
TIDELINE
Stories from Belvedere

To the people of Belvedere

First published in the United Kingdom 2012

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WEL

How do you make visible the collective memories and personal experiences of a place? And why, at the point of regeneration, is it important to think about what went before if the new is about to be ushered in?

Belvedere is a unique place. Teetering on the edge of the Thames, with its flat marsh and tall hill, it's a place of contrasts: beautiful marshland and rare species rub up against a sewage works and an 'energy from waste' facility, quiet residential areas are bound by large A roads, brutalist Thamesmead looks out over horses grazing. The place has a rich history; with a flow of people and industry arriving and leaving and the rise and fall of the river in economical and physical terms exerting a quiet influence.

Whilst there are clues in the landscape to the area's past, the memories and everyday experiences that have previously animated public and shared spaces remain hidden within the resident population.

Tideline project staff, community ambassadors and writer Sarah Butler have worked closely with volunteers, local communities, Belvedere Community Centre, Belvedere Library and Trinity School to explore and expose the fabric of Lower Belvedere.

Directly inspired by the memories of Belvedere residents and the exploration of the marshlands' ecological heritage by Trinity School students, Sarah Butler has written a series of poems about the area. These can be enjoyed in print form in this book, online at www.belvederestories.co.uk or whilst out walking in Belvedere itself, along a route from the station to the river wall.

This book also contains oral history accounts, as told by local people, accompanied by photographic portraits by Eva Sajovic and a snapshot of the work done by Trinity School students.

Camilla Brueton
Tideline Project Manager

COME

Throughout the process of creating Tideline, my ambition has been to share and celebrate local stories, whose richness and depth belie what is often described as an 'empty' landscape. I was fascinated by how certain stories kept recurring: stories of the 1953 floods, the gypsy encampments on the marshes, Sikh immigration, life in the factories, and yet each version of these larger stories had its own unique perspective and shape.

Through interviews with individuals, group reminiscence sessions, archival research, and work with students at Trinity School, I built up a picture of the personal histories of Lower Belvedere. I was captivated by Iris and Henry's stories of walking across the marshes at night time, by Bakhshish and Baljinder's memories of arriving in Belvedere from the Punjab, and Yvonne and Colin's recollections of the sky turning red above Ford's furnaces. The challenge then, was to turn these interviews and stories into texts that could be installed into the landscape of Lower Belvedere. I had to find a way to express the heart and the specificity of these stories, to honour the voices and histories of those who had shared their memories, whilst also creating poetic moments that could connect in an instant with passers-by.

I was lucky to have the opportunity to work with the poet, Linda France, throughout the process of condensing thousands of words of transcribed interviews into just a few hundred carefully chosen words. Linda helped me make two crucial decisions: firstly to categorise the stories I had been told into broad themes so I could draw out the connections between them; and secondly to choose a form for the final pieces. *Paper Trail, Five O'Clock River, A Wake of Salt,* and *River-Walking* are based loosely on the Japanese Renga form, taking its 3 line, 2 line, 3 line, 2 line progression and honouring its insistence on brevity and simplicity. I was trying to create poems that incorporated a range of different voices that were connected through geography and common experience, and so I felt particularly comfortable with Renga, which is at heart a collaborative writing practice.

There is a responsibility attached to creating text for a landscape, and to creating texts from other people's stories. Each verse of the Tideline poems relate directly to something that was shared during the project: an image, emotion, action, or memory. My hope is that by placing these stories back into the landscape, and sharing them in this publication, more people will be able to appreciate the rich narratives that make Lower Belvedere such a unique and special place.

Sarah Butler
Writer-in-Residence

BELVEDERE STORIES

BALJINDER SINGH AUJLA & BAKHSHISH SINGH TUMBER

BALJINDER SINGH AUJLA

I came to England in 1968, 17th February. I went to school the first day I was here. I liked this school - everything was new for us. Not so much for me because I come from the city, and I had seen all these things out there. The language was the biggest difference. Apart from that everything looked very new, everything was all built up, and nice and tidy - cleaner.

We were young, we just used to play and that's all. You know, we both go to school, after school finish, we liked to go and play. We played football near the station. It wasn't a proper park, but there was a flat green area where you could play football. Or we'd play in Franks Park. The centre of Franks Park, where you've got the dip, right in the middle, that used to be our corner for after school. We had two teams there, two, three teams playing football there.

Where we used to live, there was me and my two brothers, mum and dad, that's five of us, in two rooms, and another cousin's sister there as well. There was another room - four brothers in that room, plus my uncle. I mean you had like fifteen, twenty people living in a house. Because we was kids, we'd come in and run up the stairs. I was told off you know, for running up the stairs. And then we used to have problems cooking: who could go when, in the kitchen.

My first job was for this plastic factory. I worked there for six months, and my wages for forty eight hours was £7.50, which was a lot. I used to give it to my mum, she would give me fifty pence pocket money, and that was too much for me. I'd go to work, buy my breakfast, go to cinema on the weekend, get a little bit sweets and all that, but I couldn't spend fifty pence in a week.

BAKHSHISH SINGH TUMBER

I'm from a farming background, my parents were farmers. I came here in 1967. I landed on 31st May, 1967. It was strange, obviously, when I arrived, because it was a built up area, and I'd come from a rural one. It was also strange because of the language. I only knew up to about "F"; that's about all I could say in terms of the English language.

At Picardy, there was about three of us who were the first lot to ever get five GCSEs as Asian lads. In those days you could leave at fifteen. Ninety-nine percent of the Asian lads left because the whole idea was to make money. Our families came with a view to making ends meet, and also to assist the families we left behind. We came to have a better living, and to fund the journey, a lot of people went into debt back home. Ninety percent of those who came had ancestral land, so a lot of them took loans, by putting the land down as collateral.

Baljinder's dad and my dad, if you like, were probably the first two instigators of the Sikh Temple in Belvedere. Back in the sixties I remember them hiring a hall over in Lower Belvedere, a tin shed next to a church. Then we moved to St. John's Hall in West Street. We used to hire that on Sundays, and for weddings and things like that. And then we used to hire the Picardy girls' school now known as Woodside. And then obviously, we were looking at having our own place, because we were at the point where we needed it. We bought this place in Battle Road but it was not ideal and we went looking for a bigger place.

This current place we bought in 1979. It used to be a warehouse, a fruit and veg distribution centre. We had to struggle a lot, to build it up, to collect the money. We went to Birmingham, Leicester, Newcastle, to get donations from the community. We give a lot to charity, that's been happening for hundreds of years in the Sikh faith, it's how we're brought up. One of the main principles within Sikhism is called bandkah shakana, which means share what you have. So we share what we have, you know, and that is where the ethos comes from.

IVY HOUSEAGO

I was six months old when we came to Belvedere. My dad played a brass instrument, and Callender's, down on the marsh, must have advertised for brass band players. My dad was given the position in the band, so he had to be given a job. He was on the paper machine. They had huge rolls of paper, and cut it into small rolls, thin and narrow enough to wrap round the cable. Each bit of cable was twisted and wrapped in paper, then when they'd got the requisite voltage that they wanted, they twisted all those wires together, and then wrapped them in lead.

