

In the nose of the beholder

A bland set of snaps from his latest trek prompt Christopher Somerville to ask what really makes a landscape linger in the memory.

‘H mm, well...’ said Jane, looking over my shoulder at the image on the computer screen. I knew exactly what she was thinking. And now I came to study the photographs I’d taken a couple of months before on the Dengie peninsula in Essex, I had to admit she was absolutely right. Couldn’t have put it better myself.

The more you walk around this amazingly varied land of ours, the more you come to realise that beauty really does reside in the eye of the beholder – or more accurately, in the nose and ears as well, in that mysterious intertwining of experiences, of present mood and private taste that colours what the senses take in.

“Sitting at the computer that evening, staring at the level horizons and thinly layered perspectives of the muddy flatlands of outermost Essex, there seemed no magic there. How had I kidded myself there was?”

Ask a hundred ramblers what their favourite walking landscape is, or the view they most like to contemplate, and I bet that at least three-quarters would nominate hills, fells and mountains. You hardly have to tax the little grey cells to think of the reasons why. Mountains uplift you spiritually and physically, they point you to the sky, they are a back-cloth for the weather to throw colours across, they fill your view with drama, they beckon as they challenge. Many walkers, myself included, like a drop of the old mean and moody with our friendly fells. A smoking grey sky, a whistle of wind in the bent grass, a baring of rocky teeth. A feeling you have come somewhere pared back, an outpost above the comfort zone.

It probably wasn’t the brightest idea to look at the Dengie pictures just after getting home, still lit with elation from a winter walking trip to the Dark Peak – the gritstone edges and sombre moors where Derbyshire and Yorkshire collide. Racing the darkness up to Howden Moor on a windy and cloudy evening with the heather fells and steep, shadowy valleys all round had been a stunning experience; a cold blast of the upland ecstasy one tastes rarely but unforgettably. I was full of it, man.

Sitting at the computer that evening, staring at the level horizons and thinly layered perspectives of the muddy

flatlands of outermost Essex, there seemed no magic there. How had I kidded myself there was?

I found the notebook of the Dengie trip and thumbed it through. No mistaking the pages I’d scribbled in during that long day’s stroll – they were smeared with mud still gritty to the touch, blotted with raindrops, filled with crude sketches of wading birds and marsh plants. As I held the notebook to the light, a sprig of sea lavender dropped out from between two crumpled leaves, followed by a striped brown feather. A faint but distinct smell still clung to the notebook, a tang of muddy sand and of salt. Now I could bring to mind the liquid bubble of curlew and sharp pipe of oystercatcher, the iodine savour

of crackling dried bladder wrack, the way the vast mudflats shimmered with silver as a rain shower pockmarked them. Black brushy willows had been the only shapes to pierce the immaculate green and pink bowl of the evening sky. Those empty sea and land horizons grasped the senses and stretched them out wide as no moor or mountain could.

My photographs could not impart the spell of this flat country to my wife. Perhaps such magic is scarcely transmissible. Future walkers roaming here a year or two down the line, when they have hatched in that Dengie skyline and sky with wind turbine masts four times as tall as any tree, may never fall under the same enchantment. But it remains in the lumber room of the memory, retrievable at the scent of creek mud or the touch of a curlew feather.

Illustration: Jonathan Williams

