
Making sense of transience: an anticipatory history

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Abstract

In climate change discourse the concept of *anticipatory adaptation* has emerged to refer to proactive strategies for preparing communities for future change. This paper makes a proposal for what might be called *anticipatory history*. At designated heritage sites prevailing narratives tend to project long-term conservation indefinitely forward into the future. These narrative formulations fall short when confronted with the impending transformation, or even disappearance, of landscapes and artefacts of cultural heritage – a process that is likely to become increasingly common with the acceleration of environmental change in coastal and other contexts. Might it be possible to experiment with other ways of storying landscape, framing histories around movement rather than stasis, and drawing connections between past dynamism and future process? At the core of this paper is an experimental narration of the history of a Cornish harbour. The narrative presents a reverse chronology of moments gleaned from diverse sources ranging over three centuries, looking to a fractured landscape past to find resources for encountering a future unmaking.

Keywords

coastal change; heritage; historiography; narrative; preservation

Remember that while we are searching for the history of by-gone days the scenes before our eyes vanish and are forgotten. Stereotype then, as it were, the present, and afterwards trace back to the earliest times. (E.G. Harvey)¹

‘At an unpredictable date in the near or distant future’

At Mullion Cove the broad arms of two stone-block harbour walls reach out from between sheer hillsides to enclose a cobbled slipway, a scrap of beach, and moorings for a few boats. The harbour fits into the cove like a puzzle piece, its sturdy walls tightly seamed against cliffs and rocky outcrops, reflecting back their textures and colours – slick blue-green, lichen yellow, grainy grey. A couple of dozen houses and businesses cluster above the harbour and string out up the hill to the village of Mullion proper, the largest settlement on Cornwall’s Lizard Peninsula. The road ends in

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front of the café and the ice-cream shop, but the walker can carry on over the quay that holds the northern edge of the harbour. Above a sluice carrying a diverted stream a metal plaque with black embossed lettering is set into the stone wall:



The tone of the text on the plaque is puzzling, the mention of the repair and maintenance expense off-key and slightly ominous. You notice a Perspex box next to the plaque, and (if a volunteer has been by recently to restock) you pull out a slim brochure: ‘Mullion Cove: a strategy for coping with climate change’.² The brochure tells you that one Lord Robartes built the harbour in the 1890s to shelter the cove’s fleet of pilchard fishing boats. Then it mentions the cost of repairs to the harbour since 1945 (over £1.4 million by 2006) and the coded message on the plaque becomes clear. The harbour is less stable than it appears to be.

The brochure explains that in 2004 the National Trust commissioned a study on the long-term management of the harbour, taking into account the ‘increasing frequency and ferocity of storms’ and the likely effects of rising sea levels. Several options were considered, including the construction of an offshore breakwater, a regime of intensive continued maintenance, and a transition to ‘managed retreat’.³ After two years of study and deliberation, a stakeholder group including representation from the local community recommended a compromise position: the harbour would be repaired and maintained in the immediate future, but it would eventually (depending on ‘when and how the ultimate extreme storm event or series of events occur’⁴) be necessary to cease work on the harbour and initiate decommissioning and deconstruction.⁵ The brochure text ends on a cautiously optimistic note:

Receiving strong support from the community, this plan allows residents and visitors alike to enjoy the harbour for as long as possible, but recognises that, at an unpredictable date in the near or distant future, the cove will once again look like it did in 1890.⁶

And there you are, your solid footing suddenly unsettled, mediated by your awareness of the approach of an ‘unpredictable date in the near or distant future’. The boats tethered in the lee of the breakwater bob in the swell, the sun glints off the handsome harbour, all seems sound enough, for now.

‘For ever, for everyone’

Mullion Harbour represents only a tiny fraction of the National Trust’s coastal landholdings (which run to over 700 miles in England, Wales and Northern Ireland), but the significance of the 2006 Mullion Harbour Study decision reaches far beyond this remote corner of Cornwall.⁷ In the same year that the Mullion decision was finalized, the National Trust released a document to publicize the findings of a coastal risk assessment carried out using 100-year predictions of flood risk, erosion, and sea-level rise. The document, entitled ‘Shifting shores: Living with a changing coastline’, outlined ‘a new approach to planning and managing the future coast’.⁸ No longer would the default position be to ‘hold the line’ against coastal change: ‘Our policy is to take a long-term view, working with natural coastal change wherever possible’, the document explained.⁹ The organization proposed to adapt to impending change by accommodating processes of erosion and accretion at their coastal properties – or, in their words, ‘working with the grain of nature’.¹⁰ The new coastal policy applied to hundreds of miles of undeveloped coastline, as well as concentrations of built cultural heritage – sea walls and settlements, lighthouses and cliff castles, churches and gardens, boathouses and beach huts.

‘For ever, for everyone’, promises the National Trust’s motto. The organization’s commitment to long-term conservation and sustained access for the properties in their care underpins their mission and garners them substantial public support; the new coastal management policy presents some possible challenges in this regard. In the summer of 2008 I interviewed property managers at a handful of the organization’s threatened coastal properties. They all seemed to broadly accept the need to adapt to coastal change – to work ‘with the grain of nature’ – but I could sense that for many of them this approach worked against the grain of their obligation to protect the properties in their care, and they were uncertain about how to explain the shift in management priorities to the people who visited their sites.¹¹ A tension between preservation and process plays out along the coast: some managers find themselves looking to ‘buy time’ and take incremental defensive action which will allow them to defer the decision to let go. Others have adopted creative strategies to raise awareness of coastal processes and future scenarios for change – at Birling Gap artists created visual markers of the past and predicted coastline in flags and stones, and at Dunwich brushwood wave sculptures signalled the anticipated extent of coastal erosion.¹² These projects begin to suggest how it might be possible to frame impending landscape change not as loss or failure, but as something altogether more complex. This paper comes at this situation from an oblique angle to propose other ways of making sense of transience, looking to the role that narrative plays in our apprehension of landscape pasts and futures.¹³

