



# UNTRUE ISLAND

## AROUND THE EDGES

elaine tribley

Volunteer interviews and photographs together with responses to the Ness from Orford Primary School Pupils and The Essex University Wild Writing Group, collected during the Untrue Island project.

**V O L U N T E E R**  
n. 1. to offer (oneself  
or one's services) for  
an undertaking by  
choice and without  
request or obligation



Photograph by Roger Dawson, July 2012

Peter Whiley

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

16 years - I wanted something which was different from my professional life and as a NT member I found the Ness a stimulating environment with a variety of fascinating and interesting features including its remoteness, the wildlife and military history.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

Yes and it has developed as the site has changed over the years, particularly the bird life changes and also as more information becomes available on the military activities.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

There are many stories and anecdotes which have occurred or been revealed over the years as more information becomes available on its recent history. Probably too numerous to mention here.

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

Contemporary art relates to art which is recent and relates very closely to the environment in which it is produced. The sounds of the Ness created for the musical performance were very good and closely reflect this wild and remote place. However, the "sculptures" I found totally underwhelming and unfortunately do not reflect or relate to any of the better known or popular activities and trials held on site, which is perhaps a missed opportunity. They are totally lost in the vastness of the site and the buildings in which they are displayed, which already contain significant amounts of internal dereliction and military detritus.

**Did you experience the Untrue Island performance? If you did how would you describe your reaction to it?**

The musical performances were very good, generally well received & provided a unique experience for all that were able to attend.



Relaxing on the Ness, photograph by John Griffin

## Sensing The Ness.

The cold sea mouths this pebble bank,  
licking and sucking stones,  
spitting them out of its lips -  
spewing, grading, piling -  
a shape-shifter altering the coast.

Boneyard of MAD intention:  
heaps of crumpled parts  
built to finesse  
the ultimate destruction:  
pushed to breaking point -  
rest now on shingle, undefended.

Now in roofless bomb-test labs  
weeds explode, rosebay flares,  
wind and salt abrade and cut,  
rain falls like air-shot bullets,  
iron flakes peel off -  
things fall apart.

Yet on this moving spit  
stealthy seeds settle,  
roots explore, grip silt.  
A slow invasion  
measures out a new design,  
casts soft shawls on pebbled ridges -  
sea aster, campion, pea,  
false oat, detander -  
softening the dereliction.

Hawks hover and plunge  
intent on their own killing,  
hares shoot up from shingle,  
plovers place pebble eggs  
in stoney camouflage.

Mist snakes in,  
humming,  
peers over the horizon,  
hoods flint and rust  
in electronic gauze -  
confusing shape and distance,  
blurring the edges of time.



Wild Writing Group tour of Untrue Island, photograph by Elaine Tribley

(William) Lewis Dann

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

I have been a volunteer on Orford Ness for over three years. I had often sailed past the Ness, but first went there about six years ago after retiring and moving to Suffolk. I loved the place, and soon after met another volunteer socially, which gave me the notion of applying.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

I do love the Ness, and always enjoy my days there. The best time is usually the early morning when I like to go out onto the shingle and unlock the buildings. That is about as far as one can be away from anyone else in the South East of England! So yes, I do have a strong feeling for the place. There have been a few changes in my brief time there, but mainly to do with the formation of new watery habitats for the birds.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

There is always a wealth of stories, but any really strange ones I run past Paddy Heazel (volunteer historian at the Ness), and usually find that they are not true! So far no dangerous moments.

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

I am more of a conventional art lover. I think I know what contemporary artists are trying to do to make us see the world differently, but I am more of a photographer. I would love to hear some woodwind playing out there on a quiet misty day.

**Did you experience the Untrue Island performance? If you did how would you describe your reaction to it?**

No, we were away for the show on the 8th, as we live in the Italian Alps for about half the year. I also love the mountains, and find Bardonecchia in Italy almost the exact opposite of the Ness.

