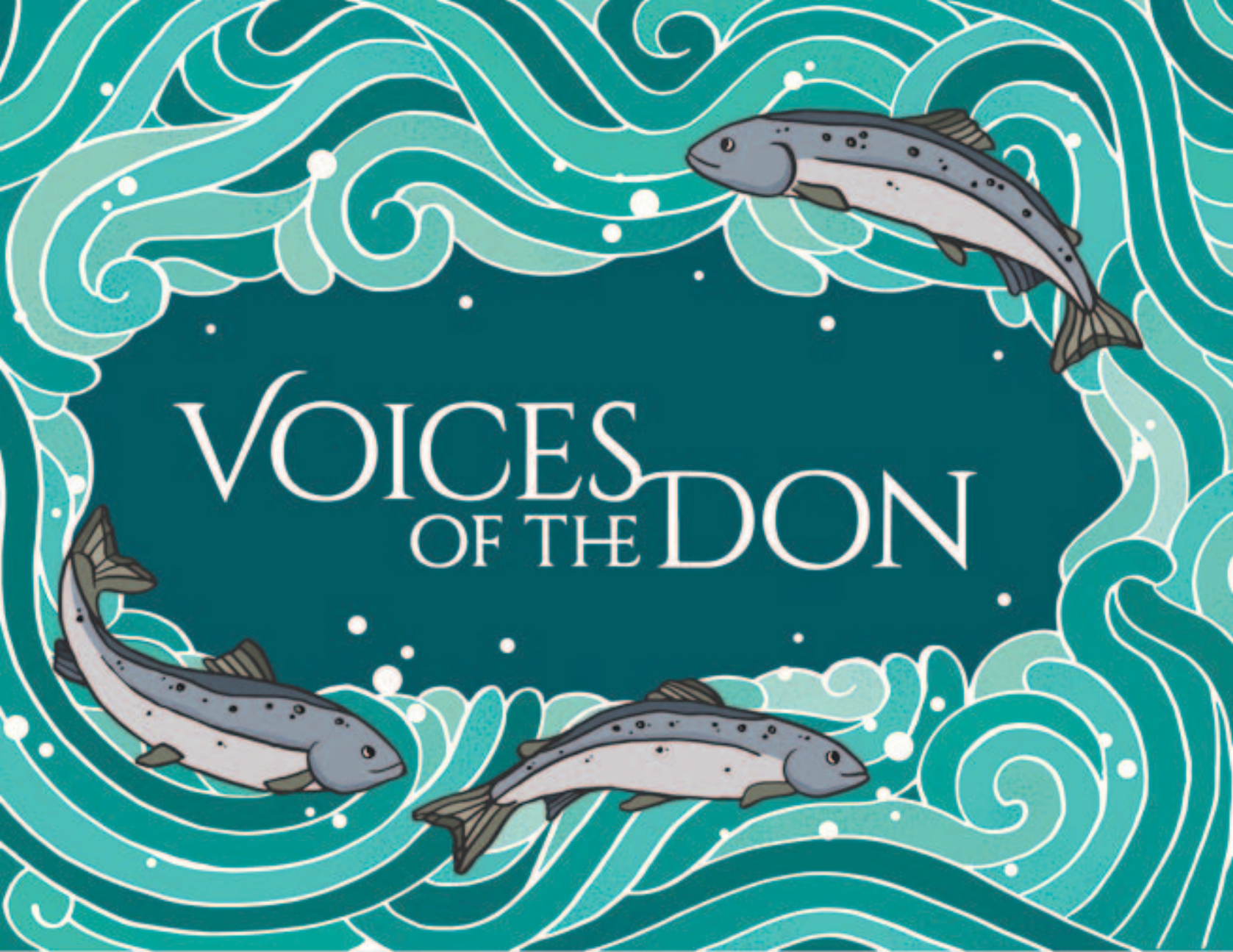
VOICES
OF THE DON

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A collection of poems, stories, images and thoughts on the River Don

Compiled and edited by Don Catchment Rivers Trust with introductions by Sally Hyslop.

Illustrated by Sophie Carter. Designed by Genie Creative.

FOREWORD

By Chris Firth MBE

I was born within a stone's throw of the river Don, way back in 1944 and throughout my childhood I witnessed the misery of the river. Despite its condition the river held a fascination for me that has stayed with me all my life.

I would wander up and down its banks looking for signs of life, often mistaking the gas bubbles bursting on the surface as signs of fish rising. I have a number of memories, which drift back on regular occasions, seeing hundreds of dead frogs scattered along the banks is one. I remained puzzled by this for years but eventually realised that they had died as a result of entering the highly contaminated water in an attempt to breed.

Another memory is one which I am sure I share with many others of my generation and that is of huge clouds of foam floating on the surface and occasionally, being lifted into the air by the prevailing winds. These clouds of foam would often hit the sides of buses passing over the North Bridge obscuring the view of passengers. I was later to learn that this was a result of the introduction of washing powders in the late 1950s. These early products were non-biodegradable and passed through Sewage Treatment Plants untreated, the detergents being reactivated when the water passed over weirs.

At the age of 29 I took up employment in Fisheries work with the North West Water Authority, later moving back to South Yorkshire in 1982 where I was privileged to begin work on helping to restore the rivers of South Yorkshire. The challenge facing my colleagues and I cannot be overstated. The Don and Rother were regarded as two of the most polluted rivers in Europe and fish were absent from all but the very upmost tributaries. One of our duties was to carry out fish population surveys using electrofishing equipment, which we did on the Don and Rother for five years before we caught a single fish.

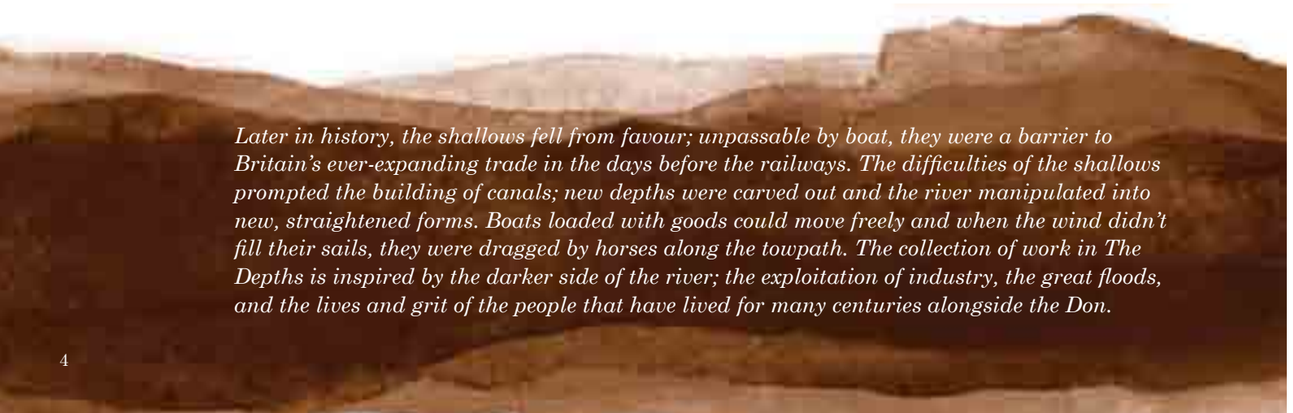
The elation experienced when a stickleback suddenly appeared on the surface was something that will stay with me for the rest of my life, because it was the beginning of a steady improvement, which helped to demonstrate that tighter controls on sources of pollution were, at last, working.

Much has changed since then, I researched the history of the river in 1998 and what I discovered has influenced the measures which have been taken to further the rivers improvement. Weirs, which began to be built on the river as early as the 12th century, have been recognised as the cause of the disappearance of the Don's once prolific salmon stocks and, as a result of this knowledge, the focus of the Don Catchment Rivers Trust's work has been on creating fish passes to enable fish to once again move freely within the system.

I feel immensely proud to have been given the opportunity to be actively involved in the restoration of this once magnificent river and to be part of the first generation in almost a thousand years to see the river improve rather than deteriorate.

PREFACE

Like a fork in a river, this book is divided into two parts. The first chapter of work is The Shallows, a word used to describe those peaceful areas of the river where the waters do not run deep. These shallow areas, where the river can be lightly crossed without difficulty, would have once been a rare place of relief and opportunity for weary travellers trying to make it to the other side. The Shallows chapter comprises the poems, art and journal extracts that highlight the recovery of the river, the fight or return of species and the reflections and thoughts of those anglers, artists and people that dwell in the shallows.



Later in history, the shallows fell from favour; unpassable by boat, they were a barrier to Britain's ever-expanding trade in the days before the railways. The difficulties of the shallows prompted the building of canals; new depths were carved out and the river manipulated into new, straightened forms. Boats loaded with goods could move freely and when the wind didn't fill their sails, they were dragged by horses along the towpath. The collection of work in The Depths is inspired by the darker side of the river; the exploitation of industry, the great floods, and the lives and grit of the people that have lived for many centuries alongside the Don.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was created by Don Catchment Rivers Trust through the generosity and interest of the people that submitted their work, thoughts, poems and stories. Thank you to all those that created this book through their contributions.