We went everywhere with the band. We had no money, but we could go with the band and all we had to pay for was the room in which we lodged. We'd take our own food, and the lady would cook it. I remember Eastbourne, and Hastings, Bournemouth, Southend, all the places within reasonable charabanc reach. It was wonderful to watch the band play. Us kids were all open mouthed all the time. We, my brother and sisters, were very proud of our dad, because they wore uniforms you see, and a uniform does something for everybody! It was black, I think, with a gold braid and red stripes down the trousers. The coat had a stand up collar, which got very hot in the hot weather. And a peaked cap, with gold braid around the front of it. They always looked very smart.

We lived down in Picardy Manor Way, right down on the marsh. We used to walk down to the river, and sit on the river bank. It was mucky, but we weren't very old, and a little bit of muck didn't bother us. We had no fear of animals or people, or trains even, we were told how to cross the crossing. We had lots of fun down on the marsh. It was our place, about half a dozen of us kids I suppose used to go down there. We'd take bread and jam sandwiches, and a bottle of cold tea - mum couldn't afford lemonade, so it was cold tea. We spent hours on the river bank. There were great big boulders, so we would sit on one, and have our lunch. I don't know whether there were rats there then, but when I was working at Callender's, when I was fourteen, we used to take our lunch there, and we used to watch the rats. We didn't think anything of them, but when I think about them now, they were black and horrible.

IVY HOUSEAGO

MOHAN SINGH

I live in Erith now, but I came to Gravesend in 53, just after floods. My first job was to build up the river bank. There was a lot of damage. When we finished the bank, I got a job at Doulton's, making clay pipes. My first job there, I pick up hard core, put them in skip. After that I got a job as a fireman for the kiln. They give me coal and a shovel, to keep the kilns burning. They had thirteen chimneys - very tall - there was a lot of smoke. Royal Doulton used to be a big factory on Church Manorway, Erith - they are closed now. Everything's gone. The factories are over now.

AJIT SINGH HOTHI

I was born in India in 1929. I came to England in 1963. I was working in the University in India, in the research section. The money was not that good there. I came here so my children could get good jobs, good education. I first came to Kent, near Gravesend. Then a got a job here in the Asbestos factory in Erith. I started on the day Kennedy was assassinated. I worked there nearly one and a half years, but it wasn't a good job - I felt that. Then I went to Mobo toys, also in Erith. They were making toys for little children. I was there for nearly seven years. Then I went to Ford Motor Company in Dagenham until I got my pension in '93. I travelled on the ferry there. It was a small ferry, until they bought a bigger one - with one hundred and fifty people going across at a time. I was in the Engine Plant, working on the flywheel.

When I first came to Belvedere there were very few Indian homes. It was very difficult to get accommodation. We worked hard so we could buy houses. My family joined me in 1966, my wife and my children. By that time I'd bought a house with my friend in Northumberland Heath. After that we came here to Belvedere. I never received any penny of a grant. I worked hard.

ROSE FOSTER

When I visited Belvedere as a child I thought I was in the country. That was what it was like - like coming from London to the country. There was nothing on the marshes at all, just animals, caravans, travellers, that was all. As I got older they started building on it.

We moved here in 1975, I had friends who'd been here their whole lives. That was one of the reasons for us coming here - to be near them. They were people who came from the marshes.

A lot's changed. Before, there were no houses at the back of me. The field in front of me - children could play on it, people learnt to drive cars on it. The back of the field was railway cuttings, it was like wild countryside.

YVONNE BALDWIN

I worked over on the marshes, twenty years ago, at the local office. I used to walk up Crabtree Manorway, right up to the waterfront, and I was accompanied all the way by skylarks. They absolutely sang beautiful. And outside the office window all day trilled a little bird - I never did find out what it was. We used to finish about five o'clock at night. I'd try and finish earlier than that, because I knew if I looked out the window at about quarter to five, there was a fox and her cubs - she would bring them out just as it was getting dusk.

It was all factories, but you still felt as though you were out in the country. When I first moved here they used to grow corn or hay. It was harvested every year. And every year it was exciting because it all caught fire, and all the fire engines had to come out because it got out of hand every year.

SANDRA COSSAR

The view from Abbey Wood was just marsh land before Thamesmead. It was always very murky, with the mist over there. You still get that when you're going along through Thamesmead sometimes, you still get that low mist over the fields.

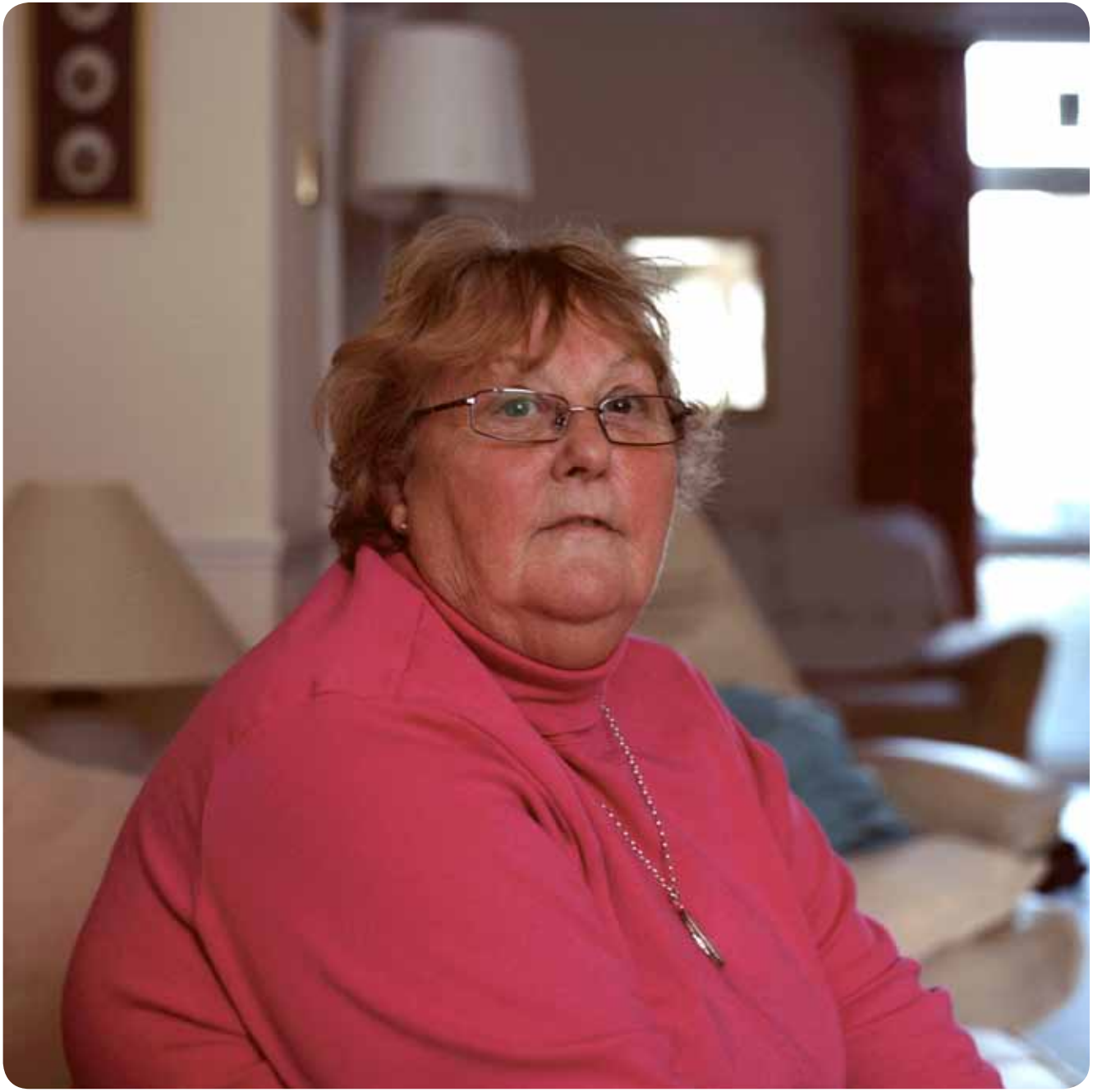
My husband's lived here all his life. He always used to say that he used to go down and pinch the peanuts off the barges. And then he said they used to go down the wood yard and pinch the wood for Guy Fawkes. They used to take an old pram down; they would sit somebody in the pram, and then they'd take the blocks out of the piles of wood to see how quickly the person in the pram could get out before all the logs came down.

