

"When the Tide is On" - A story of Sunderland Point

Sunderland Point is an exposed peninsular situated on the Lancashire coast, with a population of around 70 people. Twice a day it is cut off from the mainland by the rising tide. Travelling on the tidal road that crosses the salt marsh, brings you to a community that is fortunate to be situated in place of great natural beauty, with an abundance of wild life and history. However, it is also a place that is venerable to each Spring tide and Autumn storm, which are slowly eroding the very ground that it is built upon.

Tidal Flow

Working on a six hourly cycle, the coast of the UK is continually changing, washed by the tides that run along its shores. Each day the course of the UK coastline is being redrawn, as the falling tide reveals large areas of a cleansed no-mans land, this only later to be reclaimed by the sea, as a turning tide will rise to recover this temporary extension to the counties surface. Many people think the tide just goes in and out, which is where the idea of incoming and outgoing tide comes from. However, a better description is that it actually flows along the coast, as a river flows along its banks, reversing its flow twice a day and moving in the opposite direction. The correct technical terms are also different, as a rising tide is known as a Flood tide, while a falling tide is called an Ebb tide. The phenomenon of tidal flow is controlled by the gravitational pull of the moon and the sun, thus it can be predicted for many years in advance, but these results are only theatrical. Local anomalies which include the weather, and even the rise of sea levels due to climate change and rainfall, all contribute to variations in both timing and height.

Sunderland Point – An Introduction

The community of Sunderland Point live a life dominated by the sea and tides. Situated on the end of a vulnerable peninsula near Lancaster, the population of around 70 show an understanding of tidal flow and coastal erosion that would be the envy of any experienced sea farer or University researcher. The River Lune separates the community from the mainland to the east and Morecambe Bay to the west. The life of the river is linked directly to the life of the community. Exposed to the prevailing south westerly winds, those who live on "the point" face the threat of climate change and fluctuations in weather on a daily basis.

The point has been formed by the continual shifting of sands due to tidal streams and the flow of the River Lune. Exactly who was first to inhabit this open piece of landscape is not certain but there is clear evidence that the Romans had visited the Lancashire coast. To the south of Lancaster, it is still possible to trace the route of a Roman road, which ran from Kirkham to Poulton le Fylde and on to the banks of the River Wyre. The rivers Ribble and Wyre were used by the Romans and there seems no reason that they would have not continued further north along the coast to the Lune. Lancaster is a well known Roman town, with evidence of a fort and baths. The modern name of Lancaster, first appeared in the Domesday Book of AD1086 where it appears as *Loncastre*, a compound of a Celtic river-name and Old English *cæster* or 'old Roman fort'. The full meaning of the modern name could therefore be read as 'the Roman fort on the River Lune'. After the Romans left, much of the area was inhabited by the Vikings and came under control of a Norseman called Agmundr. However, by the 12 century an Abbey had been established at Cockersand, which faces Sunderland Point across the Lune. It was founded as the Hospital of St Mary on the Marsh belonging to Leicester Abbey and was one of the wealthiest in Lancashire. Much of the land in this area was marsh and travelling across it was a hazardous journey. It was not until the 18C that much of it was drained and it is now used for agriculture. The monks were given fishing rights in the river and would use a baulk, which was a hedge constructed from wattles near Plover Scar. This is where the lighthouse was built in 1847 and is still operational. The site of the Abbey is now under threat due to coastal erosion and in 2000 was put on the Buildings at Risk register. Something which is close to the hearts of the community at Sunderland Point.

The Lancashire Coastal Way footpath passes the Abbey and then follows the east bank of the Lune into Lancaster. A ferry used to cross the Lune, its evidence can be found by the naming of Ferry Cottage on Bazil Point. The ferry ran from what is now Glasson Dock and the appropriately named Fishnet Point. Names found on an OS map can give away much of a location's history. It is well known that Monks would act as guides for travellers who wished to cross Morecambe Bay, but what is less understood is that the Morecambe Bay crossing formed part of a longer route that linked Birkenhead Priory in the south with Furness Abbey, at the southern end of the Lake District. The monks of Birkenhead Priory operated a ferry to cross the River Mersey and the memory of the route survives in the place name Monks Ferry, which is found on Wirral side of the river. Other references to the route can be found at Monk's Lane near Preesall, Chapel Island in the Leven Estuary and Priest Skear, which is an off-shore area of rocks formed by remnants of glacial activity near Hest Bank.

It is easy to assume that Sunderland Point had been used for fishing and farming at various times since the Romans had visited but it was not until the late 1600's, when Lancaster became a port, that Sunderland Point's location became really commercially important. One of the first buildings to be built was the Old Hall, parts of which date back to 1683. It sits proudly on the end of the point, its bright exterior, neat lawn and veranda, takes the viewer to a world of summer days and afternoon teas. It is one of the few buildings marked on the OS map and provides a key visual reference point for arriving ships and it is marked on nautical charts and highlighted in the Western Almanac. Although the channel up to Glasson Dock is buoyed, Old Hall and Plover Scar Lighthouse provide key points. The channel and sand banks are always moving, especially after heavy rain or during large spring tides.

Early trade with the West Indies and Americas brought exotic hardwoods, sugar, rum, cotton and tobacco, as well as slaves. The arrival of high quality wood, in turn led to a growth in furniture making in the town by the company founded in 1730, by Robert Willow. At this time there was no dock on the Lune, this came later in the 1750's, with the construction of St. George's Quay. Before this, goods were unloaded at Sunderland Point and then carried up to Lancaster by horse and cart. The village, as we know it today, was built by Robert Lawson between 1715 to 1720, when he provided warehouses and workshops to support the growing trade and boat building industry. Included in this was the Summer House, which can still be seen at the high point at end of The Lane, which takes visitors across to the West Shore. This viewpoint was used by merchants watching for the arrival of their ships, as they approached to enter the Lune. Originally there was a wind vane attached to a compass that was inside the building. This enabled the merchants to stay in the warmth of the building and see which way the wind was blowing, so they would know when to expect their boats to arrive. Opposite the Summer House is a small chapel. One of sad stories from this time is the death of "Sambo", a slave who had arrived as a captain's cabin boy in 1736. He died in the upstairs cottage on the corner of The Lane and was buried in an un-consecrated grave, which is still well kept and can be visited on the West Shore.

