Poetry, painting and change on the edge of England

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In this article we discuss our creative research on and with a contested coastal community on one of the U.K.'s last existing plotlands[1], the Humberston Fitties in North East Lincolnshire. This fifty-six acre strip of land with three hundred and nineteen chalets.[i] is on the Humber estuary and lies close to Cleethorpes: a seaside resort and Grimbsy: a seaport now facing post-industrial decline. Our cross-disciplinary collaborative practice between poetry and visual art explores open, environmentally-aware engagements and methodologies with landscape and rural place. We investigate the relation of social, environmental and energy politics, looking out to land and sea and back to the community. Our results include original art and poetry presented innovatively together in exhibitions and books, in addition to local people's responses to our methodologies and the work itself.

The intention of this article is to demonstrate how working through and with transdisciplinary arts in a community such as the Fitties can contribute to understanding and learning about place-identity and place-value through aesthetic endeavour. The learning is site-specific and symbiotic between artists and local people and relates, in this article in particular, to small and large-scale socio-political and environmental change. Here we aim to show how these processes and interactions occur over time and to demonstrate that no place or any conclusion about place, is simple or easily gained. Equally no future decision or speculation about environmental sustainability, politics and class, or taste and aesthetics (all

themes we consider here) can be taken in isolation and without consultation with the inhabitants of a place and consideration of their histories and memories. Thus this article aims to demonstrate that there is a special value in creative practice-led, place-based, people-responsive longitudinal research between the disciplines of art, literature and rural sociology.

Threadings, bendings, tanglings: creativity and place

Since 2011 we, Harriet Tarlo (poet) and Judith Tucker (artist), have collaborated in place-based, slow-walking processes drawing on concepts of fieldwork, deep mapping (Biggs 2010) psychogeography (Richardson 2015), and contemporary walking practices (Heddon and Turner 2012; see also Gkartzios and Crawshaw in this special section). What is key for this article in terms of principle of deep mapping is Biggs' notion of this as a hybrid activity in which artistic, geographical and ethnographic practices interweave, based on place-based investigation and poetic ambiguity in dialogue with academic discourse. Through this he seeks to challenge the frameworks within which both arts practices and academic research are currently framed. (Biggs 2010). Richardson's work on contemporary British psychogeographic practices also challenges this binary as she works with literary forms of psychogeography within an academic context (Richardson 2015) thus providing another context for our inclusive walking fieldwork. However most of the examples that Richardson cites are urban whilst we work in a rural context, Heddon and Turner trouble certain assumptions in some psychogeographic practices and literatures, not least in relation to urban and rural walking practices and with particular relation to

gender. They draw attention to the fact that women have not featured in psychogeography until very recently (Heddon and Turner 2012). As walking women artists ourselves their consideration of the importance of the local and of complicating notions of the domestic and the wilderness have particular significance for our work on the Fitties.

We have also attempted to evolve a practice between poetry and visual art that explores open, environmentally-aware engagements with landscape, place and change. We eschew polemical responses to place, preferring to make work that attempts more subtle adjustments to established assumptions and sensibilities by focused engagement with sites, their human inhabitants and more-than-human elements in line with ecocritical approaches (Soper 1995, Bennett 2010, Barad 2003, Garrard 2004, Haraway 2008, Morton 2007). Early in our respective careers, both of us were influenced by Kate Soper's book, What Is Nature? (1995), in which Soper argues for maintaining the awareness of the difference between human and nonhuman effects and constantly assessing and reassessing the positions of nature and culture, rather than indulging in simplistic defence or denial of this familiar Western dualism (Soper 1995 p. 11). Later critical works by the authors cited above develop these ideas further into notions of human and nonhuman environment as "enmeshed in a dense network of relationships," (Bennett 2010 p 13) including Haraway's "natureculture," Morton's 'the mesh' and Tim Ingold's 'meshwork'.

Although marginally attempted in rural studies (Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016; Crawshaw, 2019) our work seeks to demonstrate the way in which creative practice

not only informs critical analysis but is also a critical tool in itself. Our practice is trans-disciplinary in nature and involves extensive creative fieldwork through walking, drawing, writing, photography, historical and archival research.[1] We work collaboratively with local people to generate materials via interviews and simple postcards on which participants write a short memory associated with a particular chalet address or place on the Fitties. We delivered these to individual chalets and also set up a stall where we exchanged postcards of our work for a memory. We incorporated these into exhibitions in relation to a map of the chalet park and on our social media pages alongside photographs.

This project is ongoing. Since 2012, we have been working in this place, making short repeated site visits and returning to our study and studio to work up the material gleaned from fieldwork in place and with people. We produce poetic texts, drawings and paintings which are shown in exhibition locally, nationally and internationally. We experiment with a variety of forms of presentation juxtaposing image and text: open form poems and paintings on canvas and watercolour paper; vinyl wall text, artists' books, digital print and projection alongside the community-produced elements mentioned above. This is undertaken in the conviction that "practice-led research is a new species of research, generative enquiry that draws on subjective, interdisciplinary and emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research" (Barrett and Bolt, 2010, p1). This paper introduces research as articulated by artists *as practitioners* to the field of rural studies.

The Humberston Fitties is one of the U.K.'s last existing plotlands, a place that is "on the edge" in multiple ways (coastal, political, environmental, rural), and a place that is facing change. We are committed to showing the art we produce locally but also to taking it further afield.[2] As the environmental and ecocritical movements have taught us, it is through the micro that we understand the macro. The conversations we have had about this work in local places and further afield have demonstrated this.

We have been working in North East Lincolnshire since 2012, looking in particular at water, marsh, flood and energy. Our earlier landscape work explored not only the beach, but also the raised banks of the reclaimed marshland and referenced Darwin's renowned "tangled bank in its explorations of "threadings", "bendings" and tanglings." (Darwin, 1872, p. 429). As the editorial to the 2009 issue of *Nature* celebrating Darwin argued, that bank is now unravelling due to the threat to biodiversity (Nature, 2009). What is left are complex but impoverished remnants of plant-life, an ecology of a post-industrial, semi-agrarian, semi-wild landscape dominated by certain resilient species:

under
swallows' wings

grassland verges grown into many
bendings, singings each over other vetch purples clover whites
threadings, tanglings through
up from
salt-sand
ground

As can be seen above, Tarlo's landscape poetry is written in the Anglo-American open form style of poetry in which sparse use of language draws attention to particulars - words are arranged across the page organically rather than in traditional versification and lineation. Her poems explore the connections between poetic form and landscape but they also attempt to embody human movement through place and space.

