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Telegraph Hill, SE14

Upwards, Forwards & Backwards: London & the Lakes, Memory & the Imagination

I have never lived in London. For a few years, though, most working weeks began on the West Coast Main Line as I travelled down from the Lake District – where I was based at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere – to spend sun-deprived hours in subterranean research libraries and archives. It was a life of pleasingly polarised geographies. I woke up, on Monday mornings, to the screeches of the Canadian geese over the northern end of the lake at Grasmere; then, a few hours later, I experienced auditory overload when stepping out onto Euston Road. The juxtapositions continued in London itself: days were spent in darkened rooms researching minor works by neglected Picturesque landscape painters; and evenings unfolded in the phosphorous glow of the turn-of-the-millennium city. My experience of London was also defined by a narrowly circumscribed and limitedly centralised geography as I rarely moved outside a quadrant which contained Tate Britain in the west and the Courtauld in the east, the British Library in the north and the Royal Watercolour Society on the South Bank. As a result, my sense of the city's verticality was exclusively shaped by architectural thrusts upwards: the 1960's glass of Millbank Tower, for instance, which, at the time, served as New Labour HQ; and the functional brickwork of Sir Giles Gilbert's Scott's Bankside Power Station which had recently been Tate-ified amidst the glow of Blairite largesse. It was a sense of constructed verticality which was reinforced by the *fin-de-siècle* fantasies of the starchitects whose CAD-facilitated imaginings were rapidly reshaping the city's skyline. I looked skywards as the Gherkin came-into-being and predicted, with justifiable confidence, what Wordsworth would have made of the ever-evolving view of St Paul's from Westminster Bridge.

By extension, London's outer boroughs remained unvisited, to borrow a cardinal Wordsworthian term, and purely toponymical. My knowledge of the city's outlying topography was thin: a figurative conflation of what the contemporary edgelands poet, Paul Farley, describes as 'the slow outskirts' glimpsed as the pre-Pendolino Virgin train crawled into Euston and an imagined geography shaped by Wordsworth's idealised vision of the city radiating out from Westminster Bridge 'Open to the fields, and to the sky,/ All bright and glittering in the smokeless air'. London for me, then, was not a city of naturally high places.

Instead, natural elevation was indelibly – and understandably - associated in my mind with the contours of Loughrigg and Silver Howe, Helm Crag and Seat Sandal, back home at Grasmere: fells which I continued to encounter daily, even in London, through the late eighteenth-century brushstrokes of the artists - such as Francis Towne and John ‘Warwick’ Smith – I found myself researching in those darkened, yet rarefied, urban interiors.

This centrifugal sense of urban space contrasted with my parents’ experiences of London. My Mum and Dad spent much of their twenties living in various boroughs both north and south of the river. London, for them, was defined by the centripetality characteristic of the practice of everyday life in the city; and, in terms of embodied experience, they were more familiar with the streets of Highbury and Hackney than the over-determined spaces of the post-imperial centre. For several years after their marriage, they lived in a ground-floor flat on Erlanger Road in New Cross, just around the corner from Goldsmith’s. Unsurprisingly, then, a favourite location for my newly-wed parents was Telegraph Hill: a place-name which played an improbably prominent role in shaping my own imagining of London when I was brought up, some years later, under the not-always-so-grey suburban skies of south Liverpool. Walking uphill was a quotidian practice for my Mum and Dad in south-east London; Telegraph Hill’s natural contours allowed them to see, from a distance, the man-made elevations of central London.

As local historian, John Kelly, points out in a pamphlet published by the Telegraph Hill Society, this elevated land – to the south of the hamlet of Hatcham - was known, up until the end of the eighteenth-century, as Plow’d Garlick Hill: a pleasingly poetic place-name which carries a sense of the historic rurality of this terrain which now falls in the Borough of Lewisham. Chaucer’s ‘nyne and twenty’ pilgrims would have passed close to this mound as they walked – imaginatively, at least - from Southwark to Canterbury. For the most part, though, the history of the hill – which rises to just under fifty metres above sea level - seems to have been uneventfully agricultural. In 1795, however, the Admiralty responded to the threat of a French invasion by establishing an optical telegraph station at the summit of this gentle incline. As Kelly explains, the Admiralty advanced beyond the lit beacon as a mode of communication by installing a shutter telegraph: a contraption which was approximately twenty foot high and which contained ‘six wooden shutters, arranged as two side-by-side sets

each three shutters high'. The innovative optical technology – which, with rich irony, had first been developed by the Frenchman, Claude Chappe – enabled the Admiralty to establish a direct line of communication linking Whitehall, West Square at Southwark, Shooter's Hill and so on, until reaching the Kent coast at Deal. Through the installation of the technology of military communications, then, Plow'd Garlick Hill metamorphosed into Telegraph Hill. By extension, the hill emerged into the national consciousness when, in 1815, it played a pivotal role in relaying news of Wellington's victory at Waterloo to Admiralty House in central London. Telegraph Hill continued to function as a vital communication link over the course of the first-half of the nineteenth-century; and, as Kelly points out, the initial shutter system was superseded by more advanced semaphore technology. In 1847, however, the naval line was finally shut down; but, in spite of the relative brevity of the existence of the telegraph station, this short-but-all-important history continues to be traced, of course, in the official naming of this hill.