MARGARET FINNEMORE

I remember going to the marshes with my dad. He was very good, he used to know every bird song. They were just lovely to walk through: butterflies, goldfinches, and all sorts of birds. There used to be very tall grass - nothing was ever done to it. We used to walk right the way across, right to the river bank, on what we called the cinder path. That ran from the bottom of St Augustine's Road, across the railway line, through the gypsy encampment. The river was lovely - ever so busy. There seemed to be lots of little boats, and the coal barges, which always had a black diamond on the funnel.

The Queen got married in '48, or '47. We went to see them come back from their honeymoon. Everybody stood over the river bank, waving flags as they went past. I can just remember standing there with a flag, and everybody waving and cheering, and she was a little speck in the distance.

YVONNE BALDWIN & SANDRA COSSAR



MARGARET FINNEMORE

COLIN VOUSDEN

The marshes were a heaven for us kids, because there were virtually no adults down there - no supervision. As it happened, there was nothing to vandalise anyway. It was all open marshland. It was marvellous for animals, particularly water birds. All the water birds you could think of were down there, from the UK. We used to see water snakes, grass snakes, lizards - anything and everything that you could imagine was down there.

Nobody had television then, so the cinema was absolutely vital. All the kids used to go to Saturday morning pictures, usually in Erith. That would take up your Saturday morning, then if you had your fare money, you would sacrifice that for a piece of bread pudding from the cake shop, and you'd walk back home along the river bank.

Almost opposite the Abbey there used to be a farm called Grahams. Stationed there was a horse and cart arrangement. It was a two-wheeled cart, a bit like the French Revolution tumbrel, and an old cart horse, and what seemed like an equally old driver, who used to go along the bottom road to the Borax works. His job all day was to load this cart up with the residue of the slag, or whatever it was, from the Borax works, bring it about a quarter of a mile out of the works onto the slag heaps. That was like a mini White Cliffs of Dover, because it was big enough for them to have a track going up on to the top. So you would see him going out in the morning from the farm, and then at teatime, when he finished his shift, you would see him going back along the road. My recollection is that he and the cart and the horse were totally covered in white, this white powder an inch thick on his clothing. I don't think he talked to anybody. I had a feeling he was often asleep. I guess the horse took him home; that went on for years.

My bedroom used to face north across the marshes. I could see the Ford building across the river - it had Fords written right across the front of it. They'd open the furnaces, to drain the metal, and you would get this terrific roar, and the whole sky would light up. If the wind was drifting this way it sounded quite alarming.

Midnight on New Year's Eve, you would open your doors and windows because you would hear all the river traffic sounding their sirens, all up and down the river for about five minutes. You would hear that the whole length of the waterfront - if you had forgotten it was New Year's Eve, the boats would remind you - everything would let loose for a few minutes.

COLIN VOUSDEN

IRIS SMITH

I was born at Orient cottages in 1933, then moved to Johnsons cottages until I married in 1953. I remember when I was very young going to bed in Orient cottages and hearing the owls that nested in disused buildings across the road. Hot summer days, walking down the road trying hard to spot the sky larks singing their hearts out up in the sky, and in the evening, ducking the bats above our heads, thinking they would get caught in our hair. The crickets that got into the house and started to sing in the middle of the night, and boy were they hard to find. I loved the marsh, grass snakes, grass hoppers, and rats, even the stink from the river on a bad day.

Walking home after going to the cinema could be a bit creepy on a dark night. There were three lamp posts on the marsh but they didn't give much light. The first one was just before the lane that crossed the fields on the right. I was always a bit nervous at this point as there were bushes both sides of the lane and if anything was lurking this is where it would lurk. The other dodgy place was just after the second lamp where a road ran between the two white heaps, but by that time the third lamp was in sight and I was almost home. The only time I was truly scared was when I heard a strange noise, started to run and was over taken by a sheet of paper!

My brother had a big surprise one night on the marsh. At times cattle were kept in the fields, but once there was just one lonely bull, who was good at escaping. It was wartime blackout, so very dark, my brother was on his bike and he went straight into the back of that bull. He said he didn't know who was the more surprised; he didn't wait to find out, but got up and ran like mad. The next day he retrieved the bike, which was undamaged, the bull was unconcerned, and my brother just had a few scratches.

I remember the floods. We were in the house. Why we didn't leave I don't know, everybody else had gone. But you see a flood warning wasn't unusual in those days, we quite often had a flood warning, and maybe two or three inches of water would come in, so, we didn't expect much. I think the reason we didn't move was we only had one tiny little car in the family. There was six of us, and a very young baby. And I think they were worried about taking the baby out. So we stayed put, and we moved carpets and things upstairs. We were stuck in the house a night, a day and a night.