Over the past few decades scholars have become adept at unravelling the way that geographical story-telling shapes perception and patterns relationships to the lived environment.¹⁴ The telling of placed stories relies on the art of narrative – the ordering of events, actions, and elements of experience in a communicative structure. The most perceptive work on narrative and place has focused

not on whether accounts are objectively ‘true’ or historically accurate, but on *why* stories are told in the way that they are (and on whose interests are served by the telling of particular kinds of stories in particular contexts). Research on the uses of narrative at historic sites has considered how the re-inscription and re-invention of place is accomplished through the promotion of selected ‘story-lines’, and the attempted erasure of conflicting memories.¹⁵ At many protected heritage properties a more benign narrative approach prevails, the history of place presented as a linear chronological progression – punctuated with formative events and changes of ownership – which lands us up gently in the present moment of enlightened stewardship.¹⁶ Though perhaps lacking the overt politics of the narrative strategies applied to contested sites, such narratives still have a normative orientation, and work ‘in more-or-less formulaic ways to make certain outcomes more logical and palatable than others’.¹⁷ At places such as those managed by the National Trust, narratives tend to project long-term conservation indefinitely forward – ‘for ever, for everyone’. This narrative formulation falls short when confronted with the impending transformation, or even disappearance, of landscapes and artefacts of cultural heritage.

Might it be possible to experiment with other ways of storying landscape, framing histories around movement rather than stasis, and drawing connections between past dynamism and future process?¹⁸ In climate change discourse the concept of *anticipatory adaptation* has emerged to refer to proactive strategies for preparing communities for future change.¹⁹ This paper makes a proposal for what might be called *anticipatory history*. If it is true that, ‘[w]e tell stories to explore the alternative choices that might lead to feared or hoped-for futures’,²⁰ what might it mean to craft an effective history of an ephemeral place? At the core of this paper is an experimental narration of Mullion Harbour’s history, which I hope will find a life outside this journal article. Patricia Price has recently suggested that cultural geographers should extend their investigations beyond the critical examination of ‘the work that stories do’ to become involved as ‘active participants’ – telling their own stories, and putting them to work in different contexts.²¹ If there is to be such a shift in emphasis from critique to collaboration, it seems that cultural geographers could be well-positioned to craft stories that work to foster a receptivity to and appreciation of the changing face of familiar landscapes.

‘Timeless and precious tranquillity’

Mullion Harbour has entered a curious interval, in which it is at least partly defined by its anticipated absence – although to the casual observer the harbour reveals little to suggest its finite lifespan. Our ‘common-sensing’ of the harbour tells us that it’s a stable feature in a more-or-less durable landscape.²² Mullion lies within the Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – the ‘Lizard-South’ section is described as: ‘A special landscape containing many remnants of the past perceptible in a coherent way to give a feeling of time depth and continuity’.²³ The harbour appears on the cover of several guides to the county, and in hundreds of postcards and reproductions (including a wall mural available for purchase on art.co.uk for £179.99). Promotional material for the hotel perched on the cliff above the cove describes Mullion as the ‘jewel in the crown’ of area fishing harbours, and boasts that it ‘has been preserved by the National Trust, and is today a magical place to visit with its lobster pots, quaint cobbled slipway, and old picturesque net store that provide a timeless and precious tranquillity...’²⁴ During the stakeholder meetings for the harbour study participants frequently mentioned the value of the harbour as a magnet for tourists drawn by a ‘sense of history’ and the apparent survival of traditional maritime livelihoods.²⁵

The paired framing of Mullion as both ‘timeless’ and ‘picturesque’ can work to block reflection on its uncertain future. The labelling of a place as ‘timeless’ foregrounds qualities of continuity and stability, and forecloses speculation about the past by implying that it now appears ‘as it was and ever shall be’ – a synchronic projection of persistence.²⁶ The association with the ‘picturesque’ achieves a similar embalming effect, fixing the landscape as an object for consumption, usually by outsiders.²⁷ This rather static portrayal of the harbour persists despite the National Trust’s attempts to introduce, albeit gently, the possibility of future change. The organization’s 1999 edition of the local coastal guide mentions the threat to the ‘long-term survival’ of the harbour, and suggests that ‘some might argue’ that the cost of repeatedly repairing and strengthening ‘is increasingly difficult to justify’.²⁸

There is an important distinction to make between the narrative of the ‘timeless’ harbor, which is maintained for (and by) visitors, and the more complex perceptions held by the people who know the harbour more intimately, through year-round residence or long acquaintance. Many locals rely on the attraction of the harbour as a ‘stable symbolic focus’ for area tourists.²⁹ Most of these people, however, have witnessed Mullion’s violent winter storms, and are acutely aware of the harbour’s vulnerability and the labour required to maintain it.³⁰ This awareness coexists with their appreciation of the harbour as an anchoring location for individual and collective experience, in the past and in the present. ‘Near continuity is emotionally more important than remote time’, writes Kevin Lynch, referring to the value of landmarks and landscapes from the recent past, and their association with personal and family histories.³¹ Mullion’s warden comments on a kind of ‘generational amnesia’ at work here, in that the perception of what is ‘natural’ or desirable tends to be restricted by the relatively limited range of individual memory: no one alive today remembers Mullion without a harbour.³²

What kind of cultural work might be required to give *time* back to a timeless landscape, and to open up an appreciation of the past not as static and settled, but as open and active? In a 1972 text entitled *What Time is this Place?*, Kevin Lynch mused:

Might it also be possible to use the environment to teach change instead of permanence – how the world constantly shifts in the context of the immediate past; which changes have been valuable, and which not; how change can be externally effected; how change ought to occur in the future? Past flux might be communicated by . . . representing the changing aspect of a single place. The lesson could be disturbing.³³