The chapel in The Lane, was built in 1894 through public subscription, with the intention that it was to be used as a community centre, as well as a place for worship. However, it never established itself as a place for recreation and The Reading Room, on the Second Terrace, was created in its current form in 1910. Originally there was a billiards table, daily newspapers were delivered and a battery powered radio was also installed, so the fisherman could obtain a current weather forecast.

During the second half of the 18 Century Lancaster was in, what is described as its "Golden Age" but with the opening of Glasson Dock in 1787 and the silting up of the river, Lancaster's position as one the largest ports in the country faded, as did the trade for Sunderland Point. With the construction of the Glasson Canal in 1825, ships could now travel directly to Preston or Lancaster. During this time Sunderland Point's population dropped but in the early 19C the Ship Inn advertised itself as a holiday venue and encouraged people to come and experience the pleasure of swimming in the sea and watch the sailing regattas that also took place. Sea bathing was growing in popularity and saw the

growth of resorts, such as nearby Morecambe and Blackpool. The fishermen of Sunderland Point have always supplemented their income by working as pilots, to guide boats up the River Lune. With the arrival of the railways in the 1850's, Barrow in Furness opened up as a port. Some of the fisherman from Sunderland Point would travel by small boat, over Morecambe Bay to work as pilots in the new port. Tragedy came to the community when three men were lost, when their boat over turned, while returning from working in Barrow. A memorial to them can be found in Overton church.

At this time Morecambe was known as Poulton le Sands and with the arrival of the railways other locations had better communication links, which meant that these became the favoured venue for visitors. There were originally two pubs in the village but by the end of the 19th century both had closed. The Ship Inn was at the end of First Terrace and was also known as the Temperance Hotel. Hall Farm, on the second Terrace was originally known as the Maxwell Arms. After the latter had lost its license, there were still some summer visitors and this was the last of any overnight facilities for visitors. The nearest public house is now The Globe, just over the sea wall in Overton. At one time there was also a post office. As well as providing the normal service found at a post office, it also sold sweets and cigarettes. However, during the 1970's it closed which meant everyone had to travel to Overton for these facilities. At one time there was a small hut near the end of The Pad on the 2nd Terrace, with a stove for the postman to wait out a high tide. Until the 1960's the village had always been serviced by a series of travelling shops, a fish van even came all the way from Fleetwood. However, as with many rural communities personal car ownership has changed our shopping habits. The only facilities that are now provided for visitors are the new public toilets, a post box and public telephone. Broadband has yet to reach Sunderland Point.

During the latter part of the 19th Century fishing remained a key part of the economy, with many of the fisherman working as pilots, guiding ships into the Lune and on to Glasson Dock. The Gardener family had come from Morecambe to live at Sunderland Point, providing many of the pilots that worked on the Lune. Born in 1888 on Sunderland Point, Robert Gardener became a successful businessman and ship owner. He based his business at the former hospital on the east bank of the Lune, near the now disused Linoleum works. His boats had a black funnel, with a white band at the top. They plied much of their trade between the Lune and Cornwall, bringing clay for the linoleum works, as well as stone from Pembroke and North Wales. He lived much of his life on the Point and died in 1957.

Philip Gilchrist, who was a well-respected artist, visited the Point on several occasions and later had Dolphin house built in 1912. He also bought most of the land and property that make up Sunderland Point, and which are still in the possession of the family. This means many of the properties are rented by their occupants, which in the past had led to them being used as holiday homes. However, in recent years there has been investment in the buildings and all houses apart from one in the village are now permanently inhabited.

The community has always had a strong tradition in entertaining itself, from sailing regattas to cricket matches and a continuing Christmas concert. During the early years of the 20th Century an annual cricket match was held on the field near Sambo's Grave, teams from 1st and 2nd Terrace would fight it out for nothing but pride and personal satisfaction. These matches were normally followed by a party. Although the cricket matches no longer take place, teas on the green and music still play an important part in the community life.

During the inter-war years there were a number of ferries that plied their trade along the Lancashire coast and also provided easy transport for the community. With the port of Heysham only 3 miles away along the coast, it was possible to make day trips to the Isle of Man, Fleetwood and then onto Blackpool by tram. There was also an over night sailing to Belfast, which was timed to give visitors the whole of Saturday in the city, arriving back in Heysham early Sunday morning. The out break of WWII, saw the arrival of the Army, who based themselves in a group of Nissen huts, in the fields near the West Shore. Their presence was to protect the entrance to the Lune and prevent airborne

landings at low tide. Posts were drilled into the sand off the West Shore and if you know where to look, these can still be seen. There is also a pill box, just inside the sea defences, slowly sinking into the soft ground and covered by vegetation. Further evidence of military presence can be seen by looking East over the Lune and past Cockersand Abbey, where a lookout tower at Bank End is still in existence.

After the war some of the houses had restoration work completed and the road was slowly improved. The village end of the road was lifted in 1978 and some of the undulations removed. This means that the community is cut off for less time but it does not completely remove the tide's control over their lives. The road is still covered at high tide and the flowing water's slow erosion of the land is a continual battle. The road is built on a salt marsh, which continually moves and this means the road's foundations are not secure. The council comes twice a year to clear the silt that slowly collects at certain points along the route. The maintenance of the road is vital to keeping the community alive. There is a footpath that provides access at all states of the tide but this is not a comfortable option, especially after heavy rain when the fields soon become water logged. The road follows the eastern edge of the peninsula, as it winds its way out to the village, adjacent to the River Lune,. However the real threat comes from the west. Coastal erosion has always been a threat to coastal communities and inhabitants of Sunderland Point are no different. If flow of tide controls their daily lives, then it also will control their future.

Sunderland Point Today

It is early morning and the tide is racing in, the water is grey and the sun is rising over my left shoulder. Its early morning rays colour the clouds, stroking them like a paint brush, leaving a slight red tone to their edge. I have left the car opposite the Globe Inn and walked the kilometre round to Bazil Point. The ground is uneven and wet, I've forgotten to use the path that crosses the field and my feet are now sodden. There is a navigation post just off the point, erect and vertical, I wonder how many tides have washed around its foundations? The rising tide flows over the rocks with increasing force, as a river in spate, but this is an incoming tide. Very soon the road to Sunderland Point will be covered and for the next couple of hours the community will be void of visitors and isolated from the rush of modern life. The community of Sunderland Point is now as secure and vibrant as it has ever been, with all the houses being occupied and people choosing to live there: it is far from a community in decline. Although many of the houses are still rented, with recent investment and flood defences added to doorways, the village is now in a very good state of repair.

