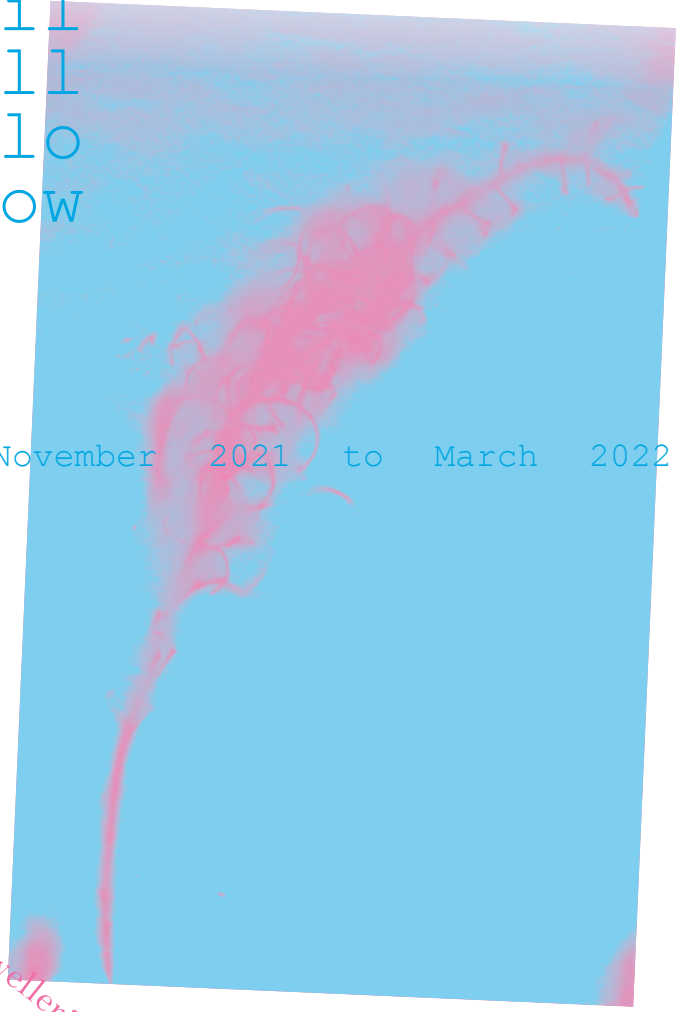


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Wet / Land / Dwellers ✨ November 2021 to March 2022



What does it mean to be a Wet / Land / Dweller?

Can you imagine life without Woodhouse Washlands?

What stories does the Shire Brook Valley hold?

Who cares?

What does it mean to be a Wet / Land / Dweller?

“And who will join this standing up and the ones who stood without sweet company will sing and sing back into the mountains and if necessary even under the sea: we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

- June Jordan,
Poem for South African Women, 1978

Christine Handley
(Heritage Group)
“you can only ever really see this valley from the air. Did you realize that? Because it’s so deep. And it’s accessible in certain areas - there are loads of paths coming in, but apart from Stone Lane, there isn’t one drivable area that you can come in, in a car - you have to walk. And like I say, areas can only be accessed visually from the air, which makes it the Forgotten Valley. And it’s a Hidden Valley, isn’t it? That’s what makes it so amazing.”

Welcome to The Willow

This publication emerges from a range of conversations, walks and workshops that artists Paula McCloskey and Sam Vardy (a place of their own) held during the winter of 2021/22 with people for whom the Shire Brook Valley, Woodhouse Washlands and Beighton Marsh are meaningful places. The encounters were part of a place of their own's Wet / Land / Dwellers project, that explores how wetlands suggest new ways to think about relationships between people and the earth.

As well as these conversations with the dwellers of Sheffield, since 2019 we have been talking with the artist Rod Garlett, who belongs to the indigenous Noongar peoples of Western Australia, who have lived and co-existed with the wetlands for centuries; but more recently are seeing their destruction.

The Willow tells a range of different stories about wetlands and those that live in, near, or with them; stories from here (on the border between Sheffield and Rotherham), but also from wetlands and their communities across the world; stories from thousands of years ago, and stories that are yet to take place; stories both real and imagined.

There is no simple narrative to follow, the story is partial, incomplete, and fragmen tary.



“as bodies of water we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation. With a drop of cliché, I could remind you that our human bodies are at least two-thirds water, but more interesting than these ontological maths is what this water does - where it comes from, where it goes, and what it means along the way. Our wet matters are in constant process of intake, transformation, and exchange - drinking, peeing, sweating, sponging, weeping. Discrete individualism is a rather dry, if convenient, myth.” ASTRIDA NEIMANSIS, 2019, P2.

“As children, we could wander anywhere we wanted. And we would go out into the Peak District - on a tram to Ecclesall, walk five or six miles to Grindleford. And then Padley Gorge. There used to be some big mounds of wood-ants there in those days (1940s).”

Peter Wolstenholme



Photo by Peter Wolstenholme



Photo by Peter Wolstenholme

WOODHOUSE WASHLANDS Sitting on the boundary between Sheffield and Rotherham, on Sheffield's eastern edge, Woodhouse Washlands comprises 53 hectares of grassland, scrub and floodplain grazing marsh. It supports a number of natural wetland features such as swamps, as well as artificially created ponds and ditches. The River Rother bisects the site from north to south, with land falling to the east of the river being in the jurisdiction of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) and that to the west under Sheffield City Council (SCC). A section of the Trans Pennine Trail (TPT) runs through the eastern part of the site, and is open to walkers and cyclists. The Washlands is owned by the Environment Agency (EA) and is managed by Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust (SRWT) under a long lease.

(Management Plan for Woodhouse Washlands Nature Reserve, 2018).

The Shire Brook Valley

Local Nature Reserve was designated in 1999 and extends over an area of approximately 100 hectares. The reserve is based around the former site of the Coisley Hill Sewage Works which closed in the early 1990s. The manager's office has now been converted into the visitors centre.

The reserve includes Beighton Marsh, an area of reed-grass swamp at its eastern end (where you can find Reed Buntings, Grasshopper Warblers and Barn Owls, Harvest Mice and Water Voles). Wickfield Plantation is one of the last remaining areas of lowland heath and coppiced oak woodland in Sheffield.

(Sheffield State of Nature Report, 2018)

“I wouldn't like you to think that the Shire Brook Valley is some kind of bucolic area. Right back to 1066, or just after, the area was managed as a work space, and everybody who came into the valley had to have permission to be here, because every leaf was owned. Nothing was free. There were areas where common land existed, small patches of it, but most of it was owned.

The willows were a huge resource for furniture, and fences, and bark. They were all owned by SOMEBODY. Every tree was owned by SOMEONE. It was a working valley, the whole of the valley was a working valley - for coal and water collection for use [with] it.”

Christine Handley

“I was born in 1935. I would run home from school, and then I was out. There was no television, it's just radio, the only thing I listened to on radio was a program called Wandering with Nomad. And it was supposedly a gypsy Nomad, who takes you through woodlands, fields, talking about the bird sounds and animals. I used to spend most of my time on the local fields watching birds, and then got a little Collie dog that came with me.”

PETER WOLSTENHOLME, local photographer and publicity officer.



The Dingy Skipper

“On the wildflower meadows - the one that we extended - I actually got one of the first records (and I confirmed it with Sorby Natural History Society and the Council) of a butterfly called a Dingy Skipper. I recorded that four years ago. This little dark brown one, it's like a mottled brown, it's a beautiful little butterfly, but I'd never recorded one down there before. I used to go round taking photographs of wildflowers and butterflies. So I wondered if its been seen before, but no, it hadn't.” I photographed it and sent the records in to ask the city ecology department, and they said they've never record one down here before. So that's a story for me!”

Kevin Hill (Conservation Group)

What is a Wetland?

