

Almost an Island?

An exploration of the Greenwich Peninsula in words and sound

Sarah Butler



Beachcombing, by Sarah Butler

There's a sign saying the footpath's closed, but no-one to police it. It's an empty part of the city; a lorry now and again, the driver perched high in his metal castle, his eye line way above your head, whistling.

The tide is neither here nor there. There's no barrier, but I suspect they wish you wouldn't walk amongst the treasures. Here at the top it's all plastic colours. Bags hold onto their contents. Blue potpourri – dyed husks that have forgotten their smell. A red strap that used to hold things together. Further in, the colours grey. Cracked glass. Feather soft ash. And down here by the shore, rusted up shapes, like tempura vegetables. A nail, a hook, the loop from a long rotted tarpaulin.

I prefer here to the tarmacked path, dissected in two, punctuated by red signs in anticipation of emergencies. Moss clings slick green to concrete corners. Cobble stones bridge the shore. The water is closer here. It's just a step across to the stacks of windows on the far shore. But standing there, I wouldn't feel the crunch and give of cracked ceramic and rusted metal and rock underneath my feet. Standing there, for too long, I would be asked to leave.

Beachcombing, by Aoife Mannix

The river is its own curator
judging art by weight alone.
Five sets of dentures carefully deposited
together to mock the random strangers
who once examined their toothless grins
in mysterious mirrors.

The man at the centre of a storm of coat hangers.
Other debris floating to the surface,
fossils a million years old, a bent kitchen knife,
a glass stopper from a bottle of acid,
plungers, spools, part of a ship's pulley.
The language of industry.

The history of a small animal
digging its burrow
now forever trapped in solid rock.
The point of turning,
filling the space with sediment,
an absence made present.

The burial records
of an unknown vagrant who died
over three hundred years ago.
A stranger passing through
whose destination came out of parish funds.
Harsh beauty, how the land itself
marks layers of change. Every one of us
who tried to read our names in the water.

Reality sliced thinly,
the pieces that are missing.
The pirates who swung for three tides
knew what it was
to swim through time's laughter.
A boat heading out to sea, a hidden warning,
a moment uncaptured.

The two pieces above were written by myself, Sarah Butler, and the poet, Aoife Mannix, in response to the same visit to the Greenwich Peninsula as part of the project *Almost an Island?* As well as writing novels and short fiction, I run a consultancy called UrbanWords, which specializes in projects using creative writing as a way to explore, question and strengthen our relationship with place. I initiated *Almost an Island?* in partnership with writer development charity Spread the Word, and Art on Greenwich Peninsula, which was established to develop a cohesive approach to creating art at one of London's most important regeneration projects. The time I spent developing the partnerships was supported by an Arts Council grant; Spread the Word secured Awards for All Funding to deliver the project.

The Greenwich Peninsula is a remarkable place. Originally marshland, it was reclaimed for farmland, and then market gardens. From the nineteenth century it saw huge industrialization and was home to the manufacture of ammunition, chemicals, steel, submarine cables and soap. Just over 100 years ago it became the site for the largest gasworks in Europe. As one resident told me: "This was where all the nasty stuff happened." Thanks to a huge level of investment, the peninsula has been decontaminated and a large scale programme of redevelopment is underway. The vision is that this 15-20 year regeneration scheme will create a new urban district for London including residential and business communities, health, education, leisure and retail facilities.

Currently, the Greenwich Peninsula stands part way along this new phase in its transformation. New office buildings rise up next to the O2. Greenwich Millennium Village continues to grow. There is a primary school, a health centre, an ecology park, a network of roads, and lots of empty space, waiting to be developed.

I was drawn to the Peninsula because I was intrigued by the effect such dramatic change might have on the identity of a place, because an existing programme of art in the public realm managed by Art on Greenwich Peninsula offered a context for my work, and because I realized that the Peninsula was a place rich in stories. The aim was to deliver a project which would engage local residents in an exploration of their local area, as well as creating a platform for new work written by myself and Aoife in response to the site.

