

# ON MORECAMBE BAY

By Peter Cherry

## THE UNIQUE MORECAMBE BAY AREA

The Morecambe Bay Area is a remarkable place, an exceptionally beautiful part of the north-west Irish Sea coast-line of England, straddling the counties of Lancashire and Cumbria. It lies at the foot of the Lake District, with the Lakeland hills as a spectacular backdrop, but is far less well known. Even less is known of the local fisher-folk who 'follow the sands' to make their living. Half a dozen families from Flookburgh, on the northern shore, west of Grange Over Sands, still harvest the natural richness of the bay without ever going to sea. Tractors are used at low tide, to catch the famous shrimps, whitebait, cockles and flukes which are flat fish, similar to plaice, that gave their name to the ancient fishing village of Flookburgh, lying just six miles due south of the southern tip of Lake Windermere. Three miles north of Flookburgh, at the centre of a peninsular bounded by the River Leven estuary and the River Kent estuary, there lies the charming village of Cartmel. It is notable for its impressive Cartmel Priory, and its compact, but beautifully situated, racecourse which attracts many hundreds of visitors during its famous bank holiday weekend meetings. On the southern shore, in Morecambe and Heysham, fishermen use tiny boats to catch the popular shrimps, most notably the Edmondson family, who catch their own shrimps daily, and run a thriving fish shop in Morecambe. But the bay can equally take life away from the unwary as well as sustain it, as the incoming tide moves as fast as a galloping horse and there are several areas of treacherous quick-sands, which can shift their position daily. Both dangers have claimed many lives, going back to Roman times, when people frequently crossed the eight miles of sands from the south to the north shores, and the bay was called 'Morikambe.'

Morecambe Bay is the second largest bay in England, and remains one of the last wildernesses in Britain. A sand plain of one hundred and twenty square miles is revealed twice every twenty four hours, by the ebbing tide, which carves the surface into subtly different reliefs each time. It is a mercurial landscape existing in two states, as sea and as sand, while infinite variations of sky and cloud endlessly tint and shade the surface of water and sand. Five rivers flow into the bay from the south-west edge to the north-west edge: The Wyre, The Lune, The Keer, The Kent and The Leven. The sands of bay are a vitally important feeding ground for many thousands of birds, in particular the small wading birds, knot and dunlin, that can be seen in vast flocks, flying in swirling, synchronized union, which is a breath-taking sight to behold. The bay is continually evolving, as channels and quick-sands come and go, moving themselves sometimes overnight after staying the same lie for decades. The shore margins ebb and flow too. Marshland will be eroded in one area while new land is built up elsewhere on the bay, often in cycles spanning centuries.

The town of Barrow In Furness, Cumbria, on the north-western extremity of the bay, has a proud industrial heritage, and many ships and nuclear submarines are still built there. There is also a very good Maritime Museum in the town, well worth visiting. The adjacent Walney Island, the largest island in the bay, has a large nature reserve, which is worth a day trip. The tiny Piel Island, just off the southern tip of Walney Island, has the ruins of Piel Castle, but is only reachable by a small boat, running infrequently. Ulverston is a town on the north Furness Peninsular, famous for being the birthplace of Stan Laurel, and has a small Laurel and Hardy museum. It also features the Hoad Monument, set on a hill beside the road approaching the town, which is in the form of a lighthouse. Just to the east of the town, there lies the tiny Chapel Island, in the River Leven estuary, which once had an ancient chapel, later replaced by a nineteenth century folly, in the style of a chapel, but which is now in ruins. The Victorian town of Grange Over Sands, Cumbria, on the northern shore of the bay, became very popular with day visitors after the Furness railway was laid, in 1857, which encircled

the bay from Carnforth to Barrow In Furness, crossing the River Kent estuary at Arnside and the River Leven estuary at Ulverston.