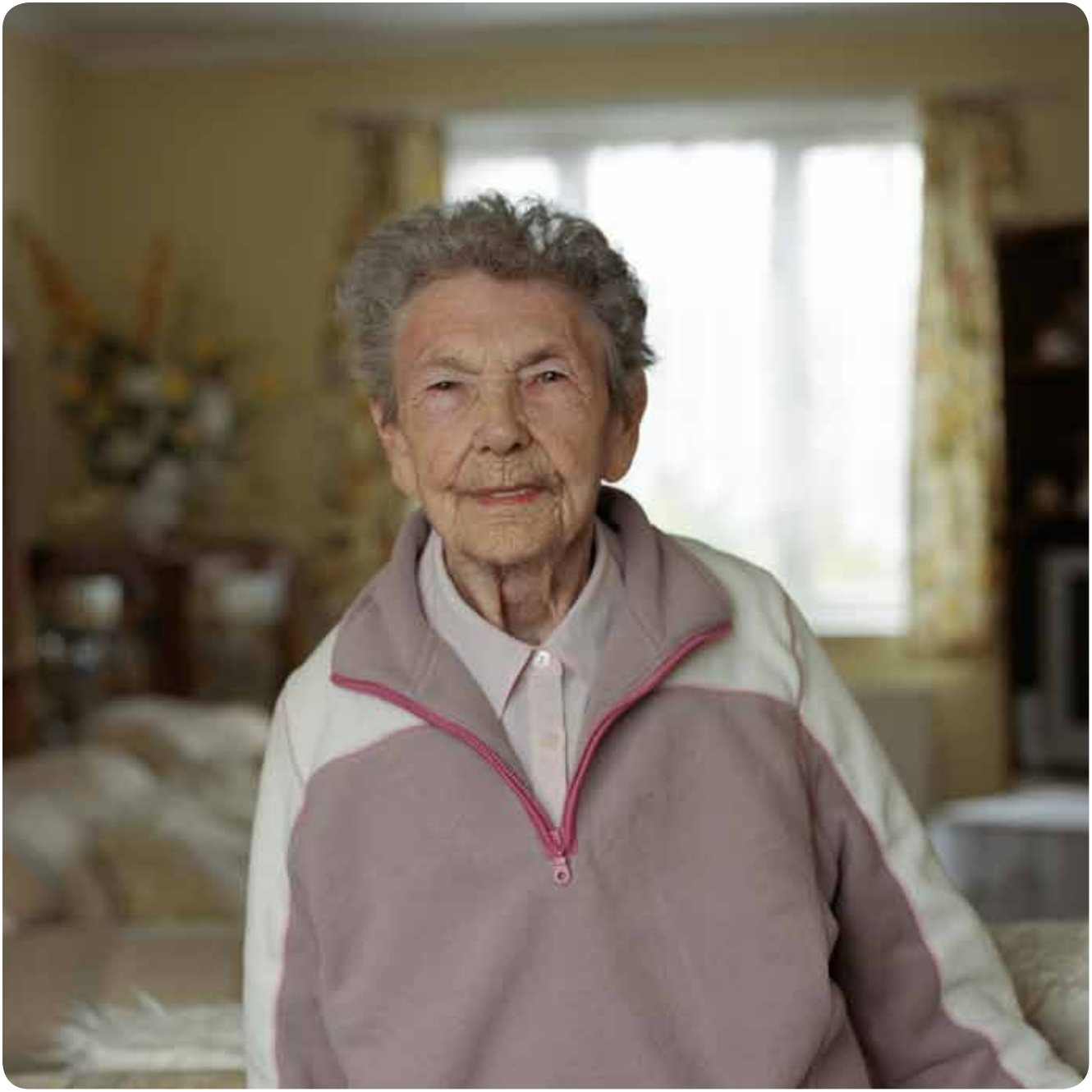
BALBIR SINGH SOHDI

I was born in 1946, and came here in January 1961. My father was here already. It was good for the family to get together. I went to Picardy School. It was a very good school. There weren't many Asians there - only four or five. I didn't have any problems. At that time I could speak very little English. It was a little bit awkward, but slowly we learnt.

After two or three years I left school and started working. My first job was with Young and Partner - the woodworks Joinery Company in Crabtree Manorway. I was just a labourer. After that I went to work at Royal Doulton - we used to make the pipes, before the plastic ones came out. I was making the pieces. Someone puts the clay in the top and the pipes come out the bottom. We were holding them and then just stacking them. Then I moved to British Plasterboard and worked there for about 7 years. We used to put the foil on the one side and plastic on the other side of the boards. There were at least 500 employees. We didn't used to have much of a social life - we were busy at the work.

In 1972 I got another job, with Ford Motor Company. I worked there 36 years. We used to work on the machines, getting everything ready to be assembled. We worked on the engines. The job was interesting - there were so many different machines, you were always learning. There used to be 7,000 people working in the Engine Plant. There are less people now, because of automation.

We used to go over by ferry. Ford Motor Company had a private contract. We used to pay about 18 pence a day. Then in 1974 they needed more people from this side, so they made the ferry free to attract more people. That stopped about two years before I left. They couldn't afford it anymore, because there were less people coming from here. Then we had to go by car, through the Dartford Tunnel.



JOSIE DUNDAN

JOSIE DUNDAN

I suppose we spent quite a few years on and off in Upper Belvedere. My Granny used to have a little sweet shop in Bexley Road - it's Nuxley Road now - right next to the club. She only had one leg. Everybody knew her because she went about on crutches. I got out of there once, I think I was about two. I managed to get out, and I was wandering along the Woolwich Road. I was going to Wooly - we used to call Woolwich 'Wooly' in them days, and 'E.g.' that was Erith. I was going along there up by the Rec somewhere. We had one black lady all them years ago, who lived in Belvedere somewhere. She knew me, and she wondered what I was doing wandering about on my own, and she took me back to the sweet shop, to my Granny. Of course they were all in a tiz-waz because I'd got out.

We were living in Abbey Wood in '53. I was married and we - my Mum and that - shared a house between us down there. The waters came up early that night, and were there early morning when we got up; we saw them up to the back door, but they weren't too bad. And then in the afternoon, the other tide - oh, it came streaming down the road then we was all crying, well we didn't know how high it was going up.

I suppose we were there for a couple of days or so, before they took us out. My husband and the chap next door took this old tin bath out and they pulled it up the road to go and do a bit of shopping! They was up to their knees in it.

Then they brought us up in the boat, up to the railway station. It was alright, you could get out there like, that's where the waters had all come up to. We had three weeks in St. John's Hall. The first night was terrible, because you had birds and cats and dogs, everything in there. Of course they sorted it out after, the animals had to go, but the first night anything went.

The Queen came down to see us, and the Duke of Edinburgh - they visited when we were there, asking everybody how they were.

JOAN WALLACE

When I was small, my grandmother used to take me down to the river to see the boats. This was before the docks were closed; the river was so busy. Across the road there was an old fashioned ice cream shop, and she'd buy me a ha'penny ice cream, and we'd go and watch the ships going by. It was fascinating.There was so much on that river at that time. You had all the barges with these lovely tall masts with the red sails, all the coal barges, all the various kinds of craft up and down. We saw Princess Margaret's wedding when she went off in the royal yacht. There used to be the pleasure steamers going backwards and forwards - the Royal Daffodil was one. Each factory along the river front in Belvedere had all their deliveries brought by sea, so you'd get all the boats all the way along there. They used to come ashore at Erith. As children, we hadn't seen different people before, and when the lascars came ashore, they used to wear sort of white shirts hanging over their trousers, and we thought it was very peculiar; we'd not seen that!