According to the international Ramsar Convention*, a wetland is any land area that is “saturated or flooded with water, either seasonally or permanently”. This includes all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans.



* The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty. The Convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975.

It provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are currently 172 countries signed up.

“Because not all wet places are the same, it is sometimes difficult to find a form of words to describe every wetland; raised bog, swamp, marsh, fen, mud-flat, lake-edge and riverside are all different environments, linked only by a proximity to and dependence on water. The term wetland or waterland seems to us to be appropriate, and wetlanders... a general term to describe those many ancient communities of people who lived upon or beside the variety of water-dominated landscapes from at least 10,000 years ago up to the present.”

BRYONY & JOHN COLES, 1989, P4

“Now this plant, it has exploding seeds. They explode, and then it goes into the water, washes down, and when it comes to a quiet area, an eddy, for them, the seeds stay in the mud, and it spreads. So when you're clearing it, you start upstream. So you're getting rid of the source, and work down.” Peter Wolstenholme

“On the Sheffield side of the Washlands, we found badger sets, but the diggers had been in [the badger baiters]. So they got this machine in, and you take the top metre of grass off (and soil), lay down welded mesh, and then put the soil back on. So the diggers can't get in.

It stops them digging. And that is an access for the Badgers. This is about 12 inch pipe, which is the same as what they make a hole themselves.

So that's an existing set, the diggers have been in to get the badgers out for baiting.

So the badgers group find that there are companies that will donate that mesh, because they believe in protecting the badgers.

And what they'll do is put the pipe down into the existing set, put the welded mesh over and then put the soil and grass back on and within a month, it looks as though it's never been disturbed. The badgers can get in and out. But the diggers can't dig through the steel mesh.”

Peter Wolstenholme



“I first saw Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed as I walked to school in the 1960s and 1970s, on the otherwise barren River Sheaf at Heeley in Sheffield. Now, once again with the torrid summer heat, the air is heavy with the pungent fragrance of exotic balsam. A lady once wrote to tell me of how on the River Aire near Leeds, she was overcome by the balsam smell and swooned in a faint...
A giant annual flower, it spreads speedily with its seeds floating downstream to new sites and deliberately dispersed by people.”
Professor Ian Rotherham set up (and named) sites such as Beighton Marsh and Woodhouse Washlands, and further up the Rother Valley, Holbrook Marsh, Heath, and Meadows. He also did the first surveys of the Shirebrook Countryside Project and wrote an account of the project in his book ‘The Rise and Fall of Countryside Management’.
<https://ianswalkonthewildside.wordpress.com/>

“The river used to meander down the valley. The only remaining part of it now is the oxbow lake, where they fish, but there used to be a water wheel and sickles works. But they decided to canalise it - in other words put a deep channel straight, so the river would run through quickly in excessive rain and snowmelt, but it meant it flooded the village further downstream.



Now what they're doing (Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust) is putting promontories in to slow the river down, and if you slow it down then in the quieter area past the swirl of the water that's where you get insects breeding and fish breeding. So, instead of the water rushing straight through, it'll come round here and then it'll swirl there and that's where you get the wildlife.”

Peter Wolstenholme

Map of Woodhouse Washlands in 1890 showing the original course of the River Rother.

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The Wet / Land / Dwellers of Woodhouse and Shire Brook are not owners, developers, or landlords. Wet / Land / Dwellers are stewards and caretakers.

Through our conversations and walks with these guardians, we have become aware of the extent of diverse forms of care that these dwellers offer to the wetlands, some for decades.

As we spoke to people across the Valley and Woodhouse, we became aware of something very beautiful about those who care for these places, over time. They show, in quiet, unassuming and even modest ways, that other relationships to where you live are possible. The stories folk shared are of other human, and more than human accomplices: birds, soil, water, plants, newts and butterflies (to name but a few), and how all these lives become entangled.



Volunteer (Conservation Group)

“One of the first meadows we would have done would be here at Carr Forge. We extended that, using the seed from over there, just at the back of it. Carr Forge must have had a few orchids in it. When we extended it to other side of there, coming up now. And on Carr Forge itself, because of the way we manage it, there were almost over 100 orchids on there this year. And then Froglife* came about four or five years ago did a series of ponds just down here. And we did the same again there. All you have to do is get stuff you cut for wildflower meadow maintenance, spread it up there. There's about a dozen orchids on there now as well. You know, it's just a slow progression.”

Story of Sally Clark

On a local forum site in 2006 a thread asks about Sally Clark. “She was a Witch, her cottage used to be a hospital and then a school, she died by fire in her cottage, and she died of old age!” The thread continues with other local people sharing tales. It came up again in our conversation with the Heritage Group:

Chris: It was called Sally Clarke's because Sally Clark lived in a cottage at the top. And she was... she was... she was probably a herbalist...

CHRISTINE: AT THE TIME, THEY THOUGHT THAT, YOU KNOW, SHE WAS A WITCH.

Chris: But that's relatively recently, that's not very long ago. Because we've got photos of the cottage on top of the hill.

This site continues to be a notable landmark overlooking the Shire Brook Valley, originally known as Gaping Hill Cottage, demolished around 1940.

We have heard the word “magic” in the past few months several times. At the DownStream workshop at Woodhouse Washlands, someone described listening to the wetlands as “magic”; a volunteer on a walk talked about Shire Brook Valley being a “magical place”.

There is something indeed magical about these places. They are beautiful in a way that seems removed from everyday life. Even for some who live in close proximity, they remain hidden (the “Forgotten Valley” that can’t be seen from anywhere outside itself).

Of course, the pandemic has meant that more people have discovered these

hidden gems, while for some they have always been part of their daily life. Perhaps those that are privy to the delights of places like the valley, the washlands and marshlands, are part of an everyday alchemy which comes from an embodied knowledge and care of wetlands. Maybe a reciprocal transformation takes place. They care, and the earth in turn takes care. Or maybe this deep connection can

also conjure a reality of how humans might live with wetlands that others are yet to realise.

Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, in their long-term engagement at the zad (“zone to defend”) in France, talk of the importance of an everyday magic in practices that seek to change the world. Inspired by their friend Starhawk, they write: *

This is the wetlands and these are the
Wet / Land / Dwellers.

* “Being able to use the instrument of magic is simply recognizing and training the power of the imagination, to create reality, rather than escape it.”

(Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, 2021, p75)

CHRIS TITMUSS (Heritage Group): “It’s changed quite radically in the last 40 years, you know, the sewage work got closed down, and it was one of the first countryside management areas in Sheffield. So there was lots of stuff done reclaiming all this area. And then they put the bypass road in, which was a huge thing. I mean, that really made a huge barrier. The field right at the very top was, in 1945, opened up as an open cast mine going right across to the other side of the valley. It’s what is now is called Sally Clark’s, but it was called Sally Clark’s before the coal mine was opened. And as a child I used to go up there with my brothers and I used to look for fossils. Picking up stuff on what was then this slightly grown-over, slightly greened-over, opencast mining area.”

In Indonesia, the Orang Suku Laut are “the people of the sea”;

They dwell between the sea and the land across a network of island “living spaces” linked by familial ties; There is no private land for the Orang Suku Laut; Land is instead collectively acquired; An “inalienable gift” from ancestors; Which cannot be bought or sold; Rather than ownership of the land, the people of the sea have an something more like an “affiliation” with the land; A “custodianship”.

SEE CHOU, 2010, CITED BY TILLEY, 2020, P 5



Wetlands and their

dwellers imagine and

create ways of relating to

the earth, and to the other

lives that they share it with

- new ways of thinking

about the relationships

between humans and the

earth, and between humans

and other creatures.