The villages of Silverdale, in Lancashire and Arnside, in Cumbria, on the north eastern shore of Morecambe Bay, have been designated as 'Areas Of Outstanding Natural Beauty' and are equal in beauty to anywhere in England, including The Lake District. Arnside became very popular with Victorian visitors, after the coming of the Furness Railway, and was home to the prominent Crossfield family, whose members built medium sized wooden boats - one of which was bought by the author Arthur Ransome, and famously named Swallow - and many of the Victorian sea-front houses. It has a great pub called The Albion, on the sea-front, serving excellent food. It also has the best fish-and-chip shop I have ever found, called The Arnside Chippy, near the eastern promenade. The steep hill above Arnside, called The Knott, is as high as Blackpool Tower, and affords magnificent views of the bay, as well as of the Lakeland Mountains. Thankfully, Arnside village never expanded into a town, like Morecambe, mainly because it is was not suitable for bathing, due to its treacherous quick-sands, and it still retains its old charm. My grandparents used to live in a house on the sea-front, with a splendid view of the Kent estuary and railway viaduct. The RSPB nature reserve, Leighton Moss, only a hundred yards from the Silverdale station, is an important bird habitat, including that of the notable 'booming' bitterns, nesting in the tall reeds, and well worth a day visit, with binoculars!

The City of Lancaster, set around the River Lune estuary, was the fourth largest port in Britain in the eighteenth century and, unfortunately, in that hundred years, transported hundreds of thousands of black slaves from Africa to the Americas, in return for valuable commodities, including cotton - to supply the many Lancashire mills - sugar, rum, mahogany, and tobacco. The Victorian folly, The Ashton Memorial, in Lancaster, set on a hill within Williamson's Park - on the site of the old gallows - with an impressive view over the bay, has an adjacent conservatory full of butterflies from around the world, called 'The Butterfly House,' which is certainly worth a visit. In my opinion, the best restaurant in Lancaster is The Sultan Indian restaurant, on China Street, contained within a converted chapel, in which I have spent many happy evenings with my family. The excellent Lancaster Maritime Museum, housed within the imposing eighteenth century Palladian style Customs House on St George's Quay, is free to enter, and I can highly recommend it. The Judges' Lodgings House, and the mediaeval Lancaster Castle, set on a hill, near the city centre, are also notable tourist attractions. One of the several pubs in the city, is The Water Witch, on the Lancaster Canal, which attracts many visitors, a large number of which are students from both Lancaster University, with its 13,300 members - where I once studied - and The University of Cumbria. Glasson Dock, near Lancaster on southern bank of the River Lune estuary, has a dock and marina, as well as fish processing factories, and a great pub called The Stork. The cluster of houses at Sunderland Point, on the mouth of the River Lune, not far from Lancaster, is notable for its large cotton tree, dating back to the eighteenth century, when there was a small port there, specializing in the importation of cotton. It also has the touching, Sambo's Grave, which was the eighteenth century memorial for a much loved young black companion to a wealthy sea trader, or more accurately, his slave. On the road to Sunderland Point, there is a great pub called The Golden Ball, which used to be called Snatchems, in the days when it was reputedly a smugglers' hideout. It is particular pleasant to sit outside in spring and summer, as it affords a view over the tranquil River Lune estuary.

The traditional 'bucket and spade' seaside town of Morecambe, has experienced a great revival in the last few years, and offers a magnificent promenade view across the bay, towards the distant Lakeland Mountains, which must surely be the finest in all England. The amazing sunsets seen from there, are, in my opinion, equal to any in the world. The recently refurbished, gleaming white Art Deco curved gem, the four-star Midland Hotel, built in 1933 - the heyday of Morecambe - is a great asset for the town, and is renowned for its excellent food. The relatively recent, superb 'Tern Project,' which reconstructed and extended the half-mile long Stone Jetty, and included several attractive bird themed features and statues, is very welcome, particularly as the former West Pier and Central Pier no longer exist. The life-size bronze statue of Eric Morecambe on the central promenade, is also a touching recent addition, and people are forever linking arms

with Eric, to have their photograph taken against the majestic backdrop of the bay. The five miles of the promenade path, from Heysham through Morecambe to Hest Bank, have also been attractively resurfaced in red tarmac. If you have access to YouTube, I can recommend an excellent eight-minute film by Sky Cam Video, showing an aerial view, at low altitude, travelling down the full length of this promenade - just search 'Heysham to Morecambe.' In the words of playwright Alan Bennett, who used to visit Morecambe as a boy, 'If only Morecambe had the climate of the Mediterranean!'

