

LCACE PROJECT – 2009 – ROSIE ALABASTER

THE VILLAGE OF HAPPISBURGH

Prior to my visit to this village I had heard the name mentioned often in the national media. For over a decade Happisburgh has been on the frontline of coastal erosion in the UK, and as climate change sees predictions of rising sea levels and increased frequency of storm surges, all eyes turn to this community to see how it will survive, cope, adapt or fail to adapt to the challenges it faces in the immediate future.

Happisburgh is an attractive Norfolk village of largely traditional flint houses. It could be said to be bordering on the twee but it has a life and soul increasingly lost on many of the hundreds of picturesque 'museum piece' commuter villages dotted about the country.

Everything is kept neatly and lovingly like all good English villages. All kept lovingly despite the abandoned revetments (wooden sea defences) and the rubble of the lifeboat slipway, undermined by the retreating cliffs.

What is striking about this village is that the sense of community seems to be thriving on its struggle to survive.

It has a post office and shop, a pub with its claim to a Conan Doyle story, an historic and well attended church, a village hall freshly decorated by the local community and frequently used for tea and cake consumption, a large primary school with its after school clubs and salsa classes in the new sports hall, a significant example of the Arts and Crafts movement in the form of the local manor, a camp site leading down to the sea, a bus service to Martlesham, a tea shop, a lifeboat house and a privately run lighthouse with its very own royal patron. All this paints a picture of a community with much to recommend it and, with its substantial history, has an established and significant community with a strong sense of who it is. The village's physical attributes are clear to see and it blends with the landscape to which it has been tied for hundreds of years. It sits nestled and sheltered in the brow of the hill which rises up towards the sea before cutting short its journey in a vertical tumble of sand and clay down to the shoreline.

As Happisburgh is set on a hill, when the floods of 1953 struck the Norfolk coast this community was saved when other nearby villages were all but subsumed. It may escape future flooding but the cliff erosion here is dramatic and clearly evident as upwards of 25 homes have been lost to the sea in the last fifteen years (Coastal Concern Action Group Leaflet). It is for this reason, along with the relentless campaigning of community members, that this village is closely studied.

In 2003 the Environmental Agency produced maps of Norfolk's vulnerable coast line that allowed you to measure out the landscape in terms of years as well as metres. Reading the map for Happisburgh must be an alarming experience for anyone with a home in the 25 years zone, for this means that it is not likely to last 25 years at the current rate of erosion. Further inland the church, (there has been one on this site since at least 1086) finds itself within the 100 years zone and so it seems is not likely to last longer than 100 years.

Human ecology is the interaction of population, resources, environment, technology or development. If one or more of these elements is undermined then the delicate balance is thrown into disarray. We think of villages whose local populations are dwindling because of lack of affordable housing, or post office and pub closures that ruin the communal heart of a village. Happisburgh has a good infrastructure but the suffering environment and lack of development in coastal defences is its' Achilles heel and leaves the community under extraordinary pressure.

THE PROJECT

This project aims to add to the economic and geographic studies that have taken place in recent years by looking at 'sense of place' in a landscape for which a future existence is far from certain. Hard to quantify or measure, the results of my interviews may be nebulous and unscientific and for this reason it seems appropriate that my findings are responded to through an art work where there is room for debate.

It is not my position to question the right or wrong of what should be done for this community. The government may yet decide to repair the revetments that once protected the soft cliffs or it may, as is likely, continue its proposed programme of managed retreat. This is a passionate debate very thoroughly covered by The Environmental Agency, North Norfolk County Council, Defra, The Tyndall Centre on Climate Change at UEA, The Coastal Concern Action Group and other organisations. My interest lies in the impact decisions may have on the coastline and as a consequence of this, on the people of Happisburgh and their sense of place.

I hope the work will in some way reflect the emotional attachment to place that is so strong within the community, varied and as rich as these attachments will no doubt be, the work must remain open to interpretation and trigger counter responses from the local population for whom the work will be dedicated. I hope to gather feedback in response to the work that may help further our understanding of the emotional impact to such threatened communities.

THE INTENDED VIEWER AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE WORK

The work will be initially exhibited in Happisburgh, subsequently elsewhere once supporting documentation has been gathered from the local community in order to provide a context for viewers of the art work from farther afield.