The Willow includes

stories from Woodhouse

and Shirebrook that

demonstrate these other

ways of relating, along

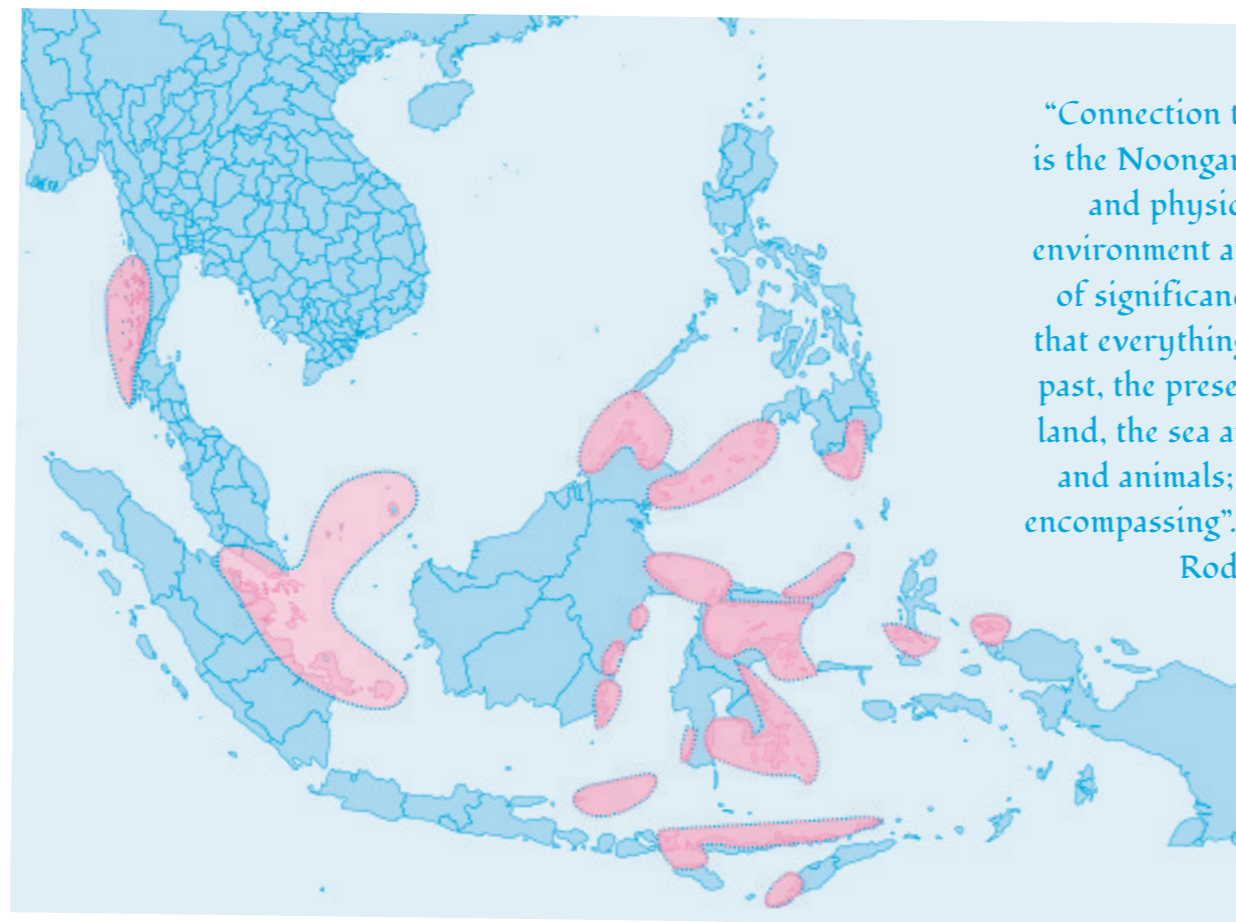
with stories from around

the world; from ancient

times to the present, real

and imagined.

The ‘Sea Nomads’ of Indonesia (Image: Obsidian Soul, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons)



“Connection to country (land) is the Noongar people’s spiritual and physical care for the environment and for their places of significance. It is the belief that everything is connected, the past, the present, the people, the land, the sea and all of its plants and animals; it is holistic and encompassing”.

Rod Garlett

As we see across the various tales and fragments throughout *The Willow*, wetlands tell stories across the world. They tell stories of the incredible biodiversity hosted by these 'kidneys' of the earth. But they also tell stories of the vastly different ways that humans relate to the earth and the land. They tell stories of the past, through their histories and archaeology; they tell stories of struggles - of protecting

not only the land itself, but those very ways of relating to the land. At the heart of these struggles are ideas, practices and lived realities of ownership, empire, and colonialism. Wetlands are so important because they are the site of these struggles as well as (maybe because of) hosting all of these beautiful, sustainable and inclusive ways of dwelling with the earth.

Florida / USA
KEY MARCO OR THE "COURT OF THE PILE DWELLERS"

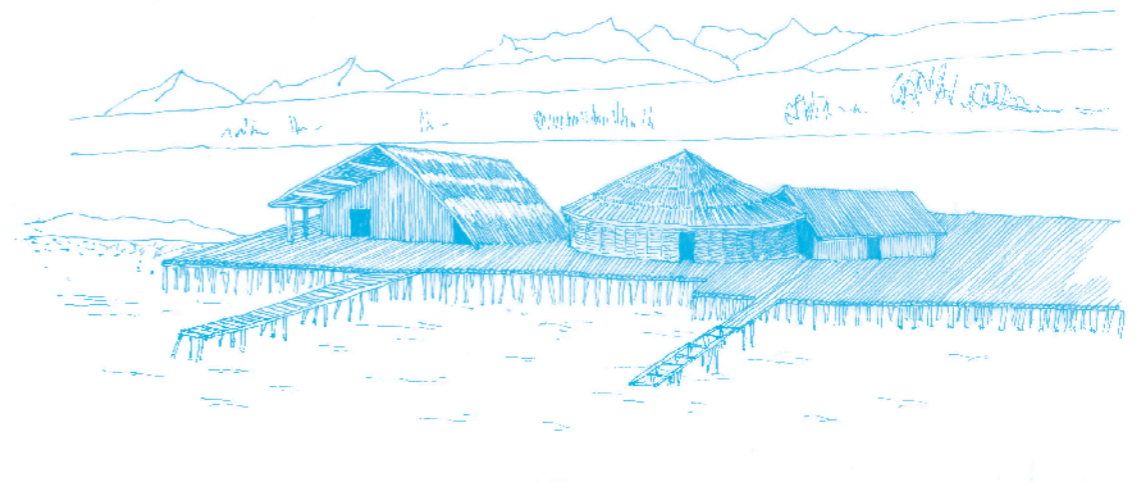
A story from the book *People of the Wetlands: Bogs, Bodies, and Lake-Dwellers* (1989), the tale of Key Marco, or "The Court of the Pile-Dwellers" is packed with different ideas about Wet / Land / Dwellers and the struggles that we find across the wetlands. It is a story that goes back to prehistoric Wet / Land / Dwellers, then through the European colonisation of north America, to 19th century British colonial archaeology, and to contemporary wetland destruction through market-led urbanisation.

"Along the southwestern coast of Florida are a multitude of islands, mostly low mangrove islands surrounded by reefs and shoal waters. Some are very small, with only a few trees or a rocky reef, others are large, and among the latter is Key Marco, or Marco Island, of about 6000 acres. In 1895, the owner of a property on Key Marco began to dig garden muck from a wet peaty deposit between two low ridges composed almost entirely of shells. Such shell ridges and mounds were a regular feature on many of the islands along the coast. A few pieces of wood, rope and shell tools were found in the quarrying operation. News filtered through to a Colonel Durnford of the British Army who was exploring the area out of antiquarian interest. Durnford went to Key Marco and excavated in the muck, recovering a heap of wooden objects, netting and rope, pottery and shell tools; these are now in the British Museum."