The village of Heysham, just west of Morecambe, is notable for its tiny St Patrick's Chapel ruin, and the adjacent open graves cut into solid rock, dating to the eighth century. It also has the charming ancient church of St Peter's, beside the sea, in which I was Christened. There is a large passenger and cargo port at Heysham, running daily car and lorry ferries to The Isle Of Man, next to the Nuclear Power Station's twin reactors. The valuable resource of The Morecambe Bay Gas Field, is about twenty-five miles due west, out to sea, from here. The town of Fleetwood, on the south western extremity of the bay, on the River Wyre estuary, was once a thriving fishing port, but now has only a handful of trawlers. A car and lorry ferry service from there, runs daily to Northern Ireland. There is also a tiny ferry crossing The Wyre River estuary every hour, to and from Knot End, which has a great pub called The Derby Arms Pub, near the ferry landing.

There are three impressive stately homes in the Morecambe Bay Area, namely, Levens Hall, on the River Kent, notable for its topiary, Holker Hall, near Flookburgh, the home of Lord and Lady Cavendish, and Leighton Hall, near Silverdale, notable for its role in the civil war, and for its annual 'Last Night Of The Proms' outdoor concerts at night, when most of the concert goers take along candle-lit lanterns, adding to the atmosphere of a memorable evening, which I have experienced myself.

In early 2022, Eden Project North was given the go-ahead, and will be similar to the very successful Eden Project already in Cornwall, which will essentially be a large conservatory made up of four transparent domes, inspired by the shape of mussel shells, and contain plants and trees from all around the world, including the tropics. This is to be on the site of the old Bubbles indoor and outdoor swimming pools on the sea front, next to the Midland Hotel, and is due to be completed in 2024, at a cost of 125 million pounds, being by far the biggest investment in Morecambe, for several decades. It is bound to be a very popular visitor attraction for many years in the future, as it will only be a one-hour drive from Manchester and Liverpool, as well as being readily reachable from Lancashire, Cheshire, Cumbria, Yorkshire and Northumberland.

In 2022, there is still a plan to build a road bridge across the mouth of the bay, from Morecambe to Barrow In Furness, which would certainly put Morecambe 'on the map' as a prime gateway to The Lake District. I do not object to such a project, as long as it does not include a barrage to harness tidal energy, as this would mean that most of the sands would be permanently under water, causing a serious loss of the food source for many thousands of birds, and a whole way of life for those people who currently 'follow the sands' would be lost forever.

## **CEDRIC ROBINSON, THE SANDS GUIDE**

On the northern shore of Morecambe Bay, nestling in Grange Over Sands, there stands a whitewashed farm house. Seen from the sands, it lies at the lower right hand point of a triangular twelve-acre patch of green fields stretching up the Grange hillside, with its base running parallel to the shore. This is Guide's Farm, and would have stood alone in a very wild corner of England when it was built, about seven hundred years ago. It is said that Oliver Cromwell once slept there in the days when the house offered ale and an overnight stay for travelers who crossed the sands from the south shore, some eight miles away. The town of Grange Over Sands grew to the east of the farm, after the coming of the Furness Railway in 1857, which encircled the bay from Heysham to Barrow, crossing the viaducts over the Kent estuary at Arnside and the Leven estuary at Ulverston. Guide's Farm is owned by The Crown, and once lived in by Cedric Robinson and his family.

Cedric was royally appointed to the ancient post of 'The Queen's Guide to the Sands of Morecambe Bay' in 1963, by the guide trustees, headed by Lord Cavendish of Holker Hall, being the twenty fifth guide, going right back to the year 1548, and has since guided hundreds of thousands of walkers safely across the dangerous sands. Shifting quick-sands come and go, often changing their position, and Cedric has to be able to recognize them. On a dozen or so, occasions between late April and early October, he led parties of up to seven hundred people, the seven miles across the bay, from Arnside to Kents Bank, near Grange Over Sands. Just a few years ago, the route was eleven miles long, starting at Morecambe Lodge, Hest Bank, and finishing at Kents Bank, but the channel of the River Kent has since shifted a several hundred yards, making the River Kent channel too deep to be crossed in safety by that route.