I was twelve when the war came. A lot of the children were evacuated; I wasn't. I'm an only child, and my mother, well she didn't want me to go shall we say. So for the first few months we didn't go to school at all. Then we went to West Street, which was the nearest school. We were handed homework, which we took home, did, and took back to be marked. Then after a few months they finally reopened Picardy school, by which time I had acquired a bike, and I used to ride along to school on the bike. One day, I was half way to school, after lunch, and the Erith siren went. I went up one of the side roads and knocked on any door. The lady that opened the door happened to be the mother of the boy I used to sit next to in West Street school. So we went in her shelter, and the air raid progressed, and then the all clear went, by which time it was too late to go to school, so I went home again! A lot of the teachers were evacuated. By 1940 the lessons were all reduced. French, all that stopped. We just had the three R's and that sort of thing. You weren't able to aspire much higher than that - it was leave school at fourteen and carry on from there.

When we moved to Cowper Road, we could look out to the marshes, and across to the river. We were there for some time, and we gradually saw Thamesmead evolve. It was really quite famous in its day. I remember seeing in the papers that a party of Russians had come to see it because they were very impressed by it. In those days it was considered very modern and very innovative. All those walkways, and the concrete - it changed the idea of Belvedere.

JOAN WALLACE

KEN WALLACE

KEN WALLACE

During the war, nearly everything was rationed or on vouchers, including coal. So to help out with the fuel shortage, my step-brother and I used to take regular trips along the river bank via a footpath opposite St John's Church. We made two wheelbarrows out of old prams that folks had thrown away, with two shafts fixed either side so that they could be pulled along. If the wind was blowing onshore, you would be confident that the trip along the river bank would be worthwhile - you would find everything from old boots, clothing, fruit, vegetables, furniture and dead livestock, including water rats, and timber crates which had fallen overboard when the ships were unloading, which we dismantled and transported home.

When unloading the coal the cranes often spilled some out of the grabs, which landed on the mud. When the tide was out we would walk out and pick it up. Further along the bank was the British Oil and Cake Mills, where they unloaded peanuts. These were crushed to extract oil and often some would spill on the dry part of the shore and we would climb down and pick them up.

We used to chase the water rats sometimes, but we weren't quick enough to catch one. You had to be careful running across the rocks. When the tide went out you used to get green moss on the rocks, and that was quite slippery. You used to have to read where you were going to put your foot next.

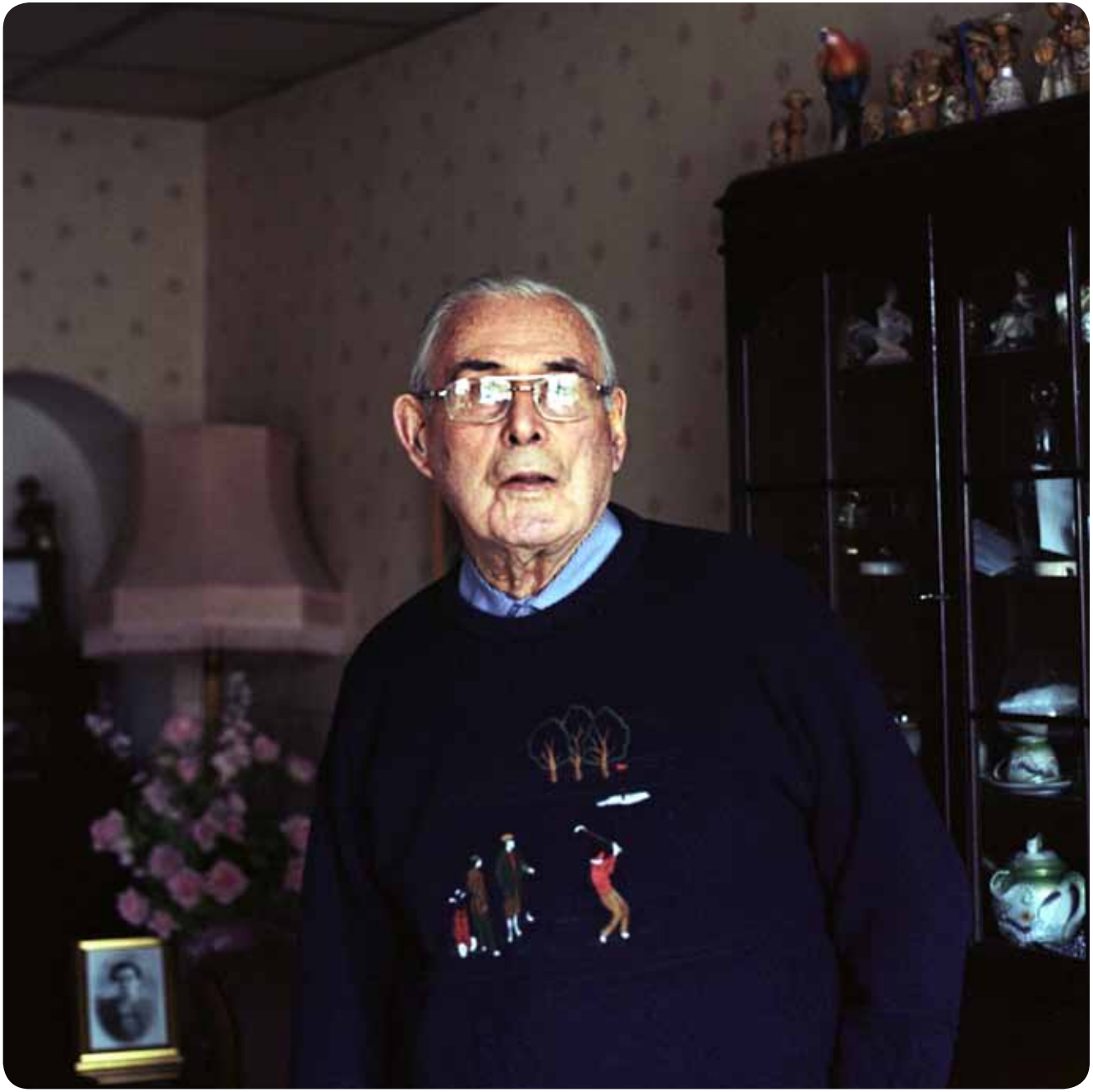
There used to be a fighter aerodrome called Fairlop just below Ford's factory, diagonally opposite from British Plasterboard, on the Essex side of the river. You could stand and watch the fighter planes take off. Often they would fly low above the water. I would imagine they were young pilots practicing. Of course we were quite thrilled to be watching them.

HENRY BISHOP

I lived in the Borax cottages. In the war we made our own air raid shelters, down there. They had some massive yellow tanks, about six foot deep. They put two together, up-ended them, bolted them together, made an entrance either side, and then covered them all up with waste material. They done four of them, in the grounds of Borax. The tanks were what they used in the factory. They used to have these tanks all around, and they used to pump all this hot borax in them. They had all wires hanging down, and the crystal formed on the wires, and all around the sides of the tanks. They used to have somebody go in and dig it all out. And that was all crushed up into powder, Borax powder.