Don Catchment Rivers Trust would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund for funding the publication of this book and supporting the Living Heritage of the River Don project.

Three years working on the Living Heritage of the River Don project has been a rewarding and inspiring time for all those involved. The DCRT team hope that this book will act as a memento for the people that followed and supported the project, and continue to inspire interest and fascination in the River Don.

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The living heritage of the
RIVER DON

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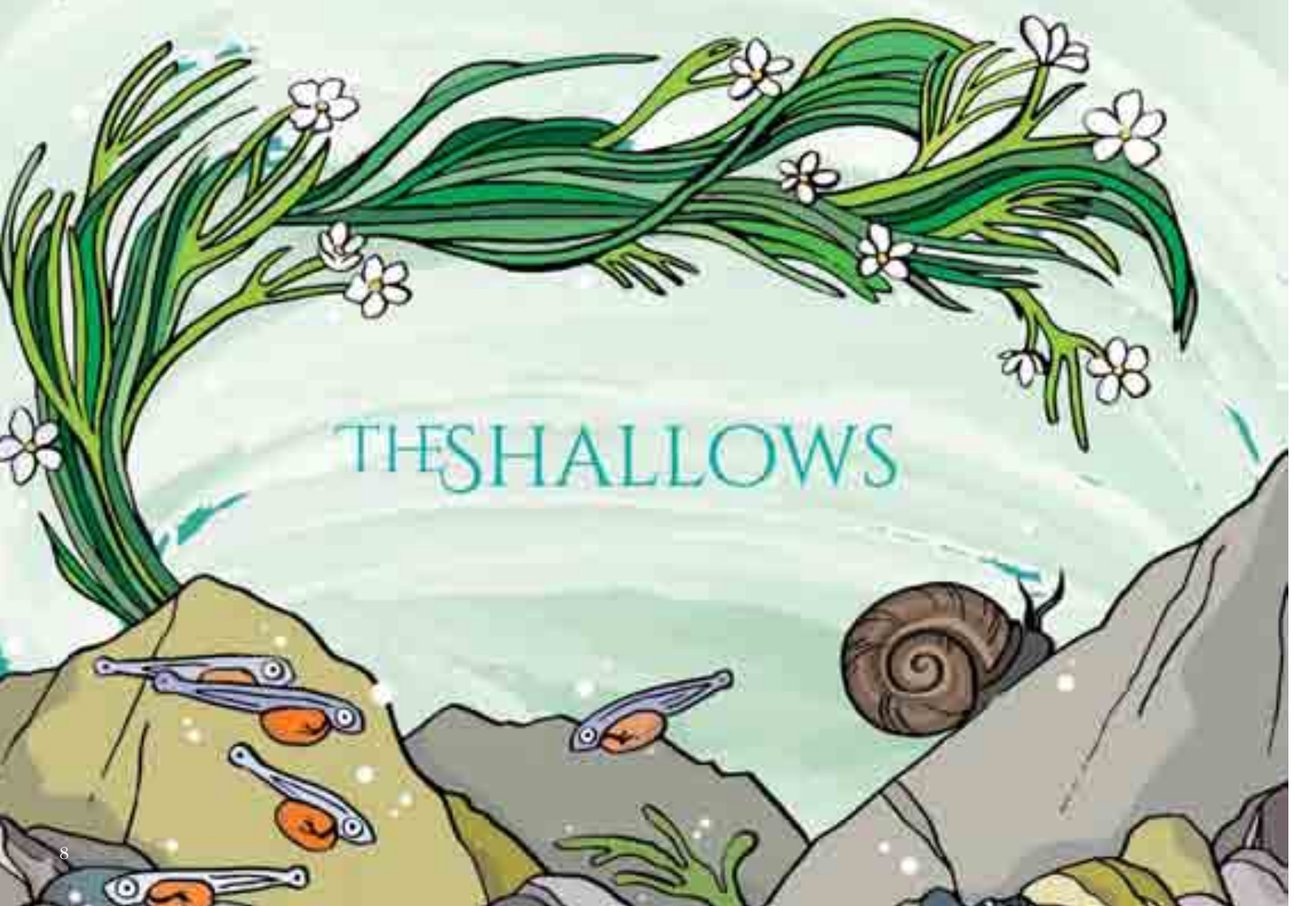


Water is often used as an analogy for the complexities of the human mind. We say ‘still waters run deep’ to describe people whose true characters are hidden and describe the vain and arrogant as ‘shallow’, those who study only the surface of life, seeing a reflection and no deeper.

It’s strange that the use of the word shallows has been transformed to depict the trivial or empty, because they are some of the most complex parts of our rivers - labyrinths of rock, water, plant and animal. Turbulent ‘riffle’ sections bubble over rocks and currents unfold, creating a mosaic of different habitats along the riverbed; essential for the ecology of the river. In the headwaters of the Don the shallows provide a vital habitat for salmon and trout who can only find the conditions they need to spawn upstream – oxygenated water, fine gravel and places for their offspring to hide and survive. Fly fishermen eagerly await the end of the breeding season each summer; you can spot them, wedged into waders, pacing the river to catch the fish that have returned to our recovering waters.

One of the shallow’s smallest yet most spectacular sights are the emerging riverflies. When dredging a net through the upper Don, the nymphs of riverflies can be caught. Pour them into a bucket to admire them. Some swim in s-shaped motions, others have plate-like gills along their bodies that twitch rhythmically. Other river creatures cling to the net too. There are the larvae of banded demoiselles with pointed horn-like antennae, inquisitive leeches and lopsided freshwater shrimp. These species provide energy for the hungry fish, supporting a whole complex web of life in and around the river. Some of the invertebrates are considered so sensitive that their absence in the river can indicate recent pollution incidents. Their presence in the Don, after decades of historical misuse, is a true indication of a growing improvement to water quality.

The following voices speak of these rich and glittering shallows. They speak of the fig seeds that germinated and grew into forests of trees along the river bank, sparked rather than hindered by the burning heat of industry. They speak of striving to create, block by block, a restored river that people can use and be inspired by. They speak of clear, bright waters where beloved British species such as kingfisher, otter and salmon, have returned and have begun to thrive again.

KINGFISHERS

At the end of the road, a river;
beyond locked garages, fence posts,
cans in the undergrowth,
I come on sky-shelved water,
scattering sparrows, thrushes,
pebble-eyed blackbirds,
while downstream kingfishers swerve
and flash like two struck matches.

With the carry of lorries
and birds' thistle-edged chatter,
I hover on the border
between two languages
wondering if I can translate
tree-shade into back street,
or honks from these roof-skimming geese
to sirens. A city in spate.

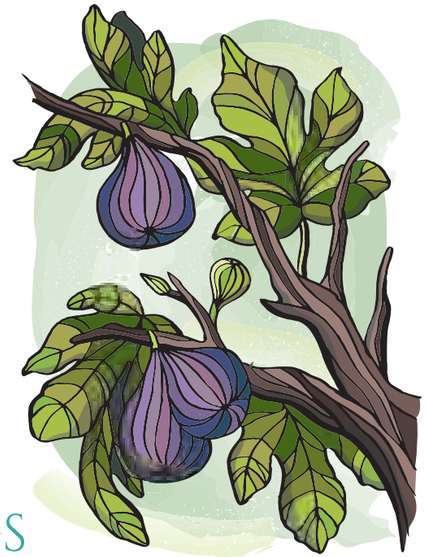
By Chris Jones

OTTER CLIFF

Beside glimpses of minks and watervoles
I think of otters ghosting the shallows,
or stowed in the tree roots of an ancient holt
where they tangle, twine like two soft knots.

Pairs swim downstream under balsam and knotweed,
are myth by the time they skim Brightside weir:
the spraint and mulched claw prints one's left behind
have the delicacy and shine of gifts.

By Chris Jones



FIGS

Squat, green bulbs, bitter
as smoke, I offer you figs
from Sheffield's east end.
They have exile's toughened flesh
and skin; its deep-cut bloodline.

By Chris Jones

HOW DO YOU WRITE ABOUT A CITY?

At the end of April 2004 I gave up my full time job as a Literature Development Officer at Leicestershire County Council. I'd had enough of driving up and down the M1 five times a week, and my writing had suffered with all those late nights, all that commuting. I decided to go freelance for a while. I got some work organising a poetry festival in Nottinghamshire once a week but with more space and freedom I began to think about developing a writing project that I had been contemplating for some time.

How do you write about a city? Well, what connects a city, ties it together? I didn't know that much about Sheffield's rivers when I arrived here in 1990. In time, I began to catch glimpses of the Don, Rivelin and Sheaf whilst crossing over bridges or stumbling on narrow (concreted) channels of water in between roads and lines of traffic. I came up with the idea that to write about the city I would write about its main watercourse, the Don. I would follow its entry north of the city (through Oughtibridge) track its path down toward the Wicker, then follow it eastwards through industrial estates, past steel works, and out of Sheffield by Meadowhall. I would write poems about my experiences of the outskirts and of the urban fringes of Sheffield as I walked along the banks of the river. I applied for some funding from the Arts Council in the hope I could collect these poems into a booklet and put on some events to celebrate the river during the Off the Shelf Literature Festival. The bid was successful. By the time the money arrived (in early 2005) my circumstances had changed again: I had just become a father for the first time.

