

A Teesmouth Epiphany by John Nicholson (1997)

Almost fifty years ago a pair of nine-year-old eyes viewed Teesmouth for the first time. Their fleeting review was favourable, on a day that began at Middlesbrough's Transporter and reached a somewhat greater intensity with the discovery of Cowpen Marsh. An attractive new place, like a new species of bird, is always a source of adrenalin arousal.

My father and I had left Darlington on a summer day worthy of that season. Along with a teenage Alan Baldrige we'd met a teenage Philip Stead, at a Transporter that juvenile eyes had equated with some marvel of science fiction.

In that year of 1949, Philip and Alan represented the hierarchy of Teesmouth birders. As a matter of fact they comprised the 'lowerarchy' too - incorporated in themselves the entire birding 'archy' come to think of it. Let me expand on that a little. People, almost exclusively male people, who went to the outdoors solely to watch birds, became defined as bird-watchers. Those observers of birds who were indifferent to the finer points of grammatical construction were content to be birdwatchers. An unhyphenated life was so much simpler then. The diminutive, 'birder', didn't develop until much later. Similarly with binoculars. There was an acute sense of avant-garde temerity when their radical reduction to 'binocs' came into vogue. I'm uncomfortable with their further condensation, to 'bins'. In this historical review I've used 'bin' for colloquial reasons, rather than personal preference, so you'll feel more comfortable. When I type 'bins', then 'binocs' are the second items that spring to mind.

Upper echelon birders of the 1940s were easily identified. They were encrusted with massive Ross 12x50 bins, and you had to graduate from weight-lifting class before you were allowed to use them. Heavy-knit turtle-neck sweaters, to reduce bin whiplash during moments of excitement were encouraged, and duffle-coats completed the typical ensemble. Other clothing was left to an individual's conception of taste. Some birders grew beards, and affected a naval swagger. But I digress.

It was quite a thrill to cross the River Tees on the Transporter on that memorable day in 1949. After that there is a blank space in reminiscence, and it neatly covers the time taken to walk to Cowpen. A young memory regulates its own criteria as to matters worthy of retention - as you're all old enough to know. So I've a dismal recall of the birds that were encountered that day. No doubt Skylark soliloquies floated down from invisible heights, and there must have been a hysterical Redshank or two to spread word of our entry onto Cowpen. My recollection is negligent of them. What remains intact, if slightly out of focus, is a sense of Cowpen's immensity. The shimmering heat-waves may have been partly responsible for that feeling of infinite wilderness. Whatever the physics of the case, the fact remains that this was a landscape where intriguing narrow creeks threaded their maze ways around hillocks, and lost themselves amongst grasslands original and unstructured by human hand. Reed-fringed pools hid behind ridges of grass, and were met with seven-year-old squeals of delight. Adventure was given free rein.

A marauding Crow was dispossessed of the eggshell it had drained. The flustered egg-owner, a Garganey, (how could I remember that?) swept by in ritual circles, on anxious wings. With the exception of a brief retentive vision of Greatham Creek, the remainder of that day is gone from memory.

A few short-trousered years passed. Led by Albert Stainthorpe M.B.O.U., a group of Darlington naturalists had set off on a trek of discovery, along the south shore of the estuary. We'd de-trained at South Bank, or was it Grangetown, and sauntered off towards South Gare, along trails long since overrun by industry. My recall of birds seen along that ancient route is modest, restricted as it is to a solitary Knot, coloured in the rich red of summer.

A birding hiatus, measured in years, ensued. My life followed formalised patterns of listless orthodoxy. Soccer entered the quixotic equation of life, and cycling rose to some prominence; hiking too.

The beginnings of my ascent towards birder status were slow, and casually serendipitous. All of which makes the more remarkable my documentation of the pivotal event, that happened during a long hike in Swaledale. I'd taken an antique pair of inherited bins along for the walk. And I'd been brought to a sudden fellside stop when the bins had managed to focus themselves upon a male Wheatear. I'd met with beauty before, but this was a class apart. The Wheatear was distracted by territorial imperatives, and allowed a close approach. His wide range of pastel-coloured plumage reached to the far side of exquisite. I stared in fascination, and age-appropriate rapture. Unrecognised at the time, my metamorphosis into a birding life had begun.

