underway, we find it great fun. A young couple lounging against the wall watch us in despair.

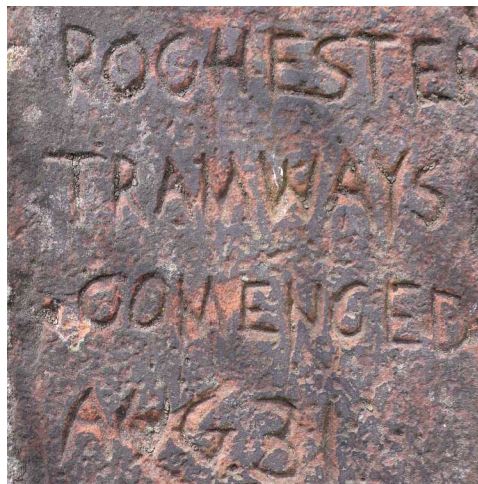
We head back across Rochester Bridge and have lunch looking back at the castle. This time I have gone for sardines, ginger beer and more biscuits. It's tasty but a mistake, as I stink of sardines for the rest of the day. Heading round the corner we find the exact spot drawn by Mr Scott on the morning of Sunday 28th May 1732. The struts of the wooden piers, which support a small island, are still here. The island, a former warehouse on the river, has been left alone for many years and the piers had remained untouched. Now the island is ringed with bags of aggregate and a digger sits ominously, silently in the centre. New riverside flats are coming no



doubt and the old wooden struts will be seen as inadequate and dangerous and swept away.

We head along the river front to Frindsbury, where the gentrification has already begun and the river is full of weed infested flower beds and keep fit machines, but beyond the fencing, the old industrial world of abandoned ships, submarines, and the arse end of industrial yards still exists. We find the footpath, which

our gentlemen used to reach the church at Frindsbury. It is very steep and we toil upwards between high mesh fences, which keep us away from the steep drop of a cliff edge, on top of which the church balances precariously. The view of the river from the top is fantastic, wide and silvered it bends away between the hills. Looking down from the viewpoint, I notice the old church wall is full of useful graffiti, pointing out things on the horizon and historic dates. The wall is becoming weathered and the graffiti hard to read with many items overgrown with ivy. I am not a graffito by nature, but find my broken penknife and scratch the date of our visit into the soft, red brick. Meanwhile the others, no doubt embarrassed by this act of vandalism, head off, only to find the church door shut. Debbie makes friends with a man who is tending the grave of an organist from Rochester Cathedral.



“We have to lock the church,” he tells her “or everything will be nicked. They have already taken all the lead from the roof and the rain has got in.”

We head downhill, finding our way through the industrial estate. McDonalds appears on the horizon. We head in to use the loo. Hilary forbids me from buying a milkshake. “Not from McDonald’s,” she pleads.

Finally it seems we have found our Evil House. The staff however are friendly and give us directions towards Upnor.

The footpath leads past the sewage works. Signs warn of heavy plant crossing, a buddleia is making its way slowly across the abandoned roadway. We arrive in Upnor with the tide firmly in. The sun is baking and, having forgotten my hat, I am beginning to feel decidedly woozy. I flop by the castle gates and begin to pull out the little Tupperware box of pineapple chunks I have carried for just this moment. The thought of the pineappley sweetness revives me a little.

Hilary is impatient. “We’ll miss the bus from Hoo, come on,” she urges. “The men’s hundred metres is on tele later.”

We walk up the cobbled high street past fishing cottages and Upnor



House’s huge main gates heading towards lower Upnor along a shady, damp footpath where cats who have abandoned all signs of domestication for the day, prowl and pounce in the undergrowth.

In Lower Upnor I take a vote on stopping for a drink in the pub. Hilary is keen to head on, wanting to be back home in time to see Usain Bolt deliver the goods. She is outvoted. We stop for lemonade and



pork scratchings and the final moments of Andy Murray winning the Tennis.