The landscape immediately on and around Telegraph Hill was radically transformed in the second-half of the nineteenth-century. During the 1840s, Robert Browning lived at Telegraph Cottage near New Cross Road in a local environment which was dominated by the Market Gardens of the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers. With the coming of the railways, however, the Company identified the potential for significant property development; and, in 1859, the surveyor, William Snooke, produced a detailed report recommending the laying of expansive tree-lined roads for the construction of 'dwelling houses of a high standard'. As a result, the 1870s saw the Haberdashers' Company lay out what was labelled Hatcham Manor Estate: a network of roads – including Erlanger, Pepys and Jermingham - featuring lines of substantial terrace houses situated on the slopes of the hill.

As a result, Telegraph Hill now came to be situated in prosperous suburbia and, through the creation of a public park which formally opened in April 1895, the highest point was retained as a much-desired green space for the residents of the sizeable new houses fanning out below. Telegraph Hill, therefore, was reshaped into a site of leisure and pleasure. As Kelly helpfully explains, it is a transformation which is recorded by the splendidly sniffy Mrs Evelyn Cecil in *London Parks and Gardens* (1907) when she notes that: 'The site of the semaphore station is now a level green for lawn tennis. On the other side of the roadway, the descent is steep into the valley, and there are two small ponds at the bottom. The cliffs are covered in turf, interspersed by the usual meaningless clumps of bushes and a few nice trees.' Clearly, Cecil

still pays attention to the natural contours of this raised ground. Crucially, though, the crest of the hill is immediately presented as a recreational zone for the ever-emerging middle-classes residing on its slopes; an elevated location which proved ideal for a spot of tennis against a panoramic backdrop of the architectural skyline of central London.

On a Saturday afternoon in November 2013, I visited Telegraph Hill with my Dad. I had mapped it all out in my head beforehand: the coming together at Euston; the journey on the Tube to New Cross Gate; the visit to the corner-shop where my parents stopped off on their way home each evening; and the opportunity to peer into their old flat on Erlanger Road. Most of all, though, I was anticipating what Caroline Dale, in *Skyline London: A Guide to the Finest Views from the Capital's High Points* (2012), tantalisingly describes as ‘a view of the entire canon of London’s skyline signature buildings’, including the vertical lines of Tate Modern and Millbank which I had only ever witnessed near-at-hand. A late November visit was promisingly timely since, as Dale suggests, the panoramic view of the cityscape from Telegraph Hill is ‘at its best when the trees are not in leaf’.

Perhaps predictably, though, the view from the out-of-season tennis courts was disappointing. That Saturday, we were late getting away and, by the time we took the path through the small park, the afternoon greyness was beginning to converge with the early evening gloaming. The promised central London skyline, then, remained frustratingly out of sight as my Dad told me about a time-before-me and a life which he and my Mum shared but I will never be able to access fully. Intermittently, the geometry of the London skyline would reveal itself through the dullness: the vertical towers of Battersea Power Station; the high circle of the London Eye; and, in a not-entirely-harmonious bringing together of these shapes, the more recent form of Strata SE1 at Elephant and Castle. For the most part, however, the eye was drawn to the Whistleresque image of the aircraft warning lights on the Shard. That is to say, sharp red dots shone through the mizzle and reached us on our park bench on Telegraph Hill: a site which my parents had visited together on an almost daily basis over forty years earlier.

The visual spectacle afforded by the walk up Telegraph Hill, therefore, was an anti-climax. It was a sense of disappointment demonstrably shared by the number of Goldsmith’s students who were in the park that afternoon, equipped with digital cameras and mobile phones, and who had made the same journey up from New Cross Road in order to show off the vertical

metropolis to their visiting parents. Yet, even as we sat together on that park bench, it became clear that the smudged skyline was an entirely appropriate image for this exercise in memory capture. As we sat in Telegraph Hill Park, my Dad's thoughts inevitably remained transfixed on the contented summer of 1967 whilst my own mind drifted back to those days of scholarly excavation researching Lake District landscape paintings in central London. As we sat in Telegraph Hill Park, then, the imaginative presence of Wordsworth – the great poet of both high places and the difficult-to-grasp nature of memory - came back into view. Wordsworth's preoccupation with the naming of places prompted reflections on the military history of this elevated spot. Moreover, I momentarily recalled how the Wordsworths famously celebrated the news of Wellington's victory at Waterloo by joining the Southneys for a large bonfire, and a rum punch-fuelled dinner, at the top of 'lofty Skiddaw': the fourth highest summit in England.