Lynch proposed approaches to environmental change that call attention to discontinuity as well as continuity, shifting perceptions and evolving uses. He highlighted the possibilities of temporal collage, juxtaposition and conjunction to draw out rhythms of change – gradual and abrupt, cultural and geological – with the aim of achieving a ‘heightened sense of the flow of time’.³⁴ Lynch’s proposals have clear relevance for places like Mullion, and his call for the invention of new representational strategies remains compelling.³⁵

‘We should increase the range of the imagined future, as well as of the imagined past’, wrote Lynch.³⁶ The project of anticipatory history lies here, at the intersection of the imagined future and the imagined past. It attempts to unsettle the narrative foundations that stabilize landscape and block reflection on future change – to activate ‘the open time of *past presents*, to understand that past time was never itself assured’.³⁷ As a theoretical concern it resonates with recent work in geography that departs from an iconographic or representational understanding of landscape, examining instead how landscape emerges through ‘mobile and material practices’ and is

composed of discontinuous and contingent histories.³⁸ John Wylie's work has been key to this shifting perspective – in a recent paper on Mullion's memorial benches (strange synergies at work here) he challenges notions of 'placing and belonging' to call for an attentiveness to 'the constitutive aspects of absence, dislocation and distancing' in the subjective experience of landscape.³⁹ Doreen Massey's critique of grounded, coherent notions of landscape takes geology rather than subjectivity as its medium, exploring how an expanded appreciation of landscape tectonics and deep-time mobility might work to undercut place-based identity politics.⁴⁰ These approaches echo through this experiment, as I look to a fractured landscape past to find the resources for encountering a future unmaking.⁴¹

The attempt to write a history that orients itself through reference to contemporary and future concerns draws on a long tradition of radical historiography. Walter Benjamin offered perhaps the most cogent critique of the historical meta-narrative which proceeds chronologically through a chain of cause-effect reasoning, and so assumes the onward acceleration of progress.⁴² He insisted that history should stop 'telling the sequence of events like beads on a rosary', and operate instead through a 'telescoping of the past through the present'.⁴³ Benjamin described his method as an attempt to 'brush history against the grain'.⁴⁴ His writings inspired Alan Pred to craft a historical method that involved radical experiments with montage and nonlinear narration, seeking to excavate dormant and obscured political energies through the 'assemblage of disjointed (geographical-hi)stories, [the] collection of jagged-edged partial narratives'.⁴⁵ While the narrative I offer for Mullion engages less directly with the political content of the past, it shares with Pred's writing and other experiments with historical form an emphasis on what David Matless has called the 'performativity of history'. By drawing attention to 'the style in which a narrative might be played', and by unsettling a taken-for-granted temporality, I hope to open up a space for reflection on the 'effective' elements of placed history.⁴⁶

The narrative that follows is offered into Mullion's interval of uncertainty. It presents a reverse chronology of (present tense) moments gleaned from diverse sources ranging over three centuries. Narrative excerpts are presented at rough decadal intervals, cut through with contemporary auto-ethnographic anecdotes. After a brief diversion into deep-time, the story picks up in 2006 and scrolls backwards, drawing out 'multiple and varied antecedents, causes, and implications' to deliver us into a possible past (that happens to resemble the plausible future).⁴⁷ Four relatively distinct strands are interwoven in the narrative: (1) material process, following the continual formation and deformation of the harbour's built form through the action of both cultural and geophysical agents; (2) cultural inscription, tracing the description and re-description of the harbour in popular accounts and official documents; (3) contemporary resonance, drawing out the echoes and affinities that bring the past into relation with the present; and, (4) photographic records, paired in an asynchronous visual montage.⁴⁸ The narrative is designed to reveal that the harbour's apparent stability hides a precarious history, and to draw out patterns and themes that are obscured by more conventional tellings – moments when it could have been otherwise.⁴⁹ I've taken a cue from, Henry Alford, Dean of Canterbury, who visited Mullion in 1868 with a companion on a 'sketching expedition', which he wrote up for an essay in the periodical *Good Words*: 'Mullyon Cove is vast in extent and unites itself, in its various parts, almost all the characteristics of Cornish coast scenery. It is rather an assemblage of subjects than a subject in itself'.⁵⁰

Mullion telescoped

About 300 million years ago: In the crust of the Devonian ocean a seam of periodite thrusts through submerged schist formations. Intense heat and pressure causes the metamorphosis of the iron and magnesium-rich periodite into serpentine – a fine-grained, scaly-green stone. Tectonic activity thrusts the layered undersea serpentine and schist formations into position at the nub of a continental landmass. The meeting place of the two kinds of rock is visible on the surface as a fault – a geological discontinuity – at the far edge of what will eventually become Cornwall. Numerous smaller fractures and shears radiate out from the primary fault zone; the sea seeks out these vulnerable seams and begins to work away at the exposed stone. Just off the fractured shore another undersea eruption, an island of pillow lava, settles into position. Millennia pass. The sea rises and falls, and rises again.

2006: ‘Harbour’s fate left to the waves’, reads the headline for the 23 March *West Briton* newspaper article on the outcome of the Mullion Harbour Study. The lead sentence is equally alarmist: ‘A Cornish harbour which attracts thousands of visitors will eventually be left to the mercy of the sea’.⁵¹ The fine print in the 96 page (plus appendices) report details the rationale behind the chosen management option dispassionately:

The purpose of the maintain and repair until failure option is to recognise that the structures are now 115 years old and that whilst the maintenance costs are sustainable in the immediate future a point may be reached when the maintenance costs are not sustainable . . . It is difficult to estimate when substantial damage/collapse of part of the structure would occur and the time scale is largely dependent on when the significant storms occur . . . After [the date of last maintenance] no further maintenance would be carried out except for health and safety reasons . . . After each part of the structure is lost the face would be made safe and when necessary the remaining structure would be removed. The intention would be to maintain some access to the harbour structures for as long as possible.⁵²