In 2016 we moved beyond considering our own movement through landscape to work more closely with people in the area, particularly those who holiday on and live on the Fitties. We were interested in exploring an alternative, restorative form of simple seaside living through found poems and small, quirky paintings, and setting these beside larger works that return us to the surroundings: a salt marsh with its suppressed but resurgent life.[3] We interacted with the community through interviews and memory and creative workshops. We expanded our work to explore social and cultural connections between people and energy and to look at further ways in which the Fitties lifestyle has a bearing on environmental concerns such as waste, sustainability and recycling.[4]

A consideration of the relation of people and place, of human and landscape is not new in our work. Tucker's densely-worked representational paintings and drawings build on a contemporary re-working of the neo-romantics. Her painting practice explores both how we might be inhabited, not only by our own histories, memories, and experiences but also by those of others, and the ways in which places too bear traces of others, both visible and invisible. Her paintings and drawings become

places between these psychic traces and the actual traces in the landscape just as Tarlo's poems incorporate research into past inhabitants of the places she works.

Place Figure 1 here. *There's always something you need to do that you've never done before* Oil on Canvas 91 cm x 122 cm

Here however we worked firmly in the here and now using techniques that are similar to oral history methods used by sociologists, historians and activists. In our case, however, this material is used to compile documentary poems, a form which Tarlo traces back to the 1930s American objectivists but which has been practiced by many poets all over the world since then. Longer interviews are condensed into short documentary poems in diverse voices, some of which are included here. These poems contain only "found" text from interviews. They are an attempt to keep memory alive, to dramatise it in a way that will engage people (perhaps more than pages of transcribed interviews) and to contribute to the marginalization of the lyric "I", to avoid a usurpation of other people's places into a singular poetic voice.

The paintings of the holiday chalets rarely have images of people depicted within them, yet we know that these are places that are far from abandoned and are buzzing with human activities. They explore how these idiosyncratic chalets are simultaneously objects of identification and desire for those who own or stay in them as well as exploring how they might reflect the owners' personalities. What happens when the paintings of the chalets themselves are placed next to or are

surrounded by the “found-text” poems? One effect is that they become animated by those voices and it is almost as if the place itself starts to have a voice.

This process of engagement, along with events at the Fitties, in the U.K. and across the globe, caused us to think about change. Change is of course paradoxically a constant in the human and more-than-human world and these days the word “change” can hardly be used without conjuring up ever-present fears of Climate Change. Like all localities, this is a changing, unstable place where human interventions and priorities intersect with the short and long-term, large and small-scale non-human developments. But, as we shall see, change has been happening particularly fast at the Fitties in recent years. How does small and large scale, environmental and political change, affect people and artists in their relationship to locale, and how is it intertwined in the complex threadings, bendings and tanglings that make up place identity?

plotland, behind land, edgeland

What is the rural sociology of Humberston Fitties and why is it significant? The Fitties is one of many plotland settlements which cropped up along the UK coastline, largely during the interwar years, when due to agricultural depression, land was sold off very cheaply, usually to ordinary city or townsfolk. Over a hundred years, it has evolved into a quirky individualistic chalet park drawing residents, second home owners, renters and summertime visitors. These come mainly from Northern British towns and cities such as Sheffield, Doncaster and Barnsley, some as close as

Cleethorpes and Grimsby, a few miles away.[5] As Sheller and Urry (2004) remind us, places to play are also "places in play: made and remade by the mobilities and performances of tourists and workers, images and heritage" (p. 1).

As we shall see the Fitties (and indeed Cleethorpes, its adjoining town) are just such playful places created by the particular seaside and holiday desires of their visitors and inhabitants. Some residents however do not want only to "play" there, but to live permanently. Due to its status as a "holiday park" the Fitties is only open from 1 March to 31 December each year, being closed in January and February, but many residents have been campaigning to stay there all year for decades. For reasons of place attachment and economics, many inhabitants (an estimated 20%) stay on in secret, employing blackout techniques and moving on and off site under cover of darkness, and have been willing to discuss this with us anonymously.

The word "Fitties" literally means "saltmarsh" and this place, like much of the low-lying land around the mouth of the Humber estuary, was carved out of saltmarsh.
In one of the first poems Tarlo wrote about the area she created the idea of "behind land" which was later used for the exhibition of the same name and for our own artists' book:

once was still might be saltmarsh low living, low-lying behind land

from this defence dune openings glimpse far sea strip

all things seem floating

headland fort moored ships pale people on purple mud sand places

The Fitties land lies low then on a flat coast behind eroded dunes and marshy beach - in this literal sense it is "behind land", but it is also "behind" land in the sense of being "behind the times", being a remnant of a wider vernacular, counter-cultural movement.

As our title suggests, plotlands can also been seen as classic "edgeland" sites, and not just because they are often coastal. According to Trevor Rowley, plotlands received a disproportionate amount of criticism for their size, as epitomised here by C.E.M. Joad's book, *The Horrors of the Countryside* (1931):

> To my horror I found not an empty valley but a muddy road
> running through an avenue of shacks, caravans, villas, bungalows,
> mock castles, pigsties, disused railway carriages and derelict buses
> scattered higgledy piggedly over the largest possible area.
> (Joad in Rowley, 2006 p 211).

Such prejudices linger and Fitties dwellers are aware of them, although they are in reality a pretty diverse group of people. This poem is created from the words of a long-term chalet-owner in her fifties reflecting on her neighbour's life post-retirement:

> When she retired, she didn't
> have a lot of dosh, I said to her
> *Why don't you go on the Fitties?*
> Her brother was agin it, thought
> his daft sister was being even
> more daft than usual. People
> either get it or they don't get it.

> In the end, he got it. My mother,
> where she came from, she
> wouldn't tell people I lived here.
> The words wouldn't come out
> of her mouth. But I think it's
> within us, what makes us want
> to come to the sea. It's primal,
> really primal.

