

The Bings of West Lothian – A ‘Day of Access’ Excursion

Rob Bushby, Friends of the Award



Are ‘The Bings’ the most viewed but least explored natural feature in the country? The shale mounds of West Lothian are both familiar and foreign, a landmark that’s close yet distant.

They squat near the junction of the M8 and M9 motorways, passed by east-west and north-south trains, scattered beyond the end of Edinburgh airport’s runway. Scanned by travellers, commuters and locals from road, rail and air, the rust-red bings are little trod. These 19th century deposits of oil industry detritus are a historic landscape blemish and also a site in recovery. They’re a wound inflicted on the countryside that, in its healing, is creating its own ecology.



This renewal creates natural links with ‘Day of Access’, a concept developed by artist-poet Alec Finlay for people with limited walking. Its aim is *“to have healing experiences of wild land...The interest is in how someone responds to the site, their perceptions and feelings”*. Alec himself is access-limited. He writes and advocates for creative forms of wild nature experiences, using place-awareness and ecopoetic approaches to discover *“what will happen when vulnerable bodies encounter vulnerable landscapes”*.

Collaboration

Since 1998 the charity ‘Friends of the Award’ has supported young people in Edinburgh and the Lothians, irrespective of background or life challenges, to participate in youth awards – primarily the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award but also the Junior Award Scheme for Schools (JASS), John Muir Award and others. These opportunities can build self-esteem, help establish healthy lifestyles, and lead to new skills and qualifications to help future prospects.

A long-term Friends of the Award collaboration with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) offers one-to-one mentoring to vulnerable and marginalised young people who are struggling with mental health issues. Usually, the focus of Day of Access is constrained walking but, for this excursion with colleagues and two young people, the focus is on exploring parallels of place-based and personal recuperation. *“I’m interested in how young participants will respond to this bare landscape of spoil, once defined as derelict and now recognised as ecologically significant”*, says Alec.

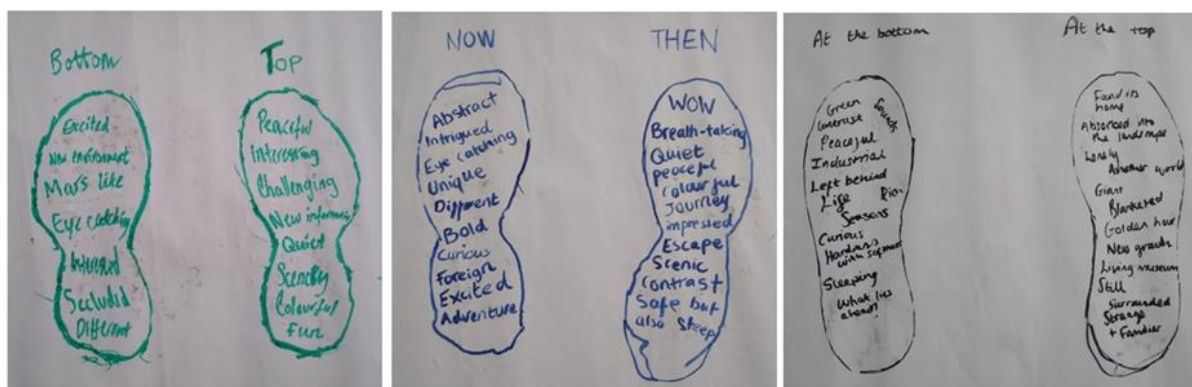
First Impressions

A 'sole map' is a simple tool for capturing thoughts and feelings and comparing perspectives across two dimensions or locations: bottom/top, now/later, here/there.

Writing words into a first footprint prompts an immediate response to the bings. An initial other-worldliness is striking. *"It's like a sci-fi film set, as if we've been dropped on Mars or Ayers Rock"* says E. *"I didn't expect the red-brown colours to be so dramatic. It feels foreign and abstract!"*

We reflect on the contrast between our industrial estate start point and, beyond the moat-like canal boundary, *"a secluded new environment. I didn't think there'd be so much woodland. The harshness gives way to a soft green lushness."*

The change from a central belt hubbub is noticed by A. *"It's so peaceful, weirdly silent, so cool. It has a sense of loneliness and desolation too, of being asleep, at rest. It makes you feel safe being away from the traffic and noise."*



Living Museum

We're immersed in natural and industrial heritage. There's a coot on the canal. The [Birdnerd](#) song app identifies long-tailed tits along wooded flanks. Knowledge about post-flowering, seed-dispersing rosebay willowherb is shared: prevalent on open ground and a coloniser of recently scorched earth it's also known as 'fireweed' and 'London's Ruin' after the Great Fire; its leaves resemble those of the willow species. Tracks indicate the presence of others – fox, perhaps, and motorbike, definitely. Two buzzards keep company with a raven, high-pitched mewling mingling with corvid croak. With mature trees, a water expanse and steep-sided bluffs, it feels like an authentic rather than artificial landscape.

The loose shale ground releases artefacts and remnants of industry, previously absorbed technology that has become naturalised. There's corroded steel cable and rusted dismembered metal – evidence of the infrastructure used to convey waste rock from local mining sites. It's easy to imagine the noisy sweaty effort expended to create the mounds, a living museum. It's a reminder too, that everything – inanimate objects, people - is in a process of transformation. To quote Neil Young, perhaps with generational incongruence, *"Rust never sleeps"*.

Plateau, Panorama, Poetry

A short and punchy uphill push reveals the elevated platform of an expansive plateau. We're on Greendykes bing, the largest of the group, with nearby Niddry, Faucheldean and Albyn bings now in view.



