

Peel Park and Meadows Wild Walk Transcript

Music

Wherever you are in Peel Park, walk towards the statue of Joseph Brotherton – it's right in the middle of the park, between the river and the university, between the formal planting area and the end of the park that borders the David Lewis playing fields.

Once you reach the statue, face the river and take the right hand path that leads towards the playground and formal planting areas. Walk along this path to the first bench on the left hand side of the path. Pause the recording until you reach the bench and start it again when you are sat on that bench.

Music refrains here

Before we start this walk, it is worth saying that it isn't very informative. It's not the kind of walk where I point out unusual species or uncover hidden histories or otherwise inform you of things you might not already know about the space we are in. Rather, this is a walk that is interested primarily in your feeling response to the spaces you walk through and a sense of wildness that might exist in these managed environments. Where nature escapes our grasp a little, but also where wildness sits outside of nature – in the city and in us.

Gavin Van Horn (2017) states that the word wild indicates autonomy and agency, a will to be, a unique expression of life' (2). It can mean 'that which is forbidden, dangerous, or out of control' (3). However, it can also, as Robert Macfarlane points out, be seen as 'an energy both exemplary and exquisite' (2007, 31); a 'quality of aliveness to which Chinese *shan-shui* artists gave the name *zi-ran*, which might be translated as 'self-ablazeness', 'self-thusness' or 'wildness" (p.31)

It exists in the world around us, external to us, but also within us.

Jack Turner (2013) says 'There are ten times as many bacteria in and on us – our teeth, the residual web between our toes, our gut, our eyelids, everywhere – than there are human cells in our body, and they are wildly autonomous, active ecosystems nested and integrated within the larger ecosystem we designate as *me*' (p.46)

Close your eyes and think about all those wild and autonomous entities that comprise your physical self. What about wild thoughts and imaginings? Those thoughts that escape your control and run wild beyond the limits of what is possible, or real, or imaginable. I think there is some room for wild imaginings just now, as perhaps we will see as we walk together.

Music

You can open your eyes again now

Perhaps you also feel, as I do, a wildness present in the otherwise managed urban spaces – the force and thrust of development, the need for endless growth, the physical changes to the lived environment, the intolerance of stasis.

Some of these ideas of the wild will drift back into view through the course of the walk. As we walk, do watch your step and be careful of any rough terrain. There are no roads to cross, but you might encounter the odd speedy cyclist, so keep watch for them. The way is mostly flat and easy, but there are a couple of moments where the way is less accessible – I will point these out and you can always choose not to complete that section if you wish. At various points, you will be asked to pause the audio to walk on or complete activities. Musical bridges will also help us from one section of the walk to another.

So...let's make a start.

Here we are in Peel Park – the new Heritage Lottery funded rejuvenated Peel Park, that reinstates its Victorian grandeur in the sweep and form of the formal planting and the clear spaces for human enjoyment.

On sunny days, the park overflows, as do its bins. People sometimes bring their own barbecues, which they probably shouldn't, but there was no byelaw against it that could be enforced, the ranger told me, as he described clearing up after the 2018 hot summer crowds, where bins had overflowed with our joyful relaxing – it was a little wild in that Un-Britishly hot weather.

Before it was revamped though, it is fair to say though that this place was a little wilder – the trees were more densely planted, there was less open, managed space – it was less appealing for us, but perhaps more appealing for the park's natural inhabitants, who occupied the trees, both alive and dead, and revelled in their

own environment – a feral place, which had gone wild, discovering its self-will through the neglect of humans, the lack of attention.

There is also a link between densely wooded areas and wildness

As Robert Macfarlane (2007) says, 'The wood and the wild are connected...because as the forest has declined, so too has the world's wildness. Eight thousand years ago, early in the Holocene, Britain was a dominion of trees' (p.92)

Imagine that.

No longer is it the case here. This, I suppose, is managed wildness and there is an appeal in a controlled, defined, tidy environment, though there is also the equal and opposite pull of the unmanageable and out of control – the pioneer plants that bravely establish themselves in the most hostile of environments, that push themselves through cracks in the pavement to meet the sun.

