

Writing the Levels

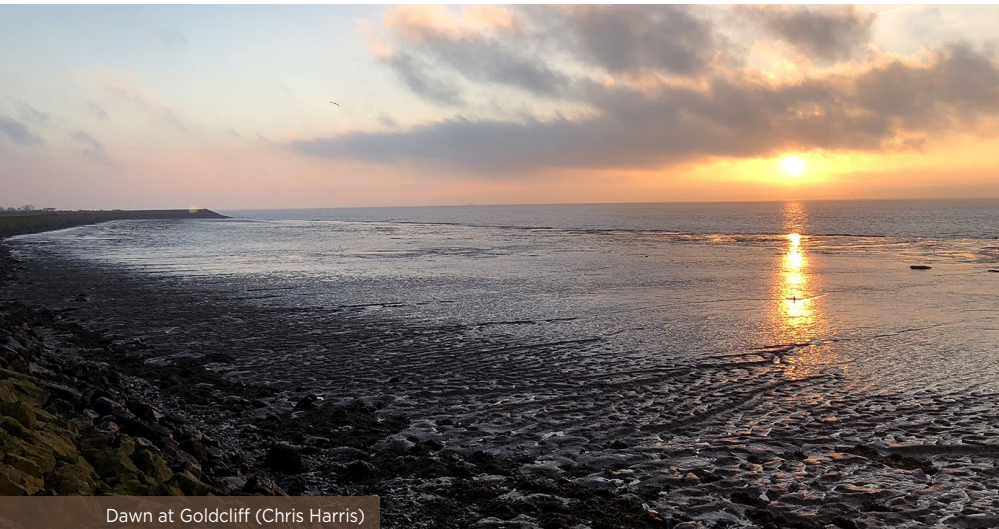
Personal connections to the Gwent Levels in poetry and prose

Discover Gwent Levels

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Dawn at Goldcliff (Chris Harris)

Introduction

About a year ago, I was due to run a workshop at the Newport Wetlands Centre. I have a long-term interest in writing as a way to deeply engage with place, and so when I found out about the aims of the Living Levels project, I proposed a creative writing workshop to the team. My idea had been to set participants a series of writing exercises to have a go at, while we spent an afternoon exploring the marshy fields and the mudflats, looking out to the silver-grey estuary and the mirror-image coast of Somerset beyond. But then lockdown happened.

I do not remember at what point it occurred to me to suggest switching the session online. More and more people seemed to be becoming comfortable using video conferencing software, while the practice of paying attention to the natural world around us suddenly seemed to be taking on a new cultural significance. But still, would people want to take part? And how would we keep the focus of the workshop on a place, while working remotely?

We need not have worried. About fifteen people logged on. Some were local, but often didn't know exactly where the 'Gwent Wetlands' was; some had family connections to the area but lived away; others, intriguingly, lived at a considerable distance (Scotland, Switzerland, even Australia) and connected to the place through curiosity alone. All were united by a cheerful willingness to engage with a group of strangers online, to use literature as a means to explore a generally overlooked stretch of Welsh coast. Then as a pleasing surprise, by the end of the session, most of those present wanted to carry on.

And so for the past year, through varying grades of lockdown, we have continued to meet as a writer's group once a month, online. We have written, listened and read together. We have learnt so much about a place which many people only see from a motorway. And I think the social side has been important too - the chance to meet as a group and chat about something interesting, at a time when so many people have felt so isolated.

This collection is the outcome. The pieces included are written in a range of styles and formats, some by experienced published authors, others by people who had never shared their writing before joining the group. Each writer has found a way to document a personal connection to the Gwent Wetlands. We dearly hope that these pieces will inspire you to deepen your own engagement with the amazing ecology, history, and culture of these Living Levels.

Phil Owen, April 2021

Timeless

Heidi Gallacher

For years have tides returned to shore
 and starlings flown in wide formation,
 reeds and mosses grown galore
 and rivers crossed this sweet location.
 For centuries has strange light glimmered,
 dawn through sunset, changing hue
 Sun o'er fertile fields has shimmered
 Reens aglow while curlews flew.

For eons, with relentless power
 have waters bled their silt and clay
 creating muds, upon which flower
 soft meadowsweet, in disarray.
 Through time have blown the winds, defeating
 Branches, bowed, sweep o'er the floor.
 Nature's laws, so seldom fleeting,
 across this landscape, will endure.