As we head down to the beach, the tide has only just dropped low enough to expose a foot of shingle to walk along. Even so it is a slimy muddy business. We look for old pipes and try to rescue jellyfish who have become stranded on the stony shore. We set one afloat only to see hundreds more, like a line of beggars

needing help. It is getting late, I avert my eyes and hurry on, past a toppling pillbox, slowly lurching into the mud and Cockham Wood Fort, with its amazing red brick wall. The tide has eaten away at each sandstone brick, so they stand out in crazy zig-zag relief, like the wall which leads to Diagon Alley in Harry Potter. I feel if I touch the right combination of bricks, the wall will open up to reveal its past, when the fort was built to defend the coast

against Dutch raiders. We follow the line of an old wooden walkway, which would have led people safely to the fort. The walkway has long rotted away and the fort is crumbling a little with every tide. The miner bees are making a feast of what's left of the mortar between the bricks and one day the whole place will just float out to sea.

We reach Hoo Marina with its lines of fabulous houseboats and lighthouse ships and stop at the boat brokers to see what we can buy. Nothing as it turns out; although maybe some of the rusty rotting boats propped up on runners awaiting restoration may one day be within our reach.

It is hot, it is late, we are all exhausted and we don't visit the church at Hoo. We reach the bus stop, just before the last bus of the day.



Back in Rochester we find we have a long wait for the train on an empty platform. Jenny reaches into her bag and comes up with some fully laden water pistols in honour of the water fights, which our predecessors were so fond of indulging in. Katie and I edge forwards, Katie gets her gun first and the three of us run in circles around the seating shelter squirting each other, firing through holes,



ambushing each other, changing allegiances, ganging up until our pistols run dry and Debbie releases the hand grenade of her water bottle over my head and drenches me. Hilary disapproves, “I mean it,” she tells me. “It is dangerous and I am not happy.”

Throughout the day the others had asked me how old Hogarth was when he undertook this walk. He was 34. They ask, I guess, because to our

eyes his antics of hopscotch and water fights and flinging cow dung at each other seem so juvenile. In this way people have changed, we are all more sophisticated, humour is not so slapstick, larks are for kids and teenagers and, well maybe, still gangs of men on holidays. Actually I’m beginning to think we have got it wrong, maybe we have all grown up too much, because what I am finding is that hopscotch, water fights and kicking horse dung at each other is jolly fun and I am not too old for it at all.

Later that evening when everyone has headed home, I defy Hilary’s disapproval and sneakily send Jenny a text saying that the water pistols were inspired.



Towards Rochester by Katie Zurakovsky

At four we left Hoo and an agreeable Widowour Landlady who had buried four Husbands. As Wee Travell'd along this Charming Country the weather was Exceeding pleassant and Scott (according to Custom) made us merry by attempting to prove, a Man might go over but not through the World and for Example pointed to the Earth and ask'd us to go through that element. Our fix'd opinion was that his argument had less Weight than his Coat Pockets which were by Some of the Company fill'd with pebble Stones unperceiv'd by him, and he Carried them sometime, But at last Discovering ye Trick and being thereby in a condition to knock Down all opposition to his Argument, Wee acquiesc'd.

Sunday May ye 28th

The butcher tells me he can get me salt pork, but I will have to wait 10 days.

“For it to salt,” he explains.

I decline and buy slices of honey roast ham instead. Black bread proves equally tricky, I search for pumpnickel, but Tesco’s can only furnish me with rye. Still I have another pint of Old Tom tucked away for emergencies. 1700’s food supplies intact we head off back to the peninsula, a couple of weeks on from our last ramble. Debbie and Katie are still in tow and Rachel has joined us again along with Mr Nobody, our solitary man for the expedition.

“A token gay friend,” he suggest, “except I am not gay.”

Despite his heterosexuality we allow him to come along.