Staying with politics for now, Colin Ward, writing from an anarchist perspective, notes that environmental arguments are often used to support socio-political mechanisms such as the planning system:

> ….unofficial settlements are seen as a threat to wildlife, which is sacrosanct. The planning system is the vehicle that supports four-wheel-drive Range Rovers, but not the local economy, and certainly not those travellers and settlers seeking their own modest place in the sun. (Ward, 2004)

In *Arcadia for All: The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* (1984), Hardy and Ward (1984) recount the sorry tale of how, in post-war Britain, planning regulations and compulsory purchase orders meant the demise of most plotlands. The "behind land" of the Fitties then is a remnant of an almost lost way of life and we shall consider here whether such lifestyles are indeed anathema to environment, as planning laws suggest, or whether they might in fact hold both the histories and the future seeds of less heavy-handed ways of living in place.

It is a vulnerable place then, this Eastern English edgeland, land always at risk from socio-political actions. Until recently, perhaps this plotland has been protected in part because of its unfashionable position on the margins on the Eastern edge of

England in a place where land is not as valuable as in those areas closer to London. In those places it is much harder to find recognisable still- functioning plotlands, for the reasons Hardy and Ward (1984) describe. Only traces remain: some such as Laindon in Essex, considered in detail later in this article, are nature reserves, others are subsumed in subsequent more suburban developments as we discovered on a visit to Peacehaven on the Sussex coast, where the grid road pattern and some green lanes are all the immediate evidence of what was one of the largest plotlands in the U.K.

In painting and writing about human presences within landscape, such as the Fitties, we aim to contribute to the acknowledgement and importance of such sites, and to acknowledge their complexity. Using painting to critique simplistic pastoral or bucolic views of British landscape is of course, nothing new. A key, mid-century example is Eric Ravilious, an artist whose landscape work also rarely included people, yet was far from nostalgic. He dealt with a pragmatic version of the rural imbued with the evidence of modern agriculture and the energy networks. Far from presenting a preservationist or melancholic view Ravilious' work engaged whole-heartedly with modernity. His vision of the "countryside" has trains, roads, railway tracks and cuttings, fences, defences, telegraph poles, pylons, cement and brick works – resisting so much work that aimed to romanticize the rural usually discussed in the discourse of the 'rural idyll' (Woods, 2011; Murdoch et al.,2003).

Ravilious even depicted makeshift dwellings in his painting *Caravans* from 1936. Although not a plotlands dweller, he repurposed "Fever Wagons," as studios and

329 living spaces. These were originally used in the Boer War and/or the Crimean War,
330 and then shipped back to Newhaven, Sussex to be used by cement workers. There
331 have been plenty of artists (George Shaw, Juliette Losq, Laura Oldfield Ford), writers
332 (Michael Symons Roberts, Paul Farley, Iain Sinclair) and academics (Shoard, 2002;
333 Edensor, 2005) engaging with often urban "edgelands". Plotlands however have not
334 historically attracted much artistic attention, perhaps as a consequence of issues of
335 class and taste. More recently, there has been a certain amount of creative
336 responses to plotlands in the south of the U.K. including Clio Barnard's performance
337 work *Plotlands*, 2008 Karen Guthrie and Nina Pope's documentary, *Jaywick Escapes*,
338 2012 and Julia Winckler's community engagement exhibition *Lureland: Peacehaven*
339 *Project.* Our longitudinal project on the Fitties begun in 2012 and still ongoing at the
340 time of writing, is a perhaps a unique mix of aesthetic exploration, in depth
341 community engagement and consideration of the relation of people and place.
342
343
344 **From groynes to gabions: change by the seaside**
345
346 The Fitties is also environmentally vulnerable, as the "behind land" poem cited
347 above suggests with its use of the term "defence." This can refer both to the old
348 Second World War pillboxes along the coast, but also to the generations of defences
349 against flood from groynes to gabions. The area is always at risk from flooding,
350 erosion and climate change effects. In 2013, we saw the radically accelerated re-
351 shaping of land by water of a tidal surge on the Humber estuary. A report by the
352 Environment Agency (2013) refers to the breach at Tetney Marsh nearby, and the
353 consequent flooding of agricultural land and makes reference to the flood plain close

by to the chalet park. The North East Lincolnshire Council also commissioned the Humberston Fitties Flood Risk Assessment in the same year, which was not seen as a neutral action by many chalet owners, as, at the same time, the council was threatening to increase the so-called winter "Closed Season," citing the risk of flood as a factor (Black & Veatch, 2014).

Although we had been painting and writing there for some years, it was only once we engaged fully with the community that we became aware of factions and highly charged differences of opinions on the chalet park relating to these issues. When we advertised our presence on the Fitties for story and memory workshops, we got into trouble with some voluble chalet owners for describing the area, as "always liable to flood, to a return to its former state". People were concerned that our words would give the council ammunition in what they saw as its prejudices against the Fitties, in particular its lack of support for some residents' desire to stay there all year. This highlighted the sensitivities that artists need to be aware of when working with people in relation to their places and how environmental and social questions cannot be separated. As the documentary poems demonstrate, place is devalued and valued by different actants in the community, as well as how deep and emotional the engagement with place is, how tied up with intimate, familial relations.

The 2013 surge and these subsequent reports brought back and focused people's minds on the danger of flooding. While some described and understood it as close call, others point out that the Fitties has not actually flooded since the North Sea

Flood of 1953 which struck Belgium and the Netherlands also, and caused over 300 fatalities on the U.K. east coast. As a result of this flood most of the chalets are raised off the ground on bricks or wooden struts, as can be seen from the paintings. It is not just the chalets that could be affected by the surges, but the surrounding dunes and beaches have radically changed over the years. In early photographs of the "camp" the dunes are far more extensive. Local people, including this man in his fifties, speak about the changing shapes on the beach at Humberston:

> My mother's in Cleethorpes
> Cemetery - 70 years between
> when I first lived here and
> when I returned. I didn't want
> my mother to be alone. Nothing
> had changed. Used to be folk
> from Sheffield, all they wanted
> was slot machines and such.
> They never walked up here.
> Down on the beach, you notice it
> daily, tides eroding constantly -
> we've lost a lot of sand, the creek's
> come in a lot. Years ago it was
> way out, the dunes were 8 or 10
> foot deep. Yep, we've lost a lot.