Walking the Gwent Levels

Richard Urbanski

I am circumnavigating the perimeter of Wales, travelling east from the Monmouthshire border town of Chepstow along a meandering line of the Wales Coastal Path. A calm estuary beckons, inviting a seemingly elusive open sea. The path has become my companion in the liminal space between land and gently lapping water, an opportunity for reflection on a circular journey around a country where the coast-line has a special allure.

Almost three decades earlier, I began another walk from Chepstow, travelling north on the Offas Dyke footpath, along the border from coast to coast. Nearing the end of my destination, I contemplated the next stage beyond Prestatyn. Starting and ending presupposes a defined route, a continuous line towards an end point on the map. This is not so for me. This is a circular journey, realised in retrospect and formed during many years of roaming a cultural landscape that has become a gravitational pull of homeland rather than journeying 'to' or 'from'. Living in two coastal towns, has offered an opportunity to explore miles of rugged Aberystwyth coastline and the gentler Penarth seascape. And now, the compass is out for another walk, again beginning in Chepstow.

The Wales Coastal Path invites you to traverse the contours between estuary, farmland, housing estates and roadside. As I move along, I'm gripped by a feeling of familiarity that also seems unusually unfamiliar. At times, the motorway drones away in the distance, playing like a low-level mood-music soundtrack. I'm not quite sure what to make of this flat, almost peri-urban, semi-wild, human-sculpted landscape. This is my first visit to the Gwent Levels. There is something here that is pulling, urging and encouraging the senses... for reflection and discovery of heritage and time past.

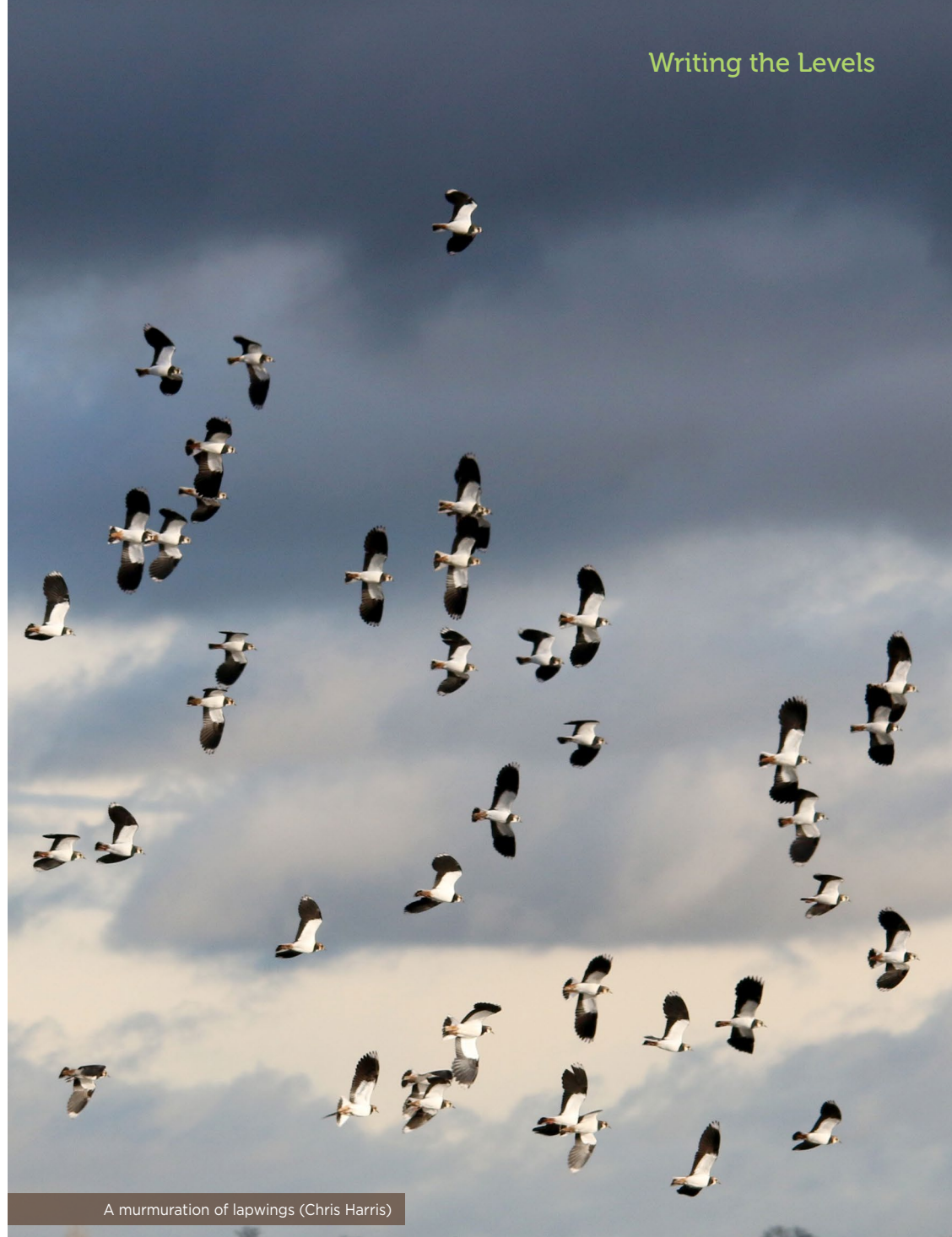
I am ducking under busy motorway bridges, across quiet field margins, shy of any early spring farming activity and along the pretty Goldcliff sea wall stretch. Aber Hafren, the Mouth of the Severn is a blue-grey calm carpet with just a little sign of maritime presence on the horizon. An occasional hint of the past pops up as vertical wooden posts punctuating the water-line. Walking the line, as many generations before me have done, provides an opportunity for reflection and closer observation. I feel a growing familiarity and an absorbing sense of, and for, the past. Moving further along the coastline reveals more of an expansive, subtle landscape of land and water, a landscape sculpted by hand and time.