There was one bomb attack on Belvedere, at night time. It was a very bright Hunter's moon. Me and my mate had been in the pub, in the Belvedere Hotel. We'd come out, 'cause they used to shut at ten o'clock in them days. He was a butcher, my mate was, and he had a butcher's bike, with a carrier on the front. I used to sit in the front. As we was going down Norman Road, you could see these bombers flying around. And I said to Joe, I said, he's going to drop something in a minute. Anyway, as I got indoors, I heard the whizz of a bomb coming down. It actually dropped two oil bombs. One dropped just outside the works in a ditch, the other one went inside the Borax, but that dropped where they used to tip all the ashes from the furnaces, and didn't do no harm. But he dropped a high explosive one, and there was three tanks on the roof, three big tanks of water, and one dropped right in there. It hit the girder underneath, and it exploded in the air, and that's what saved the Borax, if it had gone to the ground it would have done a lot of damage. And the next one, the next one hit, dropped in the grounds of the New Marsh Tavern, the pub, and course it went off, and the pub was finished.

They used to fetch all the unexploded bombs and dump them down there, on the marsh. I remember when the Earl of Suffolk died. He was a bomb disposal man. I remember this terrific bang. I run up my crane to look to see where it come from. All I could see was the smoke, but you know it blew windows out over Fords, the other side of the river.



HENRY BISHOP

BILL MITCHELL

BILL MITCHELL

I was born and bred in Belvedere. Years ago we used to go and play on the marshes every day. You could have a pond that was so clean, that if it was a hot summer's day you could strip down to your pants and go for a swim, it was lovely - like a wildlife reserve. In those days, believe it or not, we used to go swimming in the River Thames. In those days it was lovely. There was no river bank, no river wall. If I take my grandchildren down there now you've got to put them on your shoulders all the time so they can see, the wall spoils the view, whereas years ago we used to sit on the bank on a summer's evening, with our feet dangling over the side - a beautiful view.

If you go to the end of Ruskin Road at night, right at the end is a very slight peninsula. You can stand there at night and you can look over the marshes left and right and you can get a view that comes back on you, it's absolutely lovely. The lights are fantastic; it's sort of like a view of this day and age of Belvedere; unless you see it in the dark you don't know it's there.

When the River Thames burst its banks in '53, where Davis's is, at Lower Belvedere at the moment, the water come up to there - I'll never forget it. When Erith and Belvedere football pitch was on the Lower Road, the water didn't quite overlap the Lower Road here, but you could only see a foot of the goalposts, so that's how far the water had come, it must have been six, seven, eight foot deep.

From my house in Bridgestock Road, you could actually look from the back over the marshes - I thought it was snowing - but it was water. I had a mate who used to live down Norman Road, he said "we were living upstairs, luckily we had a fireplace up there. I used to have to swim down to the bottom of the garden and get the coal out the coal shed so we could dry it and make a fire."

I stood one foot away from the Queen when she visited the church hall. The people who'd got flooded were put up in the hall until they got sorted out. Mind you, when I stood one foot from her she was sitting in her limousine and I had the window of the limousine between us, so I couldn't say hello to her.

GURWINDER AUJLA

I grew up with the temple. When I was at school my grandfather was the president of the temple. Two or three days a week we'd go to school and then on the way back we'd come to the temple and we'd see our granddad here. When I was about nine or ten there were Punjabi classes which the temple ran in the evenings, and we would attend Punjabi School after school. Later it turned into a Saturday school.

I grew up speaking Punjabi at home, though I'm probably more comfortable with English now. I remember going to school and speaking very little English in the early days, and still saying certain things in Punjabi, because you'd forget: so when the teacher would call the register you'd say Hanji instead of yes, and all the other children would laugh.

The temple's changed a lot. It's one of those things that's constantly transforming, depending on the people in the committee, and on funding. It started very small and I've seen it grow and grow. It was bought around about the time of my birth, maybe the year before. It was a disused warehouse I believe. I remember, when I was a child, quite a small room with a small extension at the back; then I remember it being extended sideways; then I remember it being extended the other way; I actually remember all the different stages.

GURWINDER AUJLA

SATNAM DHALIWAL

I was born in India. I came here when I was fourteen. It was a complete change for me: we were boxed in the one room, about ten foot square. In India, we'd had a big house, a big family all living together.

My English was very low. The head teacher at Picardy really helped the people who came from overseas with lower English. We attended one class in the primary school, which was in West Street. And then he used to send us to a teacher training college, at Avery Hill. One to ones, on Saturday morning, he'd hire a bus for us. It really, really helped.

I really had a tough time at school, because I wear a turban, and the kids obviously mucked around with me. It wasn't because they didn't like my turban, it was new to them, and they wanted to touch it, and lift it up. In the end we had a fight in the park. It was just a normal teenage sort of thing.

My dad worked in the chemical company. He used to get really heavy work, and dirty work to do. But he needed the work and he needed to run his family, and he didn't really think twice about it or anything else. He came over and that's it. We were stuck really. My dad said, I don't want you to do labour work like me, donkey work, all your life, I want you to become a doctor or lawyer. So I was good in school, my marks were good, and then I did my apprenticeship.

I was a graduated engineer working in Dartford. There was a recession and the company was going down. We always talked about how we could run it better, but nothing happened. Then one morning we were having breakfast in the cafe, and the apprentice said, if you just talk about it, you'll never do it. Obviously that triggered it. And myself and another partner, Don Hooper, we decided let's do it. And that was it. We started our business. This was 1980. We had offices in Laurel Road, Belvedere - we've moved to Dartford now. We started with air conditioning and industrial refrigeration. We were doing that for about 25 years.
Then we moved in to construction, railway work, management facilities.

BUBBLES BRAZIL

It was a lovely life - a hard life, but I do miss it. My children was brought up on the side of the road. We never bought a bottle of gas, only once a year, and that was for cooking. We lived outside, everything was cooked on a fire outside. Everything was done outside. The only time we went in was to go to bed. The children might go in to watch the telly, but nine times out of ten they wouldn't 'cause they had all the animals to play with. We always had horses, 'cause my husband was a buyer and seller of horses. He would have donkeys and whatever, and they always had a little pony for them and a little cart so they could put that in and drive it. They had chickens, dogs, birds, so they never really had no time for television. They had a different lifestyle altogether. They were outside all the time.

What people don't understand is if a settled person buys a greenbelt piece of land, he wants to build house on it. A gypsy don't - all he wants to do is put his wagon on it and a portacabin for a loo. He can stop on that land for a thousand years and when he leaves it he leaves it the same as he found it, no bungalows built on it or blocks of flats.

We used to have a good living doing knife-sharpening. People used to save all their special knives for us: and their old bits of lawn mowers and things, shears, hedge cutters, electric hedge cutters, chisels, all their work tools, screw drivers, spades, forks. We'd go out and have a living every day. People would bring us out cups of tea and sandwiches, because they knew us from year after year, and all me little children and grandchildren; they watched me children grow up and then they watched me grandchildren grow up. It was a nice living. What they used to say was, we will help people who are trying to help themselves, you're not asking people for nothing you are doing a service for your keep. Some people think because gypsies people don't go into a regular job, they got to steal. We work hard. I was nine years old when I started work in the summer, if I went away with my mother and father. If they went away fruit picking, I was out in the field at 4 o'clock in the morning, and in the winter I was out helping with my mother and me granny every day.