The dunes referred to here have long lost their glory, being replaced by sand banks and gabions, the stones in these probably imported from Norway. The creek, saline lagoons and "pioneer saltmarsh" is spreading beyond Tetney marshes and onto Humberston Beach. The spaces humans value most highly and invented groynes to protect, sandy beaches, are being "colonised" by muddy marshland and an increasingly dangerous creek. Is the saltmarsh returning, re-establishing itself and how far will it go? Perhaps over time, regardless of the decisions human beings make about the Fitties plotland, the original saltmarsh fitties will indeed return, or will

there be a way of balancing encroaching vegetation, rising sea level and human habitation?

2016 was another year of radical change. In the October of that year, just as we were taking down our Cleethorpes exhibition celebrating plotland life, the news came that the Fitties were to be put up for sale by the local council. In the context of austerity Britain, they needed to offload assets. From the point of view of the Fitties people, this was the last in a long series of betrayals. What would happen to this place? Would the Fitties people take over the site themselves? Would it become homogenised, modernised and managed by a large company such as the one that ran the adjacent caravan park and become just another “blandscape”? Like many of our towns and cities, Cleethorpes is struggling to maintain its identity in this regard - the individualistic seafront, pier, boating lake and independent businesses of the town exist in tension with the strip of Macdonalds, KFC, Premier Inn and Brewer’s Fayre that run along Kings Road between the town and the site of the Fitties.

This raised important environmental questions too. Would a charitable organization attempt to work on and with the people who live there to enhance its conservation status (granted in 1996 at the request of the residents) and indeed the SSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) status of the Humber Estuary on which it in located? After a brief utopian period when the residents formed a Community Interest Company to purchase and manage the site for themselves, their bid was turned down in favour of a larger bid from a large private company called Tingdene, part of whose business is

the manufacture of “park homes” and “holiday lodges.” Tingdene have officially owned the Fitties since October 2017.

This radical period of change for the Fitties was mirrored in wider changes happening throughout the world. In the same year, in June when we were talking to local and visiting holidaymakers in the summer sunshine at the Fitties, the British electorate voted to leave the European Union. Lincolnshire was one of the highest pro-leave areas, voting 70% in favour of “Brexit”. The U.K., like the Fitties community, is in a state of uneasy limbo after the“Brexit” vote , without clear answers, but definitely heading for change. The views of the Fitties inhabitants who largely supported the “Leave” campaign, seem far from anachronistic now, but rather seem to represent a large percentage of the population who felt disillusioned with bureaucracy, unheard and disenfranchised by both Westminster and Brussels. The Fitties is located in the sort of coastal communities which the government, via the National Lottery, has been targeting, with its fund of the same name since 2012, and with renewed vigour since June 2016. The inherent mistrust of the establishment, the legacy of battles with the council, the tendency toward anarchic, defiant individualism, the long reverberations of the miners’ strike, all demonstrate that class divisions and strain in Britain are alive and well.

Class, taste, place and visual environment are all inextricably linked. This has been explored by Grayson Perry both through his works such as the *Vanity of Small Differences* and his accompanying 2012 Channel 4 television series, *All in the Best Possible Taste*:

> People seem to be curating their possessions to communicate consciously, or more often unconsciously, where they want to fit into society.
>
> The British care about taste because it is inextricably woven into our system of social class. I think that – more than any other factor, more than age, race, religion or sexuality – one's social class determines one's taste (Perry 2013).

Perry is making explicit the links between power, class and what we can see; he perceives that in the U.K. what we own reveals who we are and where we come from. Objects and houses can stand in for us. In his television programme *Divided Britain,* which featured the making of his two *Matching Pair* of "Leave" and "Remain" pots, he explicitly worked with collapsing assumed binaries post-Brexit. These invite the viewer to consider that, after Perry solicited source material from people on both sides, it was revealed that they actually had very similar likes and dislikes and understanding of what constitutes Britain. Perry knowingly draws on aspects of working class taste, of which there are so many examples of unfettered, playful curation of objects on the Fitties where plastic animals and birds abound.

Indeed, the whole aesthetic of plotland might be considered to be a unleashing of taste that flies in the face of the establishment. Trevor Rowley notes that

> In all respects plotlands stood out as the very antithesis of the normal, old fashioned, village England and the values that it represented. Plotland complexes were ephemeral, unsightly anarchistic and an affront to good taste. In complete contrast the long-established English village, was seen by middle-class observers as the acceptable unit of countryside living" (Rowley, 2006, p 211).

Like Perry's ceramics but in a different idiom, Tucker's painting in combination with Tarlo's poetry complicate the binary outlined above. After all, what might it mean to use oil paint to depict the makeshift chalets and open-form poetry to reflect the voices of their owners? The close observation, engagement and time that is involved in the making of these is one way of deep listening as well as deep mapping.

Since this period, influenced by the darker shadows outlined above, we became interested in the Fitties at dusk and in the night and began work on a new series of large-scale dramatic paintings and short fragmentary poems called "Night Fitties". These explore the play of light and dark and the uncanny transformations of the chalets that take place after hours as well as notions of vulnerability, occupation and emptiness. The work considers, in the shadow of recent dramatic political changes, how notions of place and identity are constructed on domestic and larger scales, as reflected by the play on flags and other indications of Englishness.

november week-night
dark chalets under dim
lamps glow variegated
plants: silhouettes of
lone lilies illuminate

woman in red top
feeds fox at lit door
frame intimate until
us: lifts bowl, turns
light off, door shuts

hearts hang inside
cold closed summer
houses: few vent
smoke, few gleams
car corners statuary

t.v. flashes window in
window's wide sight:
big guy in vest jumps
up behind blown rose
flicker white in colour

Please place figure 2 here Judith Tucker *We're all very close round here*, 2018. Oil on Canvas. 76cm x 101cm

***Yep, we've lost a lot*: local, national and international energy politics**

All this fear and uncertainty, as expressed here by the residents of the Fitties, is exacerbated by our knowledge of climate change, a threat surpassing and encompassing all - one that reminds us of the importance of global cooperation and the dangers of division. In discussing social and environmental politics past and present with Fitties people we focused on the importance of energy politics to the area. From the beginning, our Fitties work had a strong sense of the Humber Estuary just beyond. Here we are immediately confronted by evidence of energy. From the path on the bank built to preserve reclaimed agricultural land and prevent flooding, we look out over the saltmarsh to see tankers off the coast in the estuary offloading crude oil at the Tetney monobuoy, run by Phillips 66, an American multinational energy company, constantly pumping crude oil under and over the land. Oil is pumped by a largely underground and undersea pipeline, to tastefully painted green tanks at the Tetney oil terminal, before being piped over to South Killingham refinery for processing. In turn these products might be exported from Immingham dock or transported inland by road, rail and pipeline.