Bazil Point gives a panoramic view of the Lune Estuary. To the left is an area of marshland and from there the river winds itself up to Lancaster, passing the former linoleum works, owned by James Williamson. The incoming tide would have been used by traders to carry their loaded ships up to the docks in the centre of the town. Now these upper reaches of the river rarely see, any boats, just the occasional pleasure craft or canoeist who wish to retrace their forebears' travels. Opposite Bazil Point is Glasson Dock. From a distance it is easy to locate, the bright aluminium masts of the yachts and sailing dinghies are easy to make out against the buildings of the village. Once these masts would have been wooden and craft would have been used for commercial purposes, rather than pleasure. Turning further to the right and looking south, initially the light house at Plover Scar can be seen, a bright white tower hovering over the water. After this the vista opens out into Morecambe Bay and Sunderland Point comes into view. The village can be seen as a line of buildings stretching out in a line from Lades Marsh and the embankments that protect the farm land to the west. Looking further into the distance Heysham Nuclear Power station sits of the horizon, this giant cubic structure breaks the skyline and looks totally out of place, as if had landed from a far off world.

When Sunderland Point was at its peak as a commercial port, over 200 years ago, the river would have been much busier. There would have been larger boats beached and being unloaded in front of the houses, with their cargo then being taken by horse and cart to Lancaster. Small craft would be afloat fishing, as well as transporting people and goods across the river. From here the river narrows

and swings to the north, giving the ideal location to cross over to Glasson which, before the dock was built, would have been just a small collection of houses. Bazil Point would also have been used by local fisherman, but starting from here meant a longer journey out to the fishing grounds at the entrance to the River Lune.

The tide is not due to cover the road until later and on low neap tides the road does remain above the sea all day. Residents have become expert in understanding how the weather and even rainfall can affect how long they remain cut off from the mainland. So come with me now, as we leave the security of the mainland and cross an area of no man's land, which stretches from the sea defences by the Globe Pub to the first house in the village.

This is a start of an adventure; our destination can be clearly seen in the distance, some 2 km away, but our route remains a mystery. The road is invisible as it winds its way across to the village, hidden behind raised areas of marsh land. There are warning signs that leave the visitor under no illusion that they are about to enter a landscape of transiting nature. Crossing Lades Bridge, at the start of the road, seems to signal that our journey has begun. The surface is well covered in tarmac, but the edges break away into the soft mud of the marsh, that is shifted with each tide and there is a line of silt marking the centre of the road. Twice a year this is cleared by the council. It is currently being used to reinforce the sea defences on the west shore. The continual moving nature of this soil, is shown by the fallen marker posts that line the edge of the road. This morning is bright and the morning colours in the sky change from purples to blue, with clouds slowly drifting across the horizon. The road snakes across the marsh and as you approach the village the landscape becomes more open, a number of boats can be seen, some afloat on moorings, while others have been pulled clear of all but the highest tides. After about one kilometre we cross Wood Bridge, which crosses a tidal pool, that fills and empties as the tide rises and falls. On this morning a family of Eider ducks are using its shelter to develop their skills. The parents' dash across the surface trying to hold their family of twelve together, as a dog would herd a flock of sheep. This is swimming school, a scene that will be repeated each day until the young are strong and confident enough to leave their parents protection.

As you arrive at the village, the level of the road slightly drops, and this is the area that is last to clear as the tide recedes. The road was not finished with tarmac until 1926; before then it was just mud and was very difficult to travel over. You are surrounded by small boats, some in good condition and clearly still cared for, while others have been left, unloved and now are slowly being swallowed by the effects of nature. One such vessel is full of water, more like an old bath that would be found on a farm, than a fine craft designed to glide across the surface of the river. It has sunk into the marsh and more of it is below the surface than above. How long before it totally disappears, as each high spring tide washes across its gunwales.

Visitors can park their car on the area in front of the public toilets, but everyone should notice the line drawn on the wall to the left, marking where the highest tides can reach. Although during lower neap tides the car park remains dry, when the higher spring tides arrive every two weeks the whole area becomes a giant lake and anyone leaving their car here is unlikely to escape unscathed. During these highest of tides Sunderland Point becomes a completely different place, the mud and untidy shore line are cleaned, washed by the rising waters. There is a quiet beauty at high tide, removed from the brashness life of 21st century living, it is possible to sit on higher ground and gaze across the river, to a view that has hardly changed in the last 100 years.

On this morning the tide is still rising and there is no rush. The village is totally quiet, only the sound of the pebbles moving under my feet as I walk towards the ramp that leads up to the houses that make up First Terrace. I feel guilty about disturbing the early morning peace and walk as quietly as possible along the top stone edge of the wall that supports the ground the houses are built on and prevents the sea from eroding this away. It is more like an edge to a dock than sea wall. Past the Georgian bay windows of the houses, I turn right and walk up The Lane that takes me past the small church and

onto the west shore. There is a far more exposed feel to this stretch of coast line, the view is directly to the west and I am faced with an empty horizon. Some new coastal protection has been built up recently in this area. When the tide is high and a storm is present, this part of the coastline has sometimes been broken, flooding the fields inland and right back to the houses on the opposite side of the peninsula. Looking right, the visual eyesore that is Heysham Power station interrupts my view. Turning left I put this to my back and head south with a gentle breeze in my face. There is a rough path, just above a recent high water mark. The ground is slightly uneven with the remnants of the last tide marking a line to follow. Along with the small pieces of wood and vegetation, there is clear evidence of our throw-away society, as plastic bottles and other rubbish also lie amongst along this line. These will have been carried by currents from far away, which then get caught in the last high tide to be left as reminders of the waste of our modern life style. A few minutes walk brings a gate into view which marks the entrance to Sambo's Grave. Here is a small well manicured area, which contains the grave of a cabin boy who had died nearly 300 years ago. Various visitors have left memento's and there is a sculpture made up of stones, which are held off the ground by bamboo sticks. I'd come to take some photos of this and laid on the still damp grass to lower my view point. I roll onto my back, looking up at the sky. The clouds have broken apart providing small glimpses of a blue sky. I think of Sambo's life here, some say he died of a broken heart but it is more likely that he had not built up the natural immunities from infections, which could be found at the time. I close the gate behind me and walk to the headland that is Sunderland Point.