1998: A New Year’s storm hits Mullion Harbour; at RNAS Culdrose a few miles away instruments clock wind speeds of 82 knots, a borderline Category 2 hurricane. Waves drive in from the west around the bulk of Mullion Island and hit the head of the western breakwater and the exposed length of the southern breakwater with full force. The corner of the western breakwater collapses, and a 10 metre section of the parapet crumbles. A six metre crack appears in the coping stones on the southern breakwater. Loosened setts and stones are cast 90 metres into the cove. Works carried out to repair the damage and strengthen the aging structure includes rebuilding of the parapet and collapsed stonework, and ‘bagwork, grouting, and pressure pointing’ along the length of the breakwaters. The total bill for harbour repairs in the 1990s comes to £1,000,000.⁵³

We drive across the Lizard under a sky scrubbed clear by an early December storm. After paying our 40p to park in the National Trust lot up the hill we walk down the narrow road toward the cove. When we emerge at the edge of the harbour the wind slaps us back, and I draw my coat around my seven month-old son. A scarf of sea spray rises above the western breakwater with each swell. The stone is slick on the lee side of the wall, the wind scouring out the scooped cove. My husband climbs up to the parapet to take a photograph of the heaving sea, ignoring the sign on the steps warning, ‘CAUTION! Waves sweep over the breakwater in heavy seas. Keep well clear’. We later learn that earlier in 2007 two visitors had been swept off the harbour wall during a March storm. A BBC film crew working on a documentary about climate change attempted to rescue the couple and failed; a rescue helicopter recovered the bodies from the sea.⁵⁴



Mullion Cove, Cornwall. 1950s holiday postcard.



Parapet edge and wave surge at Mullion, December 2007. Photograph by Russell Johnston.

1984: On advice from English Heritage, the Mullion Harbour structures are listed on the statutory record of buildings of ‘special architectural or historic interest’ at Grade II. Planning guidance asserts a ‘presumption in favour of the preservation’ of listed structures:

Once lost, listed buildings cannot be replaced; and they can be robbed of their special interest as surely by unsuitable alteration as by outright demolition. They represent a finite resource and an irreplaceable asset.⁵⁵

The guidance fails to mention the possible role of other-than-human agency in the ‘unsuitable alteration’ or ‘outright demolition’ of a listed structure, or how one might go about asking the sea to apply for Listed Building Consent. The notes in the English Heritage file explain that, ‘Mullion Cove was especially important for pilchard fishing, later superseded in the C19 by crab and lobster fishing. The harbour has remained largely unaltered’.⁵⁶

1978: The National Trust assesses the condition of the southern breakwater and decides that an experimental 1950 reconstruction effort – which replaced the squared-off breakwater end with a sloping face – has failed. They remove the sloping end where it is breaking away from the main body and rebuild according to the original design, though several metres back from the line of original construction.⁵⁷

1966: A high-summer snapshot of Mullion Harbour – greenly glinting sea, scudding clouds, strolling sightseers – appears on the book jacket of the ‘Devon and Cornwall’ Batsford guide. Author Ronald Duncan doesn’t single out Mullion for discussion in his essay, but his generalized lament about the effect of the tourist industry on the Cornish coastline would seem to have some relevance:

I knew it when I was a child before so much of this coast had been turned into a car park. I can remember the fishing villages when the fisherman *were* fisherman. The Council for the Preservation of Rural England and the National Trust are supposed to do something to preserve our inheritance. It is obviously too late to prevent the desecration that has occurred. Clearly unless the whole of the Cornish coast is to be raided by vandals, some new legislation is required.⁵⁸

1953: A northerly gale coincides with spring tides to elevate sea levels along the east coast of England. 32,000 people are evacuated from their homes; when the flood waters recede the government pours funding into ‘hard’ coastal defences and warning systems.⁵⁹ The growing popularity of the seaside holiday swells Mullion’s summer population, with crowds gathering to sun and swim on the sheltered beach during the high season. Children dive off the sloping face of the southern breakwater, the maintenance of which is now overseen from the National Trust’s regional headquarters at the newly acquired Lanhydrock estate, near Bodmin.

1945: The Meyer family, owners of the harbour since their 1928 purchase of the structure from the Landhydrock estate, donates the harbour to the National Trust in October, years of deferred maintenance having taken their toll. That winter a particularly severe storm attacks the already imperilled southern breakwater: a pile of rubble blocks the harbour entrance for months. The Trust launches a campaign to raise funds for the repair, including a BBC broadcast and a grant application to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. A fundraising leaflet pleads: ‘We ask that all who know and love Mullion Cove to give as much as they can afford to this fund, thus assuring that the



Mullion, c. 1955. Copyright the Francis Frith Collection.



Gathering seaweed at Mullion, c. 1875. Copyright the Royal Institution of Cornwall.

fishery at Mullion shall survive, and the unique charm of the Cove be preserved'.⁶⁰ The tone of an internal report on harbour 'reconstruction' is less upbeat:

Although, no doubt, the harbour justified its existence in the days when in-shore fishing was a flourishing industry and small communities were very isolated from another, with the decline of fishing from the small ports and the better shore communications, and the greatly increased cost of maintenance of such structures, its utility has become less and less with the passing years and it is now only a picturesque reminder of a former age.⁶¹

I meet Justin, Mullion's warden, in a Falmouth hardware store in early spring 2009 and he tells me that the winter's unusually deep frosts loosened a section of granite setts from the western breakwater; waves cresting the parapet tossed the stones (each the size of a loaf of bread) into the harbour below. Justin sent a volunteer down with a snorkel to retrieve them, and they were fixed back in place. The next time I visit the harbour I look for the repair, visible only as a slightly fainter section of grouting, barely detectable unless you know what you're looking for. I next speak to Justin in September, during a structural investigation of the southern breakwater. The news is not good. Apparently the concrete 'hearting' in the breakwater is so degraded that the whole structure resembles a wobbly Tunnock's Tea Cake, with holes between the facing stones deep enough to stick an arm in. The contractor hired to do the repointing compares the repair work with putting 'rouge on a corpse'.⁶² Mullion's property manager estimates that the harbour has consumed the equivalent of £1000 a week in maintenance and repairs since the conclusion of the harbour study in 2006.⁶³