Do you pull those weeds out of the ground, or do you leave them to do what they want?

Back here in Peel Park, though things are a little more cultured and controlled now, there is still plenty of wildness at the edges of things in human and non-human acts, so let's go find some.

Stand up, turn right and walk past the statue to the flood marker obelisk beyond. Pause the recording and start it again when you arrive there.

Music

On the ground here below the obelisk, you can see a representation of the River Irwell. Trace it with your foot from where we are here in Peel Park up to Castle Irwell Wetlands and Kersal Dale, through to Bury and Ramsbottom and Rawtenstall and Bacup to the source of the river Irwell.

Look at the obelisk and the mark above our head where the river reached its highest point in 1866 – 8 feet and 6 inches. Peel Park is a flood plain – it is designed to flood when the river gets too high, but as you can see from the park superintendent's reflections recorded here below, it interfered with the cultivation of the area – not that the river cares for our human organisation of nature.

The Irwell is wild when it flows fast – it is a rapid response river that rushes up and recedes just as quickly. That great flood of 1866 happened when factories and houses stood along the banks here – all those colours and chemicals from the dye works, all that human waste and tree trunks and rocks – all carried along by the wild river, bursting over its banks to fill the engine rooms and the riverside slums of the workers. According to a rather florid report in Free-Lance magazine ‘The damage done to the pretty borders in Peel Park was tremendous. A lovely promenade has been covered with mud; defunct dogs and departed cats are to be found where erst the Dahlia and the aster reflected the rays of Phoebus’. It flooded again in the 1870s and in 1946 and then again most recently in 2015 on Boxing Day ([water sounds](#)). It is hard to imagine now those waters surging over the banks and covering the wildflowers, paths, grass and trees.

With the obelisk at your back and the river in front, take the path ahead which curves to the left and then over to the right. As you approach the river, you will reach a crossroad with wildflowers growing on either side. Rather than continuing on to the river, take the path to the right where the wildflowers are and sit on the bench in front of them, next to the sign about Sport and Fitness. Pause the recording and start it again when you are sat on this bench.

Music

These wildflowers erupted in May – they have died down now a little since then and then renewed in July – but in May they were riotous, breathtaking in their proud, tall, fizzing palette of colour.

What makes a wildflower wild? It seems that these are flowers that originally grew in the wild and were not intentionally seeded, but here they have been and all over the country, people are re-seeding and re-wilding spaces with these species - motorway verges, the edges of fields too. Perhaps all flowers have a wildness to them, but there is a renewed interest now in what it means to grow wild and to re-wild. I wonder why that is. George Monbiot (2014) says re-wilding is about ‘resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to find its own way’ in order to produce ‘self-willed ecosystems governed by their own processes and not by human management’ (p.9-11). To me it seems like letting go, releasing our grasp of things and perhaps not insisting that we can and do know best.

Later, we will look at more cultivated spaces – those where the work and craft of a human is more present, more clearly seen – but for now, let's remember that meadows aren't just about flowers. They are also teeming with other life:

When he lies down in a meadow, Robert Macfarlane (2007) remarks:

'I could hear the ongoing business of the meadow – the shifting of grass stalks, the shy movements of animals and insects – and again I felt a sense of wildness as process, something continually at work in the world, something tumultuous, green, joyous' (p.234-5)

Lie or sit down behind this bench and near to this meadow-like environment. Pause the recording, take out the headphones, close your eyes and listen out for all the tiny actions and activities happening in this space, within the layers of life here. Once you're done, start the recording again and we'll head somewhere else.

Move now from this space to one of the benches on the river – turn right, back along this path and then right again at the crossroads to the river path, between the two beds of wildflowers. Another sharp right by the litter bin and you should be walking along this path with the river on your left and the park on your right. Sit down at one of the three benches here that face the river, so the wild flower meadow is behind you and the river in front. Pause the recording and start it again when you arrive.