BRYONY & JOHN COLES, 1989, p44-46.

"The swamp turtle or the river turtle carries the most powerful medicine for our Noongar people (but the practice is dying out because our elders are dying and the teachers are dying and our wetlands are being destroyed)."

Rod Garlett



Pile dwellings were an early, sophisticated, approach to building houses in wetlands across the world, although Rod Garlett suggests that the Noongar would never build in the water in this way.

The site of the court of the pile dwellers was completely excavated eventually, and refilled. It is now covered by a housing development.

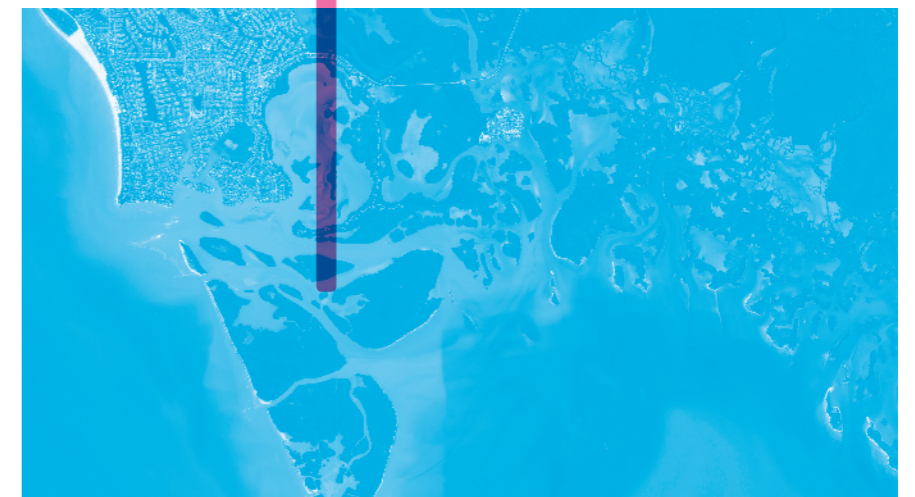


image: Google Earth



The destruction of the wetlands by urbanisation is still taking place intensely in Florida, and across the world. The Centre for Democratic and Environmental Rights estimates that more than 9million acres of wetlands have been destroyed in Florida since 1845. Further north in the state, there is another (more contemporary) story of the wetlands of Turtle Island* and how they re-define new ways of relating to the earth. A network of streams, lakes and marshes is suing a developer and the state to try to stop a housing development from destroying them. The novel lawsuit was filed in Orange county on behalf of the waterways under a “rights of nature” law passed in 2021. It is the largest US municipality to adopt such a law to date.

(Kaminski, 2021).

*Turtle Island is the original name for what westerners refer to now as North America. Indigenous communities living there still refer to the land as Turtle Island.

and the state.

The wetlands of Wilde Cypress Branch, Boggy Branch, Crosby Island Marsh, Lake Hart and Lake Mary Jane are themselves taking legal action to try to stop a housing development that would destroy them.



The listed plaintiffs are Wilde Cypress Branch, Boggy Branch, Crosby Island Marsh, Lake Hart and Lake Mary Jane.

“Chuck O’Neal, president of campaign group Speak Up Wekiva who will be representing the wetlands in court, told the Guardian he looks forward to giving them a voice.

“Our waterways and the wildlife they support have been systematically destroyed by poorly planned suburban sprawl. They have suffered in silence and without representation, until now.” (Kaminski, 2021)

“Laws protecting the rights of nature are growing throughout the world, from Ecuador to Uganda, and have been upheld in courts in India, Colombia and Bangladesh. But this is the first time anyone has tried to enforce them in the US.”

(Kaminski, 2021)



“This is a Newt Survey. That’s a Great Crested Newt. They are a protected species. The chap holding the newt there is Dr. Ian Rotherham.

(Sam: Ah yes, I used to work with Ian!)

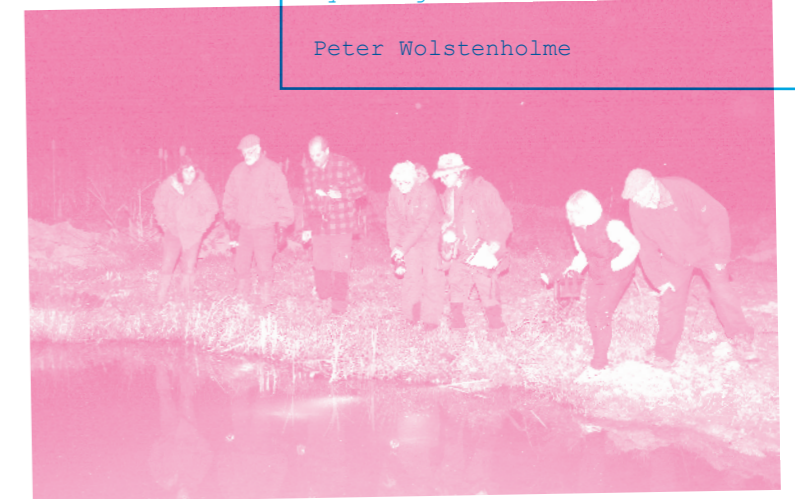
They dug out 3 new ponds, and within a year the newts were in. But they’ve not come this side of the rail track yet.

I’ve got common, or smooth newts, that have come in here and bred for 20 odd years. And then when they’ve done breeding, they’d leave the pond, and then you find them under hedges anywhere... and they come back probably about April or something like that.

I’ve found them on the path and on the drive... The eggs hatch and they stay over winter in there, and then they lose their gills and become amphibians.

They go out and then start the cycle again...”

Peter Wolstenholme



The French Philosopher, Luc Ferry, narrates a tale of legal proceedings:

In the year 1545, against a colony of weevils, the villagers of Saint-Julian, in France, sought ‘appropriate measures’ to demand the expulsion of the beasts from their vineyards, but it was argued that, as ‘creatures of God’, the animals possessed the same rights to consume plant life as the residents.

The villagers (who lost their case) were required to sincerely repent, through prayer, tithes, and processions around vineyards, followed by devotions and penitence. All of this was designed to put right their error in the eyes of God. The weevils vacated and the matter ended, only to be brought again to the courts some forty-two years later; however, it appears that the villagers lost, once again.

Not only did the judge order the vicar to re-apply the ordonnance of 1546, but a compromise was suggested in which the weevils were to be leased ‘a location of sufficient pasture, outside of the disputed vineyards of Saint-Julien’ (Ferry 1995, pp. ix-xi).

LAURA

I started as a seed
Or maybe a route system, or a network

The secret that I know...
Is what the temperature of lightning feels like

In the future I’m going to continue spreading underground
I will disrupt the human made pathways
And recycle different nutrients to different plants