So that was me for the first six or so months of 2005: looking after my son, Joseph, running a Poetry Festival, and spending one day a week walking along the Don, pen and pad in hand. If I was to push generalisations about the river as it was then I would say it was messier, more prone to being used as an open sewer, a dustbin. There's a long tradition of people chucking stuff in the river (whether by chancers, individuals or organised companies). I did my groundwork before the flood of June 2007 after all. After that momentous week there were organised efforts to clean up the river: people realised that if rubbish wasn't cleared it would just jam under the bridges and bring more water onto the roads, into factories and houses.

Kelham Island back in 2004/5 had a pub or two and a climbing wall but that was about it: much of the land was derelict or had some indistinguishable, vague factory usage. Now it's the epicentre of a new vision (version) of Sheffield.

The poems I've included here for this collection look both northwards and eastwards. I distinctly remember writing 'Kingfishers' (or finding the material for it) under the shadows of Sheffield Wednesday's hulking great big stands. I found collisions between 'urban' and 'rural' elements all the way along the river - but it seemed particularly evident in Hillsborough. 'Otter Cliff' is a pun (or echo of) 'Attercliffe'. I heard various narratives about species 'influx' in the new, cleaner Don. One of the hopes was that eventually otters would return to live within the city's limits. My 'fig' tanka speaks for itself. Who would have thought figs could grow by the Don in east Sheffield? I'm not the first writer to pick up on this peculiarity: it's such a great symbol of the exotic, of difference and hardiness.

I'm particularly fond of these poems because they capture a moment in my life when I was moving away from a tricky and tiring work situation toward more creative freedom, new opportunities. I had become a dad as well, trying to work out how to fulfil this new role. Walking up and down the river gave me the space to reflect on my responsibilities as a parent. Whenever I see or pass the Don these days I say 'hello' to it, an old and helpful, supportive friend.

By Chris Jones

WHEN SALMON ABOUNDED

WHEN SALMON ABOUNDED

One of the tragedies of the business of Sheffield undoubtedly is the way the Don Valley in this area has been desecrated. In olden days it was the site of one of the greatest oak forests in Britain, and the picturesque contours of the hills round where the three rivers meet had no ugly rival in what we now call Sheffield.

When the translators of the Douay Testament, or Catholic Work's name to St. Philip's Church, were being laid, out of the waste – as mentioned in an old print – was that "salmon abound in the sparkling waters of the Don, and an abundance of chevron may be caught."

Since then, and for centuries, the developers have done their worst, and, now, any return to "course" from any source surely must be welcome.

Reproduction of a news article from The Sheffield Independent, Thursday 15th November 1934

Submitted by Howard Bayley,
Chair of the Friends of Wardsend Cemetery.

British Newspaper Archive, Image @Johnston press plc.
Image created courtesy of The British Library Board.

SALMON PASTURES

Glinting in bright winter sunlight, cobbles
reappear, wet, through cracked tarmac.
A Halal butcher, a strip joint and the
Office of the Diocese huddle against
Workshops whose sounds and smells have filled the air
Since obnailed boots scratched sparks along these lanes
And pithead gears auled ancient istory up
From underfoot to fuel forge fires at Firth's.
Flexing furiously against the force
Of weir water and centuries of works'
dirt, silver scales shimmer. Soon they will be
at Salmon Pastures, proving that the past
Presses into the present as sure as
The rich cannot enter heaven.

By Jack Windle

Photography by Jeff Allsebrook

"A while back I saw this video of a salmon trying to make it up Aldwarke Weir near Rotherham shortly before going for a run through Salmon Pastures and the little maze of streets in Attercliffe between Staniforth Road and the River Don.

It got me thinking about cobbles, scales and the past and present of the area and I wrote a short poem about it."

DAN OF THE DON

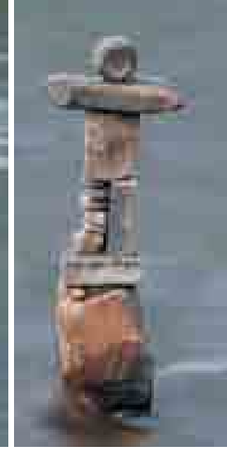
Skitters the shallows
where the Sheaf interlopes,
waterboatman-sculptor
summoning splayed relic
stacks amid spate.

Dan's materials
parody permanence,
approximate props from the
lapsed pomp of
manufacture and shipment.

The half-built and derelict
timeshare Dan's habitat,
tributaries into the
current moment.
Dan's finished product
is our purblind straining
astride the meanders for
meaning, tracking an
implicit timeline,
positing vanishing points.

Dan of the Don knows well
the precarious weight
of all we inherit,
expresses the lot in teetering
stanzas of brick.

By Pete Green



DAN'S RIVER DON SCULPTURES

"What's that all about…?" *By Postcard Café*

Like the River Don, Dan's totem like sculptures have many voices. As works of art they speak a language which is open to interpretation. For Dan the sculptures and his words are an opportunity to open a dialogue with the people of Sheffield about issues close to his heart - politics, science, education, social injustice and the natural world. Some might see characters, faces, hands or mathematical references in Dan's sculptures; others might enjoy his accompanying words. Built from the remnants of Sheffield's industrial heritage and other materials sourced from where they stand, Dan's work also relates to the forgotten or hidden history of the River Don. His art is a gift to the city of Sheffield, to be enjoyed by all who pass by.

My first experience of Dan's sculptures was a chance encounter in 2016. The sight filled me with wonderment and joy, their quiet presence catching my attention, naturally drawing me closer to the river. Spending time with them, I started to appreciate Dan's artwork - these strange forms built in and from the river and yet no mention of a website, no hashtags, no self-promotion nor corporate sponsorship. The only claim to the work was the signature 'Dan', a tiny addition to the written pieces. The anonymity of the art allowing viewers to remain in the moment, to ponder the presence of the sculptures and the river itself.

Public art can be as much about making connections with people as starting a conversation. The sculptures in the River Don have been a catalyst for both. On stopping short when spotting these unexpected creations, an exchange between strangers on the river bank might begin "What's that all about…?". People who may have passed each other a dozen times without speaking are, almost by accident, chatting about art, the river, Sheffield's industrial past or how salmon may be returning to the Don. A routine walk to work takes on new meaning, lives are enriched through seeing the river in a new light.

The sculptures are both art and part of the river. In pausing to enjoy Dan's work it is inevitable that visitors will experience their surroundings in new ways. They may notice the complexity of sound from the river, watch sunlight reflecting and patterning or enjoy the plants and flowers along the banks. Sand martins nesting in the stonework could catch their eye and if they are lucky, the flash of a kingfisher. The curious might start to recognise clues to the industry that once thrived alongside. Dan's sculptures gently ask us to question not just his art but the river and it's relationship to the city. They invite us to change gear, slow down a little and maybe, if only for a short while, reconnect with nature, art and the city's heritage.

Industries and employment, which once depended on the River Don, have receded. As a consequence the relationship people have with the river has shifted, it's presence and significance often overlooked or forgotten. In dedicating his time, skills and creativity, Dan has presented the people of Sheffield with an engaging way to take a fresh look at the river. As we contemplate Dan's artwork it speaks to us of how it connects to and arises from the Don. From the microcosm of a small stretch, we are encouraged to consider the river as a whole - it's past, present and future.

The river is in a constant state of flux and every winter, as it's waters rise, Dan's artworks are washed away and returned back to the river bed. The temporary existence of his creations are a reminder of the river's natural power and it's ability to shape and change the landscape.

The power of Dan's art is in its ability to build our relationships with the river and with each other. The positive relationship between human and river is celebrated in his sculptures. Their presence encourages us to consider the marvels of nature and our responsibilities for future generations. Dan's art is a wonderful opportunity to listen and to learn from the many voices of the river.

BRICKS AND RINGS

By Dan Bustamante

It was a hot summer afternoon, Sheffield 2016, upset by images of war I walked the endless streets, until I found myself coming down the steps of the white Smithfield Bridge to calm my mind and refresh my feet on the peaceful waters of the River Don. At first sight the river seemed empty but, among the reflection of clouds, I saw bricks and rings as if screaming at me "Pick me up!". So, one upon another, I proceeded to pile them up. As I finished my construction I noticed something unexpected; the pile of stones seemed to be alive, not looking at me but meditating.

Invigorated by this new found ability, surprised and curious, I returned the next day to build another sculpture and then another, again and again, always thinking, that there was nothing more I could build with these simple bricks and rings, but to my surprise every time I built another sculpture I realised that I had learnt something new. So I kept going and learning, always discovering new possibilities. As the days themselves piled up I built many sculptures, until one day a realisation crossed my mind: If I can build so many different sculptures with these simple bricks and rings, in a world that is so infinite in possibilities given by its physical and chemical plasticity and it's biological variety, surely there is nothing that we cannot build, no problem that we cannot solve, no ecological disaster we cannot avoid. If we use our imagination, if we look at the world with curious eyes and with open minds, there is no bridge we cannot cross, no disease we cannot cure and no war that we cannot end. We have the capacity and the world has given us more than enough resources; it is all in our minds and how we use it. Wars and inhumanity are not a natural inevitability, they are just the consequence of our blindness.