I drop the others in Hoo(by the church) and head to Grain. The idea is to leave my car here and catch the bus back to Hoo. As I sit nervously



at the bus stop, I rest my hand on the emergency Old Tom! The bus is nowhere to be seen. A local confirms that I am waiting in the right spot and another, a dweller of the Hogarth Inn, helpfully tells me the next bus is due on Sunday, it is Friday! I toy with the idea of flagging down one of the frequently passing cop cars and asking for a lift. Three girls with matching mulberry coloured hair and micro shorts pass, crooning to a baby in a carriage. The song they are

singing is made up almost exclusively of swear words. Maybe Grain was always this way, but if it was Hogarth failed to mention it. Then again, he did seem pretty desperate to get a boat out of here. Ignoring the warnings that the sea was too rough, the friends had gone to Grain beach and called at passing fishing boats until one offered them passage to Sheppey. Finally the bus arrives and we slowly wind through every surrounding village towards Hoo.

I meet the others and walk to St Werburgh church where a large funeral is taking place. We discreetly search for the grave of Sara the maidservant, mentioned in Forrest's diary, who commissioned a railing and epitaph for her master but the inscriptions are long weathered away. We spy the doorway upon which William Hogarth once untrussed himself and urinated, only



to be roundly whipped with a bunch of nettles. Untrussing ourselves today would be beyond the pale with a funeral in full swing, so we wander on, through cornfields and footpaths lost to nettles, where Debbie regrets wearing shorts.

Our path winds past Eskle Farm to the much stormed gates of Kingsnorth power station, Thai security guards watch us pass, the heat beats down on the road.

Utility warehouses flower from the landscape in yellows and grey, their entrances a delight of wildflowers clinging on beneath plantings of pine and non-edible fruit trees. The workers turn out from their shift, their fluorescent-vested joy is palpable as they head for their cars and a weekend of promised sun, flocks of linnets make merry among the thistledown bordering the path, hard, green rosehips hide their itchy sweetness and super-charged vitamin C content. Eyes watch my note taking from offices, as well they might, the last time I headed towards Kingsnorth, I was part of merry perambulation of protesters and accompanied by a youthful idealist, her face hidden beneath a balaclava.

North Street Farm proves to be deserted but we spot a well in the courtyard, possibly the very one where Hogarth and pals *'agreed to quarrell and being near a Well of*



Water full to the brim, We Dealt about that ammunition for some time.' Today the well is capped, offering no opportunity to cool off and we pass on to the river.

I force a stop.

“I need to write about the light,” I insist.

The light is buttered, there I've written about it, really it's an excuse to rest my legs. Katie brings out Peruvian dark chocolate. I love Katie

Gulls are an anting, circling in orgasmic joy at the flying feast of aerial protein that has arisen on this super hot day. They circle above the jetties and piers of long forgotten industry. We chatter about children's television programmes, the sadness of Sesame Street, the funky songs of Horrible Histories. Clouds of sweaty steam rise from the power station, a yellow crane moves slowly along the river, Katie swats at mossies, I urge her to play ball (our predecessors spent an uncomfortable night in damp beds a mile from here in Stoke and were '*tormented and swell'd by the biting of gnats*'), as she has been known to swell to comedy cartoon proportions and it would be good for historical accuracy if she would do so now. I watch the mossies circle. "Swell, God Damn you, swell," I urge.

I fear my Peruvian chocolate rations are about to be cut.

We walk, on passing, pylons



appearing stately as they tower above the all prevailing flatness of the saltings. They rise like prairie windmills next to old railway cottages, re-invented as desirable holiday homes. I try to imagine what the marshes would have looked like in the 1700's, it is easy, the industry has been imposed on a landscape which is unchanged and ancient, mud and salt marsh and the wiggle of rivulets winding their way out to the river, but here the industry

enhances, it draws the eye. A power station, on it's own is an ugly thing but here, somehow, it works. "The cathedral of the estuary," Mr Nobody calls Kingsnorth. Many would vehemently disagree, but I get it. I wish for no more development on these marshes, no burgeoning industrial estates, housing conurbations, roads, bridges, airports but would I wish the architecture of the power stations and the docks gone? No.