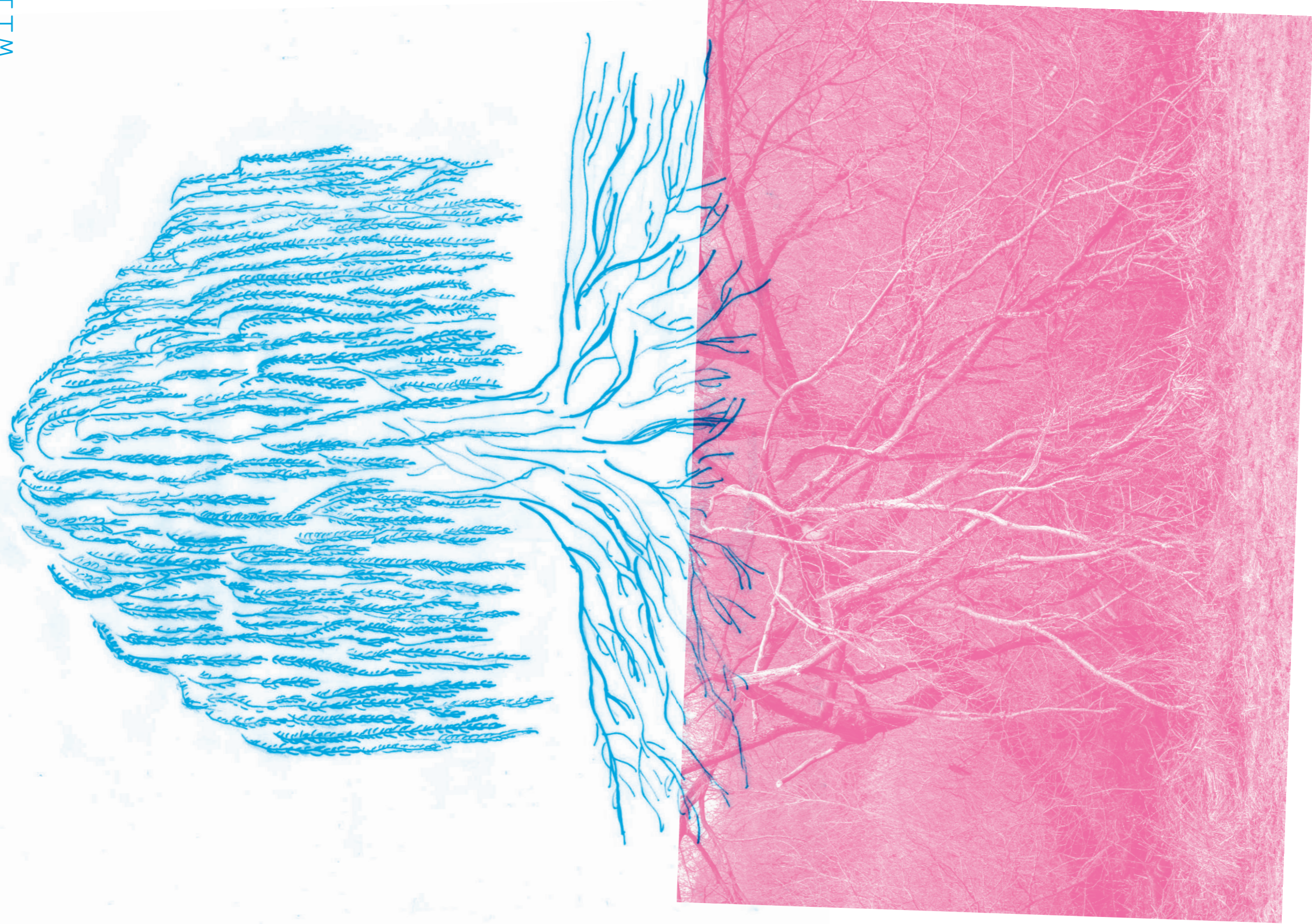
Wet / Land / Dwellers

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Wetland areas and their condition are in decline. In the UK, over the past 100 years there has been a 90% decline in wetland habitats (www.wildlifetrusts.org/water); globally, over a third of natural wetlands have been lost since 1970 (www.ramsar.org). The reasons are all due to human interference; unsustainable farming and urbanisation. The histories of how human industrialisation affected the Shire Brook Valley, Woodhouse Washlands and the River Rother are histories that are shared across the planet.

From the sixteenth century, settler colonialism saw many European countries (Portugal, England, France , Germany, Netherlands) conquering, and exploiting other countries; peoples and their lands were subjugated. For the communities who lived with wetlands for thousands of years, the wetlands were not only their habitat but

“Water is the home of many living things that contribute to the health and well-being of everything not in the water...As Noongar peoples, First Nations recognise the sacredness of our water, the interconnectedness of all life and importance of protecting our water from pollution, drought, and development and waste.”

Rod Garlett

we start to see the entanglement of capitalist exploitation and colonial dispossession.

Such a loss happened in Aotearoa, New Zealand across the nineteenth and twentieth century, beginning with the settler invasion of the Waikato region in 1863 which transformed the Māori people’s waterscapes. Wetland drainage here intentionally undermined Māori resilience, affecting both the “health and wellbeing of Māori communities as well as their more-than-human relatives (including their rivers, wetlands, lakes, and biota).” (Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, R.P., 2021, p125)

This environmental violence, like so many has left a lasting legacy.

their livelihoods, and fundamental to culture, identify and spirituality. “For the colonists they were obstacles to be removed, as were the people themselves.” As were the people themselves. Troublesome swamps and peatland, for example, were obstacles to growth and high profit ratios for the settlers; it is here that

“have you asked people to imagine a world without wetlands?”

Christine Handley

Francía Márquez leads an afro-colombian feminist and ecological movement. She said, “I am part of a process, of a history, of struggle and resistance. It began when my ancestors were brought to Colombia as slaves. I am part of the struggle against structural racism, part of the ongoing fight for freedom and justice, part of those people who hold onto hope for a better life, part of those women who use their maternal love to take care of their land as a place where life thrives. I am one of those people who raise their voices to stop the destruction of rivers, forests and wetlands.”

“At Beighton Marsh, what happened was, like all marshes, they dry up. And 300 or 400 years ago, there was so much marsh all along the river valleys that it would dry in sections and another one would get wet, so it didn’t matter. But now we’ve only got small areas (that are managed), so you’ve got to stop them drying out. Beighton Marsh was drying out, mainly from willowherb and Michaelmas daisies.

So the road was going through – the bypass – and the local MP, Clive Betts, has always been very interested in ecology and wildlife, so he was sympathetic. And they managed to get a three month delay on that section of the road and also put a bit of a twist in it. And then they dealt with Michael Spurr who is the farmer at Beighton, at Starbuck Farm and they swapped him a section of his land which is now the marsh with a section that belonged to the council.

They give us three months and Sally (who was countryside management), Kevin Hill, all the members of Shire Brook conservation group and lots of volunteers moved mainly the reeds (the phalaris) into the new area. They got diggers in, opened the ponds up, and made a new Marsh before the other one was destroyed.

That was 2007. Within 12 months it was a marsh again.

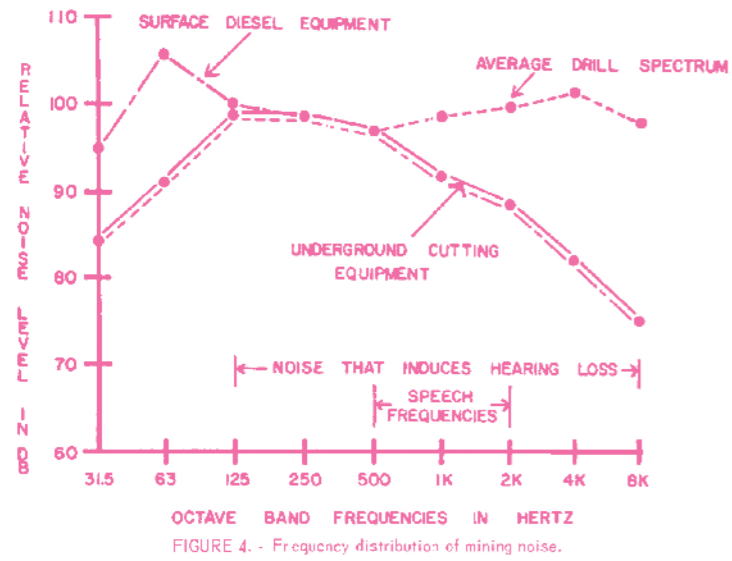
I’ve got photographs somewhere of Reed Buntings feeding young in the reeds. But the trouble is now it’s drying out. Because there isn’t a group like the Shire Brook

group, or the countryside management unit who used to go in - and any Willow that started to grow they would pull out the roots because that again multiplies, and they also would pull out sections of the bull rush because they had swans nesting and they needed space to land and take off. So that’s the sort of thing – at the moment there’s no management of it, and its drying out. The willow won’t take all the water out, but they will manage it.