Ed Gildersleeves

I've only been a volunteer at Orford for a few months, however, as with any 'island', once you are there, unless you can see the whole perimeter, it does not feel like an island. I think it is important to explain the rough geography of the place i.e. the River Ore enters the sea 5 miles south of the main visitor accessible area. Suffolk's only island is just downstream\*. The (soon to disappear) lighthouse marks the beach and the North Sea. The Ness would be an island, except it is attached 5 miles to the north, just south of Aldeburgh, making the Ness 10 miles long overall.

The geography is so extraordinary, that you couldn't make it up.

\* Havergate Island, now a RSPB nature reserve.



Photograph by Roger Dawson, July 2012

Paddy Heazell

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

I think I'm the longest serving volunteer - I started in June 1995, the month of opening to the public. This coincided with my retirement from headmastering and proved to be an ideal National Trust property for my wife and me, I am a military historian, and my wife a wildlife enthusiast.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

Emphatically yes. The Ness is unique and anyone not entirely hooked on the place - for its atmosphere, wildlife and extraordinary history - would be barmy to volunteer.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

Has it changed? In some respects not at all - its character and the attitude of the National Trust staff to us. It has become a more 'organised' venue for visitors and shows slow but obvious signs of continuing to develop in land management and provision for visitors. Dramas? two volunteers have had quite serious accidents in the course of doing their job of welcoming the public (one of them being my wife!) As for comic situations - few to match ones mentioned in my book (so treat yourself to a copy)\*.

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

I am slightly dubious of the relevance of the recent show. I certainly feel that contemporary artists MUST provide for the volunteers a detailed explanation of what they are trying to say so they can explain what it's all about\* \*. Certainly the recent show provided a major boob: what was all this stuff about Blind Landing? The Blind Landing Experimental Unit operated at Martlesham Heath (and later in Bedford) and never at Orford. How metal poles related to any work on

the Ness I couldn't see - and neither did most of the visitors who spoke to me either. My personal view is that the detritus left lying around constitutes 'natural sculpture' and modern artists should attempt to relate to it. I am much more impressed by the sound/music projects which add to the atmosphere of the place.

### End Note

I applaud the NT initiative in commissioning/hosting such artistic enterprises - I just think that the artists should ensure that they are being inspired by Orford Ness and not by their own concepts (or dare I suggest, conceits).

\* Paddy is the author of *Most Secret: The Hidden History of Orford Ness*

\*\*Volunteer notes were produced and available during the Untrue Island project.



Local Artists tour of Untrue Island, photograph by Elaine Tribley





The Pagodas, photograph by John Griffin

my name is zoe,  
Mati Hi! I'm a journalist and this is my story:  
15.06.12 I'm running to the ferry, trying to catch it  
Friday in time. I make it. We travel across the  
15<sup>th</sup> water on the motor boat <sup>and</sup> When we get <sup>arrive</sup> there  
June the tour guide is already there. I get out of  
2012 the boat, my pack waying on my shoulders.  
age 11 The tour guide is in the midst of  
telling us about the ~~pa~~ Pagodas when  
someone comes running up to ~~talk~~ him  
and whispers in his ear. His eyes  
widen as the man says something,  
and as soon as he ~~finishes~~ finishes  
the tour guide says we need to  
all ~~avaguate~~ avaguate. I run up to  
him ~~ask~~ asking him questions about  
wat's happened but he refuses to  
answere, ~~by~~ and because of that  
I get away from the group and  
I go to investigate.

Orford Primary Pupils worked with local writer Liz Ferratti on themes of the Ness, Here Mati responds to the brief: 'The enemy has gone, what are we left with? A tourist attraction, crumbling buildings. What about the future? Ghosts and echoes of the past.'

Martin Howse

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

It's 12 or 13 years since I retired. The reason I wanted to volunteer was because it's always fascinated me, I've lived here (Ipswich) since 1968, I moved up from Kent. I was a captain on one of the ferries running to the Europort in Holland from 1968 until I retired.