Edges are fertile places and I suspect our ancestors drew from the magic of place as much as from its natural resources. Looking out over the sea and big sky, I am reminded that this was once a route 'over there' across the salty water, where trade and commerce were important lifelines.

I reach the East Usk lighthouse that marks an intersection, and a place to absorb the view. Unwrapping my lunch, I catch sight of a dark flickering cloud passing overhead. It is a flowing, undulating murmuration of lapwing, travelling west along the coast. The path opens up conversations like speckled memories of transient places. The birds trigger a ripple of excitement and I feel I have arrived. The last time I saw such a gathering of Peewit was during my childhood in the north of England when it was commonplace to sit in a moorland and see a flock pass overhead. That was five decades ago and here on the Gwent Levels they now hold a sense of place and recollection, a welcome companion on the footpath.

Walking the Levels is a delight and a sensory, cultural playground. The monotony of a blue-grey-green-grey, sea-sky horizon is transformed by the brilliance of an emerging veil of sunlight that hints at the story of our ancestors, and suggests why they chose this as a migration path and eventually settled here. Walking the path invites a conversation and an opportunity to read the landscape. Meandering inland along carefully managed walkways of the Newport Wetlands Nature Reserve, they take you through the reed beds, along reens, dykes and field boundaries, reclaimed and shaped by the presence of human hands.

Since visiting the Levels for the first time, I have often revisited and discovered what, at first appearance are many contradictions juxtaposing the 'natural' and 'industrial'. Walking the Magor Marsh, beneath the pylons and across the Newport Transporter Bridge, this is an evolving landscape with a new industrial legacy. The Living Levels project has been a discovery and one that is playing an important role in regenerating the future of a landscape that addresses the current climate and ecological threats. Connecting the land and people who live and manage the wetlands is a story that has played out over many generations. It feels a contemporary new 'industrial' story is being redefined here, one that celebrates cultural exchange. The experience of walking for me is integral to understanding and capturing a landscape. Walking the Levels has given me an opportunity to reconnect and form a deeper understanding of this unique place.



A murmuration of lapwings (Chris Harris)

Memories of the Gwent Levels

Mary Reed

I have lived near the levels all my life; my earliest memory would be travelling from Cardiff with mum and dad and three siblings along the coast road to the car ferry, at Beachley to take us to England. Yes, before any of the bridges were built to cross the River Severn. Living in the city we were surrounded by houses and traffic; the coast road was like escaping; the flat landscape emerging as we bumped along. I must have had a window seat in the car as I vividly remember the water crashing in the gap between the ferry and land. I also remember travelling on the ferry being a very young child this was a great adventure; it was an open car ferry and did not take long to get to Aust.

The Aust terminal was featured on the cover of a Bob Dylan album in 1966; the same year that the first Severn Bridge opened, and the car ferry closed after 40 years.

