

Books

Looking for New England

The New English Landscape
by Ken Worpole and Jason Orton
Field Station, 88pp, £15

A record of the industrial edgelands of Essex calls for a site-specific sensitivity in our treatment of modern nature, finds Hana Loftus.

The usual response to outing oneself as an Essex dweller in polite company is an awkward smile masking visions of TOWIE and grey suburbia, while a minority will namedrop the A13, Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* or Mersea oysters. Ken Worpole's bond to Essex predates the interest of Macfarlane and other recent ambassadors for the Essex edgelands, and his most recent

book (the latest of his collaborations with photographer Jason Orton) has the air of a patriarch rallying those who champion this terrain into a common cause.

The *New English Landscape* is a quiet manifesto on 'place': the East Anglian – and specifically Essex – landscape as the new English paradigm, replacing the Cotswolds and South Downs in the nation's heart. But while its early paragraphs argue that the 'zeitgeist now [favours] a lonelier, bleaker, more rebarbative sense of place', Worpole knows that the love he has for these landscapes is far from a mainstream taste.

Worpole's connection to the eastern fringes is personal and spiritual, one in which the landscape bears physical testament to the ongoing cycle from creation to ruin to resurrection. He travels with a mind full of histories, literature and art to layer onto what he sees, and his writing is at its best when meandering into tangential

lines of inquiry and quietly revealing this extraordinary knowledge (the book is worth buying for the bibliography alone). From the possibility that Shakespeare might have been exiled to Mersea to chronicles of the 1953 floods, the reader starts to see the landscape through Worpole's eyes, though s/he might wish that some of the images he describes so eloquently –



Saxton's 1576 map of Essex, or Kenneth Rowntree's painting of the Livermore Tombs – were reproduced alongside Orton's photographs. The latter are almost luminous, despite the brooding skies, and make sacred spaces out of bulldozers slowly creating land out of the sea at London Gateway port, or an overgrown, deserted greenhouse.

Rather than a coronation anthem for a new landscape king, *The New English Landscape's* final chapter starts with a clarion call: 'It is vital that the unassimilated landscapes described in this essay are documented and valued if they are not to be levelled or 'improved' in the name of some larger political programme... the challenge for artists and others is how to represent it. The challenge for politicians, planners and developers is how to respect it'. While it is a plea for a value shift in relation to landscape, this excellent book is least convincing

when suggesting how to formalise this into a design credo. Worpole's suggestion that 'landscape design needs to articulate site-specific, historical references' can too easily get translated into banal memorialisation rather than the poetics of, for instance, Latz & Partners' work at the Duisburg steelworks.

Landscapes are always resistant to the formulas of policy applied indiscriminately, and perhaps Worpole's greatest contribution is to remind us of this resistance, rather than attempting to replace one orthodoxy with another. He and Orton represent their 'modern nature' with great eloquence and clarity; one hopes that planners and politicians are listening.

Hana Loftus is a partner at Colchester-based HAT Projects, whose work includes High House artists' studios in Parfett, Essex.

Left Photographs by Jason Orton of Horsey Island and Maylandsea.
Right Canvey Wick, Essex, photographed by Jason Orton.