The cliff is not high, not even twice my height, but it is continually changing. If someone wanted to see evidence of erosion then this is the place to come. It reminds me of the Holderness Coastline, which keeps The North Sea from reaching Hull. Holderness is the fastest eroding coast in Europe, receding at the rate of 1.5 metres each year. Each tide removes a layer of the soft red clay which make up the land here. This is then swept out, making the near sea appear red, the soil is then taken by the tide further south before being deposited to form the Spurn Point, which is a 6km long headland that sweeps out into the River Humber.

Standing in front of the actual Sunderland Point, I look up to see the edge of the field above me. There are some fence posts marking the field's limits and seem to look back forlornly as a condemned man would, as if they are waiting for the next high tide, which could bring an end to their existence. With my back to the cliffs I look out over Hall End Skear, which is an area of shingle that extends directly south from the headland. Today it is mostly covered by the rising tide but also marks the area where the headland used to extend to. Recent erosion has lead to problems for the community, as now strong south-westerly winds can blow up the entrance of the river, the waves can now sweep unopposed along the coastline, in front of the houses. Previously, when the headland extended further, it provided a protective barrier to the prevailing weather. More evidence of its erosion can be found by standing at Crook Farm, on the east bank of the river, from where once the Point blocked the view, but now it is possible to look out and have an interrupted view of the horizon and onto Morecambe Bay. Although there are plans for rock armour to be added here to protect the land, work has yet to commence.

As I turn the corner around the headland the view completely changes. From the open expanse and clear horizon, I now see a more compact and protective view. To the left is the shore line I am walking along, with the village coming into view, while scanning to the right brings the River Lune and its east bank into view. There is a sense of security as I make my way along the foreshore. The surface underfoot is not as easy; larger stones and a series of low wooden stakes, which look like disused fence posts have caught the debris each tide brings in. These are in fact older sea defences and were put in place during the 1960's. The aim was to try and hold the soft ground together. Another strategy can be found not far away at Formby, where each year local residents are asked to bring their old Christmas trees down to help reinforce the sand dunes there. The terrain soon changes as I approach Old Hall. This is a distinctive building; its design seems out of place and its elegant veranda and distinctive roof would seem more suited to the Mediterranean Riviera than the changing coastline of

Lancashire. Its neatly kept gardens provide a stark comparison to the crumbling cliffs I have just left behind. Here are the first signs of real intent in protecting against erosion. Rock armour has been built up providing a wall between the path and shoreline. It seems to provide a hard contrast and slightly out of place, but its presence is essential. Perhaps it being a product of the 20th Century is the unsettling factor. I walk by, balancing on the narrow stone line that marks the boundary between 200 years of life, as would a child not wanting to step on the cracks in the pavement. Behind the house is a small coppice that has been created by the community, planting a variety of trees, which have all grown well, in fact so well that there is now a need to cut some of this new growth back. Also in the area is a small lake, which marks the remnants of lime working. This would have been extracted so it could have been used on local farmland, which shows that the area had been used for agriculture over a long period of time.

In front of the second terrace there is a larger area of grass, neatly kept, still damp in the morning, my footprints leave a trail. My passage is silent. Turning to the right, the tide is still flowing in, a river in reverse. Water does flow up hill! Most of the boats are afloat and they line up with the tidal flow. The foreshore is tidied under the cover of the rising tide. Earlier in the year I had sat outside here, at the Village's annual "pudding festival, where appeared the largest selection of treats one could ever wish for. I left then £3 lighter but a calorific millionaire! I now walk on to where the end of the terrace is marked by the old hotel. From here it's possible to drop down to a track on the stony beach. At high tide this is covered by water and the residents of second terrace must leave their cars in the lane and use the higher path on the sea wall to reach their home. At the other end of the beach the track climbs quickly back up to the first terrace. There is a stone wall here, with a seat in it. Here I sit and watch the tide rise to its final height. On this morning the tide has yet to cover the road and I can look back over to see its course slowly disappearing through the marshes.

A Community

Lynne offers a home made cake to accompany the coffee she has already made me. Sitting in her back garden it is hard to imagine that the sea is only a few metres away. The setting has more of the feel of an English garden that would be found in the Cotswolds. It is July and for once warm and sunny. The tree gives some welcome shade and I feel content to relax while she talks about life at Sunderland Point, or rather "On the Point", as it is described by the locals. It is clear that there is no one that she doesn't know and no one that doesn't know her. It is a small place, with only one way in and out. She is enthusiastic about her life here and sharing it with others. It's therefore no surprise to find her as secretary of the Friends of Sunderland Point Association and really a central figure within the community. Each year she helps organise a series of events that brings the community together, as well as advertising these to a wider audience through the local media. Lynne has lived for over 30 years on the point. She is now a grandmother and her daughter Joanne, lives next door.

I'd arranged to meet Joanne on Sunday after the monthly service in the small chapel, at the top of the lane. However, this is no ordinary service today as the bishop from Lancaster is coming. His first visit and the church is nearly full, something which it seems is not the norm, as I soon find out. Even the vicar starting the service admits to as much. Joanne's daughter, Jenny, gives one the readings and after the service I compliment her confidence in front of so many people; she seems slightly embarrassed. I walk with both her and Lynn back down the lane and we turn right in single file like soldiers, along the sea wall to the second terrace.

Jenny disappears into the kitchen to put the kettle on. The front room is warm, quiet from the outside, only a few yards away the tide is flowing out, the continuation of the cycle it repeats each day. Joanne is sitting on the floor, surrounded by paper. She is a primary school teacher, who is soon to take maternity leave, expecting her third child. Her due date coincides with high spring tides, she nervously discusses this issue and admits she may move over to stay with some friends for a few days, while the tides are so high. Her son George, who is 3 years old, seems oblivious to my presence. more

amused by the family pet dog Holly. Jenny returns with the tea and Joanne looks relieved to find an excuse to put her work down.