I have persuaded the others to complete this leg of the walk in the late afternoon, planning to arrive in Grain for the evening. I have driven out to Grain on dark winter nights and marvelled at the spectacle of Disney lights and fairground glitter against the blackness of the marshes. I have parked in lay-by's and dared myself to walk into the blackness but the sensible 'oh what if you fall and hurt yourself,' side has always



prevailed. Now I wish to see the glitterball of Grain against a darkening sky.

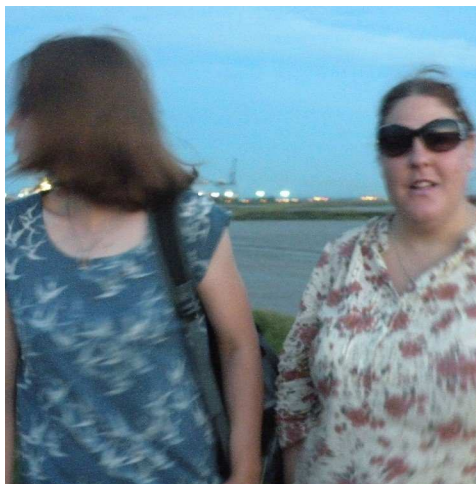
Still, Mr Nobody has other aims. We stop and I share my salt port, bread, buns and beer lunch with the others while Mr Nobody fossicks for archaeological remnants washed up onto the beaches. He peers intently at the mud, but fails to find anything pre-Roman. He dismisses it. "It's all unstratified,"

We nod wisely and swap blank looks behind his back.

The lights of Grain come on. They do not disappoint, they are too damn beautiful and we stop and whizz our cameras around taking arty shots of blurred water and lights that flip, dance and buzz across the camera screen. Lights reflect in the pools of still water, swans swim through liquid reflections of red and blue, gas storage containers glow the colour of the moon, when it is freshly arisen and low on the horizon.

We reach the road, it is dark, Mr Nobody has brought a wind up torch and gallantly takes the lead, shining it in driver's eyes as we walk along the road, the long, long road towards Grain. We play games. "If you were to be an animal, what animal would you be?"

Rachel says she used to be Eeyore,

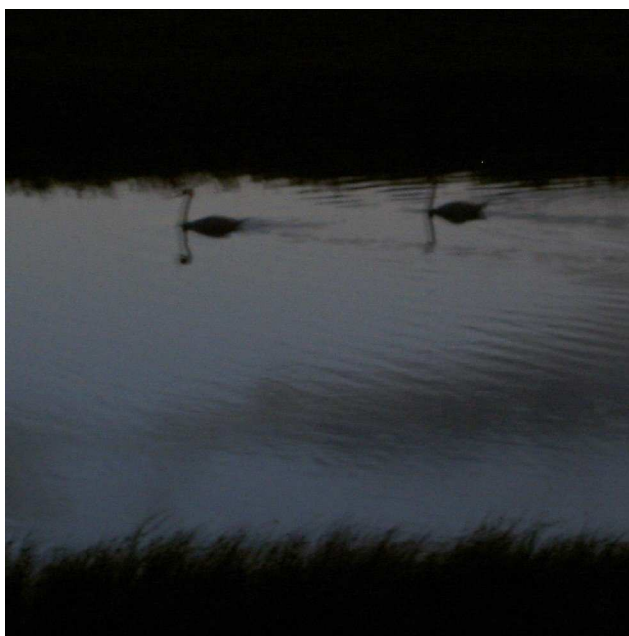
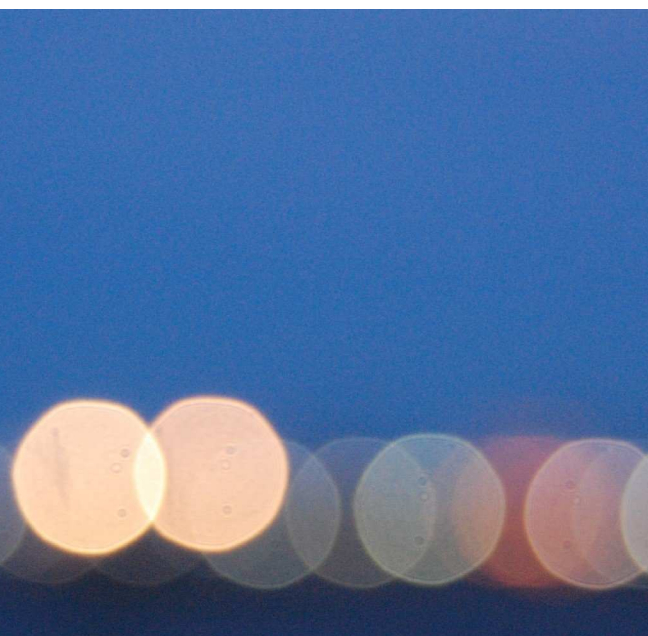