Many years later, whilst on a walk near Chepstow, with my husband and children we came across the old derelict ferry in its resting place.

As a teenager, I would travel from Cardiff to Newport by train, I had a wonderful sense of independence and anticipation; the journey took you through the flat lands of the levels where you could see for miles watching the wild horses and birds enjoying their freedom.

More recent memories would be of a wildlife photography course at Magor Marsh, an interesting day but the weather was against us. I must go back to take some better shots! I am an avid photographer, and after joining the Living Levels writing group during Covid-19 lockdown, I wondered how I could integrate both interests.

Luckily, I have access to a light aircraft, so took to the air with my camera to photograph the levels and get inspiration for my story.

I started the photographic journey at Beachley reasonably early in the morning. The light was good. I asked the pilot, my husband, to circle, so I could take a shot of the bridge then continue along the coast towards Newport Docks.

The flatness of the land struck me, along with the colours of the countless rectangular fields, with a scattering of wind pylons. I could not see much livestock from 2000 ft and where was the railway track? The sea defences were clearly visible; it was harder to make out the road structure to get you to the few houses or farms on the coast. Scattered villages filled the landscape until Newport came into view, it



looked so close, but what was that interesting white building ahead? It turned out to be the West Usk Lighthouse, a navigation aid to the docks. A large cargo ship was manoeuvring to enter. I thought I would try and get a photo on the way back, as I was on the wrong side of the plane!

The next thing that caught my eye were the remains of Llanwern Steelworks, some structures are still in use but most of the site was flattened. It still looked colossal from the air.

Onwards towards Cardiff Docks and the sea defences were noticeably smaller. Wind farms come into view, how things have changed! Cardiff Docks nearly empty,

I thought why have we never flown this way before? We were tuned into the Cardiff ATC listening to pilots gaining permission to enter airspace; we stayed well clear. We kept a good lookout as we turned to head back along the coast returning to the Gwent Levels. Was the ship still in view? Oh no, the light is not good from this side of the plane!

“A train, a train” I exclaimed but too late, it was too fast for me to photograph! Or was it?



(Mary Reed)

Moon-Crazed Work

Stephen Cogbill

A November Coast Walk of 25 miles requiring a dawn start and after-dark finish.

- | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>1 Grey mists
roll back
as I peer
offshore
at the silt-fast
ship</p> <p>ribcage of oak
hull planks
now voids of
dim daylight</p> <p>grounded there
awaiting
the lifting tide</p> <p>that never came.</p> | <p>2 The large
time-toppled
tree</p> <p>salt-claimed,
lodged against the
concrete certitude
of the
sea wall</p> <p>catches the first
brightness
of the day.</p> <p>Beneath it
I tread
the duvet
of seaweed
and flotsam</p> <p>the tree's bed
before a high
Spring tide
calls it</p> <p>falteringly,
to its next
voyage.</p> | <p>3 Past
the rootless
sea-sick
tree</p> <p>past
the jealous
still rooted
ship</p> <p>at
Passage Wharf
I stop</p> <p>to watch
and hear
the fickle tide</p> <p>first lapping
then surging
around
the Pill.</p> | <p>4 Mor Hafren
sets about</p> <p>its
moon-crazed
work</p> <p>scouring
the flats</p> <p>carrying
in its flow</p> <p>beneath the
patience hardened
gaze of
stock-still
fishermen</p> <p>an invisible burden</p> <p>the fish,
once
daylight fails</p> <p>my only
fellow travellers.</p> |
|---|--|--|--|

Morgan Williams

Rob Pickford

In this piece Rob takes us back to an imagined meeting between his great-grandfather and himself.

I'm leaning on the wall of Red House Farm in Llandevenny. There's a faint rustle and turning round, just behind me, is a guy, frail but upright with strong deep brown eyes and a face that has seen a bit of weather. He's looking fondly out across the moor that stretches out below the hamlet.

'My name? Morgan. Morgan Williams. Yes, I was born here. When? 1851. This was father's farm. 34 acres. His name? James, like his father. We were a big family. 11 of us, not counting the ones who died when they were little. My mother, Margaret was his second wife of course. Born in Rogiet a couple of miles up towards Chepstow. 25 years younger than him. All our lot were from Llandevenny, well most of us. Not my Dad. He was from Cwmcarnvan, up near Abergavenny. Why did he come here? No idea. Mary, she was his first wife, from Wilcrick, you know up by that big hill behind us. Died having the twins she did.