Cedric Robinson was a well-built fisherman in his mid-fifties. It would be easy to believe that he could be a descendent of the Norsemen who first entered the bay a thousand years ago. Fragments of the Norse language are still used today by the local Flookburgh fishermen. Words and phrases such as 'sister their' (look there) and 'luckster' (look). Added to this a mixture and corruption of English words, makes the people of Flookburgh speak a unique way, quite unlike the Lancashire lilt, and subtly different from the Cumbrian dialects spoken a just few miles to the north in The Lake District. Cedric's warm countenance set atop with bushy hair, just starting to go grey at the edges, was distinctive. He made his living by fishing the bay; receiving only a yearly fifteen pound payment for his work as guide, but was provided with Guide's Farm rent free to offset this. The trustees of the position of guide, did not allow him to charge a fee for the cross bay walks, but Cedric gladly led them for his own pleasure. Before Cedric became guide, there was only one guided walk per year, so it was Cedric who made the cross bay walks nationally, and internationally famous, being featured on many television programmes, from as far away as America and Japan. Cedric was born in the ancient fishing village of Flookburgh, where his father, Bill, also a fisherman, was born and lived with his wife.

I first met Cedric in the summer of 1981, when I was twenty-two, on one of Cedric's famous cross bay walks, from Morecambe Lodge, Hest Bank to Kents Bank near Grange Over Sands. It was a cloudless July day, and the walk was unusual in that there were only four of us on it; the Cherry family. He was already a famous personality, having appeared on several regional and national television programmes about the bay. In March the following year, I wrote to Cedric explaining that I wanted to create a book of photographs about the bay, for which I already had a great affection, and asking if I could take some photographs of his fishing activities, that Easter. I soon received a 'copper plate' letter saying that he would be delighted to help, and so I telephoned and arranged to meet him and his wife Olive at Guide's Farm, the next Friday evening.

In early April 1982, I found Guide's Farm in the darkness of the unlit end of Cart Lane and nervously tapped the brass horseshoe knocker - I had read in Cedric's first book 'Sand Pilot Of Morecambe Bay' that 'Carter' was the surname adopted by most of the previous sands guides, going back to the year 1548. The solid, white painted door opened and the familiar face of Cedric appeared. He smiled warmly and invited me in, saying "Mind your head on the door." Inside, a pair of golden curtains served as a partition to keep in the warmth of the twelve by fifteen foot living room, and a welcoming wood fire burned fiercely in a stone hearth. Cedric's wife, Olive greeted me just as warmly and I took to her straight away. With fair hair, fair skin and sky blue eyes she looked remarkably fine for her years, being eight years older than Cedric. And indeed, an oil painting on the wall displayed her beauty in younger years. It soon became apparent too, that her genuine, soft spoken and gentle nature complemented her looks. Two, massive, dark oak beams ran the length of the living room ceiling - Cedric told me he thought they were once ship's timbers - and equally substantial walls were revealed by the two foot depth of the window sill. The room was comfortably furnished with simple but solid furniture. Olive said that the circular oak dining table by the window, had come from Cark Station's waiting room. There existed an atmosphere of tranquility in Guide's Farm, which imparted a feeling of peace in me. While Cedric told me tales of his life as fisherman and guide, Olive offered me a mug of tea and biscuits. Cedric consulted his tide table and read out a list of times and dates when he could take me along with him to

fish for whitebait, flukes and cockles. At the time, he was not set up for shrimping, so he gave me the address of a Flookburgh fisherman, whom he said was a “decent sort” and would not mind taking me out shrimping with him. Suddenly it seemed, it had become late, so I reluctantly said I must leave and thanked the couple, feeling as if I had known them for years.