but is now aspiring to better things. Mr Nobody wishes to be a stag. I consider myself a wolverine.

"Not Hugh Jackman," I clarify "but the slightly feisty creature who likes a good meal."

We reach the village, it is 10.00pm. The Hogarth Inn is heaving with locals.

"A captive audience," Mr Nobody declares. "Come on, I want chips." We head to the car and leave.



*About Ten Wee quitted Queenborough, the
Morning was Delightfull the Country Very
Pleasant; through which wee pass'd Very agreeably
up to Minster A Little Village on the Highest part of
the Island. Wee Labour'd Hard to Climb the Hill to
ye Church yard it being Very Steep. Wee saw there
On a Wooden Rail over a Grave the Following
Epitaph in Verse*

*Here Interr'd George Anderson Doth Lye
By fallen on an Anchor he did Dye
In Sheerness yard on Good Friday
ye 6th of April, I Do say-
All you that read my Allegy: Be alwaies
Ready for to Dye - aged 42 years*

Tuesday May ye 30th

People were dropping like flies with the forecast for Rain, Debbie had blisters, Rachel an electrician on the way, I rallied them on. “It’s Angie’s birthday, the Isle of Sheppey awaits us and besides, I’ve already made the flip.”

Our 18th century travellers turned to flip while staying in Queenborough, washing down a bacon and egg supper with several cans of the stuff. I had brewed the flip on the stove the previous evening, having found the recipe in a book called, ‘Drinking with Dickens.’ Flip, it turned out, was not the eggnog concoction known to Americans but an old English drink consisting of equal measures of rough cider and brandy with a dash of ginger, cloves and cinnamon, heated ideally, with a hot poker.

As I board the train at Rainham, the flip is sloshing around in my thermos, which, unfortunately has leaked, so I’ve already begun to



smell like a small brewery.

It feels quite wrong to be leaving from Rainham Station instead of from Grain beach as our predecessors did, but nowadays I could stand on the shore a long time and hail my heart out at passing boats to no avail, whilst landing at Sheerness Garrison is also out of the question.

This becomes apparent as I meet the others at the station and walk to the Garrison, taking a photo produces a young man in a yellow, high-vis jacket. He is very apologetic.

“I am going to have to be all official with you,” he says. “You can’t take photos here.” I tell him our business. “Hogarth cut his toenails here you know,” I tell him, an act which, even as I say it, seems out of keeping with a military zone.

He knows who Hogarth is, he says, as his mum works in the library. “It’s all still there,” he says. “The tunnels, the gun emplacements, the pump house. They don’t let people visit, in case they’re terrorists,” he explains. He looks us over. Debbie beaming, Angie and Katie hovering in the background. “You don’t look like terrorists,” he surmises. “I’ll ask my supervisor if you can walk around.”

I am excited, this is more than I



expected. The security guard goes off.

“He’s scrumptious,” Angie declares, seeing all men under 30 in the guise of the little boys she used to teach at boarding school. Indeed, he is a cutie but comes back sadly telling us his supervisor has said no.