Miss S. Vere Benson's "Observers Book of British Birds" delayed my progress for a while. You may laugh, indeed do; just remember the time and the place, and the absence of mentors. Miss Benson did her best, bless her, and I think fondly of her unpretentious little book. My bins were also short on aptitude for their frequent tests, most of which they failed. Whilst today's optical works of science can be expected to recognise needles in distant haystacks, my early bins would readily misidentify haystacks themselves, and that on blue-sky days. My competence was compromised in every direction.

Miss Benson was ill-prepared to offer guidance as to the identity of two large shorebirds that probed the beach near South Gare one winter day. My bins were fresh out of ideas. The situation was resolved when a youth of similar vintage came along the beach. A pair of competent-looking bins swung casually from his neck. I explained the dilemma, and he followed my pointing finger with his eyes - not his bins, his eyes. "Bar-tailed Godwits" he proclaimed airily, "there's lots of them about". I felt humble in the presence of such expertise. That's when I met a third Teesmouth birder: Brian Coates.

Untutored rookie birders carry an insecure world upon their drooping shoulders. Sometimes, for security, they try not to identify birds; especially those of us who were coached by Miss Benson. Along with a trainee birder cousin (Harry Kay-Robinson), who was a ready match for my birding inabilities at that time, we'd walked from Seaton Carew to North Gare. As we came to the Gare on that idyllic summer afternoon, we were met by another swinging pair of bins, attached to another adolescent birder. As if it were an everyday event he recited a list of the birds he'd seen at the Gare, and they included Arctic Tern and Arctic Skua. Miss Benson hadn't prepared us for such wonders, and we were sceptical. We nodded knowingly, by way of thanks, and went on our way. And I still remember, as if it was yesterday, my reaction of utter disbelief! I was wrong to doubt; Jim Henderson knew his terns and skuas.

Despite Miss Benson and my much-criticised bins, I seem to have made some progress as time unravelled. Fred Cooke and I had one day returned home from Teesmouth with a list in excess of twenty species; now that was progress indeed.

Towards the end of 1957 I met Graham Bell, and I'm sure he'll forgive my complete lack of recall of an event of such historical significance. My notebook dismisses the incident with a succinct "met Graham Bell".

During 1958 my exposure to Teesmouth increased, and I began to meet graduates of the Cleveland Naturalists Club. At about that time Miss Benson found herself deposed by Roger Tory Peterson. A small investment was made in new bins, and I began to feel better pleased with myself as the percentage of birds identified increased markedly.

There was no Teesmouth Bird Club in those days, no formal structure of any kind. As elder statesman of that period, Philip Stead, occupied the position of local oracle, and became repository for records of interest. Philip had contacts in the wider world; he owned a car too. The rest of us, a dirty dozen or so, became efficient sweaty cyclists, and pedalled insouciantly around the estuary, in search of winged excitement.

I look back upon that time with immeasurable pleasure. Many of the friendships forged in the heat of summer and gale of Autumn have endured through the years, and all are remembered with affection. The late 1950s may not have been Teesmouth's finest hour, if such things are regulated by the number of rarities found, but they did produce some of the finest people my life has come across.

Such emotive recognition doesn't fit too well with my County Durham hard man image, so I'll switch topics.

Hartlepool was the place to be when nor'easters raged and seabirds swept by in search of sea-speed records. Hartlepool then meant the amphitheatre; the conversion of the Heugh Battery into an Observatory came much later. Huddled along the wall beside the top tier of cement, in the Roman-influenced excavation, we shivered towards warmth. Strenuous gales dashed into our faces, and we ignored them, concentrating instead on some visual seabird feast. I don't know how we survived such physical misery - you wouldn't catch me doing that today. Polar explorers had it easy by comparison; but they're only temporary hard men.