I often think about how Mam coped. Must have been hard taking on six children and then having all of us. Dad was busy on the farm and that was hard enough, but us lot must have been a handful. We had cows. I used to take them down onto the moor. And we had apple orchards. I used to take them apples for pressing down at Redwick. Good cider it was.

It was all change when I was growing up. I expect it's all calmed down by now. Mam used to talk about the railway coming here. Built the year before I was born. Cut right across the back of the farm. These are the self same pigsties and that's our cattle shed. This old wall and those old red tiles were here when I was a boy. We used to whitewash it. Doesn't look like it's been touched for a long time now. Dad always said that things weren't looked after like they used to be.

The railway? Mam used to talk of the noise. The digging and the explosions when they made that cutting. Then when it came, all the smoke, steam and clatter. They were worried as well what the animals would think and how we were going to get to Tenants Field, but they built a bridge and it was OK. We used to share the land, had our own patches but it all got joined up. Then of course they drained the moor down there and dug all those reens.

After Dad died it was just me and her. She was in charge, it was her farm, she owned it. I was just her assistant. When I left she hired this man from Norfolk.

You say they're going to build some new road down in front of the village. They said when they built the railway that it would be all that was needed. It'll spoil the view. I used to lean on this wall looking across to the hills in Somerset, blue in the evening light. Full of ships the channel was then. White with sails. See that island there out in the middle, up near Bristol. Denny Island its called. When I worked in Llanviangel Rogiet, me and Ursula used to take the cows across there. You had to know what you were doing mind. Dangerous sands you see, always shifting. God made that island you know. A lump of mud it was he threw from Gray Hill. It was a bet with the Devil. The Devil threw a stone. Didn't even reach the sea. You can still see it stuck in the ground behind Llanvihangel Church.

Where was I? Ah yes, you asked about Ursula. I was 31, my Ursula was 22. Bit of a fuss there was. Her lot never liked me. Not good enough for their Ursula, I wasn't. They ran the Red Lion in Magor and the butchers next door. She was well bought up. She could play the piano and went to school each week in pony and trap. They said to Ursula that if she married me that they'd cut her off without a penny. Her mother wouldn't agree so we eloped, ran off and got married in Newport. Never forgave us. You say that you've heard about it? What after all that time? Told you there was a fuss. Mind you after Robert died it was Mrs Baker, her mum who owned to the Lion. She was made of strong stuff. Our Ursula got some of that from her.

So we were on our own. We had a cottage on Common Road. You know on Barecroft, by Magor, looking at the railway. Yes, things was tight. I did what I knew how to do. Bit of labouring, a hay fuller for a time. You know what it's like, depends on what's about. Ursula and I stuck together mind, eight children we had, so it can't have all been bad. The cottage didn't work out. I got a job in Llanvihangel labouring on the farm and a cottage came with it, so that helped. The Villas they called them, by the village pump. Built for those of us who worked hard.

You say that your mam remembered me. She couldn't have been more than three, but she was a full of chat. Me, all white haired and big white beard, sitting in my settle she told you. Sounds about right. And she remembers Joey the pig, stroking his back with coal. Mind you we had a new Joey every year. Remember Ursula's Dad was a butcher and she knew the business.

Her mum, Lillian, was our sixth. I was a witness at her wedding. Bit embarrassing, never did much studying so I just made my mark. You say she had six children. It was only your mum and her sister Olive I knew. Lillian met her husband working on the

railway. Bit of a firebrand, sharp and proud mind, big in the union. A thousand people worked at those marshalling yards at Severn Tunnel. I remember them building that tunnel. Longest in the world, changed it all round here. It wasn't just farming anymore.

Your mam says that I gave her a cowslip ball. I did like cowslips, bright, soft yellow and green. Each spring the fields are full of them. Not anymore you say. I wonder why.

So your Mam worked on the railway, but not for long you say. She was a teacher in Birmingham? That's a long way away, guess none of us stay still for long. Not like it used to be when people stayed put. Well, I think they did, apart from our lot.'

Time dissolves as I look out across the moor. I turn round to ask him more questions, but he has gone.