“You can go along the beach and see where some of the guns were,” he tells us as way of compensation. “Or maybe the local museum can organise a tour.”

He really is a honey and most helpful.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Jack.”

“Can we take your picture Jack?” I ask.

“Not here,” he says furtively, eyeing the security camera, “round the corner.”

So Jack, taking his life and his job in his hands, disappears around the corner with four women who secretly wish to put him in a sandwich and eat him or at least pinch his chubby cheeks. Instead, I control myself, take a snap of him and Debbie, shake his hand and thank him for his help.

We head on, through Blue Town with it’s sex shops, colourful pubs and restored music hall. Then along past an industrial site, which, unlike modern industry, hidden behind warehouses and shrubby borders, makes no apologies. Here is industry



so naked it is indecent, with its clothes off and its guts spilling out, slag heaps, electricity sub stations, circuits and tubes all on show. We stop to gaze in wonder at the sublime awfulness and hurry on to be channelled into the concrete corridor that has replaced the beachside walk along which our brotherhood of lads perambulated merrily. Above us high metal fences are festooned with razor wire bunting and the buss of security cameras chart our progress. We pass

mile upon mile of new cars awaiting shipment.

Finally we surface onto the sea wall with views across to Grain and Deadmans Island. We stop as rain clouds threaten, crack open the flip and decapitate the ginger bread men Angie has bought along for her birthday. Queenborough still has considerable charm. People walk the quiet streets, signs point the way to seafood stalls. The creek is crammed with working boats and coils of rope.

We head to the church and wander through the gravestones. Much to my delight I find a couple of stones from the 1700's, ghoulish, gothic creations adorned with skulls, reminding me that Hogarth's era was one of disease and pestilence and public hangings, as well as jolly japes. Inscriptions have been eaten up by weather and pollution, but preserved by the growth of ivy, recreating names and



dates and sentiments like lemon juice on invisible ink. The cemetery is packed with bodies, probably among them are the gravedigger, the parson and the mayor who Hogarth and chums met and heard tails of during their visit.

Hogarth and friends struggled for sustenance, if not entertainment in Queenborough. *'The Town has Two Markett days, yet there was not One peice of fresh meat of any sort nor*

any Poultry or Fish Except Lobsters to be got,' Forrest lamented. It is still difficult to find a decent meal in Queenborough, but luckily we have bought our own supplies so we head on up to Queenborough Castle to visit the well where our predecessors encountered some sailors, who had fallen on hard times and begged a few pence with which to buy cockles. Rather ignoring the pathos of their hunger, we tuck into bacon and egg sandwiches and hot cross buns, washed down with more flip.

The steep road to Minster beckons. We trawl upwards, hating the sudden traffic and the changeable weather which forces us to swap raincoats for sunhats seemingly every few steps. The 'delightful and pleasant country' through which the guys passed has been in-filled with a random collection of detached houses, ranging from bungalows with charm, to builders mansions and derelict



properties sprouting a tangle of ivy hair. Angie despairs at the gardens covered over with concrete creating vast driveways for fleets of cars.

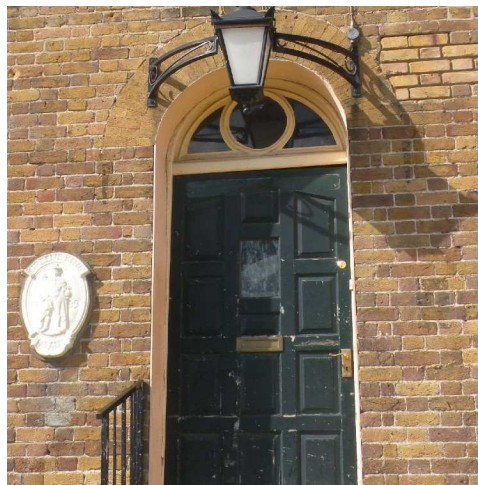
Past the Halfway House we collapse under a tree, receiving strange looks from passing traffic.