This river; it's a stream of liquid clouds, a time capsule, a teacher, an artery of this world carrying fuel for life and a unique message for each one willing to listen.

I wish there were a River Don for each one of us because this river gives me peace, it gives me hope, it teaches me things. If we look at the world with an open mind, curiosity and imagination, if we explore and use wisely all the potentials of the human mind and the resources of nature wisely, surely we can make this world a much, much better place to live.

Photography by Jeff Allsebrook

THE DON GRAYLING

By John Beal

Steal softly footfall trod
banking, mud-streaked descent,
cadenza dappled gentle pool
simmering, river bend burbling.
A fresh with fern, overhanging green,
river bestirs, boils and burns
under summer sun, lightness bedecked
with jewels a dance, leaf, twig to frond.
Flight of fly, waiting mouth entices.
Eye of fish and fisherman both wary,
soft zephyr, breathing rarely,
vigil taken beside majestic pool,
patience long, and whip-like action.
The fly descends, lands softly
no ripples disturb meniscus,
and curve of eye espies through green
the dabbling feather, spokes
striding on mercurial surface
against stonefly and caddis
artificial, enhanced
with current be-sports –
quietly cavorting
to flick the switch
of synaptic current,
and once rising, remains arisen,
thunder clap, shudder, bowstring quiver,
and quarrel, reel spins uncontrolled
allowing time for fin and back to tire.
So fly in lip and eye aflame,
the sleek silk body fights the strain.
And now the ratchet – clicks in place
and merry, the fish - away does race.
but captured still, the barb embedded,
to fight and flee, naiad swims
into shallow, driven water,
sail erupting out of glass sparkles,
and keen silver grayling attempts to flee,
away down river passed alder lea.

POLLUTION CONTROL OF THE DON

By John Housham, Retired Environment Manager

I started work in South Yorkshire as a Pollution Control Officer in the early 1980s and was shocked to learn that the main rivers of the Don, Rother and Dearne were all but dead. I can still see and smell the air and water pollution coming from several coking plants. This was a result of decades of under investment in sewerage and sewage treatment coupled with a range of heavy industries struggling to reduce costs in a global market, at the expense of the environment.

Sadly this was a familiar picture across much of the industrial north at the time and the headlines of the day were predictable:

> " Dead River"
>
> " Call to jail bosses over river pollution"
>
> " Toxic swill that is the country's dirtiest river"

Then in 1989, after many cries for change, an independent regulator was formed called the National Rivers Authority. I was lucky enough to join it and we were charged with river quality control, flood risk management, fisheries management and water resources control. The water industry was also privatised leading to the ability to raise capital to renew many inadequate sewerage and sewage treatment systems. At the same time, coal mining and the associated coking and chemical refineries were slowly closing down in South Yorkshire and North East Derbyshire.

I remember it being a desperate time for the communities affected by these changes but it all combined in the 1990s into a once in a lifetime renaissance for the rivers of the Don, Rother and Dearne and their associated wildlife. It was, however, an exciting time for many people in the National Rivers Authority and the water industry as a whole who all contributed to the recovery of the River Don. All of them will have their own story.

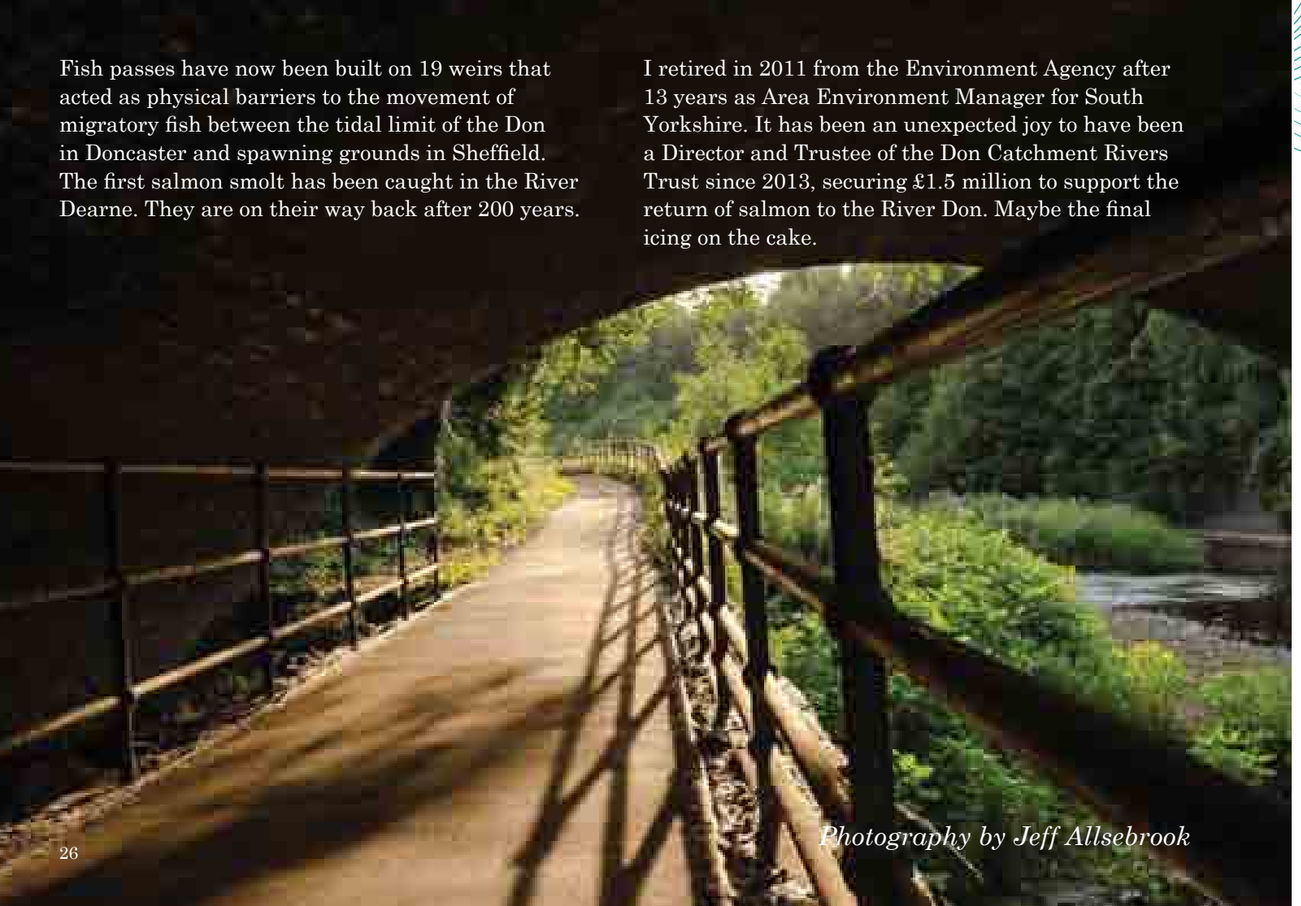
By 1995, increased treatment at Sheffield's main sewage works at Blackburn Meadows breathed new life into the Don, a picture that was repeated at many other locations across the whole catchment over the next two decades. The return of salmon and other migratory fish to the Don was no longer a pipe dream, as reflected by the headlines at the time:

> " MIRACLE – Joy for anglers as they find fish galore in the river once the worst polluted in Europe"
>
> " Salmon coming back up the ladder"

In 1996 the National Rivers Authority was combined with Waste Regulation Authorities and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution to form the Environment Agency. The rest is history as they say, with the Environment Agency pushing for further river improvements supported by national targets into the 2000s and 2010s, with a growing focus on the physical river environment.

Fish passes have now been built on 19 weirs that acted as physical barriers to the movement of migratory fish between the tidal limit of the Don in Doncaster and spawning grounds in Sheffield. The first salmon smolt has been caught in the River Dearne. They are on their way back after 200 years.

I retired in 2011 from the Environment Agency after 13 years as Area Environment Manager for South Yorkshire. It has been an unexpected joy to have been a Director and Trustee of the Don Catchment Rivers Trust since 2013, securing £1.5 million to support the return of salmon to the River Don. Maybe the final icing on the cake.



Photography by Jeff Allsebrook

GROWING UP AND GROWING OLD BY THE DON

By Liz Reeve, Secretary of the Don Gorge Community Group.

When I arrived in 1944, my parents lived at Tower Cottage, Lower Sprotborough, with my maternal grandfather. My mother's family had arrived in Sprotbrough in 1924, but found themselves at Lower Sprotborough around 1938. Grandma Bostock had advised my parents to marry in November 1939 as war was imminent and the future unknown.