Although she was born in Overton, Joanne moved to Sunderland Point when she was 4 years old and spent her childhood growing up here. At that time there were several young families and there were as many as 10 other children to play with. There didn't seem any need to cross over the marshes, there was everything they needed. School was reached by the daily minibus. However, teenage years demanded more excitement, as well as a job at the Globe Inn just over the sea wall in Overton. When the road is covered by a high tide; the locals describe this as "When the Tide is On". However, it is still possible to reach the village by foot. The route leaves from near the Globe and initially is a tarmac road, but once past Trailholme farm, the route becomes a path. This crosses the fields, which after heavy rain become water logged. This is due to the low aspect of the land, which is protected on one side by the sea defences, meaning that any water has no where to drain. Joanne laughs as she recalls many a good pair of shoes or dress that were ruined returning from a night out in Morecambe, when the tide was on and the footpath was the only way home. She met her current husband, Andy, in Morecambe and although she started a degree at Lancaster University her heart "wasn't in it" and by 21 years old, she was living with Andy in the village of Scorton, which is on the other side of the River Lune, south of Lancaster. Later they would move to Overton and start a family, where their daughter, Jenny, was born. However, her heart was still at Sunderland Point and she returned to University, becoming a teacher now working in Morecambe. Andy, her husband, is employed as a weaver and works 12 hour shifts on a cycle of 3 days and 3 days off. This work pattern actually is an advantage, as the tide rarely interferes with his commute. While others will complain of cramped trains, few can use the excuse of missing the tide, as a reason for being late to work.

The conversation soon moves to family. Joanne has two other sisters, one who is also a teacher at the same school and after her mother remarried, she found herself with a number of step brothers and sisters. Christmases can be quite crowded but great fun. She admitted to always wanting to return to the point and was happy when a house became vacant. Although it is rented and is the first to flood if the tide is exceptionally high, it is home. She wanted her family to have the childhood she did. However, household insurance is impossible to obtain. The front door faces the river and the rising sun. By the evening the sun has moved to warm the back garden; sheltered from the wind it becomes a real sun trap. Our conversation moves onto the future, Jenny has joined us and expresses the desire to be like her mother, become a teacher and live at Sunderland Point. There is a glow of admiration and respect for her mother, that's who I want to be when I grow up, you can see it in her face. Although there is a mobile signal, a broadband internet connection has yet to arrive, something that didn't seem to worry her as there seemed plenty to occupy her. Joanne felt that maintenance of the road was essential to supporting the community but that the tide was something everyone could live with. There had been discussions about re-routing the road, so it came in over higher ground from the north. But at what cost? However, this route would mean the road was always above water level and would therefore keep the maintenance down. What perhaps would keep the village viable was not the tide or road, but a thriving community and families who wanted their children to experience the life Joanne had in her youth.

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Joanne is one of many who lived through their formative years on Sunderland Point. However, Laurie arrived at the age of seven with his two younger brothers, from Stroud in Gloucestershire. Now in his last year of secondary school the family is to move to Lancaster for "super fast board band & central heating". However, he looks back at the last eight years with fond memories but more thoughtfully about how this time will have shaped his future. He admits it may not be until later in life that he really appreciates the time he spent here.

Stroud was a small modern house, with friends and a primary school around the corner. Admitting he didn't really want to leave, the family arrived to live in the Old Hall, situated at the end of the Point

overlooking the River Lune and Crook Farm on the opposite bank. Initially some friends lived with the family and he was home schooled before going, like most of Sunderland Point's children, to the primary school in Overton. The journey over the marsh to school has always been one of adventure for children. Very few children elsewhere can use the excuse of an incoming tide, as a reason to be late for school. At times he would cycle but there is also a minibus, but strictly speaking it was not meant for the primary aged children, as their school is less than 3 miles away. However, somehow the family had obtained a pass and this provided an easy ride over the water.

Old Hall was built well before the advent of damp courses. The last two winters had been cold and the heritage of the building had done nothing to keep the occupants warm. Originally built by the ship owners of Lancaster, they would use it to watch their laden boats sail up the Lune, before being unloaded. It is still possible to identify the wooden mooring stakes, just off the shoreline. When you walk up The Lane, look to the right as you pass the chapel. You'll see a normal detached house but, built as what appears as an extension, you'll see a square tower with a pyramid shaped roof. It is slightly higher than the surrounding landscape and was built so the ships could be sighted before they arrived at the mouth of the river. Inside Old Hall you can still identify the dressing room and a hatchway from a smaller space, where powered wigs would have been passed through, to be worn as the height of fashion by the gentlemen of the time.

Laurie moved to Carnforth secondary school; his choice. Not the nearest but it was smaller and also specialised in Science. The journey to school was now more complex. However, once Overton is reached there is a bus that runs up to coast to the school. He did speak fondly of one teacher who would pull his leg, that he'd managed to get in today. As this was his Geography teacher, Laurie is confident this was a reference to the state of the tide and not the distance he had to travel. I'd first met Laurie a few weeks previously at the community's Christmas concert, held each year in the Reading Room. This is no casual gathering. The room is packed, some of the audience has managed to find seats, while late comers have to stand. Cramped together you can not tell who the performers are or where they will come from, until you realise that they are one and the same. As the evening progresses each takes their turn, the quality is outstanding and there is no escape. Since arriving the tide has risen and all of us who have come over the tidal road can not return until after it has fallen again. First one of Laurie's younger brothers performs a series of card tricks and then it is Laurie's turn. He plays the guitar. This is no teenager wanting to be a star but a skilled musician. Back at home, in the kitchen, we talk about how he's learnt and the answer is self taught. Although there is no broadband, he can use the internet with the help of a plug in dongle. This was his link to the outside world. Teenagers have a reputation for being permanently wired to their computers. But I wondered what it was really like to grow up here. Laurie admitted that being away from the peer pressure may have saved him from some of the less desirable aspects of growing up in today's society. With friends on the other side of the marsh, I wondered how they felt about coming over to visit. However, it was their parents who showed reluctance towards the journey, whether it was the salt and mud on the cars or the fear of being cut off, he was uncertain. But the drive to Sunderland Point was one many people were still afraid of.