A boy yells, "free eats," out the window of his souped up motor. "Where?" I call.

Debbie points out he is actually yelling "Freaks." I take it as a

compliment. I like the freakiness of being a tourist in places where holidaymakers have long since departed. I like looking at Strood, Sheerness and Grain, not as the God forsaken holes they are now reputed to be, but places with character and history and interesting locals. If this journey has shown me anything, it has shown me to look again with fresh eyes at my local patch. When I set out, I thought I was being jolly cheeky asking others to join me on long rambles through dead end towns and industry blasted countryside but they have all loved the walks, finding interest and fun and beauty in unlikely places. None of us want to stop, we want to keep up this exploration of places little explored.

We reach Minster and pass the Prince of Waterloo, formerly The George, where the gang had procured a key for the Horse Church,



so called because of the golden horse head which once adorned the roof. The Prince of Waterloo, like so many pubs along our route, has recently closed. The sign still sways but the door is barred. Luckily the church is in full swing, the second wedding of the day is turning out. The new Mr and Mrs St Ledger walk along the path followed by their family and we take the opportunity to scurry through the door of the beautiful St Mary and St Sexburgha

Church. Inside the bells are still ringing and a team of ministers and churchwardens bustle around tidying things away before the next group arrive.

We view the monument to Lord de Shurland. Forrest's diary recounts the Shurland legend of a twisted man who got his comeuppance at the hands of his horse. Lord de Shurland reclines across his tomb, head propped upon his elbow, in couch potato fashion. At his feet his horse grins in a knowing way. The vicar informs me that the beautiful stained glass alter window comes from a non-conformists church which has been closed. Why are all our communal meeting places being lost? Churches and pubs are vanishing from every village and town. Are we all now simply 'meeting' online?

We leave the church as the next wedding party begin to line up at the



door and head to The Highlander for a drink. The men propping up the bar look shocked at the arrival of a party of women and, indeed, the only other females in the place are the barmaid and two children perched on cushions in a corner playing games with their fingers, while dad presumably, stands at the bar. The view from The Highlander is stunning, miles of marshes stretch away to the Swale and the new bridge. This is the undamaged,

unchanging Sheppey of mud and water and grazing cattle. It has to be one of the best views from a pub in the whole of Kent but the pub itself doesn't seem to recognise this. A redundant snooker table has been propped up in the picture window and the beer garden consists of a shabby piece of concrete and two underused picnic benches. I am pleased to be giving these places some trade, but want to scream at them to get their act together before they're lost.

Away from Minster we head down to the beach, the sea has become the cloudy green colour of road filings, a translucent green, reflecting the deep and the sky and the coming storm. The colour of a pebble to be put in the mouth and rolled around your tongue. A rumble of thunder is heard in the distance, we choose to ignore it, too locked up with the intricacies of skimming stones. White against



grey against green they bounce,
Angie's hair glowing against the
darkening sky, skimming stones on
her birthday, competing with Katie.
Searching for pebbles with the right
shape and balance, white orbs
crossing and peppering the water
with inky splashes. Debbie and I try
and fail to compete until my stone
bounces twice and I jump with joy.
Raindrops begin to fall. Up on the
sea wall the storm hurls the tail end
of its force at us.



to lose the will to revolve any more, we plod on. A couple, the man in a cardigan and the woman in a floaty skirt, pass us and give us strange looks. Us? We are not the ones out for a romantic stroll in high heels. The Neptune pub beckons. “Come on,” Angie says, “Let’s double their trade for the evening.”

Katie disappears to pull on her waterproofs. Angie and I stand, watching Debbie’s hat making its way towards us from behind a wall, the rain rolls down Angie’s waterproofs and disappears soggly into mine.
“Happy Birthday Angie,” I say.

The storm passes over. Angie suggests we stand like cormorants to dry out. Before we have a chance the rain returns. My legs are beginning