Close by we see windmills, which have increased in number over our time working here, turning and producing power both on land and out to sea in the massive "Humber Gateway Offshore Wind Farm. Again, we find global links - the wind farm was built in part using a loan from the European Investment Bank, owned directly by

the 28 European Union member states. Repayments of this loan will continue many years after Brexit (Willis 2016). Beyond the windmills and the monobuoy, well over the horizon, over forty miles into the North Sea, are gas platforms but only just down the coast, next to the ancient dunes at Saltfleetby Theddlethorpe, there is a direct connection to the gas fields bringing in 10% of the UK's gas requirement every single day.

Many local people work in the energy industry in one capacity or another and have views about our energy sources. Here are some notes from an interview with a retired male oil rig worker living in a nearby town:

> *I worked off the coast twenty miles and more, that's why I know they should build all those windmills offshore, not bother about inland. There's wind offshore 365 days a year. They're finally realising. We could have told 'em, like we could have told 'em how bad diesel is for you. We used to joke we didn't have time for safety, but safety was what it all was - running all the systems, opening the wells, closing the wells, checking the pumps all the time, separating out the gas, the oil, the water - regulating 24 hours a day. One summer we had a couple of osprey nesting up on the platform all summer. We used to stand on the handrails looking at the moon - the middle of the night stuff - you could get philosophical.*

This interviewee was feeling that we might do well to listen to the opinions of people we trust to work in such dangerous places. The osprey story was just one of several stories he told of hardened rig workers observing and admiring wildlife even as they continue their work as tiny cogs in the massive oil industry. It is also possible to see a symbiotic metaphor here: either the unofficially nesting osprey might stand in for plotlanders (particularly closed season ones) or vice versa.

Going back a few decades, this area is also intimately connected to the mining industry. The construct of the British holiday is inextricably tied into the industrial revolution, improved transportation, the rise of capitalism and the energy industries themselves. The Northeast Lincolnshire seaside has long links with South Yorkshire towns and cities to its West, especially around Sheffield. This began with mill workers and other industrial workers, who, in the late nineteenth-century, celebrated wakes (or feast) weeks, when the mills, factories and collieries were closed for an annual overhaul, by trips to the seaside. In these early days of working class tourism, this was all the holiday (unpaid at that) that they received.[7]

As the mines began to close through the ‘fifties and ‘sixties, culminating in the ‘eighties during Margaret Thatcher’s leadership, some of these miners, the human waste products of our old now uneconomic and increasingly unpopular energy sources, took their redundancy payments, left their accommodation in Yorkshire and moved permanently to the Fitties, joining the closed season community or relying on friends and family for accommodation. There is a poignancy to these small chalets, remnants of working class tourism, on this small piece of land sandwiched between the remnants of the landbased coal industry and the current sea-based oil, gas and wind industries.

One older female interviewee and long-term chalet-owner told us how she got to know the Fitties and became determined to make enough money to buy herself a chalet one day, eventually achieving this through shop-keeping:

> As a little girl, my Dad
> down the mines, we came
> for Barnsley Feast Week
> fetching water from
> standpipes, lighting gas
> mantles, so careful, trying
> not to break them. They
> went up from 1 & 9 to
> half crown, up in flames
> if you touched them. It was
> just mud paths, dreadful
> when it rained but
> brilliant at the same time.

This piece also demonstrates how the Fitties offered and still offers now comparatively simple living in terms of energy. The site is not on mains gas - calor gas bottles stand next to the chalets and are delivered and exchanged by lorries and many would run electricity from small windmills. Some of the older chalets still have these. The poem is often shown next to a painting of a chalet in a state of semi-repair emphasizing the mutability and flux of both structures and places and also the do-it-yourself involvement of the chalet owners, a theme developed further in the next section.

Insert Figure 3 here Judith Tucker *Renovating, 2015* Oil on Canvas 41 x 41 cm

The council acted in line with the history of local authorities in relation to plotlands, which was, for many years to ignore them. On the Fitties it was 1938 before sewers

were introduced, replacing the cart collecting the soil, electricity installed and they begun to construct a road system based on the informal mud paths already established. Even then, many people didn't risk their cars on their Fitties - it was a slower place and pace of life for holiday-makers and local visitors alike, as this poem condensed from a conversation with a retired local woman:

We lived on the estate
then, no one had cars then.
We used to come up here
with the pram. It was all dunes
around here, all the way to the
old bathing pool. My dad 'ld
come home from work, get
changed, bring sandwiches
up on his bicycle and we'd
have our tea in the dunes.
Them were the days.

The last line of this documentary poem is full of nostalgia and cliché, easily dismissed, yet what is being valued here is what so many strung-out individuals and families are trying now to recover in our world of so-called "frictionless capitalism," a world in which effort is regarded as a problem for those who can afford it. Today's infantilising culture and commercial advertising encourages us to dial up a pizza and have a low-paid, zero hours worker deliver it on a motorbike, rather make our own sandwiches and cycle them down to the beach to meet our loved ones after a hard day's work. The line "it was all dunes around here' was used as a title for one of the larger paintings which incorporates chalet and shed roofs, foliage and some eccentric life size models of birds, and serves as a reminder that the chalet site we now see is much altered after the 1953 flood.

