

River Crouch: lost walks and ghost crossings

At the core of River Crouch Festival 2015 is a walk bringing together eight towns and villages from both sides of the river to gather, share and create stories through arts projects that celebrate the River. Each day the walkers will exchange flags for something precious. The walkers will gather and carry their own relics/memory triggers in whatever biodegradable form they choose for a sharing on the final day. The Great Walk begins on Saturday 27 June at Bradwell and finishes the following Saturday 4 July crossing the river from South Woodham Ferrers to Hullbridge.

Ideas to Leap the Crouch

The project began in walks, talks and day workshops, we have shared wild ideas and fairly sensible proposals for a Great Walk around the river with linked celebrations along the way. Eight local artists are working in paired primary schools on either side of the river they are generating public events coinciding with the arrival of the walkers. The walk north and south of the river provides a thread of continuity linking the flags Ali has created with local communities, the schools activity with the landscape and the presence Richard is building on social media.

The Great Walk is open to all and consists of a series of day walks, some linear, some circular along the river, punctuated by celebrations and communications across the river. Walkers are welcome to join for part of a day or several days, we hope some intrepid walkers will commit for the full 100 miles. Here in Essex the only mountains to climb are in your mind. We will be walking and talking and connecting by social media to the world, it really is a public walk, if you cant join us on foot, join us on line!

So why walk?

Walking is a universal activity, walking is said to be the rhythm of our thoughts, walking connects us physically to the terrain, the wind and the weather. Some people walk for pleasure and for their physical and mental health, some walk for enlightenment or in penance and others walk simply because they have no choice. This walk begins at a site of pilgrimage, St Peter's chapel at Bradwell and embraces that pilgrimage tradition. Legend has it that St Cedd arrived with a special Bible, and that having established his base at Bradwell took it on to Canewdon. This is how our walk and our story begins, we will take something precious and mysterious from Bradwell to Burnham and eventually to Canewdon: a ribbon made by local school children. As we walk and traverse the river, like pilgrims we will gather relics of the experience, special and mysterious things to remember with.

Many years ago barges sailed from this part of Essex laden with bricks made of local mud to build London. Across the river from Burnham, on Wallasea, hundreds of tons of mud from under London is transforming the landscape into a vast nature reserve. The paper boats the school children will launch at Burnham and the time capsule they will make for Wallasea will ultimately decay leaving only the trace as a GPS link and memories of the day. As we walk we will share stories of people and objects that arrived along the river some of that will resonate on get tagged social media and we will carry as memories. The terrain and the

weather will help us remember and perhaps we will carry some biodegradable relic from the paper boat launch or Wallasea.

The project explores ways of communicating and reconnecting across the river, we will stop at the disused and abandoned river crossings and imagine how things were and why. Creeksea almost abandoned and Burnham booming. We will collect and carry relics and we will be given special things to carry that we won't even understand. For the school children at Cold Norton and Ashingdon we will carry a secret code, it will enable them to communicate across the river. Somehow when we arrive at South Farnbridge and then two days later at North Farnbridge the handing over of the code in exchange for the community flags will unlock the meaning of the signs being sent across the river. How will they do it and what will they say? Such mysteries are still to be revealed.

Storytellers in the landscape

The River Crouch and the tides flowing up and down will hold for us a story of the walk, as we walk we will embody the story: trees, buildings, flood defences, silent slipways will all help us remember. When we near the end of our walk, where once, so the myth goes, there was a bridge made of upturned boats, we will be able to share a set of stories. Here where Hullbridge does not quite meet South Woodham Ferrers we will explore the metaphors of river and tide and the sunrise and sunset along it. The huge open skies and the narrow strip of muddy land on which we live. We will look out for stories of the ghost crossings, was Tarzan's body double really the last ferry man? We will respect the river in its unleashed spate and using the terrain as memory triggers we will tell a story from our walk.

The questions for the walk

At the core of the project are 3 questions: *why is this place here? how do we cross the river? who are the story keepers and how do you become one?* By the end of the walk all of us, walkers, artists, school children and online followers will be carrying the stories of the river. We will hold a map of movement above and below the river produced by the school children at South Woodham Ferrers and Hullbridge and witness the transmission of a poem they have created through the air. Our questions will float in the air for others to answer and continue with.

At the end of the walk

At the Feast Day on the last day of the walk all the community flags will be gathered together revealing the special story of the walk, the walkers will share their stories using the tangible and intangible relics they have gathered. Finally as the tide begins to turn and the River Crouch begins to pour out into the sea again we will gather our relics and return them to the river. As our thoughts drift with river water flowing over the clear water at one end of our walk and the mud from another tunnel becomes a safe space for wildlife, our moment in this ecological pilgrimage will be over.

Background:

In January, Ali Pretty and Richard White led a series of recce walks on the south side of the River and they are now looking forward to the 100 mile public walk and celebratory events in June 2016. Since last summer, we have been working in partnership with

Rochford District Council developing plans and gathering support for the River Crouch Celebrations. We have explored both sides of the River through river crossings, guided walks, meetings and attending local events. Along every step of our way we have met a host of people who have helped the project take shape and gather momentum – sailors, teachers, writers, ‘do-ers’, artists, enthusiasts, community leaders, walkers, historians and volunteers – to name a few!

Richard White
walknow