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## Dungeness Headland, Kent

*At nature's mercy*

**T**HE MOST UNFORGETTABLE locations in Britain are, to me, the most unforgettable in the whole world. No doubt many feel the same about the places they know as home. Archaeologists can tell, from enamel ground out of a skeleton's teeth, where its owner had his childhood and so it is true to say the land where we were young becomes part of us. Some of it, then, is a physical thing. Our hides are tanned by the sunshine, our hair bleached a paler shade. Other places soak into the soul later on until we are changed again.

Dungeness, a windblown, storm-washed headland of pale shingle thrust out like a nose into the sea off Kent, has left some permanent marks on me. It is not mine, has never been my home. But when I think of it and close my eyes, I see it clearly, an endless horizon squeezed flat beneath all the weight of the biggest, bluest sky. I can hear it too, the crunching of the pebbles slipping and sliding beneath my feet while the sea rolls.

Those who know it best – better than me – call it the Ness. It is one of the largest expanses of shingle in the whole of Europe and designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest on account of both its geomorphology and its varied plant and animal life. More than 600 plant species grow there, a third of those found anywhere in the whole of Britain. Those on the lookout for bees, beetles, moths, spiders and such may spot a few that can be seen nowhere else.

Two roads take you there – one along the coast from New Romney

and the other from Lydd. The Ness is also famously served by the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch 15-inch-gauge light railway via the station at Hythe.

It is altogether another world, and people do come. Artists, photographers, dog-walkers, pop stars seeking backdrops for their publicity shots, birdwatchers, fishermen in search of peace and quiet as well as prey. There are permanent residents too, in little cottages and shacks, many made from abandoned railway carriages and with boats parked outside instead of cars. Filmmaker Derek Jarman made a home there from 1986 until his early death, at Prospect Cottage, a shiplap building painted black with buttercup-yellow window frames. On to one wall he put lines from ‘The Sun Rising’ by John Donne:

*Busy old fool, unruly Sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us . . .  
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be  
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.  
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.*

More famous than his cottage is the garden Jarman created to surround it, flowers planted among the shingle, sculptures made of driftwood and scrap metal. It has become a tourist attraction in its own right. All across the Ness are more hints and splashes of colour – dock flowers, sea peas, purple sea kale and yellow horned poppies.

Dungeness is famous too, or infamous, for the brace of nuclear power stations at its end. The first, the oldest, has been decommissioned, but Dungeness B is still thrumming merrily away. It ought to be utterly incongruous, but the Ness accommodates it with good grace.

It is, as well, a fragile-feeling place. Telegraph poles and pylons pierce its edges like skelfs beneath the skin. The shingle is fought over moment by moment and from all about by the waves of the English Channel. In summer it is parched by enervating sun – so much so that some folk will tell

you it is a desert (though the Met Office says not) – and in winter it becomes a playground for wild storms and biting, knife-edged winds.

At Dungeness you see how fragile Britain is. Famed for defiance and for standing up to all invaders, it is at nature's mercy most of all. We must look after her. She will be gone sooner or later, and I would rather it were later.

*Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime  
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.*