Music

On the far bank of the river, giant hogweed grows jubilantly. Can you see its large umbrellas of white flowers above bright green jagged leaves growing from thick, spiny stems? – this voracious plant *Heracleum Mentegazzianum*, is from Southern Russia and Georgia. It can grow up to 3 metres in height, dwarfing humans, and in the summer proliferates all along the river. These plants were brought here in the 19th century from the Caucasus and were cultivated, but they escaped from gardens, as many plants did and started to grow wild, thriving in the warmer lower climes of the UK. It is an invasive species like Japanese knotweed and causes severe burns if you touch it – burns which are activated in sunlight. Sometimes they try to spray it with chemicals, but it always comes back – it is voracious, dangerous and wild.

Over the line of the river rise the new developments of houses on the bankside and beyond you can see the structures and cranes of Adelphi Wharf, which we will visit soon. Lots of capital is invested in its structures – money to be made. A productive space for some.

In what ways are wild natural places productive? Perhaps they are not in a conventional sense. The forest that once covered this island had to be managed, cut back and controlled to make way for the more productive farmlands, where we could grow and pasture and farm.

Back to Macfarlane, who says: 'On the one hand, wildness has been perceived as a dangerous force that confounds the order-bringing pursuits of human culture and agriculture. Wildness, according to this story, is cognate with wastefulness. Wild places resist conversion to human use, and they must therefore be destroyed or overcome' (2007, p.30).

Stand up now and head further along the river path to the bridge. We're not going to cross over just yet though. Instead we are going to turn right and take the steps down back into the park, past the roses and lavender on either side. Once you reach the gravel path, you should see, to the left of a litter bin, a grassy path through the wildflowers. Take that path and follow it until you see another route on the right, which leads to a large tree. Pause the recording and start it again when you reach the tree.

Music

If you feel able and want to, I invite you to climb into the tree, using the chopped off low branches as a foothold. There is a sturdy, low area between the large branches where you can sit. If not, you can always lean against the tree for a little while. If you're going to climb, pause the recording, make sure all wires are put away and start the audio again when you're up.

Music

When I was here last, someone had lit a barbecue here – they had flattened the long grass, laid down the foil, disposable barbecue and burned the ground a little - there was some rubbish left there and the barbecue too. Evidence of human will being imposed on this place. There is wilfulness too in the graffiti-ed names and initials carved into the tree. Why do we have to leave our mark everywhere? It would be nice to pass by a little more lightly.

In Richard Powers' *The Overstory* two activists climb a huge redwood tree to stop it from being felled by loggers. They exist high up there in the canopy for days in a different world and describe it: 'They look

together: high wire surveyors of a newfound land. The view cracks open his chest. Cloud, mountain, world tree and mist – all the tangled, rich stability of creation that gave rise to words to begin with – leave him stupid and speechless' (p.

We are not so high as them, but we can find some solitude here under and within the branches. Take off these headphones for a little while and listen to the sounds around you. Watch the wind ruffle the wildflowers below. Think about the growth happening all around and within you. Pause the recording and come back to it when you're done

Music

Are you still in the tree? Perhaps you might want to stay a little longer.

In writing the text for this walk, I have thought a lot about the rash of nature writing we have in the world just now and where this comes from – it seems to be something to do with what we think we might have lost, something to do with most of us living in cities now, something to do with the climate emergency and perhaps also, just a little bit of pastoral nostalgia, for a time that most of us never knew.

This seems to be crystallised in Ali Smith's book, *Winter* in which one of the main characters Art has a nature blog called 'Art in Nature', in which he writes a set of contrived and constructed posts about things like snow, hedgerows and puddles, using those elements of nature as what he calls 'a good general sort of invented shareable memory for the people who'll read the blog' - a kind of pastoral confection for city dwellers nostalgic for a lost or non-existent rural childhood.