My sister was born in 1940, but the hamlet of Lower Sprotborough, which consisted of six cottages and Boat Farm was, by the early 1950s the home of 17 youngsters, ranging in age from perhaps 8 to 18. With such an age range, there was never a lack of anyone to play with and we ranged the surrounding land from morning till night, going for picnics and bike rides without a care in the world. We helped on the farm, caught frogs and mice, picked bluebells and blackberries, but we rarely went near the river.

One of my earliest memories was of the flood in 1948, following one of the harshest winters in memory. The water didn't come in the door though; it came up through the floor. I remember living upstairs and walking on planks downstairs – no thought of evacuation then. I also remember putting a frog outside on a shovel when the water went down. Any concerns about flooding were usually dispelled by my mother who always said the water had to be over the fireplace in the house next door before it came into our house. She also told the story of coming home one day to find my granddad sitting in his chair reading the paper not having realised that water was bubbling up through the floor.

The canal, and the lake, which had arrived through mining subsidence just up the lane, were the waters most accessible to us, but we were always warned to stay away from both and I don't remember any of us swimming there, though, on warm summer days, young men came from far and wide to dive into the canal from the bridge; always a cause for excitement, but we knew that the river was filthy – didn't the lavatory men who came weekly to empty the toilets wash the buckets in it at the very least!

Being children, we didn't always do as we were told, of course, and I remember catching sticklebacks in the lake and being dared to walk a few steps on the top of the weir! Surprisingly, the water seemed quite gentle as it passed over the edge. I also remember ice skating on the lake one hard winter, but the most we could do was slide on the edge.

The canal was much shallower then and I remember one day being down the bank, right at the water's edge, playing ducks and drakes with flat stones to see how many jumps they might make before sinking. I also had my old bike painted silver one day by the workmen painting the bridge.

There was a lot of traffic on the canal and river in those days too, with barges filled with coal and other unknown commodities passing through the lock on a regular basis; one was still horse-drawn too, but not for much longer.

There were days, however, when you couldn't see the water for foam, which was stirred up even more as it came over the weir and billowed up into the air all the way to Doncaster where it would land on the bus windows and other traffic passing over the North Bridge. The pollution was eventually so great that no fish could possibly survive in it and only in the 1990s were steps taken to rectify the damage that had been done over so many years.

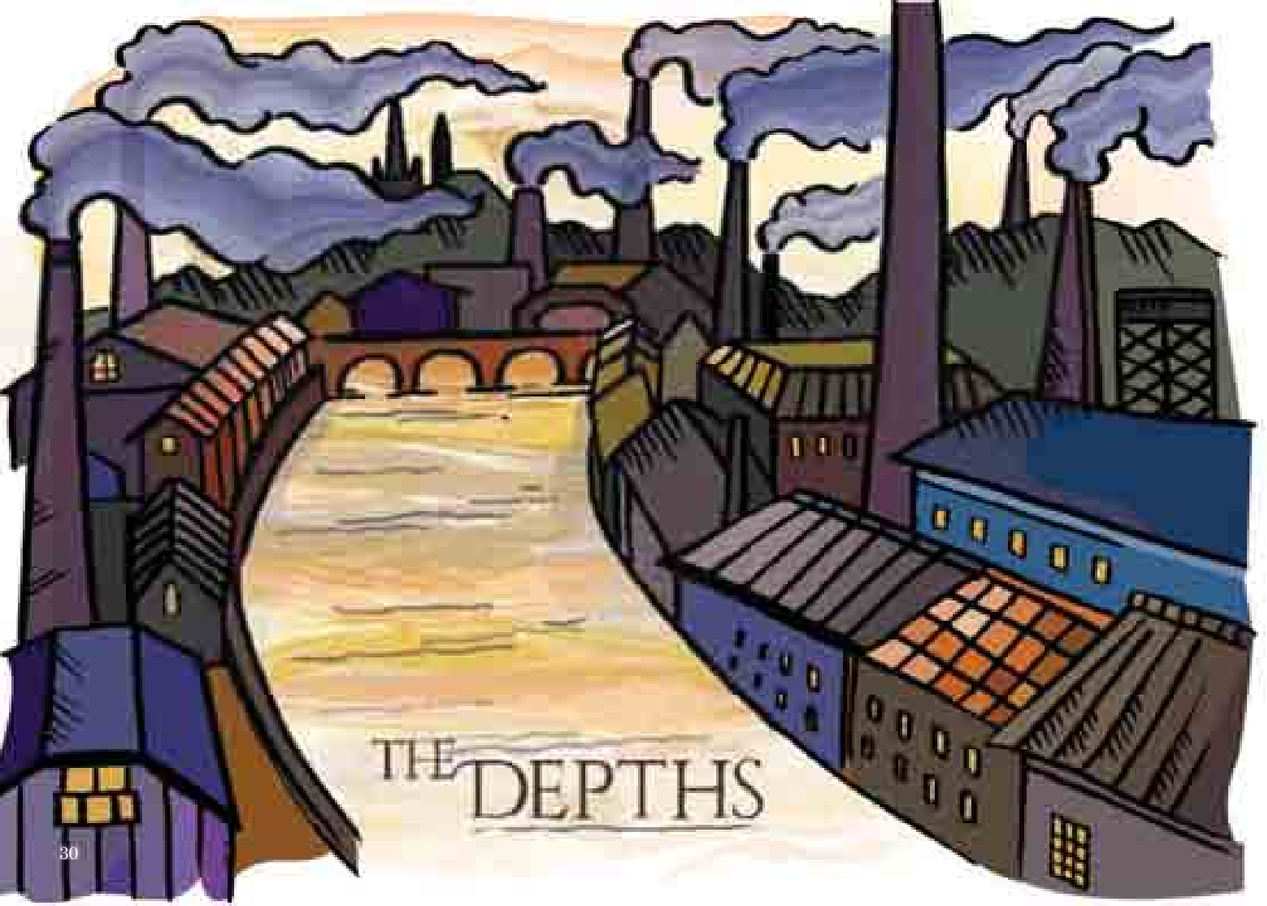
In the 1980s, when Rotherport was in the offing, Conisbrough lock was removed, the lock was enlarged and the canal was piled along its bank. The iron bars on the concrete flood wall, on which we had learned to do acrobats, were removed to enable the wall to be raised and, much to my chagrin, not replaced. The weir was also raised and the water level rose and rose until it is now much deeper than it ever was.

I'm afraid I can't remember the year, but one of the greatest excitements was when a canoe slalom was filmed for television. Gates were strung across in front of the weir for the canoes to navigate and lots of people came to watch the competition. A second TV appearance came in 1997 when 'Stone, Paper, Scissors', starring Ken Stott and Juliet Stevenson was filmed in our lane, the outside of my childhood home being used as the riverside cottage to which 'Jean' moved in an effort to escape her violent husband. Ken Stott's character was also filmed fishing in the river.

I married in 1965 and moved away from the River Don to Hexthorpe, though we returned regularly to visit my mother and eventually returned in 1999 to convert her garage, previously No. 4 which had been condemned for human habitation, into a tiny cottage where we have now lived since 2002.

Since 1948, our lane had been flooded several times, but Tower Cottage, actually comprising two cottages at the top of the lane, was lucky to escape its worst effects and the cottages lower down usually suffered no more than a couple of inches. The June 2007 inundation, however, was something else. Boat Farm, by this time The Boat Inn, along with Nos. 2-5 were badly hit; we at No. 4, with almost a metre of water inside our recently renovated cottage, having to move out for nearly 18 months.

Despite this, we don't regret our return to the riverside and now work as volunteers in an effort to maintain the beauty of what is now known as The Don Gorge and The Flash Nature Reserve for the benefit of future generations.