1935: A Red Guide to Falmouth and South Cornwall encourages the visitor to follow the road down 'beside the combe' from the village to visit Mullion Cove:

This is a delightful spot at whatever state of tide it is visited, though it should be seen at least twice – at low tide, for the sake of the marvellous colouring of rocks, sand and sea and at high tide in a south-westerly wind, when the waves hurl themselves against the harbour wall and throw up immense clouds of spray. On a fine day the view seawards, with Mullion Island across the blue water, is one of imposing grandeur, yet clothed in a soft beauty that fires the imagination of the poet and inspires the artist . . . There are two caves, which can be explored at low water; by far the finer is that from which the Island is not visible, but dead low water is necessary for a visit.⁶⁴

Access to the caves lies through a rough passageway, where the sea has worn a tunnel along a secondary fault-line at the southwest corner of the cove. In the summer of 1937 one visitor snaps a picture of the entrance to the tunnel – and then a companion emerging from the far end.⁶⁵

1924: Two of Mullion's remaining fisherman men pose for a travelling photographer from Frith and Co., their eagerness to get back to work exposed in the blur of the net they hold. Three small children sit more patiently on a heap of nets and rope, one clutching an open book. In the same year fisherman at St. Ives shoot their last seine, and down the coast at St. Agnes the harbour wall – first built in 1632 – is finally abandoned. At Mullion a few families continue to set pots for crab and lobster, though it has become increasingly common for fisherman to take outside work to make ends meet. The harbour gradually slips into disrepair. When the Meyer family acquires the structure in 1928 they are informed that they have no legal obligation to maintain the harbour; they apply cement from 'time to time', but the structure gradually deteriorates. Mr Meyer later makes a statement to the effect that,



Damage to Mullion's southern breakwater, 1946. Copyright The National Trust.



Mullion, c. 1924. Copyright the Francis Frith Collection.

'During his ownership of the harbour one or two visitors have suggested that the place should be cleaned up or repaired, but as the structure was valueless and Mr Meyer thought that the condition was not objectionable in appearance he has done nothing in the matter'.⁶⁶

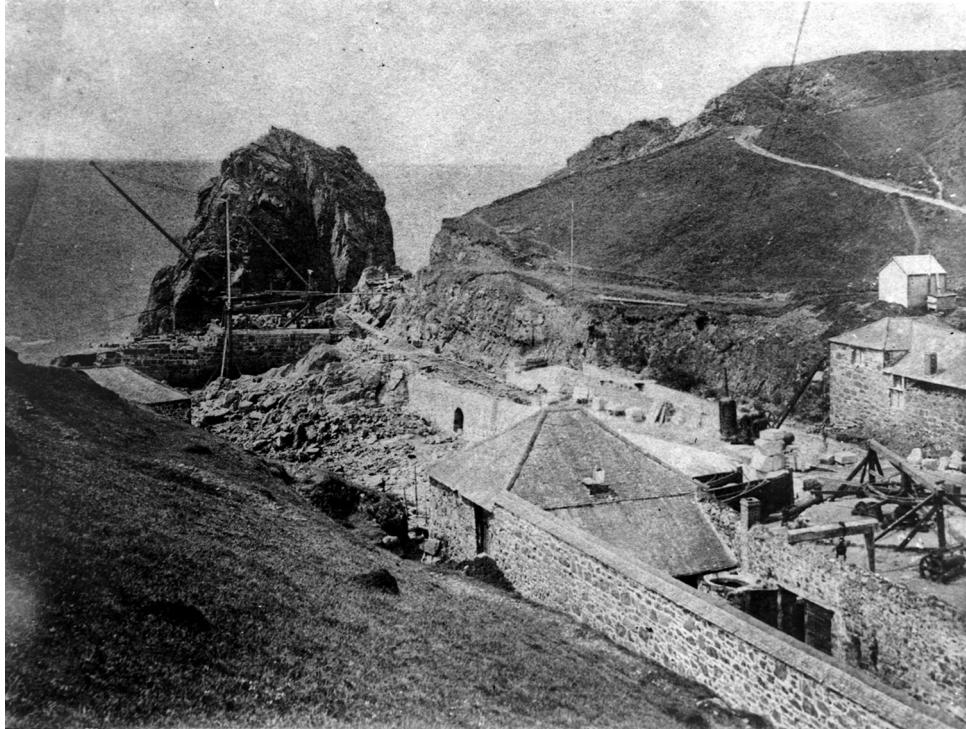
1915: Across Mount's Bay the Ordnance Survey establishes the Newlyn Tidal Observatory; operators of the tidal gauge take water level measurements every 15 minutes for six years. The resulting data is used to calculate a mean sea level, which becomes the 'UK Fundamental Benchmark'. Newlyn's brass bolt – Ordnance Datum Newlyn – acts as the reference point for manually 'levelling' the whole of the United Kingdom. All spot heights and contour lines on Ordnance Survey maps are linked back to the Newlyn benchmark.

1899: The Great Western Railway, anticipating the extension of their rail line to Helford, builds a hotel on the cliff above Mullion Cove (sister hotels soon follow at nearby Poldhu and Polurrian). Travellers book their holidays on the Cornish Riviera: 'Mullion Cove is considered by many to be the most beautiful spot along the Cornish Riviera. It certainly has many attractions for the artist, and its caves and crags have been photographed, sketched, and painted *ad nauseum*'.⁶⁷ The year after the hotel opens for business Guglielmo Marconi scouts out a location for a wireless transmission station a mile north along the coast at Poldhu; he determines that the five year-old Mullion harbour will serve as an adequate port for shipping in coal for his operation.