Without benefit of beepers, cellular phones, or cars, Hartlepool communications were of a primitive order. Mostly they depended upon precocious vocal chords. Imagine a summer day, with about fifteen teenage birders ranged around the top tier of that amphitheatre roost, with `scopes` glued to knees; tripods were for wimps. Picture if you will a long line of `Tour de Force` bicycles, resting in a ready-for-action position along the base of that arena. Add to that curious mix a detached group of non-birders - the great unwashed - and pick up, if you can, the muscular tones of a Salvation Army Band in full flow. Are you still with me? Good. Now stir in a distant cyclist, and have him approach the amphitheatre at lightning speed. See him skid to a tyre-burning stop, at the upper path. Here him yell at the top of his voice, to penetrate the distracting music, and listen to the words of the interpreter as his message is flashed along the concourse. "E.G.Brown's got a Crane on Cowpen"! Now ignore the imagine bit, because it doesn't apply. See instead the reality as fifteen bodies bound up from prone positions, listen to the chatter of fifteen `scopes` being unceremoniously condensed, and watch agile bodies hurl themselves down the steps and leap on the bikes. Watch them move off in formation, and streak away in a whirl

of chains and clouds of disturbed dust. Briefly note a band reduced to discordant pitch. Such incidents were the norm for early TBC members - spontaneous reactions to whatever fate was inclined to offer.

No enumeration of those hectic days would be complete without mention of Pete Reid. An accomplished artist, Pete also figured highly on the whimsy scale. Many and various were his influences upon the Teesmouth scene, and grown birders could be seen to cower in apprehension when Pete was seen to smile. His cardboard Dotterel, (that I erroneously remembered as a Dusky Thrush in other writing) was a classic of its sadistic kind, and fluttered into local legend. Later generations may have thought Pete's exploits to be apocryphal. They weren't. I am proud to have been counted amongst the large Dotterel audience during a superbly orchestrated prank that remains, to this very day, the stuff of grins - for almost everyone who was there.

Ken Baldrige was an occasional hometown ally, and there was a day at South Gare which saw Jimmy Monro, Vic Brown, and me, all lying flat on the breakwater as we attempted to hold bins steady, and watch a Grey Phalarope calmly spiralling in a vortex of water. All part of rich kaleidoscopic memories.

For the most part, my ever impromptu meetings were with the hard-core birders of more local domicile. Included in that formative group were Graham Bell, Brian Coates, Jim Henderson, Julius Lightfoot, Rusty McAndrew, Ian and Richard McKinlay, Geoff Proctor, Pete Reid, Ken Smith, Philip Stead, and Tony and Alan Vittery. John Dunnett flared briefly upon the scene, and then vanished without trace. Edgar Gatenby must have rumbled into view during some interlude when I was elsewhere. Edgar was already well established within the cognoscenti, and a force majeure when I met him. A birder of irrepressible enthusiasm, Edgar was a man without 'side'.

The Teesmouth Bird Club had become a viable entity during another of my absences, and a reformation of haphazard reporting was mandated. I was particularly culpable, and skilfully lax when the time came to submit records. It was so much easier to let others do it, and it required my despatch to areas where there were no others, to force me into the prosaic production of lists! Philip and Graham took care of the doctrinaire technicalities in record matters, and their acceptance or rejection of increasing numbers of rare sightings went pretty much unquestioned. Somewhere along the time-line Angela Cooper emerged as an organisational whirlwind. Blessed with a gender-related ability to change anyone's determined "NO" into a submissive "yes", Angela executed her open mandate with considerable skill, and to great effect. Her consequent MBE was well deserved and, had I been approached in a judgmental capacity for such awards (I wasn't), then a Damehood would have been on the books. I've known Dames much less worthy of that accolade.

Hovering at the edges of Teesmouth's cycling fraternity were a few scientifically oriented luminaries, such as Denis Summers-Smith. Anyone who could become so devoted to a study of single species, and House Sparrow at that, rated a special status not readily understood.

As my insecure Teesmouth tenure became subjected to ever increasing sabbaticals, a new crop of birders began to infiltrate the marshes. In memory they have coalesced into a common whole; many of them maintain their allegiance to Teesmouth. I suspect most of them will be shaving by now, and will have grown unrecognisable. But I knew them well enough a long time ago. A little removed by time from that inner circle of earlier years were Chris Bielby, Ian Boustead, Tom Bowbeer (a late starter and my senior), Eddie Crabtree, Dave Devonport, Peter Evans, Tom Francis, Don Griss, Ted Jackson, the Norman clan, Phil Swainson, and Derek Wood.

Perennial Teesmouth wanderings weren't immune from periodic disruption. Tragedy too often intervened. Far too high a proportion of our modest quota of birders failed to travel beyond their teenage years. Accidents, on bicycle or motor-bike, took the lives of Bill Anderton, George Coates, Geoff Proctor, Julius Lightfoot, and Richard 'Little Mac' McKinlay. Their deaths cast a gloom, along with a realisation that, in the lottery of chance, any one of us could have met similar fates.