As stated above, although I have ideas from my own initial research I also intend to interview members of the community to see how my ideas evolve or change.

There are two fundamental parts to this project that involve the community. The first involves initial interviews that ask questions about sense of place. I will then respond to the interview findings and create an art installation. The second involvement will be in the form of feedback about the work. Once community members have experienced the work I hope their feedback will further enlighten on the subject of sense of place in threatened landscapes.

The questions I will put forward in the interviews are outlined on the following pages:

QUESTIONNAIRE

I will be asking you questions often using the word 'place.' A sense of place is not something easily put into words so some of my questions may appear quite oblique. In this context 'place' may refer to your home, your street, your neighbourhood and the broader landscape in which you live.

CONNECTIONS:

Where in this area do you specifically live? Mark on map:

How long have you lived here?

How long has your family lived here?

What do you like about this place?

What do you dislike about this place?

Why do you live here?

Have you ever lived anywhere else? If so, what made you return?

Is there somewhere else you would prefer to live?

What would make you move?

DESCRIPTIONS:

How would you describe where you live?

How would you describe your relationship to it?

How would you describe your relationship to the sea?

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY:

Does erosion impact on your sense of belonging or sense of place? If so, how?

What do you think should be done to help your community from the risk of erosion?

Do you think it is better to adapt to cliff erosion or to protect the cliffs from it?

What methods would you favour?

Are there any words that particularly sum up your current feelings about the erosion?

DREAMS AND MEMORIES:

What is your earliest memory of this place?

What is your fondest memory of this place?

What is your saddest memory of this place?

What would you miss if you no longer lived here?

Have there been any particular events that you feel have shaped your connection to this place?

Have you ever dreamt of this place?

Have you ever dreamt about erosion or how it impacts on you; your sense of place, identity, belonging and loss thereof for example?

SENSE OF SELF:

To what extent is your identity shaped by the place in which you live?

Is your sense of place and identity under threat?

Do you have a strong sense of identity? If so, why?

Who do you think you are?

Is this a strong community?

What does community mean to you?

How is your sense of wellbeing affected by erosion?

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE:

Do you mostly think about the past, the present or the future in relation to this place and your place within it?

What are you fearful of?

What are you hopeful for?

What do you think the future will bring?

How do you think you are coping emotionally with the threat of erosion?

Do you ever feel a sense of nostalgia for this place?

What would be the greatest loss to you if erosion continued unabated? This could be physical, emotional etc.

In the event of this project being made public and or being published in some way would you consent to this questionnaire being used? Yes/No

Anonymous

Named (please tick next to choice)

PROPOSAL FOR INSTALLATION: HUT 1

The first hut is a sensory space, weather-worn wood on the exterior hints at a history with textures that appeal to the senses. Entering the hut, the viewer will experience a shadowy interior with low dappled light playing on the floor. The space is de-saturated of colour and the physical structure of the hut (corners and joins) will be indistinct, giving the feeling of a dark void.

The low light will help to heighten the other senses and the viewer will soon become aware of muffled sound design that may give the impression of being under water.

Adjusting to the low light, the viewer will become aware of the shadow of a boat at their feet. Looking up they will see a model of a boat suspended a few feet above their head. The hull of the boat will be clearly visible from below and the scale of the model might give the impression that is some distance away from the viewer through forced perspective.

This part of the installation is designed to heighten the viewer's awareness of their own physical presence within that space but also raises questions regarding the physical relationship between the viewer and their surroundings. The position of the boat and the sound design are crucial and might imply the viewer is 'under water'. Feelings of displacement are possible as the viewer begins to question their sense of place within the context of the installation. Their relationship to the boat may induce feelings of longing, of being left behind, of vulnerability, of anxiety in this liminal world. Boats can also represent hope, survival and escape as we recall the story of Noah.

What is important in this work is evoking a sense of the uncanny, where strong feelings of familiarity are unhinged by a subtle unease of something 'not being quite right.' The exterior of a beach hut is familiar and we may even feel nostalgia for childhood holidays by the sea. Allowing for a connection with familiar objects is quickly undermined by the relationship the viewer subsequently finds themselves experiencing with the installation interior.