For the most part, though, I tried to remember the poetry itself. The blurring of the buildings of central London problematised Wordsworth's assertion – voiced in 'Musing Near Aquapendente' (composed in 1837 and first published five years later) – that the elevation to a high place facilitates a 'visual sovereignty' over the surrounding landscape. More than this, the disappointment of the embodied experience in suburban south east London opened up thoughts of the younger Wordsworth who, in Book VI of *The Prelude*, recounts the pedestrian crossing of the two thousand metre-high Simplon Pass in southern Switzerland. Wordsworth recalls how, for his younger student self, to walk over the Alps promised to be an epiphanic moment; a 'spot of time' which would continue to feed the poetic imagination long after the fleetingness of the physical act. In actuality, however, Wordsworth – and his Cambridge friend, Robert Jones – crossed the Alps in a state of unselfconsciousness. Wordsworth, in his poetic reconstruction of the (non-)event, recalls how he and Jones believed that they were still heading upwards to the highest point to be crossed; but, upon encountering a local peasant, they were dispiritingly informed that they had, in actual fact, already begun their descent: 'And all the answers which the man returned/ To our inquiries – in their sense and substance,/ Translated by the feelings which we had -/ Ended in this, that we had crossed the Alps.' Wordsworth's poetic achievement, however, is to transcend the matter-of-factness of this final line, and to circumnavigate the sense of loss generated by the underwhelming bodily experience, by celebrating the unfettered potential of the imagination: 'Our destiny, our nature, and our home,/ Is with infinitude, and only there -/ With hope it is, hope that can never die'. That is to say, Wordsworth, in looking back, cuts through the

figurative clouds which descended as a result of this physical ‘failure’ and he attains imaginative clarity through an immersion in the ‘invisible world’ of interiority. The remembered experience of a high place, then, shapes the poet’s imagination and, by extension, his autobiographical poetic utterances; but not in the ways in which he had anticipated when approaching the Sublimescape of the Simplon Pass on foot.

In spite of the comically contrasting topographical scales, thoughts on how Wordsworth imaginatively recasts spatial disappointment through the filter of memory came to mind as my Dad and I rested in this not-so-high place in south-east London. In addition, the failure to get a secure visual grip on the heterogeneous skyline of central London enabled me to imaginatively travel north and north-westwards to my own young son at home on the fringes of Morecambe Bay. More particularly, I began to imagine a day when I might bring him to Telegraph Hill. Whilst my Dad looked down towards Erlanger Road and back towards the late 1960s, therefore, I looked forward to a revisiting of this elevated urban park: an imaginative anticipation of retrospection which, saliently, plays an integral role in Wordsworth’s poetics of verticality.

As we slowly retraced our route to the Tube station, the soundtrack of birdsong and jet engines audible on Telegraph Hill was increasingly replaced by the quotidian hum of the buses, cars and taxis travelling along New Cross Road. As we were sucked back into the centre of the city, I started to think about one last textual reference in the form of Gaston Bachelard’s singular conflation of phenomenology and psychoanalysis in *The Poetics of Space* (1958). In that influential book, Bachelard famously celebrates the verticality of the house and suggests that to climb the stairs to an attic room is to move towards and into an enclosed environment which provides perfect conditions for the complex entanglement of ‘memory and imagination’ that is ‘the poetic daydream’. As I walked back along the flattened topography of Euston Road, I started to reflect on how Bachelard’s lyrical meditations on the experience of architectural dwelling places are perhaps equally applicable to the experience of walking up natural high places. I remember that a former colleague once derisively dismissed Bachelard’s prose as offering nothing more than ‘vapid sonorities’. As I walked through the streets of central London again, however, and recalled earlier days spent in subterranean archives, I couldn’t help but disagree. For me, Bachelard reveals much about

the ways in which the experience of verticality – the high places – opens up the oneiric. The not-too-demanding walk up Telegraph Hill might not have facilitated ‘visual sovereignty’ over the cityscape; but the vertical movement on foot did create a space in which the memory and the imagination, retrospection and anticipation, could complicatedly coalesce.

I would like to express my gratitude to Malcolm Bacchus, Chair of the Telegraph Hill Society, for generously sending me a copy of John Kelly’s pamphlet on ‘The Telegraph on Telegraph Hill’.