JEAN MARTIN

I was standing on the corner of Pier Road in Erith, with my father, when the Blitz started. I was only three. We were talking to one of his best friends, a fireman called George Crispin. It must have been four o'clock in the afternoon. I knew it had to be a Saturday, because it was only time I ever went out with him. You couldn't see any sky because it was just black with aeroplanes. They used to follow the river up, and we just stood there and stared. I think one of the men said, 'oh my God, someone's going to catch it tonight'. You see, if they're flying high in formation, they're not bombing you. I can't put my hand on my heart and say I went down the shelter that night, but I would imagine I was put there. We never went to bed, we just slept in the shelter - otherwise you were up and down two or three times a night.

We had a very posh shelter. Next door to us, they couldn't have a shelter in their garden - I think they had a mains service or something - so they put two in ours. They had five sons, and my uncle lived with us, so there were plenty of men. They dug down in the garden, then they put asbestos - we didn't know that asbestos was bad back then - tall sheets of it all the way round. You couldn't have a door on it, because of the blast. So they got cold water tanks, like you have in your loft, filled them with sand, and they made a little passageway; so you went round there, down the little passageway, and into the shelter. My mum and Aunt May next door, they made big thick, heavy curtains, and strung them across. We had hessian bunks slung from the sides on long scaffolding poles, like hammocks. Myself and next door's daughter slept on the top two, and our mums had more solid bunks underneath. Then there was a shelf above our heads; they had a car battery in that passageway somewhere, and my father rigged up little tiny torch bulbs all the way along, so we actually had electric light down there, like fairy lights!

My father worked in the Royal Arsenal, so he wasn't called up, neither was my uncle. But if you worked, you also had to do voluntary work of an evening. So both my uncle and him were in the Auxillary Fire Service. They were out alternate nights, or sometimes they both got called out. Apparently, if you looked at their rotas, they classed places: if there's a fire here, what to send and what not to send. If there was a fire at the oil works, it said: high risk, first crew expendable. Because peanuts, you know, once they start to deteriorate, they create gas, which is as good as dynamite. Apparently they all said, right, if we get called to the oil works, we go slowly boys!

Photographic portraits by Eva Sajovic

JEAN MARTIN

TRINITY SCHOOL

WORKING WITH TRINITY SCHOOL

One of the ambitions of Tideline was to engage and inspire local people about the unique landscape and stories of Lower Belvedere. Our partnership with students at Trinity School was key to this aspect of the project. Working over the course of a year, with year 8 students and science teacher Bright Okojie, Sarah led a programme of workshops and field visits, exploring the ecology, memories and stories of Belvedere marshes.

Students worked with professionals from Bexley Council's planning department, Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre, and Thames Water. They learnt about the unique biodiversity of the marshes, the physics of the sewage system, and the history of the area, and created new writing based on their findings: from myths about the marshes, to historical detective stories, to inventing new names for the dykes and ditches which characterise the landscape. The project culminated with the production of a guide to the marshes, which was distributed to young people in the local area.

The project was one of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment's best practice case studies for Engaging Places 2009/2010 (www.engagingplaces.org.uk), a programme to support teaching and learning through buildings and places. Two students presented their work at the Unforgettable Lessons exhibition at The Discover Centre in the Royal Naval College in Greenwich in August 2010.

We followed up our engagement with Trinity School in 2011. Sarah and artist Esther Yarnold worked with Year 8 students to create beautiful poetry boxes, sharing oral histories from the area collected by each student.

TRINITY STORIES

The Marshes Water Myth: Mr Marsh's Accidental Invention, by Grace Roach

Once upon a time, on the sparkling blue shore of the deep blue sea, there was a fisherman named Mr Aaron Marsh. He decided that he wanted to catch a big fish that day, so he got into his little fishing boat and set off into the deep blue sea.

About twenty minutes later his rod started shaking, the boat started rocking and the sea started to get so rough, it was like whatever was in the end of the rod was controlling it. Despite all of the chaos, Mr Marsh was determined to get whatever was in the beneath of the ocean, out of the water and dead. After a lot of attempts of heaving this thing out of the water, he started to become tired. He thought to himself that he needed to try one more time and if it didn't work he would give up. With one last heave something amazing happened. A ginormous tidal wave grew and grew and grew. Mr Marsh was so terrified that he steered the boat in any direction as fast as he could. This must have been what was on the end of my rod, he said. Just as the tidal wave fell, Mr Marsh got out of the way, as the water crashed and splashed over the dry muddy land that was in front of him.

When it all fell silent, Mr Marsh looked at what him and the tidal wave had created, a muddy, watery big piece of land. He sat his boat for a while, thinking. About ten minutes later he decided that the new land should be named a Marsh, after Mr Aaron Marsh himself.

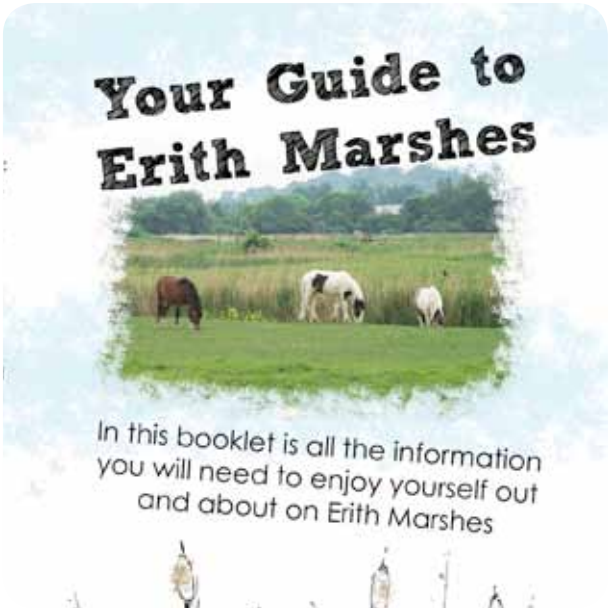
A few years later a lot of people knew about the marsh and came to visit it. As time went on nature began to take its place in the marsh. One by one, insects and birds and ranges of species made their own habitats there. When Mr Aaron Marsh came to see the marsh once more, he looked around and thought he had not just made a marsh, but a home for living things as well.

The Yellow Dyke, by Vincent DeMarco

Many years ago, a lonely man was walking his two dogs beside the river Thames. He heard a scream and walked inland to the marshes. He found a trail of blood leading towards a dyke, the dyke was pure red and a man wearing a fishing outfit was lit up by the moon, he was wearing a bright yellow cloak and a black hat. He fell apart into ashes and the river returned to its natural colour. Later, the police discovered a body further down the dyke and called the case the murder of the yellow coat.

A year later the yellow coat was found hanging on a cross in the marshes, which was in memory of the girl.