Earlier in the year Laurie's standing within the community had been raised when he raised over £500 for the Community Association. This was not by some simple act or sale, but by completing a triathlon on a course starting from his home. Accompanied by Peter Gilchrist, they rowed across the Lune, with their bikes on tow in another boat. Then followed a ride to the foot hills of the Forest of Bowland and a climb on foot to its highest point, at Ward's Stone and of course a return trip. While we were talking Laurie's mother returned and she joined the conversation. Clearly proud of what he'd achieved, she shared aspects of his life that sometimes teenagers are too embarrassed to tell of. Head boy at the school and also winner of the Community Award, he alone went a long way to destroy the negative image many have of current teenagers. Clearly very intelligent, Laurie was soon to articulate the issues that faced his generation and how Sunderland Point may be sheltering himself and his brothers from the worst the 21st century could throw at them. He recollected fond memories of his

younger years, wide open spaces, the ease with which he could play and feel safe. The house was clearly important to all the family and the forthcoming move was approaching with mixed feelings. It was clearly a great place to bring up a family and the sense of community was strong. If anything went wrong there was always a helping hand and Laurie's mother recalls an accident with a chainsaw, which showed how welcome this can be. Although the air ambulance had been required twice within the community while they had lived there, it was not needed on this occasion. Even when the car wouldn't start, there seemed an endless list of willing mechanics. However, everyone does know your business and living at the very end of the road, meant each visitor had to pass all the other houses before they arrived at Old Hall. Talking with other members of the community, there is certainly a local network of gossip and misinformation. As one person said, it's better than Coronation Street around here.

Although his contribution to the Community Association fund was really appreciated by others, he down played his efforts. Although he is studying Geography, his understanding of the environmental issues being faced by the village and those who live on the Point, is well beyond this level. Even in the relatively short time the family had lived in Old Hall, he could see how the point was receding back. He was more forthright in his next suggestion and considered that Sunderland Point as a community may be gone in 50 years time. Not through the lack of commitment shown by the residents but by the lack of interest shown by politicians, when London is so far away and was the future of 25 families really of any concern? The family had been flooded once during the last eight years but Laurie argued that with rising sea levels and lack of funding they would only see this occurrence increase in frequency. The continual efforts of nature to change the shape of our coastline can be seen no more clearly than on the previously mentioned Holderness coast, Yorkshire. The Holderness coast, which runs south from Bridlington forms the fastest eroding land mass in Europe. At places such as Hornsea and Witherness, extensive efforts have been made to maintain a coastline through the construction of sea defences that aim to protect homes and businesses. But this in turn can just cause greater erosion at other points further along the coast. Even a map from a few years ago shows a very different coastline and at various points along the coast there are references to villages that have been already lost to this continual erosion. Regular visitors to the area will experience this through a slow retreat at holiday venues, as caravans are moved away from a crumbling cliff line to prevent them being lost to the advancing sea. Nature can be a relentless enemy and water is its greatest weapon.

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Accompanying Laurie at the Christmas concert was Trevor, who is the last of the Point's full time fisherman. His work is in fact a partnership with his wife Margaret and together they still make their living from the sea. Trevor is slightly reserved but his stature provides a quiet presence in the room. Strongly built, his hands soon betray his occupation. In his youth Trevor had performed in a band that played the local pub scene around Morecambe and Margaret had become a fan. We are sitting in the kitchen; beautifully kept, it is traditional in style but its fittings are modern and it is also cosy and warm. Trevor went to primary school in Overton, where he lived and then on to secondary school in Morecambe. He first trained as a slaughter man and worked in the old abattoir near the infirmary in Lancaster. This closed in 1964 and new one built on Wyresdale Road. However, by then he had started fishing from Bazil Point with other local lads from Overton. During the 1970's there were still a number of boats working the River Lune; some would come from Glasson Dock on the opposite bank and of course Sunderland Point as well. There was no real advantage to fishing from Bazil Point, in fact it was worse as it took longer to get home. There had always been boat building along the shores of the Rive Lune. From the mid 1960's this tradition was passed onto Bill Bailiff, who built a range of boats, which went up to twenty feet in length, under the name of Character Boats. I asked when Bailey's closed and stopped building boats. When he died in 1996 came the reply, which conveyed Trevor's dry humour. There are still several of these boats being used on the river and some sent as far afield as Orkney and Ireland's west coast.

In 1981 Trevor and Margaret moved to their existing home, then only a small two up two down cottage. With the drop in demand for meat, he gave up work at the slaughter house to live off the river full time. The house is now considerably different and this is clearly down to Trevor's skill and hard work. However, this date and their arrival is inscribed above the doorway at the rear of the house. His slightly reserved and understated character, belies his talents. Extended and refurbished, it is a very different building now. A number of small out buildings are used for processing their catch. It soon becomes evident that he also built his own boat. Margaret is confident in her speech and I'm under no illusion about the efforts they have made to make the life they now have. In fact, Margaret is the only female holder in the UK of a licence that allows her to catch salmon by netting. Something that has not gone unnoticed by many people and has led to her to being interviewed on several occasions, including appearing on television.

During the 1980's few made a living from fishing along the Lancashire and Cumbria coast and soon Trevor and Margaret became known for their expertise, especially in the field of mussels and cockles. Working between North Wales and Dumfries, it is a way of life and one they shared with others. During this time there were large banks of mussels near Silloth, on the North Cumbria coast and they were central to opening these up. These were sold on to a dealer in Southampton. However, it is hard work and although Margaret and Trevor could gather a tonne each during one low tide, others may not have the determination they show. As well as shellfish they also use fixed nets to catch White Bait and Sprat. The nets are attached to the foreshore so they are covered during the top half of the tide and open up as the tide ebbs out. This action in turn catches the fish as they are carried out to sea. The white bait is sold onto a fish merchant and then onto restaurants and fish mongers. It is packaged and frozen straight after they are caught. The sprats are also frozen but then sold onto the local zoo for their sea life. The law allows them to sell a maximum of 25kg to a member of the public in a single sale. Any larger quantities have to be passed onto the fish merchant. It seemed to be too much like another way of the authorities of taking a cut and putting more bureaucracy in place.

The conversation soon moves onto their life today and how fishing is currently regulated. Clearly the EU and office bound officials fresh from University are not the fisherman's friend. After the 2004 disaster, when 23 Chinese cocker pickers died in Morecambe Bay, DFRA issued a new system for licences. But one of the failings in this system was that it allowed 40 extra licences every year, so by now there are several hundred in existence. During the start of 2012 a new bed was found in the River Ribble, south of the Lune. Fearing a repeat of the events of 2004, the authorities closed the bed and brought in new regulations that stopped anyone arriving to start collecting. However, the real barrier to anyone starting out to fish from a boat now is the actual cost of a licence. These are calculated on a unit basis, from the size and performance of the boat which also has to be inspected to check that it is safe. Plus now Trevor's boat is twenty years old, so his insurance company wants an inspection, all of which costs money. Add to this the rising cost of diesel, no one is going to become rich now. The summer of 2012 provided the worse catch since 1985. The high rain fall and fresh water in the river saw to this. They barely made enough from the caught fish to cover the cost of the licence and diesel. Would they do it all again? The life style is hard but enjoyable. However, they doubt if they could afford to start now. They started when it was affordable and there was a good market for fish. But like Trevor's original career, running a profitable business is in the hands of the local population and their eating habits.