1891: Harbour construction begins. The faulted history of the cove is reflected in the material used to build the structures. Workers use rudimentary mechanical diggers and cranes to excavate rock from the surrounding cliffs and outcrops and reassemble it in the form of the breakwaters and extended quay. Green schist cobbles lie adjacent to red-streaked serpentine boulders in the exposed walls, replicating the harbour's geology in miniature – the granite blocks sourced from local quarries represent an alien intrusion. One man, observing the construction of the harbour wall, notes that the workers have to build a masonry bridge in the middle of the western breakwater where there is no solid rock to anchor the structure to. He later tells this to his grandson, who locates the spot at the foot of the steps on the inner side of the pier. The grandson relays the story to geologists who come to Mullion to make a survey in 2004, and they note the coincidence between this spot and one of the cove's conjectural secondary fault lines.⁶⁸ In 1895 the works at Mullion Harbour are completed at a cost of £9300. Lord Robartes instates an annual regime of harbour repair and re-pointing, overseen by a local committee. Miss Octavia Hill, Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley found the National Trust to preserve 'places of historic interest or natural beauty' for the public good.⁶⁹

The parapet on the northern harbour rises high on its seaward side, forming a long sheltered granite bench that faces in towards the harbour and back up the valley. When the weather is fine people sit on the rough stone alone or in groups – reading their guidebooks, eating ice cream, watching the water and the boats and the other people walking past. The design of the harbour encourages casual contact between strangers. Small children navigate their way along the bench behind the backs of the sitters; boats come and go at the base of the wide steps as people look on; fishermen cast off the exposed end of the breakwater by the old lamp house and discuss their catch with the curious. The harbour holds a shifting scene.

1890: On 19 August Mr Matthews, a civil engineer, visits Mullion Cove to meet with Lord Robartes, the owner of the property. They discuss the construction of a protective harbour at the



Mullion Harbour construction, c. 1892. Copyright the Royal Institution of Cornwall.



Mullion, c. 1937, 'the other end of the tunnel' pencilled on reverse. Copyright the Royal Institution of Cornwall.

site, in the hopes that such a development will improve the fortunes of the struggling pilchard fleet. The next day Mr Matthews sends his report to the Lord in residence at his Lanhydrock estate.

I propose to construct a west pier of 180 feet in length, extending from the north west horn of the Cove, and a south pier 130 feet in length starting from the first point of rock on the southern margin of the Cove . . . Both arms would be of solid construction, the outer faces consisting entirely stone, and the hearting of cement concrete with large rubble incorporated therein . . . The west pier should be taken in hand in the first instance to be followed by the quay wall and the south pier. The rocks in the harbour would be removed as required for rubble stone for the works leaving the bed alongside the quay uniform for the berthing of craft inside.⁷⁰

1881: Dinah Craik makes a self-described ‘unsentimental journey’ through Cornwall. She braves the ‘steep and not too savoury’ descent past the Mullion fish cellars to explore the sea-caves under the direction of a local guide. A ‘benevolent lady’ stops to give her a helping hand into the tunnel:

. . . a long dark passage, with light at either end. My girls had already safely threaded it and come triumphantly out on the other side. But what with the darkness and the uncertain footing over what felt like beds of damp seaweed, with occasional stones, through which one had to grope every inch of one’s way, my heart rather misgave me. . .⁷¹

1875: E.G. Harvey, the vicar at Mullion Church, expresses his scorn for the practice of ‘doing the Lizard’, which usually involves a host of ‘Tourists’ driving the 12 miles from Helston and back again, sometimes with a detour to Kynance Cove, the better-known sister cove to Mullion.⁷² He extols Mullion’s particular charms: ‘Do you know Italy? Have you seen the slopes of Vesuvius? Does this black brown mass of serpentinic formation at all remind you of a layer of lava? A Cornishman would say it was not unlike “slag” from the smelting house cooled down, and cracked in all directions by the cooling’.⁷³ Elsewhere in his 1875 text (full title: *Mullyon: Its History, Scenery and Antiquities; Narratives of Shipwrecks on Its Coast; Its Agriculture, Fisheries and Mining; Tales of the Days of Wrecking and Smuggling; Longevity of Its Inhabitants; Names of Places, Their True Cornish Renderings and Significations, &c., &c., &c.*) Harvey discusses the decline of the fishing industry. The pilchards seem to have deserted the waters off south Cornwall. Some blame ‘drifters’ from the southern and eastern coasts of England for dispersing the stocks before they reach Cornish waters.⁷⁴ In 1875 there are still eight seine boats working out of Mullion; they ship their dwindling catches mostly to markets in Catholic Europe.⁷⁵ It is possible that sea temperature fluctuations are causing the declining pilchard stocks, with the fish seeking warmer waters as the sea cools and the marine ecology alters.⁷⁶ Some men turn to crabbing for extra income; others find work tending and harvesting crops of wheat, barley, oats, turnips, and mangolds, returning to the harbour occasionally to gather seaweed for spreading on the nutrient-poor serpentine soils.

On an overcast August morning in 2009 a friend and I (two toddlers in tow) meet a local fisherman and occasional tour guide at the steps off the end of the western breakwater for a boat trip. We start off along the coast, where he nudges the boat expertly into sea caves to look for seals, and tells us about the smugglers who used the caves (or ‘ogos’) to hide contraband from the officials. Our



RNLI Barbie, August 2008. Photograph by author.