Speaking of which, here we are up (or next to a tree) - time to move on. Climb down if you are up in the tree itself and walk forwards back to the grassy path, heading right through the wildflowers and out towards the metal sculpture. Pass the sculpture on the right-hand side, following the line of wildflowers on your left. Enter the grassy area, where the wildflowers break and you'll see two trees, quite close to each other, slightly to the left. Pause the recording and start it again when you are standing between those trees.

Music

Are you there now? Under the conjoined canopies of the trees? If you are, take the headphones off and slowly turn, looking upwards into the patterns the light from the sky makes through the leaves. Pause the recording and start it again when you're finished.

Wildness is everywhere – it's not distant from us or apart from us, but around and within. Back to Jack Turner (2013), who says, 'we are embedded in it, permeated by it, saturated with it, constructed by it, and maintained by it; we owe our existence to it. The idea that we have to go to Yellowstone to find or experience the wild is absurd. We simply must learn to switch scales with ease, moving deftly from the vastly big to the infinitesimally small, integrated hierarchies' (p.49). What a lovely thought.

Time to move on from the trees now – let's head down towards those lovely formal planting beds. As you leave the trees, turn left and up the slope a little, passing the bank of wildflowers on your right, with the river on your left. As you pass by, you will rejoin the path, which you will see curving down to the right towards the flower beds. The wildflowers and play area are on your right as you walk down the path. This tarmacked path then meets a gravel path which surround the flowerbeds. Turn left onto that gravel path and walk around the first bed and then a right turn by the 'Meet the Gardeners' sign, keeping to your left and taking a seat at the first bench on your left with the taller flowers behind you and the round, formal bed of flowers in front. Pause the recording now and play it again when you are in position. Use the map to help you if you need it.

Music

These beds are beautiful – there is such art, as Art might say, in the how the blocks of colour, textures, shapes and heights of the plants are combined. They form a suitable companion piece to the meadow-wild sections of the park, the formal cut grass areas and pathways throughout. Cultivation can often be about division, I think – boundaries and clear lines between things. There is a cascade of colour here, but it is formalised, controlled and bent to the will of the gardener. As one without the skills to make such a design work, this fills me with admiration and joy.

Take a moment to sit behind the bench, on the grass and on a level with the flowers for a little while. Watch the bees buzzing, the process and business and work happening. Pay attention to the arrangement and the planting, what's happening within these sets of flowers.

Pause the recording while you do this and start it again when you're done

Time to move out of the formal park now and head over to a wilder space – the meadow. You can stop the walk here if you like, if you want to stay in the park. If not, let's see what this different space feels like.

Head back along the gravel paths and then up the tarmacked path to meet the river. Turn left and head towards the bridge. Cross over the bridge, following the sign to the meadow. Take a closer look at the hogweed as you go past – not too close though... Pause the recording until you reach the other side

Music

On the other side of the bridge, take an immediate right turn and follow the path, with the river on your right and the new houses on your left towards the meadow. Along this path, you can see how big that hogweed grows on your right. As you come towards the end of the path, you can see the meadow folding out in front of you and you can see Adelphi Wharf – the new development in front of you and to the left on the other side of the loop of the river. Turn right at the sign which says welcome to the meadow onto the gravelly path that skirts the edge of the meadow. Pass the first bench that you see and as the path curves round, you will see another carved bench in front of you. Pause the recording until you get there, then sit down, with the river and the undergrowth behind you and the sweep of the meadow and thickets of trees in front.

Music

You will hear more birdsong here, but the meadow currently exists as a something of a hybrid space – it is wilder than Peel Park, don't you think, and full of relatively untrammelled natural growth, looped by the river corridor. It is also more infringed and overhung by new developments – the skeletons and more fully formed shapes of Adelphi Wharf lowering across the river, the thrum of Chapel Street above. On three sides we are surrounded by the city's crankings and workings and cries and howls, but here the birds sing wildly too, enjoying this space of growth, the places to nest and feed and hide

There are thickets of trees in front of you on the other side of the path. In a moment, stop the recording, take off your headphones and head through the long grass into one of these thickets for a little while – you won't shut out the rest of the sounds, but there is something enclosed and protecting about the mix and tangle of branches around. Pause the recording now and start it again when you're done

Music

Come out of the thicket, remove anything that has attached itself to you (or leave it there as a badge of wild honour!)