The uncertain future that Happisburgh faces leaves the population questioning their sense of place. As their destiny lies in part, in the hands of policy makers and forces of nature it is easy to see how people may feel some of the experiences described above. (the interviews will indicate a truer picture of wellbeing).



leady home

RESCUE ME!

HELP SWIMME

CHILD

D.I.Y.

FEMALE

ANXIETY

MALE

WELCOME

IF THAT BOAT IS ABOVE ME?
THEN WHERE AM I?

- AN EMPTINESS
 - A FEELING OF BEING LEFT BEHIND
 - A SENSE OF ISOLATION/ISOLATION
- Contrast this with the clutter
of activity in the striped
boat.

Sound of heavy water

dappled water light

PROPOSAL FOR INSTALLATION: HUT 2

On the outside, this beach hut is painted in vertical red and white stripes. The style is of a traditional beach hut or bathing machine from the early part of the 20th Century. Once inside, the viewer sees that the environment contrasts significantly to Installation hut 1. The space is as a cluttered studio and there are signs of industry everywhere. It has a domestic and cared for feel, the viewer may sense the space has an owner albeit an absent one. A feeling of absence should be palpable.

A red and white, horizontally striped woman's bathing suit hangs on a set of hooks, worn rugs or sections of carpet bring small comfort to the space. In one corner there are photos of salty looking men with beards, knitted sweaters, pipes and caps. A well used notebook and a stubby pencil contains a list of local men's names and contact details and credentials, the cover reads 'HEROES?' A pair of binoculars hangs from a hook and a flask sits nearby.

Most of the hut however, is dominated by models of the famous red and white striped lighthouse. The models are clearly recognisable as such but each one seems to represent different examples of how the lighthouse may be adapted to survive coastal erosion.

One model illustrates a raised lighthouse, piled up on top of a wooden structure, another shows a vertical extension added to the lighthouse, affording it great height and at least 10 more alternating red and white stripes. Another is a literal response to the term 'roll-back' (a frequently used term with regards adaptation to cliff erosion). Here we see a lighthouse lying on its side and being rolled by members of the community, pulled by tractors and levered inland. Another example is to be found cushioned in a flight case, the lighthouse is broken down in to small sections ready for transportation and re-assembly at a safer location further inland. Other models are to be found under construction.

In tone, this space contrasts with the first, it is cluttered with signs of activity and industry, something quite palpable in the community of Happisburgh with their campaigning, fundraising and extraordinary motivation.

Within the space however, there is evidence of real contradiction. The self help and DIY approach to inventing ways to save the lighthouse is clear but this is balanced by the hero spotting notebooks and images that speak of a desire to be rescued. The people of Happisburgh need the support and help of outside parties, they need a 'hero' to rescue them and this feeling may mount if their own industrious actions start to give way to helplessness and a sense of futility.

The second hut therefore, is in response to the powerful sense of creativity and persistence that helps to the community and its sense of belonging to thrive. Attachment to place in the face of physical loss of place is impressive to witness.

The threatened community then can create a far stronger community, identity and sense of place...



BEACH HUT
or BATHING MACHINE
RED + WHITE STRIPES

INDUSTRY + CREATIVITY
IN FACE OF LOSS OF
PLACE

HER LEAKFUL STATE
WHAT CAN BE DONE?

local hand-dyed
Hues

1950s bathing
Suit Red + White
Stripes

ROLL BACK

old rugs + bits of carpet



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



7.



8.



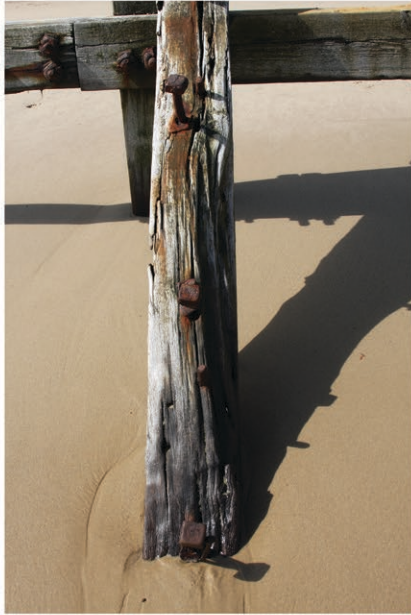
9.



10.



11.



12.



13.



15.



14.



16.



17.



18.



19.



20.



21.



22.



23



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25.



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27.