Other stories by Trinity students are showcased online at www.belvederestories.co.uk


Your Guide to Erith Marshes
In this booklet is all the information you will need to enjoy yourself out and about on Erith Marshes


for Crossness Pumping Station,
distinctive curved roof. It has been
with South London's sewage
e late nineteenth century, and is
o be joined by a new waste
g facility, which is under
uction at the moment (2010).


ditches, ponds and streams
The Reed Warbler is a plain, unstreaked warbler with brown feathers. It is associated with marshlands or other wetlands. It winters in Africa, visits the UK in the summer and likes to breed in the Erith Marsh reedbeds.
Knotted Hedge Parsley is an unusual member of the carrot family. It grows up to 50cm in length and has small pinkish white flowers.
The Peacock Butterfly gets its name from the large and colourful eyespots on its wings, which look like those on the tail of a peacock.
Marsh Myths
We've written new myths for Erith marshes – you can read them at www.belvederegreenlinks.org.uk from autumn 2010.


Crossness Pumping Station
Water Voles

POETRY BOXES

TIDELINE POETRY

A PAPER TRAIL

From the end of Ruskin Road
you can see how it used to be
come night time

    ploughed marshland
    peas, rhubarb, potatoes

she remembers corn
sown, grown
reaped, burned

    orchards sliced into gardens
    apples and pears remember

we spend evenings
ducking bats
hair wrapped against black wings

    owls declare themselves
    amongst the ruins

his father mapped a paper trail
through the night
from home to pub and back again

    there was nothing to break
    only birds' eggs and ice

a piece of paper
can sound like cloth or leather
stop your heart

    three lamps puncture the dark
    her imagination flocks towards shadows

a hawkmoth
heavy in the bulb's halo
grips her skin

    bare legs
    cold water

Ruddy Darter
Migrant Hawker
Marsh Dock, Dunlin

    we could live here a thousand years
    leave without trace

day to day
live on your wits
no excess baggage

    colleagues not pets
    horse, long dog, terrier

we follow the seasons
hops, cherries, strawberries
plums, apples, potatoes

    back here for winter
    kushti atchin tan

Brazil, Lee, Turner
Boswell, Smith, Pell
Saunders, Eastwood, Jones

    they saved their blades for us
    knives, shears, chisels, spades

years later
she questions her fear
of white pinafores and peg-stuffed baskets

    you can't take your bundle with you when you die
    live for today and a bit for tomorrow.

FIVE O'CLOCK RIVER

We make a wheelbarrow from the springs of a pram
wait for an onshore wind
hunt firewood

    we call it the red hill
    they called it lovers' lane

from the Oil Works to South End
I try on the word fiancé
we pool resources for a ring

    imported peanuts like dynamite
    high risk: first crew expendable

she can't get used to
recycled sirens
marking out factory time

    coded cargo
    black diamonds and palm trees

for the price of a pint
Robert the Devil would swim
to Essex and back

    a five o'clock river
    workers spill through factory gates

from her office window
horse hooves and the song of a nameless bird
a fox with her cubs come dusk

    jointed pipes coil
    above our heads

he spends his days
machine-bound
rolling paper

    Callender's cables in the tramways
    of Bombay, Rangoon, Hong Kong

boxed in a room ten foot square
Punjabi land ransomed
for the price of a fare

    stacking pipes onto palettes
    clay curled around clay

families re-align
men follow brothers
wives - husbands, children - fathers

    skinning onions
    tears and vinegar

the world looks new straight off the plane
dates lodged in their memories
31st May 1967, 17th February 1968

    two days here and he is lost in a language
    that scrambles halfway to Z

we find places to pray
St. Augustine's Hall, St. John's Hall, Battle Road
turn this place from warehouse to home

    hanji
    I mean yes, Miss

a school in the rafters
so our words won't lose themselves
in our children's mouths

    bandkah shakana
    share what you have.

A WAKE OF SALT

They walk on cinders
to crowd the banks
Britannia, Mauretania, Monarch

watching the hills grow
seagull-raked

throned on my father's shoulders
he remembers the zeppelin
I remember him

we watch them cast secret concrete
through holes in a tin fence

dreaming he's at the controls
the roar of a Hurricane
skimming water

if I was with my father it had to be a Saturday
the sky black as treacle, thick with planes

they sleep underground
packed into tanks
that coaxed crystals from razorite

an army of dads and daughters
pulling potatoes

no room at the Arsenal
I am sent to Stoke-on-Trent
I make friends and bullets

in blackout blindness
he bangs into a bull

a metal flanked
push-along
Mobo horse

pinching peanuts
treasure-hunting

six of us and a baby, one tiny car
we stayed put, took the carpets upstairs
watched water for a night, a day, a night

we thought we were alone
ours the only banks broken

everyone bolted
me on the back of a lorry
moonlit water

washed away
they couldn't get home

three weeks in St. John's Hall
the afternoon tide racing tarmac
a tin bath filled with food

inches from the crossbar
a drowned football pitch

she had loved
those blue velvet heels
mud-kissed, water-ruined

it left a wake of salt
enough to stop the plants from growing

a line of men
ferried from Belvedere
to Ford's

at the end of a day climbing mountains
he sleeps white-dusted dreams.

RIVER-WALKING

Come and go
move on
move on

    he reads the next place to step
    on slippery green

open the windows
abandon the dance
for the new year sirens

    the fog slips ditchwards
    liquid white

from the front of Joe's butcher's bike
he sees bombers break the spell
of a Hunter's moon

    we watch the war go by
    keep silent for hospital ships

children wait
for a roar across the river
the sky fired red

    scarlet and black and braided gold
    they played silver music

marshland turned skating rink -
even the queen came to see
how the world had changed

    we went to work
    on a rowing boat

unwrap newspaper
jam sandwiches and cold tea
bare feet against river boulders

    fat sugared blackberries
    purple fingers

bread and butter pudding
ate the price of the fare
so they river-walked home

    summer days drenched with skylarks
    the endlessness of crickets.

TEXT IN THE LANDSCAPE

Re-presenting local stories about Belvedere back into the landscape was an important element of Tideline.

A series of 24 wayfinding discs have been installed marking a route from Belvedere Station, along Norman Road, across the marshes to the riverwall, which is shown on the map above. Each disc contains a line of Tideline poetry. As you walk, you can enjoy the changing landscape unfold in front of you and catch glimpses of the past through people's memories.

In the summer of 2011, a temporary mural was installed along the river wall, featuring other lines from the poetry. This, and the wayfinding discs were designed by Studio Frith.

Photographs by Camilla Brueton

Photograph by Studio Frith

Photograph by Studio Frith

TIDELINE WOULD LIKE TO THANK

David Eyre

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Jasminda and the Belvedere Asian Women's Group

Bakhshish Singh Tumber & Gurwinder Aujla at Guru Nanak Durbar, Erith & Belvedere Sikh Temple

The staff at Belvedere Library

Belvedere Pop In Parlour

James Lambert, Tom Ginnett and Hoagy Houghton

Jack Rose

Studio Frith

Saskia Delman, Arts Manager,
London Borough Bexley

Ben Thomas, Senior Planner,
London Borough Bexley

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London Borough Bexley

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London Borough Bexley

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London Borough Bexley

John Archer

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Crossness Nature Reserve Manager

Crossness Nature Reserve Volunteers

Yeukai Taruvinga & Active Horizons

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