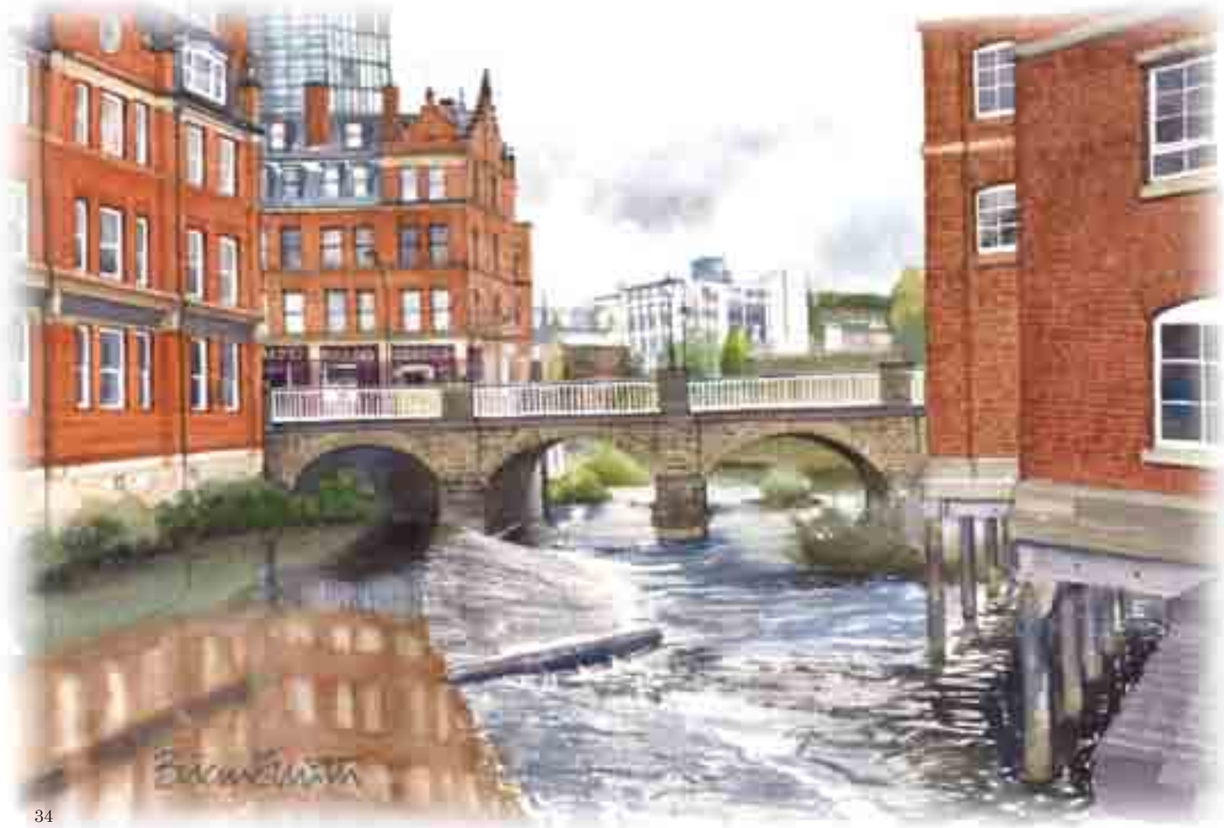


There is something frightening about deep water. The depths of the river are mysterious and unknown; we are taught not to swim where we cannot see the bottom for there are things which lurk under the surface and dangerous currents that will sweep us away. In the depths of the Don are the remains of industry; cannon balls and clay pipes nestle alongside the unused weirs and broken mill stones. Children used to stand on high bridges and drop stones into the water, watching rainbows of oils appear in ripples from the depths; they would linger on the river's floor, like a ghostly toyshop. The following voices depict the darker side of the River Don; the disasters that have befallen it, the industry that forcefully spilled into it, and the great floods of 1864 and 2007 that spilled out. They talk of the ferry crossings and the bridges built to navigate over the deep waters, the cemeteries filled with unknown graves lining the river's edge, and the dark heart of the Don that captures the imaginations of so many.

NIGHT WALK BY THE RIVER DON

By Pete Green

Saturday. The city's out there dancing
and I'm suffused in alcoholic fug
sleeping in my clothes and dreaming some
night walk by the River Don where
Neepsend Lane plays tributary to
Penistone Road, where hostelry ghosts
of the Farfield Inn drink on, nine years
since the Don called an imperious last
orders, its waters rising as high as the bar
and here my feet make off northwest:
a lane flanked dense with thickets,
the freakish Don below, a carriageway
of bustling currents. I commute upriver,
the work of the dream awaiting and white
points of light, white lines of engine noise
reaching from the road beyond. A moment
comes when rumination's apt, when to
offer down my soles to stroke the surface
seems the fittest course. I mull, send texts
(the Don could take me if it wanted to),
and I can't vouch for unseen trees
falling in the forest, but my dreamstate
absence here attests the Don still flows
when nobody is there. Its spate persists,
relentless, unabashed. Taking a cue, I
rise again and shun the lane to hold
fast to the bank, backtracking, softstepping,
taking two small falls to founder
in soft ground, still clambering implausible
ledges that narrow near to nought,
aware that if this mud dispels all friction,
balance elude us and my footing fail, I'll
dream a fatal dash against a concrete edge,
wake bewildered, wondering and unscathed.
Further up our way broadens and emerges
onto some industrial estate: undisturbed,
I dodge a barrier watched by rows of
empty windows, which disclose only
blankness, and an assumed panopticon of
CCTV lenses up in the gods. A shopfitter,
a tool parts supplier. I can't tell whether
they're going concerns or gone; we take
dereliction as read, scoping the city
that never wakes up. In the end I'm
circling one small section of some dirt track
shot with potholes, Hillsborough's lights
glaring over from across the way, playing
on the tarry, sluggish surface of the Don
to set a monochrome mosaic. The city
too, it seems, continues to exist alone
when I dream I'm somewhere else.
The only thing to do's retrace my steps.
Somewhere a security guard chuckles
as I cross his screen again. Back at the start,
just before the dream fades, there I am
baffled by a dumped bathtub I'd not
registered before, matteroffact
as elephants in rooms. I wake to find
my coat and boots bedaubed in river mud;
on my phone, each step recorded by
an app that tracks your way by GPS, and the
bathtub photographed, stark as a full stop.



LADY'S BRIDGE

By Ros Ayres

Rhythm helps me remember, I watch your currents shifting,
we are bound together, a shared history, etched in initials and dates.
RL 1740, RP 1835, ISE 1769, EW 1861

My weight is balanced in arches, at my base shaped cutwaters
ease your flow, my curved piers span feet, connecting this city
from north to south the Wicker to Waingate.

In tune, I know your moods, your levels rise and fall, passing through,
I feel your heartbeat.

Once narrow waisted, I've gained inches, seen castles fall,
chapels forsaken, mills become ghosts, lives echo,
shadows carried upstream.

You've battered me, crossing that breaking point, in extreme moments,
reaching your height, in a fury, deafening, overflowing, we collided.
An uncontrollable force, unrelenting pressure, almost my destruction,
I trembled my parapets breached I was overwhelmed.

My eaves are left scarred, ribs scuffed, I am cast of iron armour,
born of coarse grit and I watch you pass.

NOTES ON THE FERRYMEN

By Lorna Warren

Last year, I heard a Mexborough poet say that you could use the ferry at any time, the ferryman lived in the brick building at the top of the ramp and by implication that there was just one man. Not true!

I used the ferry at least twice a day from when we moved to Old Denaby in 1945 until the bridge was built. The ferry ran from 6am to 10pm. One man did 6am to 2pm and the other one 2pm to 10pm. They had a break between 10am to 10.15am and again between 6pm and 6.15pm. During those times, they would not take anyone in either direction. No-one had lived in the brick building they used since WWI. It did not have electricity and I don't think there was running water. In winter, a lot of local elderly men gathered there in front of a roaring coal fire smoking their pipes.

The ferrymen had a roll of tickets and would, from time to time, pull a lot off and throw them into the river.

Often on Friday evening, the Don would be an orange colour after the furnaces at Parkgate had been washed out. In spite of the fact that the river was never very clean, men and boys - I don't recall any females - would swim in it just below the weir.

The ferry was particularly popular at Whitsuntide and August Bank Holiday with people from Mexborough, including a group from the Parish church, coming over to the village. My grandfather, a man in his 70s, would walk down, take a close look at those at the back of the queue at the top of the ramp near the canal bridge then walk along the towpath to Denaby and by the road to us in what was then known as Ferry Lane. As he drank his cup of tea, he would point out the people just passing our garden who were those he had seen at the end of the queue. It had taken so long for them to cross the Don.

There are at least three ladies in their late 70's who have lived in Old Denaby all their lives as well as a man of the same age who returned to the village many years ago. They would all have needed the ferry to get to secondary school because at that time, we did not have a bus service. The alternative was the long walk into Denaby Main, which we had to do anyway when the Don was in flood. The ferry kept running as long as possible until it really was too high to get on and off and then it stopped. They will all have memories of the Don.

WARDSEND CEMETERY AND THE RIVER DON

By George Proctor, Friends of Wardsend Cemetery.

Hidden behind a confectionary factory and Hillsborough college the River Don flows by as it has done for centuries. It is also a barrier that preserves the uniqueness of one of Sheffield's most fascinating historical sites, Wardsend Cemetery. Laid down in 1857 the cemetery is on a steep hillside surrounded by flora, fauna and trees, all of which adds to its characteristic and individualistic identity. The relationship between cemetery and river is one of solemn respect and spirituality as well as geographic, the river has been the final crossing place for about thirty thousand citizens and soldiers from Sheffield and beyond. Our closeness to Hillsborough Barracks led to us having about 400 military burials of soldiers, their wives and their children in Wardsend. Thirteen victims of the great Sheffield flood of 1864 are buried here.

Consecrated in 1859 by the Archbishop of York, Thomas Musgrave who described the setting as "the most pleasant setting and vistas for a place of burial", thirteen hundred burials had already taken place before this consecration. The story began in 1855 when Reverend John Livesey was faced with the closure of his churchyard due to being full to capacity and the movement to close city centre churchyards through the inception of new burial acts, preferring them to be on the outskirts. It took two years of discussion and argument to finally find the site at Wardsend. Reverend Livesey paid £2000 pounds of his own money to buy the land from a London gentleman who owned a lot of land in the area, Montague George Burgoyne. The agreement was that Burgoyne paid for the new cemetery road needed, now named Livesey Street after the reverend.