In early years of Teesmouth allegiance, change came slowly to the estuary. Too soon that gradual pace of industrial usurpation accelerated. An industrial anaconda began to constrict the fragile reaches of wild country, and to reach down to absorb even estuarine borders. Only the sea itself remained aloof from industrial acquisitiveness, secured by technological limits from an aberrant definition of progress.

This narrative has determined itself as a paean to Teesmouth, and not an obituary. So that's all I'll write concerning a subject open to intense controversy. Annual Teesmouth Bird Club Reports enumerate the continued fascination of rare species for the area. If the birds themselves are adequately served by the present Teesmouth range, then who am I to yearn for a return of an earlier model?

Irony points out that ICI and later industrial clones may have affected beneficial side effects to their appetites for land. If not for them, many of us might never have left Teesmouth. Countries around the world have had their fauna documentation influenced by English expatriates, some of whom didn't even have the advantages of a Teesmouth background. Even in my limited world experience I've come across other expatriate friends who, over the years, have been responsible for the compilation of bird reference texts for entire countries: Englishmen on temporary or long-term lease, who fashioned the standard works on birds for countries as exotic as Hong Kong,

Cyprus, Korea, Papua New Guinea, Turkey, Burma, and Vietnam. Even now, as I type this essay, Alan Vittery is working on a book of Sutherland's birds, and you can't get much more foreign than that!

However achievement may be measured, some formidable ornithological motive power has been harnessed during the past few decades. I think it only fair that some of the credit for that maturity should be directed towards Miss Benson, who must have unwittingly nurtured many infant steps.

There was an earlier time when Teesmouth was confident of its place in the national scheme of things. You could wander at will over Cowpen's expanse where pastures of verdant largesse beckoned and experience mudflats that were a joy to behold. With them we shared a contentment that came as heritage with a County Durham address, at the north side of the River Tees. To the barren south of the Tees lay Yorkshire.

Rare birds of acumen gravitated to the north, with a natural facility coincident with good taste. Sometimes, in philanthropic gestures, the more altruistic for their surreptitious nature, we'd slip over to the south side of the river. It wasn't easy, even for County Durham birders, to find some mildly rare species across the river, as strays would naturally prefer to linger on the north side. But when we were successful, and not too bored by the southern panorama, we'd phone the Yorkshire birders - wake them up and let them know there was something for them to watch. Our generosity in such material concerns was legendary, and went some way to modify that acute sense of inferiority to which most Yorkshire birders were heir. In a spirit of bonhomie and goodwill we allowed them to share our county's avian wealth: let them tick away to their hearts content. Our compassion for them was widely recognised and, we thought, appreciated. We didn't even make fun of their quaint dialects - not to their faces.

How then did it come about that a County Durham birthright was taken from us? What misguided authority conspired to merge the rich north with the poverty-stricken south? Who was responsible for that hybrid (I use the word advisedly) amalgam that came to constitute the county of Cleveland? The questions are rhetorical. I don't know who, I was away. Political malfeasance is hardly a northern characteristic, so it is reasonable to assume that the covert coup d'état was instigated and engineered by Yorkshire birders. Can you believe such ingratitude, after all we did for them? I can tell you this - we'd never have countenanced that kind of boundary abuse in Darlington.

As intimations of mortality begin to express themselves upon my person, with an assortment of aches after modest hikes, I find a temptation to seek relief in an appraisal of the past. How good it would be to return to the Teesmouth of 1949, perhaps in Mr Wells's time-machine, and begin again. To that end a few provisos offer themselves. Modern Field Guides and optics would be de rigueur accessories, and a decent pair of hiking boots mightn't come amiss, just in case I'd developed an ability to walk upon water. After all, my background remains natively bound to a County Durham that nourishes a breed for whom almost anything is possible. If food was to be more than an indifferent component to life, then I'd be inclined to turn to the fish-and-chippy at Hartlepool to supply life's basic needs. And what better, to toast a tick or two on days of festival and celebration, than to have libations of brand-name Dandelion and Burdock on hand. I couldn't ask for much more than that of a Teesmouth Paradise. Who could?

