

### Suffolk. My place – Esther Freud

On a silvery blue February day, earlier this year, we push our bikes out on to the street that runs past our cottage and down through the village of Walberswick to the sea. We are heading for the beach to help form a human SOS sign which will then be photographed from the belly of a helicopter, and help focus attention on a devastating new decision by the Government agency DEFRA to allow the sea to wash away the beach and the surrounding areas of this stretch of Suffolk coast.

We speed along the street of houses, past the garage and the pub, around the corner of the Green and down the rutted path that bumps over the crabbing bridge and into a field car park. The field is low lying, puddled with water from the last high tide, where ever since the breaches of the November storms, water has come pouring in.

We prop our bikes against the wooden huts that border the plank bridge, and join the stream of people hurrying up the dunes towards the beach. Signatures are being collected here - seventeen hundred so far - and now we can see them, our fellow protestors, packed into their roped in shapes. We join the tail of the last S, waving to friends and relatives, locals and visitors, stalwarts of village events, the summer fete, the Easter egg hunt, all hoping something will be done to protect this place we love so much.

For three months last winter the footpath between Walberswick and Southwold was closed. There is a road, of course, but the pleasure of driving the tarmac detour is nothing compared to the journey by foot or bike or ferry. The bright blue river below you, the gold gorse at your side. You can stop off to admire the boats moored up, to buy fresh fish, egg on toast, or a cup of tea, at one of the wooden shacks that line the harbour. "It's not that we're asking for more Government money," someone says, "we want them to spend it more wisely. Maintain the shingle ridge, repair the breaches, or in a few years time it will cost 20 or 30 times that to raise the A12 when the road gets washed away at Blythburgh."

An elderly couple beside me have travelled here from Scotland. "We wouldn't want anything to happen to this place. It's where we spent our honeymoon." I think about my grandparents and how they arrived here in the '30's not long after fleeing Germany. It reminded them of the Baltic island of Hiddensee, with

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its sand beaches and wide open skies. They bought a house here and called it Hidden House, and for the first time since arriving, they felt at home. More and more people trundle up the beach. A thick border has formed around the three human letters of the SOS, and then our voices are drowned out by the whirr of propellers. "Wave!" someone shouts and the helicopter roars in above us, circling, as we wave our arms frantically and squint into the sun.

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