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I was like Alice, stepping through to a wonderland. A high wall with a door separated the real world from the imaginary one, but this was for real. Leaning against the wall were a selection of timber, parts of boats and a general collection of useful "stuff". Collected during a lifetime, it reads as a time-line, layers that can be peeled back, each item with its own story to tell. On the other side of the wall is a delightful garden that has been created over a number of years. This has been the home of Tom Smith for the last 50 years. Although he was born in Overton, and like many Sunderland residents

went to the Primary school there, his life has been shaped by the tides and weather of the River Lune. His younger brother Alan also lives on the Point, as does his nephew, who lives in The Lane that separates the First and Second terraces. His other brother is a shipping agent at Glasson Dock and our conversation starts with Tom explaining about the current shipping that uses the River Lune and dock facility at Glasson. We are sitting in his front room, which overlooks the Lune. There are two large bay windows that give a panoramic view which stretches from Overton and out to the Lune lighthouse. From here it is clear that nothing will pass up the river without Tom knowing about it. In many ways the current tonnage being brought into the dock is as high as ever, but that is mainly due to the increase in size of the boats. Grain and fertilizer are brought in from Rotterdam or the Baltic and at times scrap metal goes out to Spain. The pilots guide the boats from the other side of the Lighthouse up to the dock. A hundred years ago the pilots were also fisherman and the fees would provide a healthy supplement to their income, especially when the fishing was poor. The fee was 2 shillings and 6 pence, which would have been a healthy sum then. It may actually have taken three consecutive tides to get the boats up to Lancaster, as each flood tide would take the boat slightly further up the river. It would then be allowed to dry out as the tide ebbed, before being carried further up stream by the rising flood tide. This method didn't allow much fishing time and during high spring tides there was very little slack water at all. Short winter days and cold weather made fishing definitely a summer activity. Tom fished this way until 1968, using a boat built in Overton before the second world war. He still has two of the original wooden boats from the that era, the last one being completed in 1937. One day he says, I'll get around to restoring them! The uncertainty of income at this time made fishing a fragile way of making a living. This is still the case today, an understanding of which needs to be conveyed with some required convincing to the local tax office.

After primary school he attended what was then, Morecambe Secondary Modern school. This was during the second world war and the area was flooded with evacuees and class sizes of over 40 were not uncommon. He left school and started fishing full time with his father. At this time the boats were still powered by oar and sail. These were launched at the end of the outgoing ebb tide and were carried out to the fishing grounds past Sunderland Point. During the period of slack tide the nets were dropped and as the tide turned the boat was carried back up the river.

We are sharing homemade cakes as we talk and I look out of the window, as I give Tom time to catch up. He has, after all, been doing all the talking and my arrival has disturbed him from working in the garden. As I gaze across the river, I try to imagine the scene 50 years ago. In some ways little may have changed, but perhaps there would have been a few boats preparing to launch, as by now the ebb tide was running fast, assisted by recent rainfall.

Tom feels that it is during the last 10 years, that the real changes have occurred. Not in the design of boats or numbers being launched but in changes in weather and also licence fees. He remembers when the actual Point extended out and actually sloped down to the sea, rather than the eroded sand cliff you see today. Now this has gone and the south-westerly winds often blow a surge wave up the river, which is causing problems for the houses on the front. Tom's father had helped install the wooden stakes that can still be seen, near Old Hall and were meant to help prevent erosion; something feared by the community, even in the 1960's. The dock wall in front of Second Terrace was at one time the height of a grown man, but due to silting, is now no more than 2 feet high. The silting has also contributed to the decline of the mussel banks off the Lune lighthouse. As the rocks are covered by silt, the mussels find it difficult to obtain a firm footing and they rise to the top. This means that after heavy rain and a strong ebb tide, the mussel are swept away. Heysham has now become the main port on the North West coast; even Fleetwood has all but closed. With the increase in size of boats the entrance to Heysham is being continually dredged and many who live on the Point feel this has contributed to the change in not only the River Lune, but also the erosion of the Point and the West shore.

Certainly the fishing industry has changed in recent years. Very heavy rain fall is altering the course of the river and the fish are arriving later in the season. This is being felt across the country. Originally the salmon would arrive in May, but it can now be as late as September before any are seen, which is after the season closes. After the Cod War with Iceland, fishing ports such Fleetwood, started to decline and the growth in salmon farming on the West Coast of Scotland has seen another threat. In the last couple of years the local seal population has added to the fisherman's problems. They are now regularly seen at the mouth of the Lune, like the fishermen waiting for the ebbing tide to bring down the catch. A salmon licence now costs £600 for 3 months during the summer, Tom feels it is lucky if anyone really makes any profit. If the seals and changes in weather patterns don't finish them, then the authorities will! The last part of officialdom that annoys the Tom and much of the community is Natural England. Their idea of allowing nature to take its course, does little to impress those whose homes are under threat from erosion. Rock armour is the communities preferred method of preserving their heritage, but for English Heritage this is unnatural. More office bound academics making decisions about people's lives from the comfort of their armchairs.

As I'm about to leave, Tom stops and shows me a painting hanging on the rear wall in the living room. It shows Sunderland Point viewed from the start of First Terrace and was completed over a hundred years ago. Like a university academic, Tom started to deconstruct the composition. By looking at the way the chimney smoke is blowing he could tell the wind direction, there were boats returning with the incoming tide and in the distance were a number of figures. One, out side a house on second terrace, was a lone figure. This was, he felt, his grandfather. His detailed understanding of the life of those who lived and worked on the point came across in this one short description.