I found out about the Ness through someone who lived in Ipswich and found the whole place quite interesting both the historical side and the natural landscape, but it was originally the pagodas that fascinated me, I could see them from the sea when I sailed my ships in.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

I drive a vehicle for the guided tours and have been writing up notes for training up people to become a guide whilst training myself, I've trained about half a dozen so far. Every time you're out there (on the Ness) it's a different place, pouring with rain one day, the sun out the next, the weather changes everything.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

One visitor who came to see where her father worked (he was a scientist in the Black Beacon) came face to face with a photograph of her father, it was totally unexpected and it was very sad, she was very moved by seeing the picture. Several times we've had a couple of boys who went in the Black Beacon and set off a fire extinguisher! and early one morning we've had people on top of one of the pagodas.

What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?

I'm not into contemporary art, but I've got an open mind. I like landscapes, oils and ships, I've got a signed limited edition print, an exclusive made for a group of people who knew the painter.



Weather watching, photograph by John Griffin



“Untrue Islands’ by Orford Primary Pupil

## Orfordness

I am treading on earth's dream of the sea,  
it feels, or on the ocean's crust itself.  
I am between elements here, on shingle  
fine-tuned to respond to the sea's caress  
or to turn its back on the wind's rebuke.  
It is a landscape rolled out like a map  
of time, what's been before and what's to come.

'Here be ordnance,' say the signs; skins of bombs,  
brazen bits of bullets like dragons' eyes  
remind us that they haunt this place, their lairs  
raftered over with the sky. We can hear  
an echo of the beat of their wings, smell  
the fire of their breath and are brought at last  
to their one remaining egg; white, so pure,  
it will hatch demons to consume us all.



Wild Writing Group tour of Untrue Island, photograph by Elaine Tribley

Friday 15th June <sup>revised</sup> Theo Reed ~~2000000~~ Year 4.

I'm a secret scientist and I will tell you what I do in the cold war. I create weapons for the English. This is a hard time to be creating weapons. I come here ~~every~~ every day. My family doesn't know about my secret job they think I ~~work~~ work for the national trust. Last year I ~~took~~ <sup>had</sup> my take my son to work he was 3 years old he <sup>went</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>one</sup> of the <sup>past</sup> and stepped on a mine. I was very sad <sup>but</sup> I put a side my feelings ~~at~~ and decided to make bombs. I built a ~~the~~ <sup>ear</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>ear</sup> bomb that was never used.

Orford Primary Pupils worked with local writer Liz Ferratti on themes of the Ness, Here Theo responds to the ideas of: 'weapons, defence and destruction, nuclear bombs, Cobra Mist and Radar.'



The performance, photograph by John Griffin

Clive Chambers

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

For 5 Years; I'm a retired publican, I moved to Orford when I retired. I work between 14 and 20 days in the season.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

It's always a changing vista with the light and the different times of year, always very benign really, just sleeping.

The beauty of being a volunteer is going to open up when no one else is around and it's fantastic the sound it's making, and we see a lot more of the wildlife than the visitor does, because it's so flat as soon as the visitors arrive the wildlife moves off ..... towards Lantern Marsh. You see short eared owls or avocets or whatever while travelling around. The area where most birds congregate when disturbed is where the green building is where not many visitors go.

I want to pay a great tribute to Grant and Duncan who are so passionate themselves about the Ness and communicate with volunteers very well indeed; what I've learnt has been from Duncan and from Paddy.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

Beyond the odd naughty person who doesn't want to follow the designated routes for their own safety and to protect the Ness and try to get to the Black Beacon by walking straight across the shingle, but that's very rare.

Sometimes we have problems with photographers who want a particular shot, they want to know why can't they go where they want to, but most people want to learn about the Ness.