Carry on along the gravel path, with the river and undergrowth on the right and the meadow on the left. As you walk along you will see the large developments being built across the river on Chapel Street looming over this space. A smaller grassy path off to the left will lead you to a pond, beyond an arrangement of tree stumps. It looks dead – quiet and still, but there is lots of activity within. Walk towards it and watch the surface of the water for a little while - see what you can see in its apparently sullen and murky depths.

Return to the grassy path, which loops around the pond and follow it into the heart of the meadow, with the spire of St Philips in front, the Chapel Street developments to the right and you are now heading to the other side of the river loop and Adelphi Wharf, the four huge new buildings being built on the banks of the river. As you walk, you will see a bench to the right, carved with flowers and a bee carved into it. Pause the recording and start it again when you are sat on the bench.

Music

Look over towards the university to the left. The trees there are huge and old. They mask the Maxwell Building and there is little sense of the river that loops around us. Watch the rippling of the wind on the long grass for a little while, then hunch down to look a little closer at this process – get a grass-eye view of the meadow.

Music

Stand up and follow the path right towards the river, crossing the first gravel path that intersects with this one and then turning left onto the gravel riverside path, with the new developments and the river to your right. Just beyond the gated area around the weir, here is a desire path to the right, which has been trodden by others and leads down to the weir and the water's edge. This path is a little more steep, less accessible and, as we've already seen, giant hogweed grows down here, next to the river, so please be careful and don't head down here unless you are happy to do so – you can always miss this part of the walk out and stay on the gravel path.

Farley and Symmons Roberts say of desire paths that they 'are lines of footfall worn into the ground, tracks of use. They are frowned upon in our national parkland, where they are seen as scars and deviations. PLEASE KEEP TO THE FOOTPATH. You often see desire paths in public gardens and greened city spaces, taking paved paths 'off road' into new trajectories along roadsides and riverbanks' (2012, p.23)

Stand and look at the weir here. It's fierce, isn't it? This is one of the many ways in which we try to manage the flow of the river, but here it seems to accentuate its power – look at the lonely skeletons of the unfinished buildings and the force of the water together. The grinding of the teetering concrete columns into the riverside.

Head back the way you came, re-tread the desire path and join the gravel riverside path again, turning right towards the exit of the meadow. Walk along the river and you will see a grassy opening and two carved wooden benches here on the right that offer a more lofty view of those developments and the work that is happening here.

Take a final seat now and look over to the developments and buildings you can see in front of you and beyond. It all looks a little alien now, don't you think?

This city (and the other one) - they are wild with urban developments. Those wild processes that ferociously destroy and re-shape the lived environment. The vertiginous lift towers, looming moodily into the sky to indicate another space of development. The cranes and cranes and cranes, loping above us. The churning lorries and HGVs carving up the streets. Of course, these are human processes, made up by us, dreamed and designed by us and built by us, but somehow, it all feels a little beyond what we have control of ...and sometimes, I feel like I can already imagine these new, new places abandoned, taken over by nature and inhabited by vines and ivy and knotweed.

Music

This is where our wild walk ends. Carry on along the path to the Welcome sign, where we entered the meadow. Take a final look back at the swathes of long grasses, think of the river looping around us, and the developments that surround it. Once you're back at the sign, turn right onto the gravel path that will lead us back to the bridge. Cross over, down the steps on the other side and straight ahead back to Joseph Brotherton.

Before you leave, do take the time to offer some feedback on the experience – I'd love to know your thoughts. On 12th July from 11-3pm, I'll be standing in the park. Any other day, who knows, but you can always go to my website and leave a message for me there - it's www.joanneemmascott.com

Thanks for coming on the walk with me and see you soon.

References

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