They used to make baskets with willow, and in some areas somewhere down on the Washlands, they use Willow to make live sections for people to sit and fish – they would make around a banking with it. I forget the name of it...

...I checked with Christine Handley, planting cut willow is known as “Willow Spilling” The cut willow easily roots forming a living, growing shape. I have seen it used on the Wash lands Oxbow to strengthen the bank where fishermen sit. I have also seen it used in the Shire Brook Valley where the path was crumbling where it ran close to the top of a steep bank of the Shire Brook.





Gary Stewart, sound artist on the Wet / Land / Dwellers project:

My approach to working with sound on this project has been to embrace the different intertwined sonic phenomenon that take place between physical things that share proximity. That might be the flow of water, laboured boots through mud, the hum and drone of a dual carriageway or deep breathes of recovery on a brisk walk. Equally interesting to me are the possibilities for sonification of the imagined real through an audio synthesiser playfully manipulating and converting fictitious imaginary waveforms to produce sounds for people to experience that express the feel of what I am trying to politically and emotionally convey.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2021) says that capitalism (the West's economic system) is a sound.

“Capitalism is a sound, it is a crowding sound, creating a static sound of panic within me about the scarcity of life and about how I'm alone. It's important to remember first of all, that's not the way it always has been. There's actually other sounds, you know, there's actually a way that I can reclaim my listening and displace the power of these messages that are panic-inducing”

DOWNSTREAM

We arrive at the washlands on a Saturday morning late January. The open floodplain provides little shelter from Storm Malik, who's 45km per hour winds make it difficult even to stand.

It's such a different place, we say, to the washlands a few days ago, when it was far, far colder - ice and frost crunching under our feet; calm and still then; and filled with a beautiful din of delicate sounds, of birds, leaves, and trickling water.

Now our ears and bodies are engulfed in noise. Forces of the air pressing against us and making it difficult to hear one another. We're worried about DownStream; about people not turning up, about people not being able to hear us, or those intricate sounds of the washlands.

But we quickly begin to hear beauty in the noise. (the question of how to find beauty in a landscape returns at Shire Brook Valley the following Saturday). The winds pushes against us, we can feel it against our bodies, and rushing past our faces; loud, dynamic, discomfoting. Hannah texts to say at least it will be exhilarating.

It reminds us that our reason for being here is to think from the wetlands, with the wetlands. To be here, listening, feeling. The storm doesn't put anyone off, we end up with 25 people here. The wind dies down a little. We talk about sound and searching for sonic difference and for sonic dissonance. Gary describes how we might navigate the washlands through sound. People search for the vibrations of other creatures, of life and non-life; they imagine sonic fictions and try to hear traces of alternative histories.

“Governments are not listening, my old people told me if you are to learn the lessons we teach, you must listen with both ears and that listening must include your heartbeat.”

Rod Garlett



Something very striking about the Shire Brook Valley and Woodhouse Washlands is the rumble of traffic, the dial of which is turned up or down as you meander across the green spaces. It's hard to filter it out. Particularly in the Shire Brook Valley I can only see the rich diversity of plants and ponds. But the sonic-scape is different - behind the wind and the birdsong there is an aural reminder that this is an urban wet-land-place.

Sitting with this sound prompts me to think of the past. How the sounds of the Valley have changed and continue to transform. I feel the hum of the traffic as a (sonic) transportation of a different time, not in terms of the current geography and proximity to the A57, but as a temporal transportation to when the Valley and its wet places served the burgeoning industry of the 19th and 20th centuries. During the height of coal mining the earth, air and the water of this area would have all been affected by, or indeed contaminated by the industries it served. I have stood on these sites, and tried to imagine what it must have been like. If I close my eyes, and listen hard I can imagine how different the place would have sounded, or those men who went underground, the intensity of the machines constantly whirring, drilling and grinding, the shock of explosions.

How can we know what's coming if we don't listen?
We must listen and listen hard.

The Wet / Land / Dwellers know how to listen. They are attuned to the dynamic sonic textures of the land, air and water. Some caretakers of the valley, washlands and marsh talked of the disappearance of the Willow Tit. As we stood in the Shire Brook, Kevin, the bird ringer, recalls that Willow tit numbers ringed have dropped from 7 birds in 2015 to 1 in 2021.

The noticing of absence has appeared in different conversations with different people.

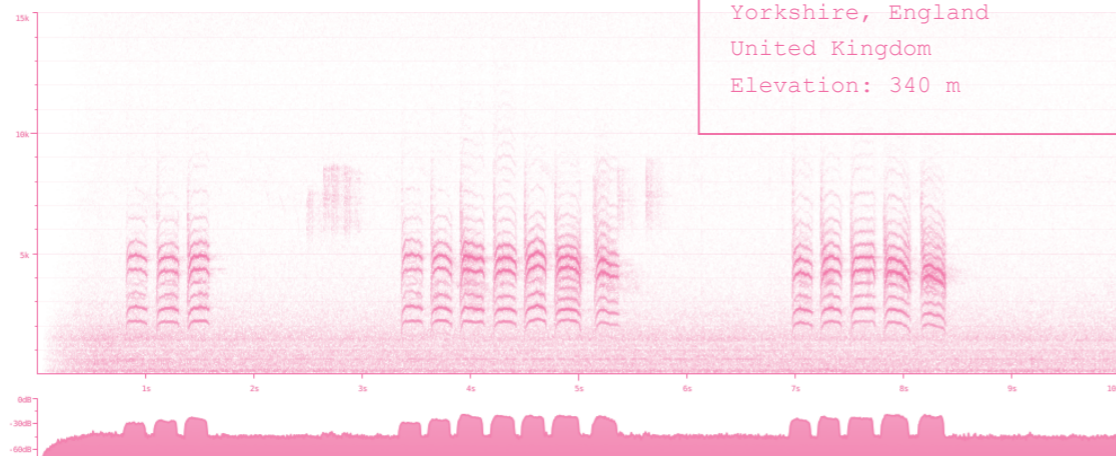
Careful listening to the complex wet-lands soundscape is part of a larger story. Bird song has always had an important role to play in defining how humans interact with more than humans.

95 species of bird have been recorded on Woodhouse Washlands and Shire Brook Valley (including Beighton Marsh).

“When we start with birds, and bird signs, we can go on to sketch ecosystemic relationships between people, landscapes, plants, and everything else. By watching and listening carefully to birds, we are better informed about what is happening beyond our immediate environment, in both space and time.”

(Wyndham and Park, 2018, p545)

Noticing absence thus becomes part of a practice of paying attention as a form ecological awareness.



<https://xeno-canto.org/619945> XC619945 · Willow Tit · Poecile montanus kleinschmidti

“This is Sorby Breck Bird Ringers, here at Beighton Marsh.

Do you know how they do the bird ringing? They have mist nets with pockets in, they put them down the flight lines early morning. There's no injury because the nets are so soft. And that's a Longtail Tit, caught in there.

