

## ARTS FUTURES

### **A Cultural response to the issues of Land Management through the lens of the Alde & Ore Futures consultancy pilot project 2010**

Through the language used in the Shoreline Management Plan and other documents which describe our coast and estuary, we as a group recognised a capacity to look at landscape in a different way to that offered in these texts. We shared an emotional view, we thought that change was a given.

The language we saw was Churchillian. Phrases such as advancing the line, holding the line, managed retreat, overtopping, resilience planning and rock armour were terms that came from a wartime mindset. Subconsciously, these clamp the arguments in rigid language, evoke feelings of invasion and threat. (In fact as a nation we have always suffered invasion from the sea, Viking, Saxon, Norman, are we predisposed to look to the sea warily?) Looking at the Alde and Ore district through this lens, we saw pillboxes, Martello towers, military bases. We heard helicopters, buzzing electricity cables, gunshot, and the pips of radar. We felt this was a limited picture.

Words like compartments, cells, and management conjured an illusion of control and influence, directing the elements to our convenience, containing them in safe places. We even 'annex' our birds. Benefits and harm are graded into categories and sub-divided into others: minor – major negatives, neutral -major positives: sounding like mathematical oxymorons.

This language removes the spirituality from our reed beds, rivers, beaches, deep woodland and grasses. Where was the questioning, human voice in this process? (Where is the voice of the Church in these discussions?)

What would happen, if you replaced the words manage and management with creativity and creation? We would have creative retreat and a shoreline creativity plan. Why could human intervention not be considered aesthetically, culturally as well as technically? The word management smacks of bureaucracy, creativity speaks of possibility. In other words how do we work with the potential of this problem as apposed to the control of it?

Human usage of the land has evolved over the generations, from those that look out from within the land: the labourers and workers, changed by industrialisation, to the new experience, predicated on the visit. The observer now experiences this landscape through controlled experiences, tea shops and log-bordered car parks, with information boards tempting them onto walks and paths, designed by agencies to fulfil requirements and mandates: the preservation of bio-diversities, wildlife, research, military use and economic concerns all figure.

The reduction of liability and risk now seems to be a major factor in our experience of the environment. The dangerous cliff edges that we risked life on, are at risk themselves... Minimising the risks that their demise exposes us to is now our concern.

In fact, minimising risk and its associated terminology brought us to the very title of this project, Futures. The word for us alluded to financial markets, to gambling and in the context of the recent crash, deluded expectations of investments built on shifting sands.

In one of the topic group meetings, it was suggested that in 1953 we were better equipped culturally for coping with the aftermath of the floods. Stronger communities, National Service, more people working on and knowing the land, and word of mouth, allowed for effective response to emergency and repair of damage. This has been displaced by diminished communities and disconnection, exacerbated through the medium of mass communication.

Artists could foster new physical and philosophical spaces, floating houses / meeting places on the river, grow floating gardens, enclose mud flats and make new land, archipelagos. We could invent novel ways of creating flood banks using clothes filled with earth ("The fabrics of Society"), develop amphibian-living projects which draw us back towards a deep connection with the water. We thought of exhibitions, public events, schools workshops, and realised we could provoke discussion, enrich conversation, offer a different view.

This landscape is mined culturally, it is sifted intently, its traces are harvested in many ways, but it is not only a provider of food, its value is not only economic. Defending it with Rock Armour preserves one value, but does it destroy another? The tethered edge, the lost path, the stumps and the rounded bricks on our beaches, add cultural value. One contributor said he doesn't visit East Lane any more: What would be the point?

We discussed the idea that as artists, we had the ability to frame landscape, to digest it, to interpret it. Concepts such as the Romantic, the Picturesque and the Sublime evolved with artists, and these constructs now inform our notion of the beautiful. They inform the criteria for areas of outstanding natural beauty and are fundamental. Capability Brown re-ordered landscape according to them. It is hard to think that the Lake District was considered an ugly, scary place until the romantics re-imagined it.

We could help to create emotional investment by knowing land, and being in it. As stakeholders, we could explore new ways of valuing it aside from the economic. This alternative view could help add value to land with low populations. Differing interpretations could be offered. One person's reinstated river wall could be another's footpath, or an artistic initiative. Major civil engineering could involve the arts community, turning it for them into cultural

statements, amounting to a Cultural Estuary, which, when viewed through the altered perspective of Google Earth could offer new potentials. We could create permanent, real-time events in cyber space, tracing altered flows with tagged floating GPS; we could listen to them through tidal pipes, and mikes.

Through this consultancy process we have heard a myriad of voices and views. We could not hope to convey the totality of our discussions, only a fragment.

This then is our contribution.