

## Hunstanton

The Wash is the estuary between the north most peak of East Anglia and the east coast of England. On a map it is the square-shaped indentation of the coastline, as though the North Sea had torn out a large chunk of Britain. On the edge of this sits Hunstanton which, despite facing Northwards, is famous for being the only east coast town where the sun can be seen to set over the sea. From Boston Square you can often see across the water to 'The Boston Stump', otherwise known as St Botolph's Church in Boston, Lincolnshire. A small grey tower, it is just visible on the horizon. Occasionally, you can also see beyond to Skegness Pier, although this is rare and most likely only on clear summer days. From 1882, the Skegness Steamboat Company began to run paddle steamers, which took visitors into and across the Wash, the 3/- trip to Hunstanton being the most popular. This day trip continued until 1910, when the development of the Hunstanton sandbanks and the falling interest in steamboats brought the business to an end. Now Hunstanton is like various seaside towns across the country. On hot summer days it is overrun with ice-cream eating, sunbathing tourists, who retreat out of the heat to spend their tuppences in the arcades or ride the small fairground. You cannot walk across the green for hot red bodies, cannot drive through the small town as a constant stream of people cross the road that divides the beach from the centre.

However, in the winter Hunstanton takes on a completely different identity, with the ghost-town atmosphere of an abandoned theme park, the grey melancholy of empty beaches with the arcade signs flashing through the fog. It is this Hunstanton that I want to visit, static and seemingly unchanging, the pound shops and Woolworths determinedly opening despite the tourists decreasing to no more than an occasional trickle. I walk along the promenade, following the path of the concrete sea wall from the old lighthouse to the empty funfair. At low tide dog-walkers and couples navigate the Groyne that divide the beach at regular intervals. The beach is still, flat and continues on into the distance, until your eyes catch the bubbling cusp of the waves hitting the shore.

At high tide in the darkness the town changes its identity once again. A heavy atmosphere develops and evaporates with the clouds and the tide. The sea pours in until it is only feet away from the top of the wall, on rough nights waves crash against it creating sheets of water that throw themselves over the top. Lit by a trail of wrought-iron lanterns this creates a strange juxtaposition between the tame, controlled town built to appreciate the seaside, and the reality of the violence of the sea. The town sits defiantly on the hill staring into the face of channel. Looking into this it sometimes feels as though you are on the edge of the world, especially on foggy days when the horizon becomes a gradient of greyish blue, the sea and the sky bleeding into each other and becoming one hazy void, the only relief offered by the faint glow of pier lights on the horizon. In August 2007 a fire on Skegness pier destroyed bars, stalls and an amusement arcade, gutting a section of the seafront. The smoke from the fire could be seen from Hunstanton, almost as though a message of smoke signals was being passed across the wash. The towns echo each other over the body of water, in a fluctuating dialogue communicated through the language of visibility.