Beyond is an exceptional panorama of central Scotland. We take it in collectively, naming what we see in a 360-degree sweep. There's Bass Rock and North Berwick Law, Edinburgh and Arthur's Seat ("*you can see my house from here – sort of!*"), Hillend and the Pentlands, Jupiter Artland, Ben Ledi, the Ochils, the three Forth bridges, Lomond Hills, East Neuk of Fife and back round to the Forth Estuary islands.



Having encountered several of the ‘[Lost Words](#)’ given recent prominence by Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris – Oak, Bramble, Fox, Raven – we dip into their books of poem-spells for impromptu readings. In a follow-up session participants respond to the landscape using an acrostic format:

<p>Bold to the eye Intriguing from afar Nature fights back Great hues of colour Silence</p>	<p>Bright, bold colours Interesting to learn about a New environment Great views all around – Star Wars vibes</p>
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<p>Bring me a ruler to measure the sky I want to know how far it stretches from Bass Rock to Black Hill Now listen to the sudden quiet as you step into the realm of Giants, sleeping by the road. Blanketed in green, a lush and verdant Mars Swept by time, a living museum. Claiming its space. A lonely island left behind.</p>

‘Here Be Dragons’

Unrolling a decades-old black and white aerial image confirms the evidence of recuperation. The previous barren-ness is in stark contrast to what surrounds us now. Some sightings:

<i>Coot</i>	<i>Wild strawberry</i>	<i>Pied Wagtail</i>	<i>Crow</i>	<i>Buzzard</i>
<i>Raven</i>	<i>Rosebay Willowherb</i>	<i>Long-tailed tit</i>	<i>Hawthorn</i>	<i>Elderberry</i>
<i>Blue tit</i>	<i>Bramble/blackberry</i>	<i>Rosehips</i>	<i>Bike tracks</i>	<i>Fox prints</i>

Medieval mapmakers supposedly inscribed the phrase “*Here Be Dragons*” on maps to indicate unknown regions of the world. As we set out our contemporary OS and Urban Nature maps to orientate ourselves, there’s an equivalence with uncharted territory for young people to navigate.

Contradictions, peer pressure and complex emotions might be seen as common challenges across generations. But the world has changed rapidly in the past two decades. The ever-present nature and scale of issues, stresses and pressures that can cause vulnerability, anxiety, struggle and crisis are without precedent. Whilst the greatest causes of dissatisfaction in adolescence continue to be school, friendships and appearance, ‘the environment’ is the number one concern for four in ten children in 2022 ([The Good Childhood Report 2022](#)). Mental health services are stretched beyond capacity and failing to meet a rising demand for support.



Conversation turns to “a mental health journey”. Individual experience rather than clunky generalisation is important, as is context and shared understanding. What helps progress? “Nature connection and the chance to put something back. Spaces that feel safe, peaceful, away from busy-ness. I want to return here with my family and pick up some of the litter. Why? To help nature’s progress. It helps to know your place...And even if it’s just a tiny gesture in the scheme of things, I’m thinking about the impact I have on the world.”

‘Greening the spoil’

Alec’s concluding [blog](#) questions are a prompt, and perhaps rhetorical.

“How do wounds heal over time. How can we learn from nature’s ability to heal. What has been spoilt and what can still heal?”



What's immediately apparent from the rejuvenation of Greendykes bing is the role of time and natural process. Whilst not wishing to force responses by way of direct metaphor, its ecological reality provides a compelling motif. Ongoing support for CAMHS referrals and young people across Edinburgh and the Lothians embraces principles of pacing, individual need, nature connectedness, focus and networks of support.

A and E have revisited their excursion experience in follow-up discussions – its challenges, as a stimulus for creative reflection – and are planning a return trip. Sharing their words and images might act as a '[proxy walk](#)', and an invitation to others to explore West Lothian's shale bings.

Notes on the West Lothian shale bings

Getting there

[How to get to Broxburn in West Lothian by Bus, Train or Light rail \(moovitapp.com\)](#)

There's an irony to The Bings being tricky to approach on a 'Day of Access' outing. Entry via Greendykes Road and Albyn Industrial Estate is less than welcoming.



Instead, follow Dunnet Way (near Lidl) to Clifton View, where a path leads to a footbridge over the Union Canal to the wooded flanks of the shale mounds.

Background

Read Alec Finlay's [blog](#) about reasons for selecting 'The Bings' as a 'Day of Access' location, and associations with the artist John Latham.

For History & Heritage watch '[What They Don't Say About Scotland's Oil](#)', an informative 15-minute YouTube video by Scottish history tour guide Bruce Fummey.

Day of Access

"A new program of 12 'Day of Access' events is funded by Heritage Lottery Fund and supported by Lapidus Scotland. The concept is to offer creative forms of access to wild nature, using place-awareness and eco-poetic approaches, allied with the practical knowledge of rewilders, foresters and foragers and discover: what will happen when vulnerable bodies encounter vulnerable landscapes".

The first ever Day of Access was held at Meall Tairneachan in 2019.

These are closed events, but their purpose is to encourage people to arrange their own Day of Access, and I will continue to update the blog."

'On Not Walking' [Part I](#), [Part II](#) Alec Finlay essay

"A couple of years ago I came up with a walking for art project: the proxy walk. For this a recipient chooses a place they loved to walk, when they could, and the walker does the walk for them...I've been told of an artist who gifts walks – a woman making them for other women – and of a nurse in a Perthshire care home who does the same for elderly residents. All limits create new possibilities."

The first image is by Hannah Devereux. The others are by Rob Bushby.