For a small scale project (the Awards for All funding amounted to £5,000, and in-kind support added another £4,000 to the value of the project), *Almost an Island?*

delivered a significant amount of activity. The project blog <www.almostanisland.blogspot.com> archives 47 new pieces of writing by participants, who took part in a programme which included 4 drop-in workshops, 3 targeted workshops, a series of interviews with local figures and a drop-in family day during October half term. Aoife and I created 12 new pieces of writing, and a 10 minute soundscape, available to download from <www.urbanwords.org.uk/urbanwords/projects.html> which combines a selection of their own writing with the voices of local residents.

One of my favourite elements of the project was a workshop I ran at Millennium primary school, currently the only school on the site. I took a year 3 class on a walk of their local area, encouraging them to explore sounds, smells, sights and textures, before facilitating creative writing work back in the classroom. It was one of those gratifying occasions when the teacher picked up on the work I did, creating a whole series of new poems with the children after my visit. Thank you letters from the children after the workshop included comments such as:

"Thank you for taking us on a wonderful trip ... It was the first time I've been working with a real writer ... You have taught me how to explore an interesting world with my senses. Now it is easier for me to explore the world around me."

"You showed me amazing things. You taught me that I can play outside instead of watching TV. You showed me a spiky berry that I have never seen before."



Participants at the drop-in family day
Photo: Art on Greenwich Peninsula



After the workshop I pulled the children's work together into a group poem to archive on the project blog. The piece was picked up by another artist working on the Greenwich Peninsula. Faisal Abdu'Allah was commissioned by Art on Greenwich Peninsula to create a temporary piece of work on a hoarding site opposite Greenwich Millennium Village, currently the main residential area on the peninsula. Faisal used an edited version of the group poem, as well as two other pieces of text, to create a light box installation. The poem was also published in *Spotlight*, the in-house magazine of Lend Lease, one of the developers on the peninsula, which is distributed internationally.

A Walk on the Greenwich Peninsula

by class 3 Lichtenstein, at Millennium Primary School

We went for a walk on the Greenwich Peninsula.
Tell me, what did you see?
A squirrel, a plane, and some shimmering shells,
Prickly grass, and brown and white stones,
The blurry reflections of colourful houses,
The perfect river flowing, moorhens swimming.
A bus, a swan, a beautiful dog.
We saw the sky.

We went for a walk on the Greenwich Peninsula.
Tell me, what did you smell?
Leaves fresh as green apples, sharp as mint.
Seaweed from the sea,
Dark green water,
We smelt the cool fresh air.

We went for a walk on the Greenwich Peninsula.
Tell me, what did you hear?
Crackling, crumpling, rustling leaves.
The sound of a plane, a sound like a bell.
A bike cycling very gently
The brumming of cars
The engines of boats
The whooshing of buses.
The splashing of ducks' flippers
Crashing waves
We heard our own footsteps.

We went for a walk on the Greenwich Peninsula.
Tell me, what did you feel?
The barriers tingling our fingertips,
The concrete hard on our feet,
The breeze, the soft leaves, the smooth silver poles
The grass, a stone and a shell.
We felt warm, laughing, brilliant, happy.

As a writer, the project challenged me to create new work in response to a specific place. As a result of the project, I find I have a stronger relationship with the Greenwich Peninsula than with the area of London I currently live in. This experience reinforces an understanding that is the basis for my work with UrbanWords: that engaging creatively with a place can have a positive impact on your relationship with it. Aoife comments: "For me, the project was an exciting way to combine my writing practice and working within a community. Greenwich Peninsula is a fascinating and inspiring place. Running creative writing workshops and having the chance to work with local people gave



Year 3 students from Millennium Primary School on a walk of the local area. Photo: Art on Greenwich Peninsula

me insights into the area that in turn fuelled my own writing. I very much believe that a sense of place is essential to creativity and also to a community's well being."