Warming up, photograph by John Griffin

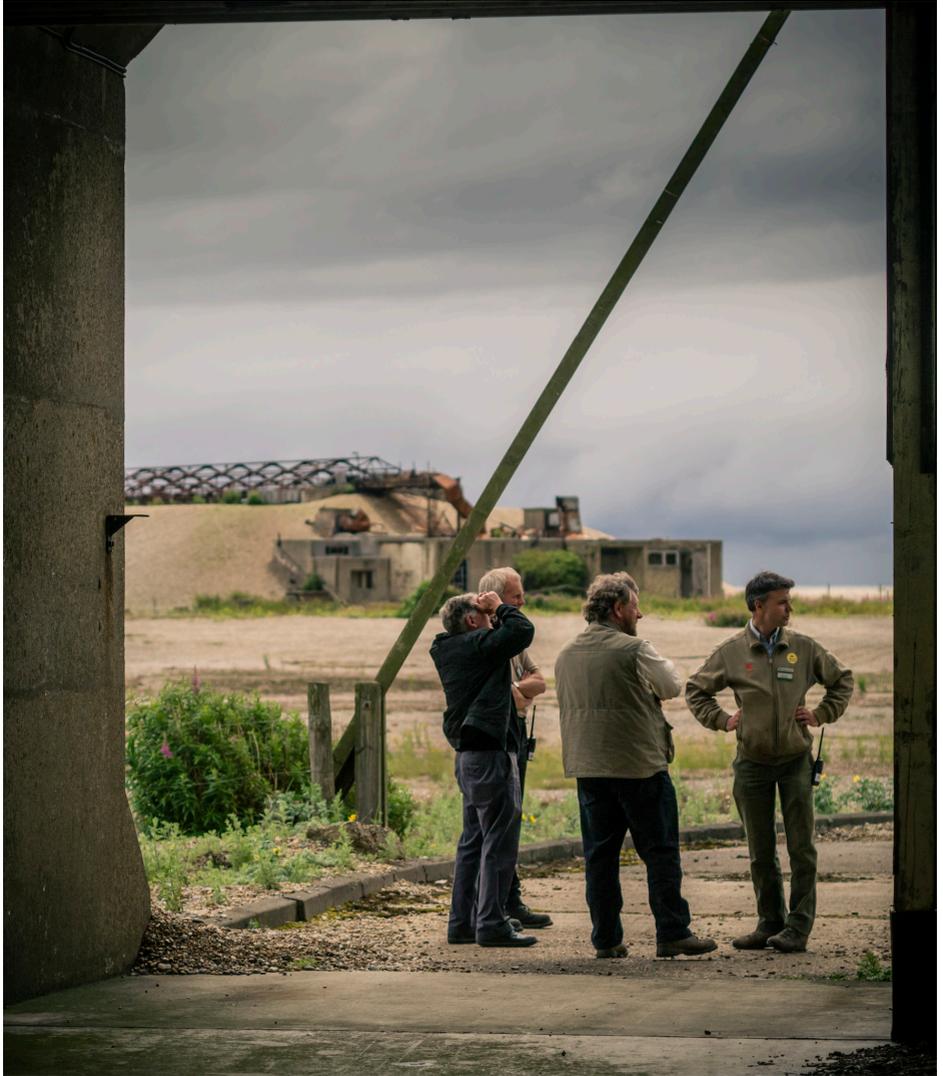
There was a lot of damage done before the National Trust arrived with people driving 4x4's across the Ness, not knowing what they were doing, but basically driving over two thousand year old shingle. People don't realise how really important the Ness is for flora and fauna because it's a unique habitat but also from the point of view of military history.

Also the way its been created: the lines of vegetation are at the top of waves created by storm surges going back some two thousand years ago. During the storms of 1953 some police officers were on the site over night, they climbed onto the roof of some of the buildings and were saved by an RSPB warden. He won an OBE or CBE because he rowed out there in the dark when the storm was abating to save their lives. The sea wall was breached and all the marshes were flooded right up to the castle; an engraved plate on the quay marks the level of the flood.

The National Trust building on the Quay was the MOD police building and the car park was built by the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment for the workers. Over 600 people worked on the Ness then, they checked in at the police station and went over by landing craft, to walk to the various places they worked.

The early work with Radar on the Ness meant that we won the Second World War, parachutes were developed on The Ness and they developed the ability to fire through a propeller. Aerial photography and the launching of a plane at sea was pioneered on the Ness, so much that was done over there.

A very elderly lady who came to talk to me had been in transport in WW2 and had been involved in bringing across hardcore for the roads that were going to be put down on the Ness, she told me all about it, it was quite amazing.



A posse of NT staff, photograph by John Griffin

Also, how they blew the pontoon bridge up. It was winter 1942 or 1943 and they built a pontoon bridge for vehicles to get over to the Ness but the river froze up and ice built up on the pontoon so the army decided to blow the ice away but someone used too much explosive and blew the bridge up!

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

I think they're trained con men, I was impressed with the musical suite, brilliant, that to my mind captured a great deal of what the Ness is about, but as far as the sculptures are concerned - no! lots of people were saying 'what the hell is that?'

I'm 65 years old now, and I know what I like, modern art I'm not keen on at all. I'm a historian and enjoy looking at normal paintings of people, going back to the Renaissance, decorative art in churches etc. that's the sort of art that I can appreciate. I find it hard to understand what a big metal ruler painted black and white is doing for the environment, I question who commissioned it. Lots of visitors couldn't understand it. I'm appreciative of the performance but the art on display was too far out, it's like talking to people on Venus with Jupiter's language.

The only other art project\* that we've had that I can remember was last year where we had some areas designated as areas of art - another superb piece of con-manship - how can you say something is art that's there anyway. Three areas designated as being art for a month, one of which was the large concrete area near the Bomb Ballistics building, no-one knows what it was built for, that was designated as a building of art and I thought - no!

\*A project by Hugh Pilkington who 'appropriated' three circular concrete objectson The Ness and designated them artworks for a month, in the manner of Duchamp.



Watching the performance, photograph by John Griffin



"Untrue Islands' by Orford Primary Pupil

Sue Cross

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

I came from Leighton Buzzard to Ipswich to do nurse training and never went back. I was a community nurse then and worked for a charity which supported people with learning difficulties. I had the opportunity to go to the Ness as a visitor on a disability awareness day, I was turning fifty and really like the place so thought I'd look into volunteering. I've now been a volunteer for 15 years although it doesn't seem that long.

I'd been in the Air Force and feel very comfortable there and I'm really interested in knowing what the RAF did there and the social side of the Ness for them. Because of the Official Secrets Act only a snippet of new information is given to the National Trust each year.

I find it an intriguing place and always find out something new every time I go, I work there about 10-12 times a year but it varies each year.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

Some of us feel when we're there we own it because it's so isolated sometimes we have the opportunity to have an hour or two just sitting and enjoying the place and sunbathing on the beach. I love the way it changes colour depending on the weather.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

Some people walk on from Aldeburgh and wonder where they are! Last year a chap with a folding bicycle arrived from Aldeburgh and didn't know where he was, when he found out he said "it's good job I didn't bring the wife!" Sometimes fishermen come up from that end of the Ness

One guy who came across had worked here in his twenties but was very disappointed in the Ness and said the place is dead now for him, other people will reminisce for ages.

In the past people had a pretty good social life on the Ness although there wouldn't have been that many people stationed there, its all quite secret so maybe people didn't share what they were doing there. They had a mini golf course there once.

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

It never ceases to amaze me, I do understand the art installation and the research that went on, the scale of bombs and velocity and speed and the measuring in the olden days in the film industry. It's very unusual but not my cup of tea. I wish I'd studied the history of art so I'd have an understanding. I'm interested in why and how people become creative, how they get there and how they can influence other people.

A lot of people didn't know what to say, some people found it baffling, especially the size to the buildings, in Lab 5 it was very insignificant, it didn't stand out very much. When I heard there was going to be sculptures I was expecting something in bronze because of the weather, something that would weather well, I didn't think about form or shape just thought a connection with Orford Ness but of course the connection is measuring and research and research based objects in terms of speed and their ability to destroy but none were really used to destroy, they were developed to protect us rather than something that was to destroy.