The way that Burgoyne was repaid was unique. Toll bridges aren't unusual but for a funeral to have to pay to cross a bridge to get to the cemetery certainly was. In 1857 funeral organisers had to pay the grand sum of 6d (equivalent to around £6 today), some time between then and the 1920's this had risen to one shilling. For those interested in Greek Mythology there is the comparison with Charon and the River Styx. The Don could be the Styx and the bridge the ferry and the ferryman who had to be paid before anyone could cross into the underworld, Wardsend cemetery of course.

The first two bridges would have been built to a similar design with outer walls of stone, possibly Ashlar, with an infill of building material and a couple of brick support structures inside, then a roadway would have been put on top along with the parapets. The third bridge (2009) was different, built of reinforced concrete and steel. A metal skeleton covered by concrete for the basic design with steel parapets and a modern roadway. There is another bridge hidden away out of sight; the footbridge that was crossed by workers at the Neepsend power station, closed in the 1980's. This bridge was used to cross the river from 2007 to 2009 while the new Wardsend bridge was being built.

Further down the Don towards the city are the derelict buildings of the Old Park Silver Mill, dating from the 1760's the mill was used in the manufacture of Sheffield plate items. It was put up by Joseph Hancock and was a follow on from Thomas Boulsover's invention of Sheffield plate. The mill is private property today having finished working in the 1950's. Also, now completely gone is the Old Park Corn Mill from which Club Mill Road got its name, this was opened in the 1790's by a group of organisations clubbing together to lower the price of flour; unfortunately it didn't do very well and the mill didn't last very long before going into private hands.

They share the same weir, the next one down from Wardsend bridge after the slitting wheel weir. The river Loxley flows into the Don by the silver mill.

With regards to nature in the cemetery there are rare wood ants along with birds such as the robin, redpoll and tawny owl. Butterflies like the lesser tortoiseshell and skipper species and a host of different fungi can also be found. Small mammals shelter under the cover of the yew, oak, holly, silver birch and sycamore trees. However, our crowning glory, the jewel in our crown, is in the spring. A covering of delicate English bluebells, that on a breezy day can be seen with their delightful nodding heads creating a wonderful blue wave. Wardsend is social history and ecology all wrapped up in one bundle. At Wardsend are thirty thousand voices, every one having seen the passing flow of the Don.

Top: the original Wardsend Bridge.

Right: the collapsed bridge after the 2007 Sheffield Floods.

Below: the New Wardsend Bridge as it stands today.

Main photograph: Fishermen downstream of the bridge.

Photography by George Proctor

A GLIMPSE OF OLD SHEFFIELD

By Howard Bayley, Friends of Wardsend Cemetery.

You could be forgiven for thinking this photo was taken somewhere in the Peak District. In fact, it's the River Don from Club Mill Road, just a few minutes' walk from Wardsend Cemetery.

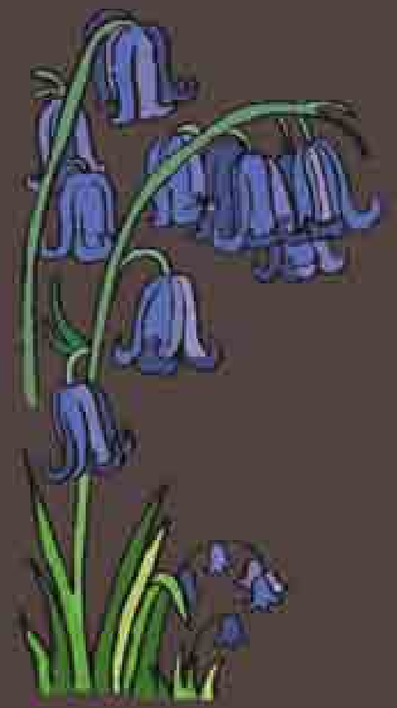
What you see here is a glimpse of old Sheffield. An old weir on the city's arterial River Don where heritage and nature combine. Close to the historically important, but sadly derelict, Old Park Silver Mill and a river to which salmon will hopefully soon be returning.

The busy Penistone Road lies behind the wall on the far bank. How many people driving to and from work would be aware of this scene just a few yards from the busy dual carriageway?

Trout, kingfishers, otters, heron, dippers, cormorants, bats and all manner of other animals and insects have found a home on the rejuvenated River Don. The fact that as a city we don't appear to recognise what a potential gem we have on our doorsteps is very sad.

Since the early 1900's there have been calls to 'Beautify the Don' in the areas above and below Wardsend. The growth of industry, and lack of respect for, and connection with, the natural environment meant the opposite happened. Wouldn't it be great if this was the generation that turned that around?

Photograph by Howard Bayley



SOLDIERS FROM THE HILL

My name is William Dixon, I'm a soldier of the Queen,
They brought me here from India, long ago;
They laid me in the hillside in a place that's always green,
Where I could see the city, down below.
But I was not alone, there are others just like me,
When evening comes and when the kids have gone,
This silent little army will gather round the stones
And dream about our childhood in the sun.

There are squaddies, there are sergeants, there are corporals and clerks,
There are many more who fell before their time.
There are some with broken spirits, just a few with broken hearts,
On ivy-covered stones that bear no rhyme.
The rattling trains run through, and the earth, it settles down,
The murmur of the wind, the falling rain,
The dog rose and the briar have become a living shroud,
We long for Sheffield sunlight, once again.

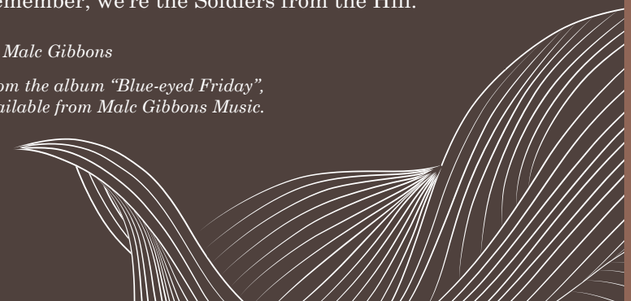
From world's end to Wardsend, from Hillsborough to home
We look down to the valley, and when the sun has gone
We'll shoulder arms and go from a world you'll never know
And guard the bridge across the River Don.

If you visit in the evening when the world is fast asleep
And a yellow moon is rising through the trees,
You may hear the hiss of whispers and the clink of iron feet,
And you'll smell tobacco on the gentle breeze.
Did you see the shadow that wanders down the hill ?
Is there someone singing "Goodbye, Dolly Gray"?
In our home of shale and gravel, at the foot of old Park Wood
Our world is in the night and yours -- the day.

I've noticed many changes in the city, down below,
Where horses walked, now motor buses run.
The steelworks have all disappeared, the air is crystal-clear,
I can see the slate roofs shining in the sun.
But there's no room for others deep inside this place,
With wives and families crowding round us still,
You won't always notice us, but try not to forget,
Remember, we're the Soldiers from the Hill.

By Malc Gibbons

From the album "Blue-eyed Friday", available from Malc Gibbons Music.



"One Sunday afternoon in 2009, I visited Wardsend Cemetery for the first time. I had never seen a place like it. The tree roots had pushed their strong and muscular fingers through many of the scattered and ruined graves. Long strands of ivy hung in the dappled shade. The names of the thousands of residents displayed themselves solemnly and proudly in their broken rows and receded slowly into the green and mossy dark of a September dusk.

It was the name William Dixon that struck me. I wondered if he was one of the many soldiers from Hillsborough Barracks. Were any of his friends and family also interred in this place? What happens here when darkness falls? Does a ghostly battalion watch over the river crossing? I have no answer to these questions, except to say that I experienced a strange feeling that I was being watched by some unseen presence, when I performed this song by the War Memorial. It is for all those residents, some forgotten and some remembered, that I wrote this."

A TOUCH OF IRON

Rotherham remains;
shawled by greyness along canal
backwaters for problems pushed in and forgotten.
I climb the carbon sides of slagheap number three,
now a memory too close for comfort
of fifty birthdays ago.

Surrounded then by the thump,
thump forge in the night
buckets of clinker and clattering rails,
orange explosions lighting the night
throwing up down the hill.

Vermilion eyes razored the sky dressed in red,
smelting ore molten hot with a touch of iron
turning compass needles north.
From this hill the terrain is inert for the quiet fanatic.
I see the Bailey Bridge,
as pretty as an army on manoeuvres
or the Parish Church painted in black halftones.

A green belt holds up the Parkgate Mall
with shoppers canned and ready to go,
flitting moths from neon lights.

Damp air curls in strands around the towpath
lapping between the lock gates and steels
along the elementary canal
dabbed with a whiff of petrol.

Boxy brown buildings smudge the distance
with fumes from an effluent society.
I recognise the boy who follows his dog
under the bridge over the River Don.

Constellations of weed glints on the water.
His dog sniffs the dead rat;
two kids on bikes clatter the duckboards loose,
the metallic yammer scares the dog and
she drops the dead rat,
I try not to look back.

