Where White Yarrow Grows:

Will Aviation Be Allowed to Wipe This Small Surviving Refuge?

Greg Quiery

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.*

*It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;*

*It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil*

*Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?*

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;*

*And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;*

*And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil*

*Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

INSERT QUIERY PICTURE 1

Although I do not share his faith in God, the thoughts of Gerald Manley Hopkins are in my head as I walk one morning early here at Oglet, where the silence settles as the thunder of jet engines retreats into the sky. The breeze swirling in its wake simmers a moment in the trees and dies, like a swarm of finches settling down into the woods. The quiet deepens. So still the air. The rich sandy soil yields underfoot. The path is decorated here; white yarrow and blue cranesbill. The silence is shattered again from the air, as a flight of Greylag geese burst suddenly from behind the branches above. I come to the low wall overlooking the shore. The tide is out. I count those feeding quietly there: knott, snipe, oystercatchers, turnstones, geese. Behind me, with a deep gathering rumble, another jet prepares to shatter the silence.

*Here is the hidden land*

*Where dry grass lies behind the fence*

*Where the broad flat of the runway*

*Comes to the Mersey banks.*

*Here is the out of sight land*

*looked down upon and never talked about,*

*the fallen on hard times land*

*that must survive on what it can.*

*Here is the wild land*

*Cut up in slices,*

*Left to its own devices*

*That makes the rules up as it goes along,*

*and never will be told how to behave.*

This is Oglet, a natural beauty spot in the shadow of the city. An edgeland, former home to landed gentry, sandwiched now between the airport and the Mersey. This has become contested land, with an uncertain future. To residents of the nearby Speke estate – which lies within an easy walking distance - it is a tranquil place, a refuge, where they can walk a world familiar to their ancestors; a place of shallow streams, tall grasses, birdsong and river waters. Here teenagers can muck about in the pond mud and build dens amongst the birches. To conservationists this is the last redoubt, where birds in their thousands, bats and even otters make their home. For all its industry and pollution, the shallow Mersey encompasses broad mud flats, rich feeding grounds for of geese and waders in their thousands. But the multinational corporation which owns this land, has a ‘Master Plan’ which includes “the construction of runways, terminals, aircraft parking facilities, air traffic control towers, waiting rooms, passenger lounges, hangars, international and domestic baggage reclaim facilities, administrative spaces and related infrastructure, and the installation of signaling, safety and security systems.”

 INSERT QUIERY PICTURE 2

***The fields, hedgerows and wooded cloughs provide a home for bats, amphibians, insects, rare plants and flowers. Oglet is home to many red list birds which have suffered a 50% decline over the last 25 years.***

I come down the worn-out wooden steps, cross a narrow gulley and take a steep slope up to where the path is lost in trees. A minute further and there is a break in cover, where I can look out over the broad sandy bay that is the heart of Oglet. Above me a sparrow hawk hovers, hunting field mice. At my feet a spotted firebug on a globe of dandelion seeds. In the thicket of hazel and birch behind I can hear the cheeping of the small brown creatures, so difficult to distinguish from each other. I walk on towards Hale lighthouse. A walker lowers her binoculars to point out a yellow hammer feeding in the furrows. Further on where the path narrows again the meadow on the left is home to a colony of lapwings who dip and rise chaotically over grass, gently cooing as they swing and swoop beside the fence which hems me in. The abrupt chirrup of a curlew carries from somewhere out behind the grassy estuary reeds.

But all this fragile beauty, this complex web of life, is now caught in the grip of those who take account of nothing but the drive for corporate enrichment. Capital has sunk its teeth into Oglet. A road has been closed, barriers are going up, fencing strengthened, and rights of way obstructed. Planning regulations have been flaunted. This is the juggernaut of international commerce that those who value Oglet are confronting.

INSERT QUIERY PICTURE 3

**The estuary shoreline is what is known as a RAMSAR site, a place of particular importance to birds, who feed on the mud flats as the tide retreats. The Mersey Estuary regularly supports over 20,000 waterfowl in winter. The five-year peak mean for the period was 78,015 birds, comprising 47,714 waders and 30,301 wildfowl.’**

In 2022 the city council removed the protection of green belt status from Oglet, prioritising development over protection. That November, in the gathering dark outside Liverpool town hall members of the Save Oglet Shore and Greenbelt campaign were joined by other environmental campaigners to vocally object to the proposal. During the course of the debate that night councillors promised – in the face of such determined lobbying – that green belt status would be restored.  A promise that, like so many others, has now been forgotten.

Statutory agencies with responsibility for the preservation of the environment include Natural England, the Environment Agency, local authorities and the police. But more often than not they are neglectful of their duties. The local authority has yet to publish the Local Nature Recovery Plan required under the Environment Act 2021. It took continual lobbying over a twelve-month period to get Merseyside police to identify officers responsible for enforcing environmental regulations. Natural England, whose responsibilities include “ensuring that England’s natural environment, including its land, flora and fauna, freshwater and marine environments, are protected” has raised no objection to the removal of green belt status at Oglet.

INSERT QUIERY PICTURE 4

**Those walking the lane near Oglet Farm now find their path into the fields by the shore obstructed by a fence and padlocked gate, eight foot in height. Another route closed off, without prior notice or any consultation.**

But if you think Oglet is forgotten, think again. Just google Oglet Shore and Greenbelt to discover page upon page in celebration of this precious patch of edgeland. The wildflowers and grasses, the trees and thickets, the small mammals and birds have all been observed and documented, celebrated in photos, newspaper reports, drawings and poetry, including my own book Oglet. It is the culture of conservation, of those who would preserve rather than destroy. It is a culture that expresses the fierce attachment people feel, the commitment to the survival of Oglet and every living thing that thrives along that shore.

Will councillors and MPs recognise their obligations towards what wildlife remains along the Mersey? Should this be sacrificed to an airport facility that has such intensive carbon footprint? For baggage handling and hotel cleaning jobs? Think of what the cost will be.

Campaigners walk these green fields each day. They resist the closing off of paths, they research the effects of the air pollution and the noise, they document the birdlife, the flora and small mammals. They lobby the city council. They offer evidence to planning inquiries. Can they save this land now caught in the grip of those who never factor in the cost to the environment of the deeds of man.

INSERT QUIERY PICTURE 4

*And for all this, nature is never spent;*

*There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;*

*And though the last lights off the black West went*

*Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —*