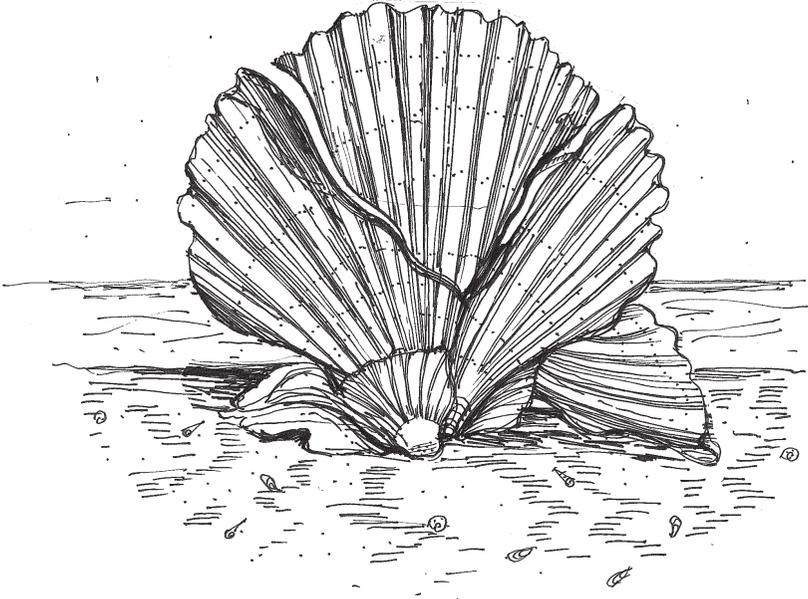


5

Art

Penwith / The Llŷn Peninsula / The Suffolk shingle





The ocean was just as magnificent as I had expected. At Botallack, sunlight turned the distant sea into the sliver of another land. At Porthguarnon, white water fizzed into emerald froth around the rocks. At Nanjizal, the shallows were turquoise under the sun. Beyond Sennen Cove, the ocean became a cool, deep cobalt. Every writer and every artist who has visited the Cornish coast has tried to capture its polychromatic drama: Thomas Hardy wrote of ‘the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western sea’; D. H. Lawrence of that ‘infinite Atlantic, all peacock-mingled colour’. We have a collective folk image of the Cornish coast from writers, painters and poets; from Daphne du Maurier, Virginia Woolf, J. M. W. Turner, Patrick Heron, Sir Terry Frost; from numerous television dramas and travel supplements. And many of us, five million each year, visit and come away with our own vivid impressions of surf, sand and sky. But no matter how well we think we know Cornwall, it can still surprise us.

Walking the coast path around the western tip of Britain for the first time, I was not prepared for the beauty of the rocks. Penwith, the name of Cornwall’s final peninsula which lies beyond Penzance and St Ives, is dominated by granite. It pops out everywhere: in ancient standing stones and chamber tombs on the moors; wrapped in gorse and brambles within Cornish hedges; as inconveniently large obstacles

in pasture; and in forming gigantic cliffs, bluffs, ledges, gulleys and chasms – called *zawns* in Cornish – where the land is exposed to the ocean. When the sun shines, the granite becomes golden; when it rains, it is silver. Sometimes it is pink; sometimes green, or orange with lichen. Shadows fall on it, from the clouds or a solitary raven swirling above. It lights up the landscape and is the reason many artists first came here.

A pilgrimage to the land's end has long captivated us. The West Country inexorably funnels us to its furthest tip and two great peninsulas branch off the 100-mile peninsula that is Cornwall: the Lizard becomes its most southerly point; Penwith its most westerly. Penwith was named 'Bolerium' by Ptolemy, which was probably taken from the Celtic sun god *Belenos*, and in earlier times, our westerly questing is thought to have had a religious purpose. Today it is mostly to seek pleasure: the thrills of its surf or the relaxation of its perfect holiday beaches. The historic link between the old and the more contemporary way of relating to the south-west coast is art. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, spiritual questing became bound up in the act of artistic creation. The power and beauty of this uniquely varied landscape and seascape has inspired generations of artists to experimentation and discovery.

My own pilgrimage was modest: I was walking around the coast of Penwith from Newlyn in the south, famed for its fishermen and its artistic community, to St Ives in the north, famed for its artistic community and its fishermen. Cornwall has claims to be a separate country and, within it, Penwith can seem a province of its own. It isn't: it is another world. All but one of the twelve parishes west of St Michael's Mount have boundaries with the sea and yet Penwith still possesses a mysterious middle. This is high moorland, dark with heather and dotted with standing stones and cromlechs, enigmatic tripods of stone built by the ancient Brythonic people of Cornwall. Between the moors and the sea is a patchwork of tiny fields, framed by

Cornish hedges – stone banks swathed in bracken, bramble, heather and gorse. The gorse surrounds the green pasture ‘like stupendous ropes of shining golden bloom’, wrote W. H. Hudson in 1908, noting the pleasing pairing of yellow with the blue ocean. Farming hamlets of grey stone cluster between tiny fields that date from the Bronze Age. Place names, which bear testimony to Cornwall’s divergent past from England, are particularly odd: Grumbla, Ding-Dong, Break My Neck Farm. The tin mining that once dominated this landscape now serves up picturesque ruins – brick chimneys and stone wheel-houses – along Penwith’s northern coastline while the softer south coast is divided by fecund, fern-filled gulleys. Every pause and glance and the landscape offers a scene to paint. Like a great beauty, this peninsula cannot take a bad photograph, at any hour, in any light. A third of Cornwall’s edge is Neptune coast, protected by the National Trust, probably because it is so inspirational: moving more artists – poets, painters, authors, sculptors, potters – to creation than any other coastline in the country.

After a dank October day when the cloud sulked on the cliffs and spat rain along the south coast from Lamorna to Porthcurno, the skies cleared as my dad and I reached Tol-Pedn-Pennwydh, the holed head of Penwith. The spectacular blowhole dropping from the clifftop to a watery cave below set our hearts racing but what really struck me were the great grouped clusters of granite on the cliffs. Millions of years had softened these once austere and geometric blocks into near-human figures and they stood, facing the western sea, as if they were wives and children, waiting for a fisherman’s boat to return home safely. The brilliant, troubled nineteenth-century Cornish writer John Blight called them the ‘guardians of the western coast’. Close to Land’s End is an outcrop called The Armed Knight: a man’s head in profile, with sharply incised panels of rock forming a body of armour plating.

If Penwith still conjures up other-worldly associations when Cornwall is full of tourists, it must have appeared even more alien in the summer of 1811 when its granite caught the eye of J. M. W. Turner. More than any other visual artist, Turner was responsible for the creative gaze falling westwards. Although beach resorts were beginning to take off, few people made the epic, uncomfortable trip to Cornwall via coach-horse on its atrocious roads. Famed for his seascapes, Turner wanted to paint watercolours of little-seen places for a book that would whet patriotic appetites for the grandeur of England when the country was at war with Napoleon. As the art critic Michael Bird explains, Turner found the cliffs and reefs possessed the Romantic quality of ‘the sublime’ – a form of nature that inspired wonder and fear. Romantic painters eschewed the classical habit of dividing land and sea with a clear line of horizon; instead they combined land and sea in a maelstrom, often placing the spectator at the heart of the scene, at the perilous water’s edge. An engraving Turner produced of Land’s End is all glowering skies and ominous bare rocks; for his audience, such pictures would have been as exotic as images of a newly discovered planet today.

Assailed by the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic movement idealised wild landscapes whose majesty dwarfed the people within them. If they were expecting an unspoilt wilderness, however, nineteenth-century visitors to Cornwall were in for a shock: the coastline was dominated by the smoking infernos of tin and copper mining. These first Romantic tourists were not dissuaded but, rather than tripping to its coves, they hailed its cliffs. These were the great attractions and pubs – the Logan Rock Inn, the Gurnard’s Head – were named after distinctive formations. After a muddy day on the coast path, Dad and I found our way to the Logan Rock, an old stone coaching inn with a real fire, real ales and real local drinkers. Signed pictures of rugby union players adorned the walls alongside old prints that told the story of ‘the celebrated Logan Rock’ on the cliffs half-a-mile away.

The rock was a large lump of granite reputed to be so delicately balanced that a gust of wind – or a man – could make it wobble. There were dozens of rocking or ‘logging’ stones in Cornwall but the Logan Rock was the most spectacular. William Borlase, an eighteenth-century geologist famed for his guide to Cornish antiquities, claimed it was impossible for man to unbalance the stone but in 1824 his high-spirited nephew, a naval lieutenant called Hugh Colvill Goldsmith, enlisted lads from HMS *Nimble* to dislodge the rock. They pushed it 3ft down the cliff but local people were outraged, as were the tour guides who made money showing visitors this natural wonder. Naval top brass threatened Goldsmith with the sack if he didn’t restore the rock. In an operation considerably more arduous than its displacement, Goldsmith used scaffolding and improvised levers to return the rock to its resting place. For a long time afterwards, the rock was chained and padlocked in place, which rather emasculated it. When its shackles were removed it never logged as well as before.

Earlier that evening, as dusk was falling, Dad and I had clambered down the coast path to Penberth, a tiny stone fishing hamlet where forty boats once worked and fifty men were employed to winch vessels up its steep stone jetty. One house was built virtually on the rocky shore, side on, as if it dare not confront the waves. The front door was open and the television was on, a rare thing in these parts: a permanent home for a local person. (Most of Penberth was owned by the National Trust, which leased such houses to local tenants.) When we climbed the cliff path out of Penberth, we paused for breath and looked down on its beautiful slipway, big sea-smoothed stones stitched tightly together like the most immaculate crazy paving. A woman appeared and was watching the waves run up the slipway, transfixed by the sea. It could have been a scene painted by the first artists who arrived in Newlyn in 1880. The railway reached Penzance in 1852 and Cornwall could now send produce up to London from

the fertile, frost-free fields of Penwith, which grew vegetables and flowers earlier than anywhere else in mainland Britain. In return, London sent back artists, and more tourists.

This was the birth of mass tourism in Cornwall. Unable to compete with the sophistication of Brighton or Bournemouth, the county offered something very different from the very beginning – a romantic vision of a foreign land. An early railway poster likened the Cornish peninsula to a map of Italy. In reality, Cornwall offered the nearest thing to a Mediterranean climate combined with Arthurian legend.

Some of the first painters to arrive had lived in Dutch or French provinces where artistic colonies were nostalgic for the innocence of rural life. Their philosophy was to paint *en plein air*, and Stanhope Forbes, who made his mark at the Royal Academy in 1885 with a depiction of a Newlyn fish sale, found Penwith to be an English version of Concarneau in Brittany. At first, the Newlyn school's scandalous realism was attacked as immoral but, ultimately, Victorians were charmed by its melancholy images of local children, women waiting for boats to come home and weather-worn old folk. Although local people might earn a penny or two for posing, Cornish fishermen were often understandably hostile to being ogled by gentlemen artists over a canvas. By the 1890s, as Cornish metal mining began its calamitous collapse and thousands of Cornishmen emigrated to mines all over the world, sail lofts and fishing sheds in Newlyn and St Ives were converted into studios. Laying the foundation stone of the Newlyn Art Gallery in 1895, the press baron and philanthropist John Passmore Edwards, presciently using language that became commonplace a century later, predicted that the mining industry would be superseded by a new one based on Cornwall's 'scenic wealth'.

As the art critic Michael Bird points out, the fashion for the Newlyn school's paintings of grieving fishing widows waned during the First World War when everyone was losing their menfolk but

so many artists and intellectuals now poured into West Cornwall that new ways of representing its landscape flourished. A tradition more buoyant than Newlyn emerged in St Ives after James McNeill Whistler, accompanied by younger artists Walter Sickert and Mortimer Menpes, painted there during the winter of 1883. 'Nature,' opined Whistler, 'contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music.' It became a cliché that artists were drawn to St Ives for the quality of its light.

The potter Bernard Leach and his Japanese assistant, Shoji Hamada, were the first of an internationally renowned avant-garde to arrive in St Ives. Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson came at the start of the Second World War, some years after Nicholson first visited and had been greatly struck by a chance encounter with the 'naive' work of Alfred Wallis, a local marine salvage dealer who had taken up painting after the death of his wife. With his painting and her sculpture, Nicholson and Hepworth brought abstraction to the increasingly fusty local artistic tradition. The modernists still found shapes, colours and energy in the scenery around them, however. Patrick Heron, the painter who moved to a remote house, Eagle's Nest, near Zennor, from where he campaigned vociferously against post-war development and road widening schemes that would have ruined Penwith, was convinced that the air 'contains more light than in England: light reflected up and off the sea'. The abstract painter Sir Terry Frost recorded how he created his painting, *Blue Movement*, from many evenings watching the water over St Ives, defined by a common emotional mood: 'a state of delight in front of nature'. Nicholson once described the chore of painting his garden gate: 'As soon as my hand touches a brush my imagination begins to work. When I finished I went up to my studio and made a picture. Can you imagine the excitement a line gives you when you draw it across a surface? It is like walking through the country from St Ives to Zennor.'

That northerly stretch of the coast path is particularly strenuous,

fizzing with a lucid, westerly light that England's east coast lacks. Perhaps it is partly cliff-top vertigo but the western horizon seems drawn sharper, 'the sea's blue light, with points of diamond', as the doctor-turned-artist John Wells put it. Despite these elevated qualities, visual artists are as susceptible to peer pressure and pragmatism as any other creatures – they just disguise it better – and many of the reasons they took to St Ives were convivial. A railway line to the little town opened in 1877 making it more easily accessible from London. Leslie Stephen, the editor and critic, and his children, including Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, made St Ives their summer home and childhood memories of Godrevy lighthouse later informed Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*. Once a critical mass of artists arrived, galleries, patrons and, later, grant-awarding bureaucrats followed; artists could now make a living in Cornwall. In 1938 alone, the St Ives artists had eighty paintings accepted by the Royal Academy and a whole railway carriage was set aside to convey the canvases to the London show.

When I walked Penwith's coast path in October, a three-cornered leek was in flower, usually a token of April; red campion and devil's bit scabious were also in bloom. This far west, Britain's severe seasons are softened; effete intellectuals flourish when it feels a lukewarm 16°C most days and grass grows all year round. In the early twentieth century, the writer W. H. Hudson became a regular visitor to Penwith, lodging with a local matriarch, Granny Griggs, in Zennor. (Granny's formidable guest list included Sir Alfred Munnings, one-time president of the RA, Edward Sackville-West and the alcoholic novelist Roger Gull.) 'W. H. Hudson always seemed to be nursing some ailment and was no doubt much cosseted by Granny,' recalled her granddaughter Alison Symonds in her memoirs. Penwith wasn't simply a place for gentle recuperation, however: the artists played plenty of golf at Lelant; Australian painters Will Ashton and Richard Hayley Lever organised cricket matches and, best of all, before 1914,

there was no closing time. The Sloop in St Ives opened at 5 a.m. to serve returning fishermen.

By the 1960s, the international reputation of the artists of Penwith had diminished: Nicholson left St Ives and London galleries were in thrall to pop art. Locally, however, an artistic community continued to thrive. Painters like Frost, Bryan Wynter and Peter Lanyon (a rare Cornish-born artist) 'were a bit like jazz musicians, they had this edge to them . . . a kind of glamour and turbulence,' remembered Matt Hilton, son of the artist Roger Hilton. 'All these artists, in their 20s and 30s, even 40s . . . driving around in jeeps. It was like a movie going on when we went down to Cornwall.' Creative people were absorbed into Penwith and while there may no longer be a distinctively West Cornish movement, there is still an unusual number of resident artists, particularly in the decades since Tate St Ives opened in 1993. 'If you're not going to live in a city in Britain then this is the next best place to be for art scenes,' Anthony Frost, an acclaimed abstract painter and the son of Sir Terry Frost, told me. 'You've still got amazing things coming to the Tate and artists working here and showing all around the place.'

After my walk with Dad around the peninsula, I visited Anthony at his Penzance studio, concealed within an old telephone exchange. The view across Mount's Bay from his window was almost identical to one described by his father when he looked from his Newlyn studio and I suddenly understood how such scenery could inspire abstraction. 'The sun comes up over the Lizard in the morning,' wrote Sir Terry. 'St Michael's Mount starts off like a Japanese woodcut, a triangle of island and castle nudging through a shroud of mist, and then to the right is a red glow, and if you wait and watch the sun comes up, first as a semi-circle and then a circle behind the Mount, there is a red reflection shimmering in the water, and that's my morning treat.'

Anthony Frost grew up with artists racketing around the peninsula,

setting off explosions on bonfire night, playing cricket against the farmers and staying up until dawn painting, or drinking. He also saw how the movement of boats on water gave his father 'his shapes, which stayed with him all his life'. But Anthony's own artistic journey was, like any son's, an attempt to move beyond his father – and that meant moving beyond his father's surroundings too. The Penwith coastline was a backdrop to his life, rather than an explicit theme in his work. Anthony designed many of The Fall's record sleeves (he believed he actually qualified as a member of the band because he once sang on stage with them in Hamburg) and felt that music, not landscape, was his primary influence. His studio featured dozens of vibrant, sunny, half-finished abstracts and ten old-fashioned radio cassette players, set on timers to record radio shows. 'We all need music. I can't live without painting but I know some people could. I don't know anyone who could live without music.' His paintings were named after fragments of lyrics or, in one exhibition, after Captain Beefheart songs. Another show was called Magnetic Fields, which people thought referred to the ancient field patterns of Penwith, but was actually named after a rock band.

Early on, Anthony hated people 'looking for landscape elements' in his work because he wanted to escape any idea he was following his father. These days, however, he is quite happy to have, say, his yellow and turquoise works associated with Porthmeor beach. 'I don't deliberately set out to do that but you can refer them to the landscape,' he said. 'You get amazing Venetian-red bracken and the granite that throws the light back at you – it's almost nuclear. Then there's the sea which is ever-changing. I do find the landscape wonderful. I'm not sure my paintings are about the landscape but they are about colour and I'm sure you're influenced subconsciously or consciously by the colours you're walking through all the time.' The salvaged materials he throws into his works are also taken from his environment and so are often nautical – bits of canvas sail and

ripped beach tent or windsurfing sails in fluorescent colours. ‘It’s a mad one really,’ conceded Anthony. ‘Because of the materials I use, that ties me. It definitely seeps in, in various places.’

Anthony Frost’s bouncy works reflected the uplifting side of Penwith but if the peninsula were simply an easygoing British version of California, as Cornwall is often marketed today, its artistic legacy might be considerably smaller. Visual artists may have been attracted by the vivid light but many writers and poets take inspiration from shade, and the peninsula possessed an abundance of dark power.

*This is a hideous and wicked country,
Sloping to hateful sunsets and the end of time,
Hollow with mine shafts, naked with granite, fanatic
With sorrow. Abortions of the past
Hop through these bogs; black-faced, the villagers
Remember burnings by the hewn stones*

John Heath-Stubbs, the poet who briefly joined the artistic influx of the 1940s, wrote these lines after encountering a mermaid that you can still find carved into a dark wooden bench in St Senara’s Church, Zennor. According to local legend, a beautiful lady would occasionally attend the church. No one knew anything about her but she possessed a mellifluous voice and as the years passed she never appeared any less alluring. One day, a young man called Matthew Trewella, the best singer in the parish, was inspired to follow her when she left the service. He was never seen again. Some years later, a ship dropped anchor near Zennor and the captain was hailed by a mermaid, who asked him to move his anchor because it was blocking her front door. The crew were well aware of mermaids’ tendency to lure men to their deaths, and sailed away smartly, but the villagers concluded that Matthew had succumbed to her charms. The story

was said to have inspired the fifteenth-century carving but folklorists believed it was the other way round.

Heath-Stubbs was part of an Oxford generation including Iris Murdoch and Philip Larkin. His detection of menace in Penwith might be attributed to his own discomfort with anywhere beyond the drinking dens of Soho (he also wrote: ‘Sheffield,/With her necklace of razor-blades, Bradford,/Throned upon her tumbled woolsacks, Leeds,/Crouching over her drain’). After his first visit to Cornwall, Walter de la Mare claimed that he did not feel safe until he had crossed the River Tamar back into Devon. Denys Val Baker, the post-war chronicler of West Cornwall’s artistic set, identified a ‘strange, brooding, compelling quality’ in the land. The novelist Ruth Manning-Sanders, who lived at Sennen Cove, described how she walked the cliffs in wintery twilight and heard the voices of drowned sailors. ‘It is then,’ she wrote, ‘that the sense of the primordial, the strange and the savage, the unknown, the very long ago, fills the dusk with something that is akin to dread.’

None of this menace was present when Dad and I rested from our walk outside the Tinnars Arms in Zennor, benign sunshine playing over pints of ale, the only sound the *tick-tick-tick* of passing walkers’ poles on tarmac. When I have found myself alone on our coastline at dusk, however, I have felt this dread, from the indisputably eerie Orford Ness to the busy channel below the White Cliffs of Dover. Does it come from a collective unconsciousness forged when we had good cause to fear the sea? Or something else? Artists in Penwith sometimes traced it to the human sacrifices supposedly practised by Brythonic religions in these parts, as John Heath-Stubbs suggested in his line about the burnings by the hewn stones. Perhaps his poetry spooked me but I was filled with a sudden unease when Dad and I encountered a white bell tent inexplicably pitched on the cliff-edge as night fell on the coast path near the Logan Rock. Dread materialised again when a moaning noise emanated from the sea at Porthcurno.

After some time listening, Dad concluded it was only a sea buoy, whistling in the wind, but its song transported me far from carefree Californian Cornwall.

Sven Berlin, a rather saturnine-looking sculptor who left the peninsula in 1953, disillusioned by the split between St Ives' modernists and Romantics, wrote more precisely about the strange potency of this landscape than any other visual artist. 'The open coliseum of each little cove of sand or rock may be the theatre for any natural, supernatural or unnatural event,' he suggested: the sea's breathing, the slow flight of seagulls and 'the mind's incessant vertigo at the cliff edge' could all 'act as the charming of magicians and open up the deeper rooms of experience in man, making him aware of his being part of the natural universe, at the head of a great unseen process of gods and devils, spectres and dragons; of being a channel for unknown and undefined forces; of facing the mystery of life, awakening powers of perception which search beyond the frontiers of normal events.'

Time collapses on the cliffs of West Cornwall. The twisting tunnels of the arsenic calcinator at Botallack, constructed in the nineteenth century, appear neolithic; the standing stones are as redolent of the Celtic-inspired rites of hippies as of neolithic burial customs; and the observations of John Blight in 1861 still perfectly describe the cliffs today. There is no clear calibration between past and present in Penwith; all human history is present, jumbled and insubstantial next to the thunder of ocean and the splendour of granite.

As the history of visual art in Penwith showed, artists were attracted to a place that had already attracted artists. These painters, sculptors and potters were mostly a jolly bunch, social creatures, sculpted into scenes and gathered at pubs. Poets, in contrast, styled themselves as solitary animals, seeking escape from convivial society. My next journey in search of how creativity has been forged on our coastline was to learn

about an exemplar of that solitary poetic tradition: R. S. Thomas. A defiant loner who came out of the west coast and spent his long life working his way back there, Thomas was popularly portrayed as the Ogre of Wales, white hair wild, eyes ablaze, and an apparent advocate of the burning of holiday cottages owned by the English. He was a man of paradoxes – a Welsh-speaker who could only write poetry in English; a passionate Welsh nationalist who berated his countrymen in the most uncompromising verse; and although he made his name writing about the farmers of mid-Wales, he was also a man of the sea.

There are two lovely words in Welsh describing a state of being for which there is no precise equivalent in English. *Cynefin* is a person's heartland, the place to which they emotionally belong; *hiraeth* is the anguish caused by estrangement from that spiritual home. 'It was Holyhead itself that made me what little of a poet I am, a horrible little town with a glorious expanse of cliff and coastal scenery. I shall never outgrow my hiraeth for it,' wrote Thomas in a letter to a friend in 1952, when he was living in a fine vicarage surrounded by the flowery hay meadows of mid-Wales. A tall, austerely handsome man, Thomas lived for all but thirteen years of the twentieth century, and in its final thirty-three he reconnected with his heartland, the far west of Wales, where the rocks, trees and ocean resonated with memories, connections and inspiration.

If you are never more than seventy miles from the sea in Britain, you cannot stray more than four miles from salt water on Llŷn Peninsula. Pointing westwards for twenty miles into the Irish Sea, a slender promontory of marshes, meadows and small mountains rising towards Snowdonia, it has sixty miles of coast. The National Trust owns some twenty-five miles of it.

I arrived at night, in the fog, guided by sat-nav, and thereby ascertained nothing about Llŷn apart from it being exceptionally dark, cold and quiet. My holiday cottage, Tan y Bwlch, was close

to R. S. Thomas's former home: both were traditional single-storey stone dwellings with a low-ceilinged kitchen containing a big hearth and a ladder leading up to a hayloft-style bedroom in the eaves. As Byron Rogers noted in his excellent biography of Thomas, most of these tiny old houses are now like space stations, 'turning in the void, immaculate and empty, but ready at a moment's notice to spring to life with the arrival of the next paying visitors'. Renovated cottages sporadically filled by English holidaymakers was the fate of Llŷn, once *Pura Wallia*, the heartland of Welsh-speaking Wales, where history and culture were supposed to be vibrant and enduring. 'In the Welsh consciousness, it is the Welshest heart of Wales, much as the Italians consider Italy to become more Italian as they journey south,' said Richard Neale of the National Trust, a fascinating and knowledgeable Welsh speaker who accompanied me on my explorations of Llŷn.

The sun rose the next day, showing me my surroundings in daylight for the first time as if a blindfold had been removed. The house was perched on the side of a hill and possessed of an epic view sweeping down to the ocean. The land would've been picturesque anywhere, but set off by the sea, it looked stunning. Below the mountain moorland were tiny strips of pasture, a dozen different greens, divided by stone walls, clinging to the land before it curved into the sea. There were relatively few villages but dozens of individual white cottages were scattered all over, where people had once scratched a living from five sheep they'd graze on the moors and a pig outside their dwelling if they were lucky. Mod cons were added much later, and I liked the old telegraph wires, sagging and bouncing in the wind between wooden poles skewed by their years in the wet ground.

Sea views materialised in unexpected places, in every direction, when I wandered over the Llŷn peninsula. The great sweep of bay below my cottage was called Hell's Mouth. It looked deceptively benign from a distance, but it was named after its ability to trap and wreck sheltering ships: a black dot on the beach was all that remained

of the boiler of one unlucky vessel. Across Cardigan Bay, rising out of the water, were the mountains of mid-Wales and, on a clear day, Cader Idris. Looking west, the light on the water was miragey, like it is as you gaze from Penwith, a spirit tempting you westwards. Gazing from the east coast, the North Sea had no such beckoning quality.

Aberdaron was the last halt for pilgrims at the western tip of Llŷn before the sacred island of Barsdsey, the resting place of 20,000 saints. It was at Aberdaron where R. S. Thomas finally returned to the west in 1967 as the parish vicar. Ronald Stuart Thomas was actually born in South Wales in 1913 and spent much of the First World War in Liverpool, the only child of merchant seaman Thomas Thomas (known as Tommy Twice) and Peggy, a formidable woman from whom he inherited a certain forcefulness and coldness. In his autobiography, Thomas remembered: ‘One day on the sands at Hoylake my father pointed southward to where some blue-green hills loomed. “That’s Wales,” he said. Prophetic words.’ This is a nice example of RS’s self-mythologising, or what Professor M. Wynn Thomas calls the poet’s ‘Liverpool complex’ – his lifelong sense of being internally exiled from his own country. Interestingly, Thomas could get a similar outsider’s view of the main body of his country from his cottage on Llŷn, from where the blue mountains of Wales appear to form a separate land.

After the war, Thomas grew up in Holyhead, the busy port on Anglesey where ferries run to Dublin. ‘Holyhead was one of a number of British towns that seemed to be dying – blackening like an extremity with gangrene,’ wrote Paul Theroux in *The Kingdom by the Sea*, a caustic snapshot of our coast in 1982. Holyhead has also been dismissed as the place where pebbledash goes to die. (The preponderance of pebbledash is a result of the poor-quality local building stone, which mean that its houses require a protective render.) RS’s boyhood was shaped by the sea, ‘its noise, its smell, its ferocity on windy days’, as he wrote. By day, he would play by South

Stack lighthouse, now a nature reserve. At night, flashes from the lighthouse darted into his room like the sails of a windmill.

When he studied at Bangor University, his early poems about the sea were derivative.

‘So now in winter hateful is the sea,/Hateful its low and melancholy roar’, he wrote, borrowing from Matthew Arnold’s ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ in *Dover Beach*. Later, however, the sea became a route back to his childhood, and a scathing portrayal of the wounds left by his cold mother in *Ap Huw’s Testament*:

*My father was a passionate man,
Wrecked after leaving the sea
In her love’s shallows*

Later, Thomas considered his childhood self in relation to his much older being while standing on the Llŷn Peninsula, looking north to Anglesey. Playing on the double meaning of headland, he wrote: ‘One headland looks at another headland. What one sees must depend on where one stands, when one stands.’ Looking back, he saw not uncomplicated childhood joy on the beach but pain, and skewered his family’s loveless triangle in an incomparably bleak poem about a family outing:

*There was this sea
and three people
sat by it and said
nothing.*

RS’s early adulthood was a journey away from the coast. He was ordained in 1937 and his first post was on the border with England, where he met his wife Elsi, a talented English painter who was as idiosyncratic as her husband. Five years later, he became vicar of

Manafon in mid-Wales. The life of a parish priest did not much suit Thomas, ‘a true poet not of belonging, but of estrangement’, according to the critic Peter J. Conradi.

Thomas was the ultimate outsider: creatively, intellectually, socially and emotionally. He was a poet who longed to write in Welsh but couldn’t and had to ‘stand outside an adored tradition like a tramp at Christmas’, as Byron Rogers put it. To be a rural vicar in the Anglican Church in mid-twentieth-century Wales was to be an outsider because most of the country had embraced nonconformism. Thomas disliked the English ruling classes, but ambition or snobbery – his own or his mother’s – gave him the accent and manners of an aristocrat; his countrymen often assumed he was English. It sounds like he rather relished the old idea that a rural vicar was an intellectual black sheep in a field of labourers: he once vaulted the churchyard wall after conducting a funeral to avoid mourners and so disliked small-talk that on another occasion he greeted a parishioner who commented it was a nice day with: ‘We can see that.’ He was an outsider to his own family, lacking any ability to express his feelings to those he loved, except very occasionally in his writing. As Gwydion, his only child, remembered, he was ‘a man incapable of love, and full of love’, the most extreme of his many contradictions.

In RS’s century, Welshmen travelled east to reinvent themselves as Englishmen. Ever the contrarian, Thomas took the opposite path. ‘I think places had an unusual importance in the lives of RS and Elsi,’ his son Gwydion has said. Thomas’s arrival at the western end of Llŷn, as vicar of Aberdaron and by now a famous poet, was ‘the culmination of a lifelong quest for the “true” Wales he had first glimpsed, as an English-speaking boy in Holyhead, when he gazed across Anglesey and the Menai Straits at the magnificent profile of the mountains of Eryri, Snowdonia, in distant Gwynedd,’ judged Professor M. Wynn Thomas. ‘I think I came here because of the sea,’ Thomas said when interviewed by Byron Rogers in 1975. ‘I’d written myself out of hill-

farmers, and coming here brought me into contact with things just as elemental as them: you know, sea, sky, the wind, those sort of things.’ (This dry joke was typical of his unexpected sense of humour.) ‘There are rocks out there on the headlands that are 6,000,000 years old. To see the sun casting your shadow on 6,000,000-year-old rocks . . . drives you furiously to think, as they say.’

Before he returned to Llŷn, RS befriended three eccentric English spinsters, Eileen, Lorna and Honora Keating, who had lovingly restored Plas yn Rhiw, a petite manor house, and were frantically purchasing random patches of land to keep the peninsula exactly as it was, which somewhat alarmed many locals. In the library at the back of their house are Thomas first editions. ‘To the ladies of Plas-yn-Rhiw, with kind thoughts from RS Thomas’ is his dedication in *Poetry for Supper*, published in 1958. By 1971, they had grown closer and a selection of Wordsworth’s verse edited by Thomas contained the dedication in pen: ‘To Lorna and Honora, with love from Ronald’. RS was at home with the English upper-middle classes and the Keating sisters clearly admired the dashing poet, showering him with gifts of money. As I flicked through this small trove, out fluttered one of RS’s thank-you letters to his patrons. ‘Dear Lorna and Honora,’ he wrote. ‘It was very kind of you to remember my birthday which I thought I had managed to KEEP dark – certainly it is no cause for rejoicing any more. I had asked Gwydion to get hold of a rather expensive book for me, so if he succeeds your gift will go a long way towards it.’

The best gift of all, however, was Sarn y Plas. In 1962 the sisters gave RS a lease on a damp little cottage perched on the cliff overlooking Hell’s Mouth as a writers’ retreat. When Thomas retired in 1978, he and Elsi moved there permanently, building a small extension but living a terrifyingly ascetic existence. There was no central heating, no television and no space for RS’s books or Elsi’s paintings. One winter, Elsi recorded matter-of-factly that it was 1.8°C in the living

room with the fire on. Water seeped down interior walls and Elsi painted with her feet inside a cardboard box containing an electric stove, burning herself severely on one occasion. Gwydion, their son, found mould growing on his father's shoulders.

An impression of this difficult, stubborn man still lingers strongly in his former haunts today. Everyone seemed to remember encountering RS even though he rarely welcomed casual chat. 'He was a tortured soul but that's where his poems came from,' smiled a lady in his fine old church at Aberdaron, which had been abandoned to the incursions of the sea before the villagers changed their mind and shored up its graveyard, spectacularly positioned overlooking the tiny town's sandy beach.

Richard Neale, who had worked for the Trust in North Wales for several decades, was twenty when he first got to know Sarn y Plas. He had moved nearby to begin repairing the ramshackle estate that the Keating sisters had bequeathed to the National Trust after their death, with the stipulation that RS could stay on in his leased cottage. This was the 1980s, at a time of rising fury about the way English visitors casually purchased second homes for their holidays and Richard recalled one night stepping out of his front door: 'Suddenly on the hill I saw a fire and loads of blue lights, and it was a holiday cottage burning down.' R. S. Thomas had famously provoked media outrage when he sympathised with Meibion Glyndwr, the Welsh nationalist group behind the arson campaign – 'What is one death against the death of the whole Welsh nation?' he pondered – but RS didn't trust the nationalists to be well-organised enough to realise that his cottage was not an Englishman's second home and he erected a large sign in Welsh to say so. During a fifteen-year campaign from 1979, more than 200 cottages and several estate agencies were torched.

Richard would meet Thomas on the lanes. If the poet saw the young National Trust warden approach, he would lift his binoculars and

pretend to watch a bird to avoid conversation. Richard persisted and one day revealed where he lived. ‘Oh, so it’s you who cut the beautiful old fuchsia from the front of the house,’ retorted RS. Once Richard and some other lads were fishing off the rocks by Aberdaron. RS arrived with a very primitive rod, promptly caught two mackerel and quickly departed again: fish for supper. ‘He was extremely taciturn,’ said Richard. ‘You got the impression his mind was on higher things.’ Eventually, Richard played his trump card with RS: his grandfather had taught the poet Welsh. RS was as uncompromising as his verse: ‘He didn’t teach me much. I didn’t get on very well with him,’ he told Richard. ‘I got a much better teacher afterwards.’

Given these caustic exchanges, it is hardly surprising that those I met on Llŷn had mixed views on Thomas. Many locals disliked his snobbery more than they admired his championing of the Welsh language and nation. Interestingly, however, RS never repeated the harsh portraits of local people in Aberdaron that had characterised the poetry about mid-Wales that made his name. Instead, in his later years, his poetry turned inwards, toward his struggles with religion, as he waited on a God who did not show himself. The poet and vicar came closest to discovering the divine through the landscape of Llŷn, and its coast was an intrinsic part of poems about his doubting faith and his fears for Welsh nationhood. In the mid-twentieth century, English Romantic literature had helped stimulate the Welsh tourist trade ‘by conveniently overlooking the country’s society and culture in order to reduce “Wales” to a gloriously inviting empty landscape’, argues Professor M. Wynn Thomas. RS was part of a generation who, although working in English, used their writing to repopulate and reclaim their nation. And yet there was a strong Romantic strain in Thomas too and his verse is rooted in the ancient interplay of scenery and weather: ‘It blows in off the Atlantic,’ Thomas wrote, ‘accompanied by rapidly passing effects of light and shade that hold the attention and compel aesthetic awe.’ RS country

– mainly the hills, of course, but also the west coast – has become as unmistakable as Thomas Hardy country. As Professor Wynn Thomas says, ‘His writing has permanently altered perception of the Welsh landscape itself.’

While I was exploring Llŷn, Richard Neale agreed to show me Thomas’s cottage. The road had been closed some years ago because of a landslip and the tarmac was encroached by weeds. A dirty white Mercedes parked in the hedge was slowly being reclaimed by ferns and moss too. Footsteps of other hesitant pilgrims had made a slight impression in the long wet grass leading up to the door. Hunched against the hill, turning its side to the only warmth, and view, to the south, was Sarn y Plas.

The low stone cottage still leased by the Trust to RS’s son Gwydion lay empty, as damp as ever and at the mercy of the brambles. Ivy clawed at the stone walls, an elder twisted by the door and cobblestones were covered in a slippery layer of ragged turf. Everything was prematurely aged by its proximity to the sea. The garden, once lovingly tended by Elsi, was overrun with wild garlic. Gwydion’s parents would’ve probably approved, Elsi having wittily chronicled RS’s craze for garlic-munching. There were still tokens of their life here. Outdoor chairs were scattered on a couple of small patio areas, as if the elderly couple had felt a spot of rain and hurried inside. Another RS obsession was to make a perfect haycock and someone had cut the little hay meadow by his cottage and left neat stooks in the field. It felt as if the poet might appear at any moment, as he would when tourists pitched up seeking directions, and mutter ‘No English’ with fake incomprehension before stalking off. With a start, I spotted a small hand waving from an attic window. It was a sculpture, and I remembered reading that Elsi once made one of her own hand, and reassembled it after RS accidentally shattered it during a rare frenzy of spring-cleaning.

It might have been damp and run-down but the cottage was still an ideal hermitage from where a poet could contemplate the sky, the rocks and the sea as it thundered into Hell's Mouth below. It had been a place of writing and could now be a place for a small act of worship. I stood underneath the cramped window at the southern end of the house and Richard Neale took a slim volume of R. S. Thomas's poetry from his pocket and began reading.

*In Wales there are jewels
To gather, but with the eye
Only. A hill lights up
Suddenly; a field trembles
With colour and goes out
In its turn; in one day
You can witness the extent
Of the spectrum and grow rich
With looking. Have a care;
The wealth is for the few
And chosen. Those who crowd
A small window dirty it
With their breathing, though sublime
And inexhaustible the view.*

The appeal of the west coast to artists is obvious when it is blessed with mesmerising light and a rich trove of ancient religion and folklore while the cliffs of southern England are giddily beautiful. When I climbed High Down on the Isle of Wight, I could see why it was bought by Alfred Lord Tennyson – contemporary poets must fantasise about the days when their superstar predecessors could purchase such a spectacular muse of a landscape. But why would artists flock to a long stretch of shingle beach sculpted by the brown German Ocean?

During the second half of the twentieth century, Aldeburgh became a creative community almost as renowned as St Ives. Benjamin Britten set up home on the Suffolk coast and, in 1948, founded the Aldeburgh Festival with his partner, Peter Pears and the librettist Eric Crozier. The magnetism of Britten, the greatest British classical composer of his age, attracted other creative people, but I wondered what role had been played by the coast itself.

If Aldeburgh had been fortified by concrete promenades and turned over to mass tourism, I doubt such artists would ever have arrived. The town, a struggling, silted-up port until 'discovered' by discerning Victorian visitors, does not flaunt its beach, a plain, unadorned shingle bank that forms a flimsy barrier to Suffolk's marshes and inland waterways. To the north and south of Aldeburgh, the coast is all legendary nature reserve: Minsmere, Dunwich Heath and Orford Ness. But this is not unspoilt coast in the traditional sense. Looming over it, dominating the horizon for miles in either direction, is Sizewell A and B: the first (decommissioned) nuclear power station a dark block, the second, active station a conspicuous white dome. It seems surprising that artists would reside here but they have done and still do, despite this monstrosity and the sinister Cold War installations on the Ness. 'Installation' is a particularly apt word because both these grotesque human developments, like a good artistic installation, are in keeping with the land around them, and commune with it in an unfathomable way. I suspect that the bleak allure of this coast is older and stranger than the nasty buildings we have put on it. Sinister legends cleave to this coastline: predatory black dogs, UFO sightings and weird creatures. Some years before Sizewell materialised at Thorpeness, a young girl called Sybil Armstrong was looking at the sea from the living room of her wooden bungalow when she saw a sea serpent. Running outside with her governess and cook, they watched the creature, five times as long as a fishing boat, crawl over a sandbank and then 'beat on the

sea with enormous oyster coloured fins' making a spray of water five or six times the height of a man, *The Times* reported. It reminded Sybil of a swan taking off.

It felt like February but it was May. The wind was cold, the shingle was beige and the sea was brown and then I heard Maggi Hambling, the painter, thundering in my ear. 'Bronze,' she barked. 'When people say brown or "it's all grey", I say, "Go and look again, it's full of colour."' I also required some artistic prompting to realise that the shingle beaches were full of colour too. 'It takes time to realise how floral shingle is, how pale blue and pale grey, how burgeoning – and how local,' noted Ronald Blythe, the author of *Akenfield* and a writer who inhabits the East Anglian landscape more completely than any other.

The shingle was like a strip field, ploughed into gentle ridges by the sea, which put each stone in its proper place. The big ones were rolled to the bottom of each shingle valley; the small were thrown to the top. From a distance, the shingle appeared empty but, close up, plants sowed themselves between pebbles and the sea's haphazard harvest – one pine cone, one orange glove, one grey sandal, one blister sheet of pills (used), one blue plastic lighter (rusted), two plastic bottle caps, seaweed, hosepipe, fishing line, a piece of green twine. Clumps of blue-green sea kale were flowering, its cream blooms wafting sickly-sweetness among the salt. Peppermint sea holly formed miniature sculptures in the shingle. Spreading low over the stones, large mats of sea pea captured dew and spray from the sea, almost indestructible in the hottest conditions. During a sixteenth-century drought, the crops failed and the population of Aldeburgh survived by consuming sea pea. That night, I ate some sea kale, its fleshy leaves turning racing green on contact with hot water. They were juicy and watery with a trace of bitterness, a less memorable spinach, but definitely edible beach food.

The frequently undemonstrative waters of the North Sea combined with the steep shingle beaches of the east coast allow an intimacy with the sea that is impossible on the west. I sat on a little ridge, centimetres from the waves. The noise of water on shingle was a conversation, pebble to pebble but also sea to land; an eloquence a sandy beach can never obtain. Some waves were placatory and quiet and rustled the rounded flints; others rattled in, loudly declaring their intent to move the shingle. This sea music, clinking ‘its shingly trinkets at my ear’, as Blythe put it, sang to Benjamin Britten throughout his life. Britten was born and raised in Lowestoft, the northern-most point of the Suffolk coast, and it cannot be a coincidence that he lived within earshot of the sea for so much of his life. In his elegiac memoir of 1950s Aldeburgh, *The Time by the Sea*, Blythe wrote: ‘Benjamin Britten, Lowestoftian from day one, might be said to have come out of the sea like one of those oceanic beings who blow horns in the cartouches of ancient maps. Unlike me he was oceanic from the start. Tides accompany his pulse . . .’ Britten would run across the stones late at night carrying a towel to swim. ‘Out of it came his music,’ observed Blythe. ‘Supposing, like me, he had come from where he could not hear it?’

Britten’s patronage and example encouraged other musicians, writers, painters and poets to stay or settle in Aldeburgh but plenty moved here independently. Before Britten in the late 1930s, Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines established the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing inland, teaching Lucien Freud; after Britten’s death in 1976, contemporary artists have continued to trade London for coastal Suffolk, including Sarah Lucas, who lives in Britten’s former farmhouse, and Maggi Hambling, who created the infamous giant steel seashell just north of Aldeburgh. You can crunch round the four-metre-high *Scallop*, shelter from the wind and run your hand over its cold curves. People scratch things on it and it has been seriously vandalised several times since its arrival in 2002. Some people love it;

others hate it, but it remains one of the most striking contemporary works to take such direct inspiration from our coast.

In the drive of a house in a Suffolk village untouched by rumours of the sea stood a muscular two-tone Chrysler with the numberplate H1 0 GAY. Behind it was an old outhouse extended into a large, light white room of double height with canvasses of the sea on one wall, portraits of the deceased Soho wit Sebastian Horsley on the other, and a desk in the middle. Stalking across a floor littered with white cigarette butts was Maggi Hambling: big grey curls, snazzy trainers and a look so alert it was almost predatory. She had started smoking again, she explained in her wonderfully patrician voice, during the installation of *Rearing Wave*, another impressive sea sculpture, because it was so stressful to watch it dangling from a crane.

Art is easy, reckoned Maggi, quoting Constantin Brancusi; the difficulty lies in being in the right state to do it: 'It's the muse, my darling. One spends one's life searching for the muse.' Muses often come in human form, but on 30 November 2002 another kind arrived. Maggi had just finished the maquette for *Scallop* and drove to the shingle of Thorpeness one Sunday morning. 'There was this exciting storm raging. The sea was like a roaring beast, the waves throwing the shingle up in the air. I got back to the studio and I was actually painting a portrait from memory of a London beggar, twelve inches by ten, little canvas, and being very slow – because I come from Suffolk, I'm very slow – it wasn't until three o'clock that afternoon when I looked out across the water meadows and still these huge winds and rain were roaring about and I said, "What the fuck are you doing painting this memory painting of a London beggar when what's inside you is the storm?" So that was the first little sea painting – I painted directly on top of the London beggar.'

This compulsion to paint the sea probably lurked within for many years. Maggi grew up inland but holidayed with her mother

at Frinton-on-Sea. 'As a tiny toddler I'd walk into the sea and talk to it all the time. I can't remember what I talked about but I apparently had real conversations, just me talking to the sea, my friend. As I got older I tried to listen to it, too.' When she moved out of London, she was not tempted by Cornwall or Wales or Scotland: she wanted to return to that same stretch of sea. 'Where art begins for you is very important and art obviously began for me in Suffolk, when I was fourteen. It's my bit of sea, the sea I've known all my life.' She didn't talk to it now, though. 'I try to empty myself so it can talk to me. It's my whole thing of trying to be empty so that the subject can come through me into the paint, onto the canvas.'

The beggar obliterated by a wave was the first of Maggi's North Sea paintings: small, vertical and tremendously energetic oils; detonations of British sea power. 'I can't think of anything else that's got the lot. It's got all that primal, organic thing, and it's got God; you can't beat it for a subject.' She developed a routine, driving twenty minutes from her home to Aldeburgh or Thorpeness and contemplating the beach, always early in the morning, 'when the sea was mine'. After a while, she began to draw in a sketchbook, like a pianist performing scales, getting into the rhythm of the waves. She sat on a stool so the water practically touched her feet. 'When I paint the waves I want them to seem as if they are crashing in front of you, right now,' she said in another interview. 'That's the magic of oil paint over any bloody photograph because a photograph is just a single moment, immediately consigned to history, whereas an oil painting is the result of many hours' work, culminating in a single moment.'

I admitted I could not detect the passion of Maggi's waves in the real North Sea. 'Well that's because you're a writer. You don't use your eyes,' she said merrily. Maggi did not dwell much on the interaction of moon and tides but spotted an aesthetic connection between the curve of a wave and the curve of the moon, which I had never thought about. 'That's because you're a writer,' said Maggi again, with twinkly ferocity.

Aeschylus compared breaking waves to endless laughter, or ‘unnumberable laughterings’, as Maggi put it, and she found that beautiful. Two decades ago, she created a series of paintings about laughter. A crashing wave is the sea’s moment of abandon, when its features are in disarray, and it is rather like another human experience: the orgasm. Critics often consider Hambling’s waves to be a depiction of sex. ‘You spot a wave way out at sea and then it fiddles about a bit as it comes towards you and then there’s the great orgasmic crash,’ she said. ‘That fits.’

Early on, some locals plotted to topple *Scallop* in the night, incensed by its prominence on the beach and disappointed that its inscription, ‘I hear those voices that will not be drowned,’ a quote from Britten’s opera *Peter Grimes*, was not a more obvious tribute to the composer. In spite of the grumbles, the sculpture has survived, and even become a place of pilgrimage, which is apt because a scallop is a symbol of pilgrimage as well as the Roman goddess Venus. ‘I conceived it as somewhere for somebody to sit alone, thinking about life and death and looking at the horizon and all these deep things, and unless it’s the middle of winter or very early in the morning, it’s full of children,’ said Maggi, but she wasn’t complaining. *Scallop* is a tribute to Britten and the sea and a shell makes the song of the sea when we put it to our ear in childhood. Children climb over it, people leave flowers by it, others propose marriage there and Maggi knew for a fact that couples have made love in its shadow too.

In *The Time by the Sea*, Ronald Blythe seemed ambivalent about the sea as a creative force. Like many aspiring writers, he went to live in Aldeburgh to write. It didn’t happen and, against the advice of his friends, he dragged himself away from this creative community to create the book that made his name, *Akenfield*. He needed solitude. Later, however, he recalled days with the poet James Turner in North Cornwall. ‘We would sit on the dizzy headlands and let the Atlantic rollers drug us into mindlessness,’ he wrote. Perhaps the sea is an

anaesthetic and stops us thinking. (R. S. Thomas would disagree because, as he said, the sea drove him ‘furiously to think’, but that may have been because he was looking for God; interestingly, the closest he felt he came to God was in the abandonment of artistic creation.) For Maggi Hambling, this is precisely the point. ‘I don’t do enough thinking probably,’ she admitted but then, she thought, it was important for a visual artist not to think too much. ‘You’d never do a picture – you’d think yourself out of it.’ The sea allowed her to empty herself and become a vessel through which the subject showed itself on canvas: ‘Thought doesn’t come into that.’

The sea enabled Maggi to find a state of mind in which she could create. From time to time, she tried to draw the wind. ‘I suppose it’s the same thing – this great energy, this great power, this great movement. If you’re walking in a great wind, it takes you over, doesn’t it? And you become part of this great surging force, and that takes you back to being in the moment, which is what you’ve got to be when you are painting something.’

For other artists, musicians and writers, however, the soporific state induced by the sea created a different kind of focus. ‘At first I thought that to “look” at the sea was a landsman’s compulsion,’ wrote Ronald Blythe. ‘Britten watched it all the time . . . It possessed its own talk. Tucked into a windbreak I would listen to a commotion of shouts and barks, birdsong, and little floating pennants of distant conversation. Up by the Martello the rigging of the Yacht Club could be orchestral. Fitted naked into the accompanying shingle on an August afternoon, I should have been writing, notebook and pencil being so near. But usually I did nothing. I listened. It was why I came there.’

Explorations of Neptune

I can't offer anything less obvious in **Penwith** than one of the greatest walks in Britain: the South West Coast Path around Land's End. If you're not a wild-camping maverick, the sensible principle when walking this path is to book accommodation in advance and set modest mileage targets for each day of walking; it's strenuous, with lots of ascents and descents, and there is so much to enjoy that it is nice not to be route-marching as dusk falls. Despite the celebrated nature of this walk, I enjoyed long stretches barely seeing a soul when I was there in October although I've strolled parts in the summer when it is obviously busy. Most people head south from St Ives but I prefer south to north, and I made a late afternoon start from Lamorna, overnighted at Porthcurno (with its fascinating Telegraph Museum and the amazing cliff-edge, open-air Minack theatre) and then did a long day's walk around Land's End and up to Pendeen. The third day I continued with an easy walk to Zennor whereupon the path gets seriously strenuous to St Ives. Every tiny portion of this coast has amazing views and stories. My highlights: the tiny harbour of Penberth; the eerie columns of granite around Tol-Pedn-Pennwydh; the sun on the beach at Nanjizal, one of the finest, quietest southern coves; the oceanic sweep of Whitesand Bay; Cape Cornwall, 'the connoisseur's Land's End'; the ruined mines around Botallack (restored by the National Trust in such a sensitive way that you wouldn't know they had been); and the Gurnard's Head (both the real headland and the pub; the Tinnars' Arms at Zennor is very nice too). The only lowlight is Land's End which is still a mess.

OS Map

Explorer 102, Land's End

Nearest railway station

St Ives to the north of Penwith and Penzance to the south are both yards from the coast path

Websites

South West Coast Path

www.southwestcoastpath.com/

Porthcurno Telegraph Museum

www.porthcurno.org.uk/

Minack Theatre

www.minack.com/

Cape Cornwall

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/st-just-and-cape-cornwall/

Levant Mine

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/levant-mine/things-to-see-and-do/botallack/

Botallack mining walk

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356403825884/

The Llŷn Peninsula

Plas yn Rhiw is the atmospheric manor house formerly owned by the philanthropic Keating sisters, who became good friends with R. S. Thomas. They donated their house and the numerous landholdings around the village of Rhiw at the western end of the Llŷn Peninsula to the National Trust, and the house is a good starting or finishing point for a circular walk that cheekily skips past R. S. Thomas's old cottage and takes in both abandoned farms and gentrified cottages perching on the hillside overlooking Hell's Mouth. Turn right out of Plas yn Rhiw down the hill and then left onto the coast road. Bear right at the first fork and you'll turn onto a track which is the old coast road. On the left is the currently fairly derelict cottage belonging to R. S. Thomas. It remains the private property of his son, Gwydion, although ownership will eventually revert to the National Trust. If you continue along the old road, you rejoin the coast road. Cross it and take the left-hand footpath which you can follow across mostly abandoned farmland containing more typical vernacular cottages of

Llŷn. You can continue on paths up the hill to the top of Mynydd Rhiw, which is only 304 metres above sea-level but feels a lot higher, surrounded by water in all directions. Footpaths bring you back into the village of Rhiw. The Llŷn peninsula matches the Cornish peninsulas for scenery and reminds me of the west of Ireland with its pasture, tiny scattered cottages and spectacular beaches but is, of course, its own, unique place, a heartland of the Welsh language and a locus of pilgrimage. ‘Unspoilt’ is a belittling sort of word but Llŷn is exceedingly well preserved without yet being completely gentrified, although sadly much of its wildlife-rich marshland between its hills has been drained and ‘improved’ over the past century. R. S. Thomas’s other former haunt, **Aberdaron** (complete with radical new National Trust visitor centre), is worth a visit. I’m going to have to return to see **Bardsey** – it was too rough to cross to the island when I stayed on the Llŷn.

OS Map

Explorer 253, Llyn Peninsula West

Nearest railway station

Pwllheli, 11 miles (from Rhwi)

Websites

Plas yn Rhiw

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/plas-yn-rhiw/

Aberdaron

www.aberdaronlink.co.uk/

Bardsey Island

www.bardsey.org

The **Suffolk coast** between the famous drowned port of Dunwich and Orford Ness is a place of extremes, although it is not conventionally beautiful. Inland are sandy heaths; by the sea are crumbling cliffs and shingle beaches. The most famous spot is now Minsmere, the RSPB reserve celebrated for its abundance of rare birds and mammals. Next

door is the National Trust's **Dunwich Heath**, which is quieter and equally blessed with striking wildlife, from adders and nightjars to the fearsome ant lions which lay tiny insect-traps in the sand. Dunwich Heath is a fine place for a walk, with another excellent teashop in the old coastguard cottages which are not long of this world, such is the speed of the erosion here. South of the great bulk of Sizewell B is Thorpeness, a striking little Edwardian holiday resort created by a wealthy Scottish barrister. Maggi Hambling's *Scallop* is on the shingle just north of Aldeburgh (beach parking right there), which is a pretty town with a rich cultural life, particularly its annual festival. If you venture into this splendid region, you must visit **Orford Ness** (see Chapter 3).

OS Map

Explorer 212, Woodbridge & Saxmundham

Nearest railway station

Saxmundham, 7 miles from Aldeburgh

Websites

Dunwich Heath

<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dunwich-heath-and-beach/>

Maggie Hambling

<http://www.maggihambling.com/>

Ronald Blythe blog

<http://wormingford.blogspot.co.uk/>

Further Reading

J. T. Blight, *A Week at the Land's End*, Alison Hodge, 1989 (1861)

Ronald Blythe, *The Time by the Sea*, Faber, 2013

Philip Marsden, *Rising Ground*, Granta, 2014

Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went Into The West*, Aurum Press, 2006

R. S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, Bloodaxe, 2004