The soundscape was a way of bringing together the different elements of the project – the conversations and workshops with local people, and the writing created by myself and Aoife. We performed the soundscape at the conference, *Artists Making Places*, hosted by Art on Greenwich Peninsula in November 2008, and took it

back to Millennium Primary School to share with the students there. Vivienne Reiss from Art on Greenwich Peninsula commented that: "Sarah and Aoife's presentation at the end of the conference was particularly poignant for me as the audience was brought back to the Peninsula and the event ended with the voices of local people."

As with any project which takes place over a short period of time and with a limited budget, *Almost an Island?* would have benefitted from more resources to allow myself and Aoife to build on the relationships we made over the two months we worked on the peninsula. Despite this, I found the project a very satisfying one to work on, and the partnerships involved meant that writing created during this project has gone on to have a life and a platform elsewhere on the peninsula. It was also gratifying to work with partners who were open to the idea of writers working on public realm projects, an area traditionally dominated by the visual arts. In her evaluation of *Almost an Island?* Vivienne Reiss says, "This was our first project involving creative writers and it highlighted for me a particular role for writers in regeneration and will inform the longer term strategy for Art on Greenwich Peninsula."



'In the Same Place' – an art work by Faisal Abdu-Allah, incorporating work from *Almost an Island?*
Photo: Art on Greenwich Peninsula

Something to do with the sky, by Sarah Butler

You'll have seen the place I live, just off the shore. It's a boat, except it's not going anywhere, a sliced hull sitting on a rectangle at the bottom of the river.

Wherever you stand you can hear the water. It's like the river's breathing. Sometimes I'll sit, especially when it's dark and you can see the buildings on the other side like a tapestry of lights, and I listen for words in the water. Wish. Kiss. Miss.

What do I love about the place, you ask. Why am I here, you ask. Because of the water. Because my eyes can stretch further than a wall or the block of a body in front of me. You've met people who live by the sea. Haven't you noticed there's a stillness at the centre of them? It is something to do with the distance. It is something to do with the sky.

No Compass, by Aoife Mannix

Suspended above the river,
the low thunder of barges banging
fills the evening with the ghosts of shipwrecks.
The art of reading treacherous currents,
how the sands change with the light,
sulphurous yellow, slate grey.
The remains of the city far in the distance,
fingers pointing up to heaven, a landmark inverted.

Will-o'-the-wisp voyages, gas worker sailors.
Her grandfather dived to lay the Atlantic cable,
a string tying us to new worlds.
Telegrams sunk, lost communications,
the green rust of dark, dangerous, dirty labour.

The dream of a small rowing boat navigating
the Thames, the twists and turns of an urban skyline.
Contaminated history, how the mud can suck you under
quicker than you'd ever believe possible.
The mystery of names, signposts sighing in the rain,
the wind whistling orchestras through steel girders.

If you get lost out here, the water
will bring you back eventually.

Walk, by Sarah Butler

We could go for a walk together some day, you and me. I'll show you the secret places, if you ask right. The empty space behind the hoardings in the square, where grass creeps up between stones, and buddleia blooms pink amongst the grey. The field behind Sainsbury's where the skylarks sing.

We'll reach down and touch the grass, crunch leaves between our fingers to find out what green smells like. There are treasures on the beach if you take the time to look. If you're not the kind of person who likes talking, we can just sit and listen. The barges sound like thunder. The boats sound like bells. There are birds that've flown half way across the world to be here.

<www.almostanisland.blogspot.com>

<www.urbanwords.org.uk>

<www.artongreenwichpeninsula.com>

<www.spreadtheword.org.uk>

<www.aoifemannix.com>



*Aoife Mannix is an Irish writer and poet based in London. Her first novel *Heritage of Secrets* was published by Lubin & Kleyner in 2008. She is the author of four collections of poetry, all with *Tall Lighthouse*. Her work has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 4, and the BBC World Service.*



Sarah Butler is Director of UrbanWords, a consultancy which actively explores and develops literature projects that engage with regeneration and urban renewal. Sarah has eight years of community literature development experience and is also a writer of novels and short fiction.