Mullion, c. 1890. Copyright the Francis Frith Collection.

guide is the fifth generation in his family to fish out of Mullion, in a lineage that reaches back before the construction of the harbour, when seine boats were hauled above the tide line with a capstan. He traps crabs (brown, spider, velvet) and lobsters to sell on through Hayle, with most ending up in markets in northern Spain. I ask about the history of fishing in the cove and he recalls his great uncle telling him that the last good pilchard season was in 1899. As we round the bulk of Mullion Island and the harbour becomes visible (the paler granite of the recent repairs on its exposed flank standing out against the older stonework) he refers to the harbour as a 'white elephant' that never paid for itself.⁷⁷

1859: The Royal Albert Bridge over the Tamar River carries its first rail passengers from Devon to Cornwall on the second of May. A few months later John Murray publishes his *Handbook for Devon and Cornwall*. Route 19 ('Plymouth to Penzance') makes a diversion off the railway line to take in the Lizard Peninsula, noting the serpentine deposits as one of the area's primary attractions: 'a rare and beautiful rock of an eruptive character, which has derived its name from the supposed resemblance of its streaks and colours to those of a serpent's skin'.⁷⁸ At Mullion Cove, Murray encourages the traveller to take in the 'picturesque rocks' and to pass through a chink in the cliff to access 'one of the finest serpentine caverns in the district'.⁷⁹

1857: On 13 April The *West Briton* publishes a letter from the Reverend Harvey:

SIR,—It seems to be a question how many lives must be lost, and what number of vessels wrecked, before any steps are taken to provide a place of safety. It is a very melancholy sight to witness so many human bodies cast on our shore, a prey to the birds and fishes, without an effort being made to prevent such occurrences. Possibly about £20,000 would be all that is required to fill the gap between Mullyon Island and the shore, and extend an arm to the west of the island, which, I venture to say, would be of more use in saving life and property, than the same amount expended anywhere in England for such a purpose.⁸⁰

In September a crowd of 10,000 gathers on the Western Esplanade in Penzance to witness the launch of the new Mullion lifeboat (named the 'Daniel J. Draper', after a Methodist vicar lost in a wreck in the Bay of Biscay).⁸¹ Reverend Harvey describes the vessel as 'a noble boat . . . and the largest on our Cornish coast'.⁸² In order to create launching and landing access for the new boat large areas of rock are blasted clear in Mullion Cove, and a stream diverted into an artificial channel. The celebratory launch at Penzance concludes with a 'lifeboat regatta'.

At the annual Mullion regatta in August 2008 I buy a Barbie in a hand-knit Royal National Lifeboat Institution outfit (orange life vest with RNLI lettering, blue roll neck fisherman's jumper, orange leggings) for 25p from a small boy with a stall set up on the northern quay. A large crowd has gathered for the event, and the harbour walls are crowded with bodies – watching other boys in the slippery pole competition, trying their luck at 'whack the rat' and the coin maze. As a finale to the day the RNLI helicopter rescue team expertly winches a couple of volunteers from the waters of the cove. The guidebook for sale in the tea shop contains a brief history of Mullion's lifeboat, and the disclosure that, 'Despite frequent wrecks, the lifeboats only put to sea in earnest three times. The many entries in the logbook which read only 'crew mustered' in response to a distress signal give a hint as to why: it was simply impossible to launch the boat in severe weather'.⁸³ The lifeboat house is a residence now; a marble panel with a commemorative inscription to Reverend Draper salvaged from the original structure during the renovation of the building leans against a wall next to the winch house, at the back of the harbour.

1847: The Rev. C.A. Johns approaches Mullion over the cliffs from the west, and comes on a narrow valley occupied by a mill, some fish cellars, and ‘a few humble cottages’.⁸⁴ As he nears the water and makes his way past the beached seine-boats the view opens out:

[W]e find ourselves in one of the most romantic coves on the coast. Mullion Cove should be visited about mid-day on the second or third day after new or full moon the tide is then low, and several interesting spots may be inspected which at other times are inaccessible.⁸⁵

Johns directs the visitor to enter a ‘natural archway many yards long’ on the south side of the cove. On passing through to open shore, he continues, ‘No time should be lost in traversing this and rounding a projecting mass of serpentine, for on the other side of it lies the entrance to by far the most imposing of those caves on the coast which are accessible by land’.⁸⁶ The cave reveals a ‘splendour scarcely to be endured’ – and a tantalizing glimpse of St. Michael’s Mount from inside the cavern. On Johns’s second visit to Mullion in November the floor of the cave and its pools of still water are strewn with apples washed up from a ship wrecked off Land’s End.⁸⁷

I catch the 9:47 low tide on 18 September 2009, determined to find Johns’s cave. I pick my way through the tunnel from the harbour – groping my way semi-blind to the beach-bright sunlight at the far end – and head to the other side of the little cove. Even at the tide’s lowest ebb the sea laps around the projecting headland, and I wade through ankle-deep water, wondering if I’ve gone too far. Only as I’m writing this do I realise that low tide is substantially higher than it was in 1847 – at Newlyn sea level has risen 15cm since measurement began in 1915. Since 1847 the rise has been closer to 25cm, mostly due to the seesaw effect of post-glacial rebound in northern Britain causing subsidence at the tail end of the island.⁸⁸ If current projections of accelerated sea level rise are accurate, by the 200th anniversary of Johns’s walk the sea at Mullion may have risen another 25cm.⁸⁹ Storm swells and waves driven against the harbour will be significantly more powerful, and the cave may only be accessible by boat. I found the cave – its entrance hidden by a slab of upright serpentine, and inside a narrow vaulted space of slick stone and still pools.

‘The range of the imagined future’

The story returns to the rough passage through the rock, the gap that draws travellers to the far side. The passage may be, to return to Lynch, a ‘crevice through which one can venture back or forward’ in time – the portal that allows us to see where the harbour’s fault-lines lie, and how they might be navigated into an uncertain future.⁹⁰ The narrative rewinds the history of the cove to deliver us into the period before the harbour existed, where we were once and will be again – a rough loop in time. The use of reverse chronology allows us to imagine the history of this place an assemblage of ‘past presents’ which remain open to addition and subtraction, the process of making sense and assembling story exposed.⁹¹ This ‘telescoping of the past through the present’ also gives Benjamin’s ‘Angel of History’ a literalist twist: ‘His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet’.⁹²

The alternative narrative structure used in this account draws out certain themes and patterns. We become aware of the labour and investment required to keep the harbour intact through cycles of formation and deformation, distortion and substitution. The narrative pulls out detail buried in reports and surveys to expose the harbour’s physical vulnerability, and the attempts to stabilize the structure through ‘naming’ as a conservation object – in 1945, in 1984.⁹³ We also glimpse some of

the ways that people have encountered this place, and enticed others to follow them. The evolving traveller's narrative is characterized by a curious recursive quality – the continual summons of the 'picturesque' begs the question as to whether the harbour's eventual ruins will be so described. The contemporary echoes offer another folding of time and place, a response to E.G. Harvey's guiding historiographic principle: 'Remember that while we are searching for the history of by-gone days the scenes before our eyes vanish and are forgotten. Stereotype then, as it were, the present, and afterwards trace back to the earliest times'.⁹⁴ The photos provide their own visual commentary, a juxtaposed temporality that offers a glimpse of the future through the lens of the past.