Eyes Scanning the Levels

Liz Aiken

The watcher returns. Standing safe. Spying out to sea. Binoculars raised to eyes that arch across the reed beds. This safe, flat dry land. The low grey menacing sky. The day promises cruelty like a three day-old bruise. The vivid purples and blues have started to fade now tinged with dirty yellows and dank greens. The wind whipping in from the Atlantic and up the estuary push the clouds across the skies. The rising tide slaps with a crack as seawater hits concrete barriers then falls back, pulling with it the debris of silt, gravel and discarded fast food boxes. The clouds shape the reflections. You stare and imagine the dragon of myth, now reshaped into a mouse. Then a sudden change, a flash of light. The sullen mood is weakened by the rays of sunshine cutting through the cloud line. Vision is clearer. Grey transitions into the palest baby blue. The effect is powerful. The colours of the land and sea sharpen, revealing the possibilities held within the day. The whine of the wind replaced by the songs and calls of birds, this land is their haven.

The spy raises the binoculars every day to watch. The routine unchanging - the observation, noting and digitally recording.

The list grows. The list turns a hobby into an obsession.

Watching from land stolen from the sea. Capturing the memories of seeing this land again. The scent of salt, weed and reeds, hearing wild calls now the curlews cry cur-lee frightened now a rapid tremolo. Joined by a tremulous chorus as sandpipers, turnstones, redshanks and the explosive Cetti's warbler add to the soundscape. The tapestry of wings scatter in alarm then fly high above the sea wall.

Binoculars raised to watch with the background of their mournful high pitched calls. Then calm as the birds return and settle on the shore of sea-stolen land. No threat this time. The shelducks calmly waddle.

Binoculars observe the birds safe to sleep, eat, preen and mate. Turning towards land the reeds sway and the water sheds the taste of salt. Here the bitterns boom, peewits call, water rails skulk and stank hens lurk.

All seen by raised binoculars, now turned skywards the swallows swoop and swirl ready to depart. Soon the sounds of summer will fade and the blues will take on the shades of greys and mists drape and hide the sea from the land.

All the names recorded, every call heard and feather spied contented with the list yet strange no raptor has flown this way. For one last time today the binoculars scan the levels. From sea to sky and across the reens.

Danger spied a raptor to be noted as the hobbyist sees a hobby soar. The swallows fly with an elegant waltz across the land. Too late this haven now shattered. As the hobby flies playing out the killer's dance. Birds scatter, whirling, wheeling pulled into the air above sea no land can steal. The swallows journey ends above the sea-stolen lands of Gwent as the hungry bird swoops with sharpened talons.

Time and Tide

Stephen Cogbill

An archaeology field trip to Goldcliff

Called from sleep
not by the sun
but the sea-state
of the estuary

We're off to that
shape shifting,
inter-tidal world
Not properly land
nor sea.

At first
firm bands of silt
carry the weight
of our assorted wellies
Most spattered with dried mud
Others hosed into
reluctant shininess
by fastidious owners.

A furlong out to sea
A flock of oystercatchers
peeps loudly as
It wheels into the sky
leaving no trace
on the flats.

We get there
past recumbent
half-submerged trees
Our timid feet sinking in
over the ankles

The fear
of boot-topping depths
to come

We wobble like drunks
seeking the salvation
of firmer ground.

The Prof
seemingly immune to wobbling
leads us straight
to the spot

With buckets of water
and urgent hands
We scoop and sluice away
the mud

Washing away time.

We stare at the footprints
In the silty clay
Children
who played in this place
running in the mud
nearly 8,000 years ago

Laughing and shrieking
the warm mud oozing
through their toes
What hopes and cares
they must have carried?

A cloud passes

A few fleeting moments more
before the tide reclaims
these secrets

It will claim us too
given half a chance!

We race to record
what we see.

Back home
I look at

the photographs
on the table
Scant proof it was anything
More than a dream.

The shy, mythical
'land under sea'
Is teasing us

Hinting at its existence

And the distant lives
It is keeping to itself

It has me in its thrall.



Prehistoric human footprint, Goldcliff, circa 5600 BC (Chris Harris)

Liminal Concerto no 1

Maxine Smillie

Rock Stone Wall.
Rock Stone Wall.
Currents, debris, rise and fall
Currents, debris, rise and fall.

Lip lapping on concrete edge
Boundaried human/nature force.
Wild and free, next to man's pavement laid.
Sea butts to nibble, weaving away the illusory safety.

Rock Stone Wall
Rock Stone Wall
Currents and debris rise and fall
Currents and debris rise and fall