Several older people we talked to who have stayed on the Fitties since they were children clearly remember the oil lamps for lighting mentioned above, as well as the fetching of water from standpipes:

> We came for the whole
> Summer from Immingham.
> Everyone had a bridge
> across the dyke. We'd 8 tin
> buckets, we'd to traipse
> up and down 3 times a day
> to fill em up at the pump.
> We'd go cockling, picking
> samphire from the beds,
> watercress from the dyke,
> free-flowing then. Uncle Tom
> auctioned fish at Grimsby
> Docks; he had about 4
> languages. There he is, doing
> the roof repairs as usual.

Immingham is a local commercial port town largely created in the early Twentieth Century with the building of its dock, railway and industrial factories. To summarise, Fitties people came largely from Northern cities and towns, predominantly South Yorkshire often working for the carbon energy industries. They were not well off in the main, but they were practical, on holiday as in the rest of their lives, foraging for cockles, picked samphire and watercress and collecting coal from the beaches. This kind of subsistence living extended into the ways in which the chalets were constructed, and maintained. Although for some this way of life was a temporary contrast to a working existence, for others it became a more permanent way of life.

There's always something you need to do that you've never done before: recycling, adhocism and self-build

In the spirit of plotlanders everywhere, Fitties people were traditionally and frequently still are self-builders. As Walton notes of early plotlands, they were originally composed of:

> … unplanned, self built, knots and straggles of seasonably occupied dwellings featuring creative adaptations of old tram cars, railway carriages, old army huts and later bus bodies which sprang up on the shoreline … offering a foothold to bohemian seekers after the simple seaside life or, increasingly working class families whose only hope of affording a seaside holiday … was via this makeshift and independent route (Walton, 2000 p36).

While there are a few very old chalets left on the Fitties (such as the appropriately named *LingaLonga* and *Era*), there are certainly no railway carriages left. Godfrey Holmes in a 2017 *Independent* article, "A last hurrah for plotlanders, Britain's interwar guerrilla housebuilders," gives a lively account of the kinds of materials used:

> …timber and felt are essential ingredients of plotland, which other materials are favoured? Panels of asbestos. Corrugated iron. Iron sheets now rusting as wall or covering. Hardboard: later supplemented with chipboard. Clapboard. Lots of it. Chicken-wire also. Car doors. Flint. Pebbles. Second-hand bricks. Discarded glass. Recycled anything. (Holmes 2017).

All of these, and more, can be seen on the Fitties, especially in the older chalets and in the piles of possible, potential materials stored under tarpaulins in the more ramshackle of the plots. At the Fitties, inhabitants used and re-used and swapped and bartered building materials, cobbling together chalets, huts and sheds from old materials, often left over from the war. One writer of a memory postcard recalls:

Our bungalow is made up of two WWII huts from USAAF Goxhill.
Brought to the Fitties in the Fifties. Legend has it that the actor
Clarke Gable slept in one when he was based as Goxhill.

We stayed in this chalet several times with its sign saying: "Did Clark Gable Sleep Here?"

This poem, created from words spoken by a long term male resident of the Fitties, now in his seventies, recalls in how he came to live there:

I'm a cabinet maker, bit
of all sorts really. A mate
bought a place on 8th Avenue.
I came to help him, never
went home. People kept saying
when you've done that can you
do me this or can you do me
that? In two years I'd enough
to buy my own. You bought 'em
from the owners then, you bought
'em as seen, everything in. We knew
it were used in the War, billeted
to soldiers, nothing more.
There's always something
you need to do that you've
never done before.

This use of readily available materials *ad hoc*, as Joanne Lee notes, *"*is about doing something with what you've got, and doing something *now* – not waiting for the perfect time in a perfect future where perfect materials and perfect tools are available" (Lee, 2010, p 6). Lee's essay draws on Jencks and Silver's (1972) book on *adhocism* and argues that British allotment sheds and the Humberston Fitties, themselves, were precursors of the idea of "*retrieval* adhocism" a term coined by Jencks and applied to the 1960s and 1970s counterculture and hippy communes (Lee, 2010). She notes that "for Jencks it is a particularly democratic kind of

creativity, in which one fashions one's personal environment from impersonal subsystems that already exist." (Lee, 2010, p.1)

This adhocist approach became so highly valued that the council attempted to institutionalise it in the "Chalet Design Guide" (1997) published just after the declaration of conservation status. This document specified how homes are to be repaired or altered, declaring that "[d]esigns will be expected to show individuality, diversity of appearance, a mixture of dimensions and volumes," that "recycled materials and those from sustainable sourced resources will be encouraged" and that "it is the uniformity of mass produced material which should be avoided" (North East Lincolnshire, 1997). At first it seems a trifle ironic that such a document should exist, but the language reveals that it is not just for their quaint aesthetic appeal that we value these settlements, but for their attitude to materials, for their emphasis on sustainability and recycling in place long before these terms were so commonly employed.

Building work on the Fitties is collaborative, individualistic and creative, often merging the practical with the decorative or artistic, and frequently involving found objects, objects other people dump, leave to collect, or which wash up on the beach. Talking with one ex-coalminer about his spectacular display of flowers and surreal objects in front of his house, he assured us that every single object was salvaged. Gesticulating at the lions; pillars; squirrels; wishing wells; mushrooms; canons; footballers; balls; pots; flowers and stones, he said, "Everything's thrown away, even the flowers. All this stuff here's what people are throwing away." The flowers were

discarded by council gardeners as they replaced one display with another along local promenades and roundabouts. His own display brought all materials together in an equality that could be read one and the same time as a satirical take on taste, but also a radical respect for these objects as on an equal level regardless of origin, not just their pasts as human objects, but their own individual entities as beings, be they plastic or stone, wood or plant, officially living or dead.

Recycling principles extend to all elements of life, including history. As is implied here, there's much we can learn for the future from looking into the history of places, from layering into our artistic fieldwork a sense of individual and collective pasts, as well as archival local researches. This process, which runs parallel to the painting, drawing, writing and listening that takes place in the field itself, is akin to deep-mapping processes as advocated by Pearson and Shanks (2001). They call upon us "to record and represent the grain and patina of place and landscape "through juxtapositions and interpretations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the factual and the fictional, the discursive and the sensual' (p9).