The narrative that I present here is self-consciously crafted to do a particular kind of 'work', and this is perhaps one of its weaknesses as well as one of its potential strengths. The narrative sets out to disclose that the harbour is not so stable after all, its history one of oscillation between utility and redundancy, investment and abandonment. It has been preserved only with great effort, and now the self-evidently durable structure is crumbling from the inside out. The risk is that this narrative will come across as a form of apologia to provide validation for the National Trust's decision to (eventually) let 'natural processes' reclaim Mullion's harbour – complicit in a framing of the situation that downplays the organization's economic and pragmatic reasons for scaling back harbour maintenance.

What I hope emerges from this telling is an awareness of the inevitable entanglement of 'cultural' and 'natural' (and, indeed, 'economic') imperatives in the history of the harbour, as in the history of any material artefact.⁹⁵ The invocation of natural process to support a policy of non-intervention at Mullion cannot be separated from the justification that led to the construction of the harbour in the first place, when the same set of 'natural processes' were cast as violent and threatening. The harbour is a temporary arrangement of matter, made durable by a 20th century heritage discourse that granted it a symbolic cultural value. The decision to allow the harbour to deteriorate reveals, as Gavin Lucas has pointed out, that 'entropy is a social as well as a natural phenomenon'.⁹⁶ The eventual deconstruction of the harbour will be as technical as it is natural, and 'working with the grain of nature' will entail a managed ruination, a collaboration between sea swell and heavy machinery.⁹⁷ As the National Trust struggles to hold together an artefact as old as it is, other inscriptions of place are waiting to resurface. When the harbour's temporary arrangement of materialized culture gives way to a new (old) ordering it will be necessary to recuperate dormant relations to place, or invent new ones.

In the meantime, as we wait for the 'unpredictable date in the near or distant future' to arrive, there could be an opportunity at Mullion to expose how – as Graham and Thrift have proposed – 'architectures are morphogenetic figures forged in time, tacking against a general entropic tendency'.⁹⁸ This could mean 'surfacing invisible work' by, for example, using coloured pointing in stone-work maintenance, or providing signage to indicate the chronology of major repairs to the structure.⁹⁹ This kind of interpretive intervention could work to give *time* back to this landscape, in line with Lynch's suggestion:

We need not be so concerned about perfect conformity to past form but ought rather to seek to use remains to enhance the complexity and significance of the present scene . . . The aesthetic aim is to heighten contrast and complexity, to make visible the process of change. The achievement of the aim requires creative and skilful demolition, just as much as skilful new design. We look for a setting that, rather than simply being a facsimile of the past, seems to open outward in time.¹⁰⁰

When the moment of retreat arrives, Mullion could become a model for imaginative decommissioning. Managed ruination could mark each stage of the demolition process – with stone salvaged

and recycled into new forms, the past made visible with fragments of the harbour retained as elements of a reimagined landscape.

I offer this speculative narrative as an invitation to further experimentation – in line with Barbara Bender's 'plea for more open-ended theorizing that questions disciplinary boundaries and recognizes the untidiness and contradictoriness of human encounters with time and landscape'.¹⁰¹ This experiment presents only one of many possible ways of writing an anticipatory history, working 'with the grain' of material process while brushing 'against the grain' of linear chronology.¹⁰² I have drawn mostly on published and archival sources, and have given relatively little space to contemporary voices, other than my own. Other anticipatory historians might choose to layer oral histories, or work with a more diverse collection of visual material, or extend the exploration of textual collage and montage. Ultimately, the adoption of anticipatory narrative approaches at other sites might help overcome the cognitive trap in which 'the apparent stability of the current state of the world is deceiving our senses' and blocking our ability to respond creatively to change.¹⁰³

More prosaically (and more practically), I hope that a version of this story will find its way to the Perspex box on the quay, a working narrative for a soon to be re-worked place. It could be used by property managers as a device to remind people of the harbour's finite lifespan in the indeterminate interval before its destruction, and it might help those who encounter Mullion understand the harbour-less state of the future cove as part of a broader story, in which the geology of the cove itself is set within a recognizably cultural history. The narrative could also become a resource for other interpretative interventions, raw material for performances and artistic engagements that propose other ways of making sense of Mullion's transience.

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- 96 G. Lucas, ‘Time and the Archaeological Archive’, *Rethinking History*, 14, 2010, pp. 343–59. See also C. DeSilvey, ‘Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Mutable Things’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 11, 2006, pp. 318–38.
- 97 During a discussion of a draft of this paper at a gathering of ‘Anticipatory histories of landscape and environment’ network in September 2010 one participant suggested that, if the 19th century was about heritage ‘preservation’, and the 20th about ‘conservation’, perhaps the emerging paradigm for the 21st century is one of heritage ‘adaptation’.
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- 99 Graham and Thrift, ‘Out of Order’, p. 17.
- 100 Lynch, *What Time?*, p. 57.
- 101 B. Bender, ‘Time and Landscape’, *Current Anthropology*, 43, 2002, p. 106.
- 102 A sustained engagement with the theoretical content of this project might lead to a more ambitious proposal for ‘futurist’ historiography, drawing on the Futurist’s reading of ‘universal dynamism’ in Bergson’s theory of time. See B. Petrie, ‘Boccioni and Bergson’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 116, 1974, pp. 140–7.
- 103 I. Hanski, ‘The World that became Ruined’, *EMBO Reports*, 9, 2008, p. S34.

Biographical note

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