The performance was fantastic, it did speak of Orford Ness, all the background sounds and the wonderful music by Arnie and the other chaps. That young lady, her voice was beautiful.

I was round at Lab 5 where one of the installations is and I was told to chivvy people along to get to the performance on time and this lady came round and I spoke to her and she was Polly's mother, I told her how fantastic Polly was and what a wonderful voice she had, her mum was really pleased! I thought it was lovely that she came from Framlingham and was local.



Arnie Somegyi and the band perform at Orford Primary School, photograph by Elaine Tribley



Blind Landing in Lab 2, photograph by Elaine Tribley

Roger Dawson

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

This is my second year on the Ness. I retired three years ago, I was a scientist and originally designed animal feeds and ended up working in animal health. During my first summer of retirement I went to the Ness, which is only 20 mins from where I live but I'd never been there. I went across and picked up a leaflet, met some volunteers on my walk, got home and sent an email enquiring about volunteering. Duncan invited me out and here I am. It's a lovely place to go I like the outside and really enjoy it.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

I like the wide outdoor spaces, the best outdoor space I know other than the Ness is the Lake District where I come from. For wild outdoor spaces the Ness is the nearest you get to the Lake District.

**Since working there have you encountered any funny stories, anecdotes, emotional situations or dangerous ones?**

Most people are quite sensible and generous, we did have a situation with a partner agency recently driving around really fast in a Range Rover, they also clambered onto the roof of unsafe buildings looking for refugees and didn't have a clue how to behave.\*

\* the issue was with new staff and has now been resolved by the rangers on site.

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

I know very little about contemporary art, I'm not that sort of a person at all, the sort of art I like is Constable and Canaletto. I saw the measurement in lab 4 but it didn't do anything for me, I have a vague understanding of what it's about because the girl who was looking after it explained.

14<sup>th</sup> June 1939

Today, I've been sent to a camp by the sea. I'm part of shore defence. ~~to~~ My job will be to protect some buildings ~~from~~ from our main enemy. The Nazis. Other than that nothing's been told.

16<sup>th</sup> June 1939

We've arrived at destination. I over some of the other soldiers say we're at "Orford Ness" where ever that is. As we were trekking across the island, there were busy people rushing in out of vast warehouses with huge columns.

My tent is cramped, there's five of us in here: me, John, Harry, Sam, and Isaac.

As I'm writing this the rest are telling stories about what's in those strange buildings. Isaac thinks they've got a cloning machine and are going to make huge armies. What ever it is in there I want to find out.

By Madelaine, aged 11.

Orford Primary Pupils worked with local writer Liz Ferratti on themes of the Ness. Here Madelaine responds to the brief: 'invisible enemies and secrecy'



Waiting for the performance, photograph by John Griffin

Simon Bradford

**How long have you been a National Trust volunteer on the Ness and what inspired you to become involved?**

I have been a volunteer on the Ness for about 6 years and have known the place for many years more.

**Would you say you have a personal relationship to the Ness? Has it changed during your time there?**

In common with my fellow volunteers I am very attached to the Ness, in particular I value the unique landscape and the range of exotic species that inhabit the place.

**What is your understanding of contemporary art? Have you experienced the new installations in the Labs? What is your understanding of them?**

My background is in the Arts, I did my first degree in Fine Art at Portsmouth in the sixties and worked as an art librarian for over twenty years at Middlesex University, in the end as Faculty Librarian and Learning Resources Manager.

I have been out there with Jane and Louise on a number of occasions over recent months, from the initial planning visits to the installation - helping mostly as a driver. I have been on duty several times since the opening, talking to the public about the work. I remain impressed by it and find different things to like about the pieces each time I am there.

Two themes stand out. One is scale; these strange ruins, which are always on the skyline or beach line, seem larger or smaller depending on your viewpoint. Another is decay; the buildings exhibit a wonderful range of the symptoms of disintegration and the rods are hovering there shiny new and a bit mysterious.



Blind Landing in Lab 4, photograph by Elaine Tribley



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



commissions **east**