We attempt to do this in our local exhibitions by showing textual and visual texts from diverse sources. Before it was a plotland, the Fitties was a place where people camped and indeed some older residents still refer to it as a/the camp. This poem is made entirely from phrases used in newspaper reports on early camping at the Fitties before the First World War, as cited by Alan Dowling in *Humberston Fitties: the story of a Lincolnshire plotland,* pp21-3, 29:

unwonted animation attractive incident
mass of driftwood sandhill fires
truly Bohemian alfresco meals
water from the spring summer by summer
free and easy the fun of the thing
reading and walking croquet or tennis
wading and gathering the benefits of outdoor life

This poem has been shown next to a painting of a decaying chalet which was soon to be demolished and a new one built on the same site. It demonstrates what characterised life on the pre-war Fitties and reminds us of something of the original essence of the place. In many ways these values (beyond the financial) still survive and we recognise the need for them, hence the revival of the concept and indeed the phrase, "well-being". This word is used in one of our memory cards by a couple who built their place from "demolition timber" after the floods in 1953: "the fitties is part of your soul and well being." Many of the people we talked to had moved to or visited the Fitties in an attempt to restore this sense. Here are the words of one retired owner of a holiday house on the Fitties:

I only come here
when the weather's
good. I've been more
this year than ever
before. My wife's been
poorly, throat cancer
you know. After all
the treatment, the
chemo, we came. My
travelling days are
long gone and the
fresh air helps her
to breathe easier.

We can see here the enduring sense of "the benefits of outdoor life." Is it an anachronism that the Fitties is still here or is the fact that it is, and that it was designated a conservation area in 1996, reveal what we value? Will these values be undermined or upheld by the current ownership? For how long will the Fitties survive?

"restored my faith in nature & mankind": Fitties futures and the value of "nature"

The pre-war phrases in the poem cited above emphasise how intertwined the "natural/cultural" past and present of this landscape is, thus eroding away at binary ways of thinking about place as predominantly "natural" or "cultural", "rural" or "non-rural" (Casey 1993, Haraway 2003). Robert Macfarlane refers to this, acknowledging when you are in a landscape that might be termed 'wild,' "the human and the wild cannot be partitioned." (MacFarlane, 2007, p 127) He situates this discussion, in part, in the story of plotlands now deceased:

> North of me here in Essex, I knew, were the so-called 'plotland' woods of Laindon and Thundersley: young woods that had sprung up on land that had been built on in the late nineteenth century, and then again during the great slump in land prices of the inter-war years. Street after street of bungalows, many of them self-built, had rotted back into the ground, and the trees had returned – native oak, ash and hornbeam – and with them had come the creatures. (MacFarlane, 2007, p 282)

Laindon is now a nature reserve, its one remaining chalet preserved as a museum.[8] Unlike plotlands like Peacehaven which have been largely built up or developed, Laindon has been "re-wilded." Re-wilding is of course a controversial subject in

today's environmental politics (see for example Monbiot 2013). For MacFarlane the possible futures evoked by places such as Laindon may be sad on one level, but on another they contain hope for our over-stretched and crowded island:

> Abandoned places such as these provide us not only with images of the past but also with visions of the future. As the climate warms, and as human populations begin to fall, increasing numbers of settlements will be abandoned. Inland drought and rising sea-levels on the coasts will force exoduses. And wildness will return to these forsaken places. Vegetable and faunal life will reclaim them. (MacFarlane, 2007 p. 282)

As we argued above, this is a one possible, perhaps ultimately probable, future for the Fitties, situated as it is in an area where all land has been "reclaimed," or perhaps borrowed is a better word, from the sea. For the present however, the Fitties will not be re-wilded. It is hard to believe that Tingdene, whose company manufacture and sell off-the-peg homes, will resist the temptation to populate the Fitties site, whether slowly by stealth or more wholeheartedly, with their own products. These will not of course be the classic self-built homes created from local resources with local and individualistic identity. Already this tendency towards "blandscape" creeps into the replacement chalets we see on some of the empty plots that arise on the Fitties when chalets decay and collapse or are taken down. We memorialised these in paintings and poems of some chalets on the brink of demolition.

Place figure 4 here Judith Tucker *Truly Bohemian, 2016* Oil on Canvas 36" x 48"

The names of Tingedene products reveal the inspirations and aspirations appealed to: Kudos; Hunting Lodge; Country Lodge; Dolben Lodge and Regency Classic. Interestingly the places that make up the names of some of these products also reveal associations far from Northern British seaside towns and very far indeed from the Northern cities where most of the Fitties dwellers hail from: Kensington; Alpine Lodge; Tresco; Savannah; Havana; Valetta and Arcadia. Tarlo has worked with the names of Fitties chalets and some of them are not so far from these in their fanciful nature but there is a vital difference between making and naming your own fantasy retreat and having one manufactured and named for you. We are reminded of the quaint booklet on Fitties style cited above: "it is the uniformity of mass produced material which should be avoided."

Tarlo collected and played "name games" with these names, grouping them into little four-line poems based around principles of sound and sense. Yes, we saw aspirations, though these could often be read with a pinch of salt in context:

Tudor Cottage
The White House
Cherry-Wood Chalet
Le Chateau

Other names were somewhat humbler in association; references to cabins, dens, shacks and cottages are common:

Doric
The Hut
The Little Haven

Hideaway

Many names are deeply personal and declarative of ownership:

Ann's Den
Ellie's Place
Eth's Den
Grandad's

Others, such as "Davlins," "Janeric" and "GerryMyra" are testimonies to love, the chalet representing a fused entity, a shared dream place.

In one way, it seems a shame to unpick the associations of these name groupings here especially when this causes us to neglect the sonic games also being played in their composition. When exhibited interspersed amongst Tucker's smaller, unevenly sized paintings of chalets and surrounding combination of "wild" foliage and planted shrubs, these poems tell their own story draw forth a sense of what people value. They emphasise the individualism of people who live on and visit the Fitties, an individualism balanced with a strong sense of community that still exists and is referenced by many Fitties' people, though some speak of it being eroded in more recent times.

