

Walking in Air, 26 May 2025, Mounts Pond, Blackheath  
Carol Watts

### Ghost Ponds and Palimpsests

I'm writing this from the vantage of July, looking back on my notes from walking in air on Blackheath in late May. We are now at the end of the third heatwave of the summer, so there is something cooling in remembering back to another day when the weather broke, in the wind and showers of late May. The pond had dried out by 6 May in 2025, so we met it in its cockpit state, with the green of flags, exposed gravels and yellowing grasses. There was a lot of energy noticeable in the atmosphere, and the crows were active in all the roiling. The pond had dried up more than a month earlier than 2024 (23 June), and by mid June the year before. It's closer this year to 2022, when the water disappeared by 27 April, ahead of a very hot summer with the highest temperatures ever recorded. That was the summer caught in *Mimic Pond*. Keeping random noticings in my notebook holds something of a record of its barometric rhythms, and forms of prediction. I recognise the signs. It is a ragwort year on the heath this year, which seem to correspond with hot dry seasons, rather than the damp cool ones.

Returning to the pond with Will, Emmanuelle and David was a curious experience, in that I carry both a sense of completion – what I may now 'think' about the pond and its unearthed connected histories – and a deep and open familiarity over time with that spot, which on the day initially cluttered the kind of encounter 'walking in air' makes possible. It felt fresh to share it and see what emerged, though confusing. I felt oddly shy. The fact that the pond was dry was a surprise I think to the others. So what would being there yield up? Was it a pond at all? The pond's seeming absence demands that you work that out relationally, dismantle usual ways of predicating. Emmanuelle mentions a kind of shame at this pond disappointment in her notes, a disorientation which feels familiar, and interesting to me. Being there reminded me of the resistances I always have to work through in remaining open to walking in environments and landscapes, not just in this neighbourhood, alone or with others. Partly the flattening of expectations of sensuous connection with what surrounds in any present moment, since it must remain distinctly itself, emphatically un-owned, plus a usual internal resistance to slowing down and simply breathing. I realised that day that my writing in *Mimic Pond* has often come through a pace and repetition of movement – a sometimes speedy if steady looping around in terms of its fieldwork – rather than a somewhat meditative practice of slowing down, which sometimes happens in later gathering in writing or notebook records when what has been caught consciously or unconsciously begins to surface. Also a practice in the present I'm thinking about just now as oddly lenticular, in that it registers angles like a generous array, a kind of animal distraction, without fully

looking at what I've met in the face. Attention is sometimes a process to be arrived at, or a thickened state to exist in, not always immediately on call. It was suddenly surprising that despite all my attentiveness over years it was on 26 May the first time I had actually sat down on the ground of the Mount itself. That was almost enough.

On the day vestiges of this resistance initially emerged in the route I took, beginning as a kind of avoidance – I found myself saying that 'strictly speaking' I was walking off the heath, down the distant Pond Road in the Cator Estate, which leads off the south-east margins of Blackheath near to the Prince of Wales Pond. Pond Road is named after a large pond that once existed there in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a landscaped part of a great estate, Wricklemarsh House, its architectural design celebrated in *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1739. This palatial building I later discovered was already a ruin by the time that J.M.W Turner sketched it sometime in 1796-7 (a sketch I haven't been able to find), its features and stone rubble largely recycled into other grand houses by 1806. By the twentieth century this former pond had become a boggy spot, marked by a kind of depression – like a ghost pond – a 'green' in the housing estate, with willows marking its previous life still growing there.

I took with me some words to underpin my wandering – Ponge's understanding of a meadow as 'aerating' and 'dissipating', which captures a movement of presence/non-presence in air – and Tim Ingold's notion of *perdurance* – how things persist through time in a palimpsestic way: 'with the palimpsest past inscriptions do not lie beneath the semi-translucence of the present, but rather *rise up* to the surface even as the inscriptions of the present sink down'. For me there is a kind of patience to be found in acknowledging this 'rising' and 'sinking' – not simply the shapes and marks that come to the surface (as they especially do in dry seasons, marking out the shadows of old field systems or archaeological remains), but also as a way (anthropologically speaking perhaps) that places and features and their nonhuman inhabitants of all kinds may manifest *to* someone as they encounter them, *or no*. My experience over months at Mounts Pond had felt like this movement of waiting and acceptance was always central. Walking in air is for me a reminder of this patience.

What was it then that drew me to the empty space on Pond Road adjacent to the estate houses? Another notion of a ghost pond, perhaps an echo of a feeling that Mounts Pond itself might now somehow be 'lost' in the waning of my shared life, which arises as a brief moment of mourning at the end of *Mimic Pond*. But also a reliable curiosity, not knowing what would surface, just that something might. The large depression of the Pond Road pond was even less evident than I'd seen it before. A huge female white poplar tree on its margins was in the process of letting go of its seeds in white drifts, like snow – another tree sometimes found by water. Aerating and dissipating. Walking back

over the heath across a section I rarely visit towards Greenwich Park – uniformly flat, exposed and cropped – I wondered why I was walking there in particular. I registered some gorgeous clumps of weeds on the roadside: viper's bugloss, ladies' bedstraw. But also a feeling of emptiness.

It was not the first time I'd gone on that route. My notebook records wandering there in February 2024, looking for Nathaniel Hawthorne's house at 4 Pond Road. Hawthorne had lived there in 1856, and mentions his own experience of walking in air on the heath: 'On this great, bare, dreary common I often went astray ... and I drew the air (tainted with London smoke though it might be) into my lungs by deep inspirations, with a strange and unexpected sense of desert freedom'. On returning home this time, I found out that the grand estates which had sat on the edge of the open ground of Blackheath in the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries were caught up in land speculation, underpinned by fortunes made in south seas stock (before the bubble) and East India Company dealings. It explains something of the shape of the heath and its building encroachments and enclosings, famously the earlier property of John Morden, whose College stills persists there on a corner of the heath (originally for mercantile occupants fallen on hard times, now a place for retirement), and the selling of building leases to the rich by John Cator who bought up the Wricklemarsh estate, still evident in the wealthy family names marking roads and street areas: Eliot/St German, Dartmouth, Ashburnham, Vanbrugh.

To think of the perdurance of the heath in palimpsestic terms – of what is present in its rising though no longer there – is perhaps to read all the extractive forces at work and written into its smoothing out and filling in, of booms and speculation and money, the nature of manorial 'waste' and carvings out of resources, the bomb rubble that reputedly filled some of its gravel pit gougings, the rye grass sown to cover it up, the history in other words of an ancient urban and metropolitan commons. And in all this trampling, its continuing nature: the ribwort plantains and sheep sorrel that depend upon that walking for their own travelling and dispersal, the colonies of clover and yarrow, the plants returning each year to the same road margins – blue and white chicory, wild rocket, mallows, champions – the chance still to sense and breathe the wider social meanings of 'desert freedom', as this seasonal pond rises and disappears. At the same time this continues to be an experience of moods and rhythms, shifting forms of attunement, as forces pass through and across bodies and air.

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