By Chris Bilton

EASTWOOD TOWPATH CANAL GHOSTS

We walk on the towpath
in the gruel of evening light;
the dog finds a plug of tobacco
long, aromatic and pipe ready.
I read the Braille smell harbouring flesh
tones and see men; briers gripped
with morgue white teeth clop the path
pass blasphemous after shift chit-chat.
I ratchet up the pace of steps
as tobacco smoke burns my eyes.
With a mortal urge to breathe I gasp
away the smoke from burning lungs.
We shoal from the path as high-winds
part the fumes and fresh night air returns.
Again on the path and into the light
the dog and I walk quickly on.

By Chris Bilton

“I’ve walked the towpath along the Eastwood stretch of the canal for well over 50 years. My father and I walked the dog and used the bike trails nearby. Years later I accompanied my 2 daughters, explored the slag hills that long before I watched being formed from my bedroom window, buckets of red hot slag were poured down a hill that exploded into a sparkling conflagration that lit the night sky. We loved throwing small stones on the frozen canal water and hearing that sinister ‘pinging’ sound it made or watching the shimmering heat ‘mirages’ on train tracks from the railway bridge and waving to the passing trains and barges.

Now my grandchildren are enjoying the delights of the canal. We make up stories about the tracks we see in the mud as we walk the towpath. Dog prints become a ‘Devil Hound’ that stalks the canal in the dead of night, or the strange reflections from the canal’s edge that are the ‘canal goblins’ taking a dip in the cool waters and warning walkers of the dangers held in its murky depth.”

EXTRACTS JOURNAL OF DAVID BURTON

When we were young lads in the late 1950's we would often go out on our bicycles, Graham Fisher, Terry Slack, Roger Brookes and me. We would cycle down to Aldwarke Lock and dare each other to walk over the hump back bridge on the ledge above the canal. We would follow the canal to Eastwood Lock and cycle on the steelwork's slag heaps. They were like an original skateboard park. In some places we could feel the heat still remaining in the slag. We could see the slag being tipped from rail cars high up on the side of the slag heaps. We cycled over a wooden bridge over the river at Eastwood, the wooden planks rattled as we went across and we could see the water in between the gaps. I later found out that it was a Bailey bridge, I was in Bailey House at Oakwood school.

One day we saw 2 barges stuck on top of the weir at Aldwarke. We managed to climb onto the one nearest the bank and then on to the other one. We looked inside and they were empty and looked to be used for carrying coal. They may have come adrift during one of the many times when the river was flowing very high. Sometimes the road bridge over the river at Aldwarke would be under water by about 1 or 2 feet, the water flowing very fast. The steel mesh panels on the bridge were released at the bottom and hinged at the top to allow debris washed down by the river to pass through the bridge. There was only one place we could get safely to the edge of the river, that was at the downstream side of the bridge at the Aldwarke Hall side.

One day we crossed the lock at Aldwarke and got onto the "island", the canal on one side and the river on the other. On the river side there was a small mooring with a small motor boat tied up. We all got into the boat and just sat there bobbing up and down in the water, and then ran off before we got caught.

We went close to the river's edge to see the water and watch the barges go by. I remember hitching a lift on a barge at a lock and getting off at Aldwarke lock. I remember having nightmares about going near to the fast flowing river and falling in the water.

By David Burton

A RIVER WITH ATTITUDE

On this crossing, where the Don
greets the Rother and the canal,
where the people came
to find home and converged,
a confluence that swirled
and eddied and swarmed
in tension or in peace,
in drought or in flood
like last December
when the water came up
and stayed up and whirl pooled
furious under the bridge
and peaked and roared,
not every meeting is straightforward.

For a town to grow
it needs three things,
a river, materials to exploit, immigrants.
The Don was here before fires,
before crops, before huts,
before tracks became lanes
became streets, became town.
They came, they took
from his source, harnessing his power
although heavy set and slow,
a workhorse not a deer,
a seam of coal,
not pretty thread,
fat with barges laden down,
he carries us.

His voice is gruff,
It's the roar of Miller's fans
on match days, the drunks
singing down Ship Hill
after closing time,
clutching lampposts,
arms like ropes round mooring pins,
it's the chants of the UAF on the days
when Britain First came to march.
With a mucky laugh,
pooled with dark foreboding
strewn with beer cans, Tesco trolleys,
crisp packets and half eaten Greggs,
but he isn't choked, or stagnant
or broken or stalled,
he's ponderous and cluttered
and thick and silted,
knows the trick is to keep moving,
shrug; ask nowt from no one.

A river with attitude,
even the carp wear boots,
hold their ground in the depths,
immovable as bouncers,
they sneer at fisherman's hooks,
stay out of reach and bask
while youths use locks
as dirty swimming pools
and the towpath is littered
with the casings from nicked copper wire,
a suitcase left in the grass
spills out clothes
like a crime unannounced
and the Don rolls his eyes to trouble
as after sundown the water broods beneath
the husk of the Guest and Chrimes factory,
destined to subside into the mud
or rise unbidden into luxury flats,
should anyone ever decide to invest.

This town isn't waiting
for your pity or your favours
it survives with or without you
through these ages
and still the people come to find home
settle among neighbours
they don't understand.

The Pakistanis weren't the first or last,
perhaps the least inclined to mix
with locals of stubborn heart,
definite vowels, wariness.
They came for work not trouble,
a quiet pious people,
who bought their weary selves
to the school gates, the factories,
the taxis, the takeaways, the town hall
and stayed.

The trouble with rivers is
they need to be crossed,
bridges must hold from both sides
like a handshake or a rope
neither person drops,
foundations cannot be the sort that fray,
or turn their faces away
like the police and councillors
who didn't value our girls,
straight talking only goes so far.

In this run down pit closed
industry forgotten stomping ground,
forged in disappointment
and hauling your own self up,
where you can turn the heat up
and no one jumps,
only bends like wrought iron
from pit to call centre
if that's what it takes,
we're bred tough.

If you never tried to turn a keel
through wind and tide,
never heaved a lock gate shut
maybe you won't know
how foolish it is to mock
the water as weak, facing its final act,
they say there are otters again now,
we're still waiting
for the salmon to come back.

This town isn't waiting
for your pity or your favours
a succession of shops shutting down
won't faze us, we are floods
threatening to overspill the locks,
we are gaps in terraces
like knocked out teeth,
we are the Hastings clock
keeping perfect time
one hundred years on,
we are trainers flung on telegraph wires,
we are street bazaars, brass bands,
melas, carnivals and galas,
we are skateparks, bandstands,
Mecca bingo and Poundland,
we are triers.

While the Don sits magnanimous
playing chess beneath the trees,
stroking his mangy beard
of weed and debris,
In companionable silence
with his brothers,
An uneasy stream he wraps us,
holds us close, enfolds us.

By Charlotte Ansell

Charlotte has lived most of her adult life on houseboats; spending the last ten years with her family on a Sheffield keel moored on the Sheffield and South Tinsley navigation. The history and wildlife of the River Don and other local waterways have been a source of rich inspiration in her writing.

SOAPWORT

She has trusted it to me -
this chemise still warm from the night, her tryst.
It is as though she has lifted a layer.
If I wash it, the Lord and her husband will not see.
I have a root gentle for a job such as this,
will palm its oil over her trouble.
How the linen clings! So fine I can spy
the world through its weave.
Desperate, it dies - heavy on the stone.
But the dirt will rise. The water will open
its jaw, swallow it,
close again like the grave.
The river will remember how I dipped her,
left her secret in its depths.

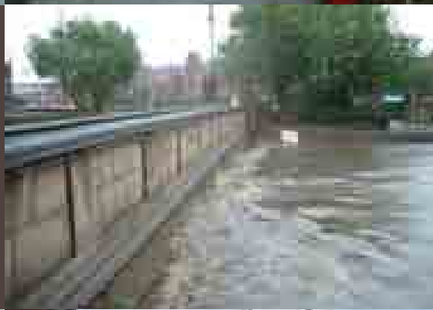
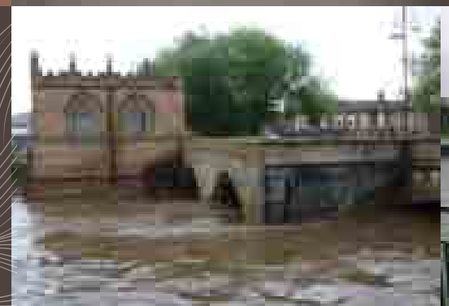
By Carolyn Waudby

"This poem was inspired by the folklore of Soapwort, which grows on the banks of the Don. It references Sheffield's medieval past – its castle, dense streets, trades and activities, an area where the Don meets the Sheaf, which was known as the Shambles."




Images from the 2007 floods in Rotherham

Provided by Chris Bilton

This cannonball was discovered during construction on the Steel Bank fish pass in 2016.

With the close proximity of Hillsborough Barracks it's fascinating to wonder how it ended up in the river Don.

Steelbank fish pass under construction

Photograph by John Beal

Email: info@dcrt.org.uk
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A limited edition of 300

Published December 2018