

The Severn Bore

I had done my Bore homework (checking the timetables, watching YouTube videos, even logging in to Bore surfers' forums to get the latest gossip of where to watch and surf the river wave). But, by the time the crest of water surged into view from our riverbank viewing point at Arlingham, all prior knowledge fell away during what was a much more exhilarating, raw and absorbing experience than I had prepared for. A moving wall of water, surging against the downstream flow of the river at a conjuncture of time and tide, channeled by the land either side until, with nowhere to go, the energy behind the surge forms into a wave? This truly was a natural spectacle.



Carpark preparations at Arlingham. Photo: Marianna Dudley

This was the second Team Power and Water trip to watch the bore, and my first. Over the next two years I am investigating our seemingly insatiable and imaginative need to turn to water for recreation, and the hardy river surfers of the Severn are a group that I want to connect with, talk to, and understand in a historical context. I grew up in Cornwall and have surfed for years; I know the unique rewards of climbing into wetsuits and braving cold seas through winter. But, stood, shivering, on the riverbank watching men dressed head-to-toe in



Getting down the riverbank is tricky. Photo: Marianna Dudley

rubber sliding, inelegantly but necessarily, on their bottoms down the muddy bank and entering the brown river water, I admit that I wondered why they did it. (Note: I counted forty surfers in the water at Arlingham. Some drifted over from the village of Newnham on the opposite bank; but all those who left from Arlingham were men. There was a level of ‘blokey’ camaraderie, and plenty of back-slapping and greeting of (old?) friends. I’ll be looking into the dynamics of the river surfers’ relationships with each other as well as the water; the ‘who’, as well as the ‘why’ and ‘where’.)



Surfers make their way out to the water. Photo: Marianna Dudley

The men sat on their longboards in waist-deep water, and we spectators chatted amongst ourselves. I'd estimate that there were at least as many of us watching as there were in the water. Over the river at Newnham, there was a visibly larger crowd. Cameras and phones were poised to capture the last 5* Bore of the year (there is in fact another one in September, but it happens at night). It was 08.19 in the morning, and we'd brought packed breakfasts and flasks of tea. Some people had binoculars, and someone else was filming with a camera set on a tripod (the latter was positively identified, eventually, by Alexander – though we didn't want to interrupt him – as Antony Lyons, an environmental artist who is currently a Leverhulme Trust artist in residence at the University of Gloucestershire's Countryside and Community Research Institute, where he's working on a project entitled 'Sabrina Dreaming (Severn Estuary Tidelands)'). There was a sense of occasion befitting a sporting event. Then someone remarked 'There it is!', and all focus turned to the water.



The Bore begins to pick up the waiting surfers. Photo: Marianna Dudley

It moved *fast*. It picked up the surfers and propelled them upriver at a speed that almost shocked me. It was *noisy*, a wall of sound as well as water. It churned and changed form, the wave forming clean faces in some sections where it passed over sandbanks, crumbling at other places into a broiling brown-white mess of water. The surfers were carried by this liquid energy, arms waving as they tried to keep their balance.



The surfers line up as they pass Newnham church. Photo: Marianna Dudley

At one point, they lined up beautifully just as they passed us, gliding in harmony. Shortly after, most of them were off their boards and beginning the most difficult stage of their journey: that from river to shore, paddling against the surge rather than riding with it. One man we chatted to said that his personal record was surfing a 3-mile stretch. The pitfall of success when surfing the Severn Bore is that the farther you surf, the further you have to trudge back to your car in a cold and clammy wetsuit.

After the wave itself passed, the spectacle wasn't over. Water rushed across the riverbed and filled it. It was also a very high tide; the riverbank couldn't contain the water, and it eked over to fill the grassland before coming to a stop at a man-made embankment (there to protect the farmland and houses behind). Eyes tuned to watch the water now picked out floating logs, debris and seabirds moving, for a change, upriver.



Aftermath: the river floods the embankment. Note the submerged bench in the middle ground. Photo:
Marianna Dudley

The experience of the Severn Bore was a sensory display of the power of water, and of the human determination to harness some of that energy for pure joy. It occupies a place in the local calendar (timetables are published yearly), but the regularity of its occurrence hasn't diminished the excitement of experiencing it. People travel to see (and surf it), and those who don't are still able to view it. This year, a Sky News helicopter filmed aerial footage of the bore – by 4pm two days after the event, it had received 374,829 views on YouTube. I enjoyed the commentator's observation that it was a bit like the Grand National, cheering on the surfers and willing them not to fall. This bore is a phenomenon in many ways, nature being just one.



The surfers return to their cars, and waiting friends and families. Photo: Marianna Dudley

Source: <http://powerwaterproject.net/?cat=3>