They use these [camera] film cartons to weigh the birds. Once you put their head in, they don't struggle, they don't move. And obviously you know the weight of the carton. That's a Greenfinch. And we did catch a Kingfisher.” Peter Wolstenholme

RECORDING DATA

Recordist: David Pennington
Date: 2021-02-01
Time: 09:05
Latitude: 53.5355
Longitude: -1.7379
Location: Country
Carlecotes Ponds, South Yorkshire, England
United Kingdom
Elevation: 340 m

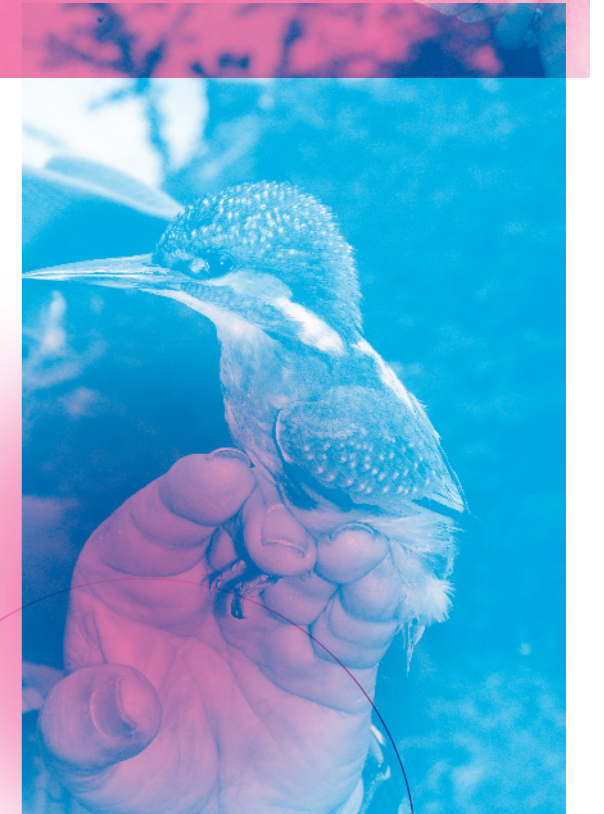
“The valley is a hidden gem, full of history containing remnants of old forges, coal mines and sewage works.

Nature has now taken over these sites and it has turned them into very beautiful areas. I have had ringing sessions in several sites throughout the valley, but Linley Bank Meadows is my favourite by far. With its big sky and green meadows containing singing Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and in some years Grasshopper Warblers.

Being so close to the River Rother makes it even more special for birdwatching and ringing. This is a river that runs north to south and is a busy migration route. During my ringing sessions on Linley Bank, I have caught more birds here than other sites in the valley that were already wearing a ring that has been ringed somewhere else in the country.”

The Ghost of the Wetland
Stacey Sampson Kevin Bower, Bird Ringer,
Shire Brook Valley

Come to this place
And you might see her
Amid the stumps
And the sprouting bulbs
And the pleated mushrooms
And the lightening trees
And the beer cans
She has seen it all
The shifting boundaries
And the streaming ochre
And the sharpening scythes
And the crumbling stone
And the passage of feet
She has felt it too
The poisoned water
And the compacted earth
And the coppiced branches
And the disturbed silence
And the tenacity of spring
Come to this place
And wait for her
Be still
Until her strange light glances in
Or the chill of her is at your neck
And you will be reminded
That she has seen it all
And she has felt it too

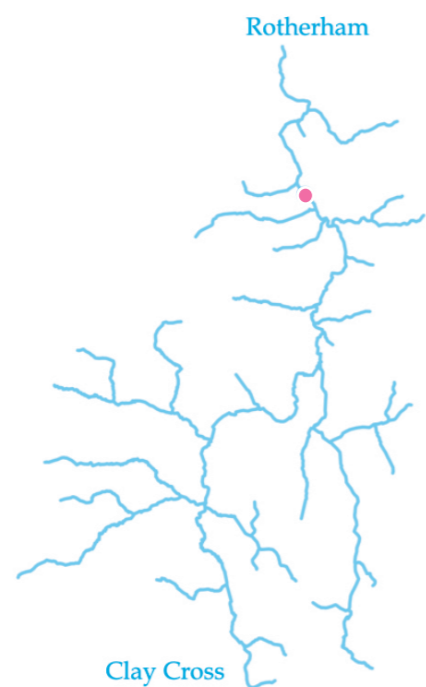


“Sorby Breck Ringing Group is an autonomous group that is associated to the Sorby Natural History Society. It was formed in 1979 by the merger of the Sorby Ringing Group with the Breck Ringing Group. For many years the latter was based at Breck Farm, Staveley. Both groups were active in the Sheffield and north Derbyshire areas, each ringing about 1000 birds per year. Following merger annual ringing totals began to rise and have grown steadily.”

from www.sorby.org.uk/groups/sorby-breck-ringing-group/

We know that Wetlands are an indispensable ecosystem. They are a freshwater supply, they provide food and building materials, and host high levels of biodiversity. They help with flood control, groundwater recharge, and climate change mitigation.

“[wetlands] are special, places they are important places to Noongar people’s survival and health and well-being of a healthy country, they provide food, and medicines, they are like a shopping centre. It provides an economic base, it underpins Indigenous history, innovation and culture and is fundamental to spiritual beliefs. Wetlands have significance as ceremonial and initiation sites, traditional hunting and gathering grounds and as boundary markers.”
Rod Garlett



Cassie
 Everything started when we met
 The air tasted delicious back then
 We know what’s in it that way
 The same with the water, we always have
 We persist
 Because we have each other
 We remember when your cattle came
 And the water became pungent
 You humans think your actions matter
 But our kind is ancient
 We absorb
 We transform
 We remain
 Our spores spread
 They are on you
 They are in you
 We will never end

You are here; near the end of the Rother’s 27 mile course from near Clay Cross to join the River Don at Rotherham. Somewhere between two and seven cubic metres of water flows down the river past you every second. A cocktail of water, blended from many sources. Hipper. Holme Brook. Moss. Doe Lea. Barlow Brook. Redleadmill Brook. Hawke Brook. Pools Brook. Pigeon Bridge Brook. Each contribution its own. Each mix of mud, of leaves, of effluents, of upland rain, a signature of place, of use, abuse and history. You are here, but the river is everywhere.

[Watercourse data: Environment Agency, Open Government Licence v3]

Photo and text by ecologist Phil Warren

“The Harvest Mouse Survey - they used to do every November, at Beighton Marsh. They originally said, the experts, that this was the only colony they have ever seen in a marshland - as harvest mice are usually associated with cornfields. That’s all marshlands down there, so that’s interesting. We used to go down there every year to count the mice.”

Kevin Hill,
 Conservation Group
 Harvest Mouse Survey



Photo and text by ecologist Phil Warren

For centuries the river meandered its way through the washlands, a sinuous path, balanced between deposition and erosion, soft-edged and quick to rise out of its channel and spread across the level of the floodplain, feeding it with silt. And then we dug deep, and dug straight, and built up banks and guided the water quickly through the landscape, like a drain, and stopped the flood. But everything connects, and in drying one place we wet another. So barriers were built, which rise and fall, hold back the flow, and take control, and make the floodplain flood again.



“This is every November, the harvests mouse survey (they are called a Harvest Mouse because they nest in corn). But when [the farmers] changed to two harvests a year, they lost their habitat. So they were an endangered species.

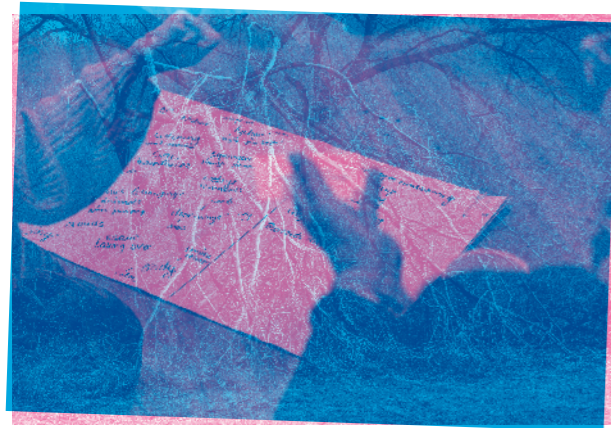
But then they were found in the Phalaris Canary Reed grass, which is a similar stem and leaf to corn.