Returning to our environmental theme, many Fitties names simply evoke the peaceful associations of being near nature. In particular, the sea just over the dunes is often referenced:

Sea Breeze
Sea Way
Seachelles
Samphire

The importance of the seaside location cannot be denied as the resident who refers to its "primal" qualities above suggests. One or two also reference the more-than-human creatures that inhabit our world

The Foxhole
The Willow
Mole Hill Bank
Swallows Nest

Timothy Morton may have argued in his 2007 book *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* that the word "nature" with all its Romantic baggage must "wither away." (Morton, 2007, p 1) As artists and writers engaged in the "environmental arts and humanities" we may agree, but we must not forget the discourse of the world we are living in where the word flourishes and is mobilised daily for ever-more-complex eco-ethical debates and purposes. "The State of Nature" reports brought out by leading wildlife organisations in the U.K. firmly employ it from the title onwards and provide invaluable information for activists and academics.

The word "nature" is used by many Fitties dwellers, including the woman (who describes herself as "a girl from Brum") whose words are cited in our sub-title here: "restored my faith in nature & mankind".. There are conservationists on the Fitties, declared and undeclared and certainly unacknowledged, the planters of trees, the installers of handwritten notices about slowing for hedgehogs, the secret feeders of foxes. There is often a poignant contrast between the animal-shaped ornaments in the gardens and the creatures living there. On one visit we glimpsed a fox darting in

961 front of a stone crocodile dressed in England football regalia. The cement squirrel in
962 the painting *We were all close around here* looks up quizzically at the large England
963 flag.
964
965 We were struck by the affection and support of the wildlife on the Fitties and
966 adjacent coast. One older man told us of the triple roof on his building - as each one
967 failed, the next owner placed another one over the top. Now the spaces between
968 are full of nesting birds - "We don't disturb them" he said, "they were here before
969 us". Others are members of The Woodland Trust and the RSPB (Royal Society for the
970 Protection of Birds) and attempt to interest them in the land on and around the
971 Fitties. One of these women was active in planting on empty plots to prevent them
972 becoming dumps, and in forming "community gardens." Since Tingdene took over, a
973 tree that she planted in an empty plot next to hers, was threatened by the company
974 but was saved by a community protest. Will it one day be replaced by a Tingdene
975 "park home" or "holiday lodge"?
976
977 It is early days to judge the new owners, but it is hard to believe that this private
978 ownership will be a completely positive step either for the Fitties people, the
979 conservation status or the broader SSI status of the coastline. Perhaps there has
980 been an opportunity missed. What other different possible futures might this
981 creative, practice-led, community engaged work allow us to imagine? After all, Colin
982 Ward is well known as a pre-cursor of the transition movement with his concerns
983 about the unequal distribution of land and the need for sustainable housing. What
984 might have happened if we extended the notion of adhocism, "the doing something

with what you've got now" to the way we think and make communities as well as how we make paintings and write about these areas? Might it be that there is more at stake here than nostalgia for mid-century utopianism? Might there be more at stake than a sanctuary for ex –miners, a way that a few oddbods might eek out an existence? Like Climate camps, like the allotment movement, might we see in this humble patch of land surrounded by the global infrastructure of various kinds of energies, of trade, of tourism the possibility of recognising and understanding the need for vast, organisational changes, in wider politics, in everyday life, and in environmental attitudes and actions.

Alongside, and perhaps more important than our attempts to engage people in some aesthetic appreciation of our work and pleasure in their own creativity and memories, lie a series of place-based and eco-ethical concerns. Through exhibition and workshop, we attempt to increase, or more commonly unearth, affective and effective understanding and value of place. This includes the desire to consider the conservation of local environments and stimulate debate about wider global issues, in this case, heritage and tourism, flood risk, climate change and energy politics. It's on the small and local scale though that there is also impact. In an informal conversation with a resident who was setting up the community interest company, we asked if we could assist in any way. She replied: "You've done your bit with the exhibition and talking to everyone. People have come together and stopped arguing as much". The responses to our evaluative questionnaire from local people at our most local exhibition at the Cleethorpes Discovery Centre, about a mile from the Fitties corroborates this: "Visiting and listening to the stories. It has been a stunning

piece of work and benefited so many with pride and enjoyment" and "Deeply satisfying depiction of a special area. I am not a Fitties resident but a frequent visitor that recognises its special atmosphere and status. Long may it be as it is. This exhibition in its various forms is a major contribution to making this possible." Perhaps, the following more modest response, is all the more poignant for its understated commentary on an enhancement of an everyday experience, and a fitting way to conclude: "Really interesting combination of images and words, a lot to reflect on. I will think a little differently of the Fitties now when I walk the dog each Sunday morning through there."

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Endnotes

[1] [1] Plotlands can be briefly defined as places where individuals have historically self-built holiday houses. There is a more detailed account of their history in the second section of this paper, "plotland, behind land, edgeland." In addition see our journal article Tarlo, H. and J. Tucker, J *'Off path, counter path': contemporary walking collaborations in landscape, art and poetry.* Critical Survey, 29 (1). pp. 105-132 for a more detailed account of our working processes.

[2] The work from this project has been shown locally in Cleethorpes, Grimsby and Brigg, nationally in Sheffield, Cambridge, London and the Isle of Wight and internationally in Yantai, Nanjing and Tianjin in China, as well as being discussed in Brussels and Krakow.

[3] For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of our collaboration see our book chapter Tarlo, H and J. Tucker, J "Drawing closer": an ecocritical consideration of collaborative, cross-disciplinary practices of walking, writing, drawing and exhibiting in In: Barry P. and W. Welstead, (eds.) *Extending ecocriticism : crisis, collaboration and challenges in the environmental humanities.* (Manchester, Manchester University Press) pp 47-69.

[4] The photographer Annabel McCourt joined us in this aspect of the enterprise and contributed photographic portraits of interiors of chalets and people to the project and these were exhibited alongside the other work.

[5] There are exceptions, as this memory postcard demonstrates: "Made the 'girl' from B'rum welcome & restored my faith in nature & mankind" (B'rum is slang for Birmingham).

[7] John Walton, 1983, and 2000 has written extensively on the social history of the British seaside and Colin Ward's Arcadia for All explores the plotland movement in

[8] Footnote http://www.essexrecordofficeblog.co.uk/tag/plotlands/

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