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It's the last house before the Isle of Man and the description Wilton gave me was right. He lives at the last house up The Lane , opposite the chapel. Once you walk past it the path drops down to the West Shore. From here, if you set off in a boat in a westerly direction, the first land you would hit would be that of the Manx. Wilton is recognised as one of the elder statesmen of Sunderland Point. Although he was born in Cumbria in 1918, his life has revolved around Sunderland Point. He met his wife, Christabel who was also born in 1918 and they have lived in their current home since 1983. It is one of the few houses on The Point that you have to walk up to. It is at a height of 31 feet above sea level, probably the highest point on the peninsula. The clarity of his voice and memory come from a man half his age. Much of the information that has enabled me to write this book came from our conversation. He confirmed much of the history I had gleaned from previous conversations with others and added detail and dates with an almost encyclopaedic memory. I wondered if he'd ever thought of entering Master Mind. His brother, Hugh Cunliffe's work "The Story of Sunderland Point", contains a wealth of information about the community and its history.

We sit in the front room, warmed by an open fire. It is bright with windows on all sides, even though it is dull outside. Between the two world wars, Sunderland Point's population was at its lowest, many of the houses were used as holiday lets, with the same families coming each year. Christabel came each summer as a young child, with her family from Blackburn and this is how she met Wilton. In 1922 his father suffered an accident that prevented him from working and as his mother had relations on The Point, this was to become their home. At this time the road was in very poor condition and had yet to be tarmaved. So it was decided that he would be educated in Lancaster, coming home at weekends and for holidays. Apart from walking across the fields, the only other way to reach Overton and onto Lancaster, was to hitch a lift with one of the farmers, who used to charge 6 pence for the ride. Cars had yet to reach the village, horse and trap was the main form of transport. Each summer all the families would come together; there were cricket matches and acres of open space to play. Their childhood summers were always remembered as being long and warm. He recalls a story from the 1920s when he had the opportunity to visit London but didn't really want to leave Sunderland Point because he enjoyed being there so much. He shared with me a couple of photographs of the village

from this era, they were timeless, showing how little had really changed in the last 100 years, they could have almost been taken yesterday.

After leaving school he initially worked for the Post Office, before being called up in 1939. He joined the 59th Signals Division, based in Liverpool and saw active service in North Africa. He had kept in touch with Christabel during the war and although she had moved to Accrington, she had passed her driving test, something unusual for a woman at that time. They married in 1947 and lived in Lancaster, although deep down they always knew they would return to The Point. His mother was one of six girls but Wilton was the only child from between them and later in life, as his aunt's passed away, he became an expert in selling homes and dealing with wills.

It is easy to listen, as he recalls numerous stories about his life and how it has changed. With no travelling shops or post office now he suggests that the community was better served in the 1920's, when many local businesses would make weekly visits to sell their produce. The lack of Broadband and the internet did not seem to concern him. He now makes a weekly drive to the Coop in Heysham, where there is also a doctor and post office. He seems to dismiss any problems with the tide; life can wait. Like many who live here, he seems to be able to compute tide times in his head at a rate that would embarrass the UK Hydrographic Office. Although he admits that; for those who are employed in shift work, it could be a problem. He does recall the time when a pregnant woman was taken by boat to Glasson Dock, as the ambulance could not reach the village because the tide was on. There was also the time when a helicopter had to land outside the reading room to lift off a man who had fallen down a stairwell. Our conversation moves to the future and what may now threaten the community. Although he was uncertain about the future. There had been a couple of scares in the past, when someone sought planning permission for a caravan park, which was fortunately refused. There was also the time when a major oil company arrived and put down a couple of test drillings, but nothing came of either. A different outcome would have certainly changed the community for ever. I suggested that we try to take a photograph outside; it is bitterly cold and the wind blows straight up The Lane. It reminds me just how exposed and vulnerable the community is, not only to the weather but also to decisions others may make for them.

It is now November and although the sky is clear, there is a cold wind blowing. It's been one of the worst summer's on record, some parts of the country were experiencing a months rainfall in a day and the Lancashire was no exception. I am once again standing at the end of Sunderland Point, looking west. The seasons have changed, leaves have left the trees and the sun is lower in the sky.

During the previous week there had been a very high tide, measuring 10 metres in height at Liverpool, anything of this magnitude, when combined with a low pressure system can threaten the village with flooding and further damage to the coastline. Twice a year, around the time of the Spring and Autumn Equinox tidal heights can exceed this magnitude and on these dates the community is particularly venerable. Today the tide height is measured at 9.7 metres and I have timed my walk to arrive at The Point, as the tide reaches its maximum. I had left the car outside the Globe Inn, on the safe side of the sea wall and chose to walk over the fields to the West Shore. It had been heavy going, crossing the water logged ground, I'd hoped that the shoreline would be easier underfoot, but I was to be mistaken. The high tides had combined with recent rainfall to make the coastal path equally heavy going. The marsh areas were still flooded and any solid ground had been turned to a soft depressing mud. The extent of tide could be seen by the line of debris that stretched out in front of me, forming a guide to follow. The wide range of rubbish found is not as shocking as the height it has been deposited, it seems just one rouge wave would have lifted this line up and over into the neighbouring field. I walk past the new sea defences, recently constructed from silt scraped from the road. Once I reach The Point, there is only just enough space to walk on the beach as the waves are almost touching the base of the small cliff that marks the end of the farm land, which is some eight feet in height. There are now fence posts hanging free, held only in place by the out stretched barbed wire, they swing in the wind, like the last of the autumn leaves about to fall. Fresh soil has also been exposed, each of

the recent high tides revealing another layer of history. Each year new stories are laid down, only to be retold to future generations when the action of the weather and tide has decided to become a story teller again. How many more stories are to be told?

Only 20 miles away, in a direct line, but over 45 miles away by road, Blackpool has now a new seafront. Built at a cost of £200 million, it shows what is capable, when the "hold the line" policy of the Government is implemented. While politicians may travel to the Arctic regions to show their concern for the environment. Their gesture is to show they may be considering climate. Perhaps their sincerity would be better served if they visited one of the many threatened communities of the UK coastline. Sunderland is not the only threatened community. A drive along the Yorkshire seaboard and further south to the Holderness coast will give you many more examples of the power of the sea. The force of nature can not be underestimated and water is its greatest weapon. I turn my back to the wind and walk with the River Lune on the right. With the tide now fully in; the river's width is at its maximum, stretching right across to Crook Farm on the opposite Bank. Sunderland Point is continually changing, each day its foreshore is swept clean by one of nature's greatest forces, which also provides a livelihood for some of its inhabitants. On one hand the tide can be the communities best friend but next month it will once again provide its greatest threat.

to be continued

Andy Biggs - Lancashire 2013

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