Peter Wolstenholme

And they were finding colonies - we had a big colony in Beighton Marsh. So every November - a survey. They build a nest, they have their young; then about the end of September, the whole family leave it and spend the winter in rubble or under hedges. So in November they count the redundant nests, note it every year, and depending on the numbers you find, you know how the colonies are doing.”

Photos by James Clarkson



A story-telling workshop with Stacey Sampson began with an embodied experience in the wetlands; a group wander through Shire Brook Valley to search for “treasures” which functioned as inspiration and building

blocks for collective word conjuring and poetry summoning. Before we headed off for the meander, Stacey handed us all a stack of yellow postcards bound with elastic bands. Each card contained gentle prompts in black ink:

“Pause: Notice your body in this environment. How do you FEEL?”,

“Pause: Breathe deeply. What can you SMELL/TASTE”

“Share a MYTH/STORY/LEGEND you have heard about this place”

We set off for the walk late morning. The air was damp, the wind blustered. The dry weather of January had given way to a stormy February.

But the weather Gods were favourable as the forecast of rain didn't come to pass. In pairs we read the cards and talked, we scanned the earth and the sky and we listened hard. After over an hour of walking, talking, laughing, listening and falling we assembled at the visitor centre.

Back together in a room we reflected on the walk.

It felt intimate; peaceful and a pause from the usual busyness of life. Enchanted even.

SUE

I don't know when I began
I've got no sense of time or place
Or what happens
I am a witness
I know at night, though
That creatures inhabit this place
The spirits
The fairy-folk
The animals
This land must continue to be cared for

ANNE

I knew you as pollution
Time has changed to elation
With all the wild seeds
And plants and trees
The birds and the bees
And it is beautiful

Lichen Remembering
a collective poem

Blackberries sweetening
Blue-tits chattering
Willows rustling
Wind cutting
Water travelling
Traffic swooshing
City intruding
Life Circling
Buzzards dancing
Deers leaping
Skylarks nesting
Magpies watching
Cottages disappearing
Spores drifting
History persisting
Lichen remembering
Ancestors listening

Nature Moves by Nature Box, Shire Brook Valley

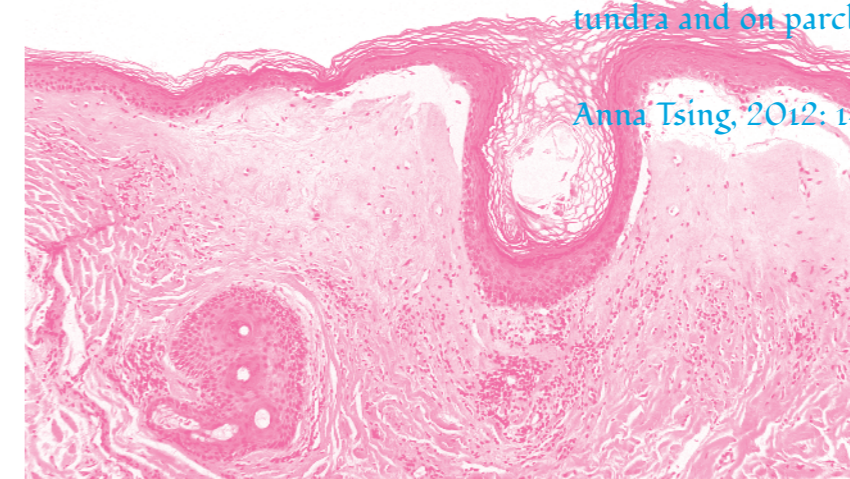
Moon orbiting
Sun shining
Planes gliding
Trees swishing
Trees falling
Butterflies fluttering
Ants crawling
Webs spinning
Spiders catching
Marshmallows melting
Children eating
Mushrooms growing
Earth decomposing



As people spoke, they intermittently lowered their masks to sip cups of steaming hot tea. Stacey called us to attention. We were to make a collective poem, she announced. A kenning.

A word that emerged was “Lichen”. This sparked particular interest. But of course! Lichen are a complex life form; a symbiotic partnership of two separate organisms, fungus and alga. The fungus provides a structure for the alga to live in, while the alga provides food for the fungus. These micro species act as “air scrubbers” for the air we breathe. They literally clean our air. The adverb chosen was “remembering”: “Lichen remembering”

The concept of ‘symbiosis’-mutually beneficial interspecies living- was invented for the lichen, an association of a fungus and an alga or cyanobacteria. The non-fungal partner fuels lichen metabolism through photosynthesis; the fungus makes it possible for the lichen to live in extreme conditions. Repeated cycles of wetting and drying do not faze the lichen, because the fungal partner can re-organise its membranes as soon as water appears, allowing photosynthesis to resume. Lichen may be found in frozen tundra and on parched desert rocks.”



Anna Tsing, 2012: 142-143

The dream I dream.... FUTURE DAYS

Shire Brook Valley 2032

Michael 'Ziggy' Senkans

One day, fingers crossed, the calamitous A57 will be broken up by the forcing of green shoots, the powerful pushing of fungi, the tunnelling of the mole and badger, the under cutting of the Shire Brook as it wanders down to meet the sparkling River Rother (alive with fish and hunting birds). Maybe we'll see the beaver back in the valley and with it we'll have a vibrant wetland seething with all manner of life. Species, long thought extinct or unreachable, even exotic are back, the stork, the crane, the osprey, the bittern (I can keep adding here, try wild boar, lynx, wild cattle, wolf, dare to dream. Don't forget hippo, Creswell Crags had hippos, so can the Shire Brook Valley). And the purring song of the turtle dove can be heard in the valley, after many year's absence mixed in with the songs of warblers and that old symbol of 'spring moving in to summer', the cuckoo! Back, with a vengeance, lots of parasitic potential (biodiversity in action). Deafened, by the constant 'plop' of the water vole as you move through the landscape. Blinded, by the metallic sheen and flicker of damsel and dragonflies, what more do you need? Where do we the wetlanders fit in to this reverie? I'm already there, care to join me?



"our obsession with market-foremost democracy distorts what should be the most fundamental concern: care. The market can't make ethical decisions about who receives what care, yet we've organized our democracy to leave large segments of the polity priced out of the markets that would make us better when we are ill, educate us when we are ready to learn, let us spend time with our children if we have them, and ensure the safety of our loved ones." - Jean Tronto, 2015

Chris Titmuss
(Heritage Group)

"What I love about it is: young people need space. I remember being so strictly confined as a child and a young teenager. And I had to come down here and sneak out to get some space, to come down here with my friends, and have some private space that some people don't think young teenagers should have. But it's a way that they can evolve into, I think, well balanced human beings... to get away from home environment, and get into a place where they can be themselves and just come out with a group of friends. And that's what we're increasingly getting here. And yeah, they bring alcohol and you can smell weed occasionally. But it's a big space."

CREDITS

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Huge thanks to the Heritage Group and the Conservation Group, and all the amazing caretakers of the wetlands, and also to:

COLLABORATORS:

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Stacey Sampson
Gary Stewart
Phil Warren

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a place of their own



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To be a wet/land/dweller is to understand social ecological living, to connect to the proliferation of life that exists there and to practice co-existence. This might be a listening practice, a breathing practice, a walking practice, a tending practice; practising for what is to come. Reattuning our bodies to the water. Reminding them that we came from water, both the womb and the river bed. So that as we move towards ever more watery futures we might even have to summon our gills and our fins, we might need to retrace and activate our umbilicus to find new channels for oxygen and carbon dioxide to flow in and out of our bodies.

Between then and now, however, between the reattuning and the transformation, there is much work to be done.



“The Earth is our Mother, some say
we came from the earth and one day
we will return to her (Our mother),

Since the dreamtime mother earth
has always provided for our
Noongar people, and we have had
our Lore’s/laws about the land
forever, those are still practised
today and are handed down
generation to generation (from the
old to the young).”

Rod Garlett