One week later I returned to Guide’s Farm. Daylight showed the house to be a sturdy whitewashed building, with a stone built barn attached. I knocked on the familiar door and a voice inside called me in. “Ced’ll be down in a minute,” said Olive. Her husband soon appeared, smiling and asked. “Are you ready for off?” Reluctantly I left the warmth of the fireside. The outdoors was not inviting; damp, cold, overcast and misty. It was already mid-afternoon and dusk would be closing in a couple of hours. I shivered and pulled on an extra pair of socks, followed by green wellingtons. Cedric put on his waders and yellow oilskin, climbed aboard his yellow tractor, and leant forward to bring the machine to life. A precious burst of sunlight lit the yard as I opened the gate to let Cedric out, then climbed awkwardly onto the machine. “Hold tight” said a smiling Cedric, and we made our way the hundred yards down Cart Lane, turning right by the level crossing keeper’s house to wait before the railway gates until the crossing woman emerged; a lively character called Eva. The tractor rattled over the tracks and down the stone ramp to the muddy shore. The wheels ploughed furrows, nearly a foot deep in the sticky substance, but a hundred yards further on we reached wet, but firm, sand. Cedric opened up the throttle, and a warm plume of diesel fumes blew in our faces; actually welcome in the cold air. He shouted to me above the roar of the tractor, and pointed out the direction of Silverdale to where his whitebait nets were set. Ten minutes later his nets yielded bulging silver ‘tails’ which Cedric undid, then poured the tiny silver whitebait into his metal boxes. The knot was carefully retied and the net vigorously shaken to dislodge strands of seaweed. Cedric strained back to set the net in line once more, and after he attended to the remaining two nets in the same way, we were soon aboard again and making for home.

The flames of the fireplace were more welcome than ever when we returned to the Farm. Olive was cooking some food, and insisted that I stay for tea, and so I gratefully accepted, having a fair appetite after the afternoon’s outing. Ink-blue dusk was tinting the eight-paned living room window as we eventually sat down to eat.

## **THE FLOOKBURGH SHRIMPERS**

. Seven o’clock on a numbingly cold early April morning in Flookburgh. I was in the yard of a house near the village centre, waiting for the shrimpers to arrive, at three hours after high water. Around the yard of this grey building there was an outhouse which contained fishing equipment. Next to that a stable and then a greenhouse, beside which stood two old rusty, red tractors. My breath hung in the still air and my hands and toes were gradually losing their feeling. Presently, my solitude was ended by the arrival of Tant Wilson, with his two sons Tony and Michael. Tant was a stocky man with brown hair and a taciturn countenance. His elder son, Tony, age fifteen, was taller than his father, with neatly cropped straight sandy hair. The younger boy led a horse out of the stables into the adjoining field. He was Michael, age thirteen, just above shoulder height to his brother, with straight brown hair, wearing a brown anorak, black waterproof over-trousers and a navy blue hat. Tant and his sons soon climbed into their yellow oilskins. Few words are exchanged between the three of them, as fish boxes were loaded onto the back of the tractor together with a pair of riddles (sieves) and a short handled shovel. A four-foot-long wooden plank with steel uprights and waist high handles, used for cockling, called a jumbo, stood on one of the two boards which had been home-fitted along either side of the tractor. Tant took hold of a bare ended wire dangling from the engine and sparked this onto a terminal: the machine coughed for a few seconds until a cloud of sooty smoke emerged from the exhaust. Michael quickly pulled a pair of working gloves out of his pocket, and stretching out, carefully held one of them open over the warming fumes, but his father impatiently shouted “Don’t be so bloody daft, it’s not that cold!” Tant called to me to jump on and the contraption lurched forward and we turned into Winder Lane then right along Main

Street through the village, turning right again at the square to join the Mile Road. Tant drove standing, as there was no seat. We travelled at full speed down the dead-straight mile long road which crossed the grassy plain from village to shore: once covered by the sea when Flookburgh was first settled. Soon we slowed down for a cattle grid at Sand Gate, the entrance to the bay. Crossing the marshland margin we eventually reached a muddy end where the track dipped down alarmingly into a deep dyke (channel) and the tractor strained to climb to the other side. It took all of my grip and balance to stay onboard, but mercifully we were now on firm sand: the bay proper. A few hundred yards ahead, half a dozen long, wheeled objects could be seen.

As we approached, I could make them out as trailers with nets and rope stowed on top. Tant told me that these were always home built out of old car chassis fitted with planks and pivoted steel side arms, as he skillfully backed the tractor up to his own trailer. Tony and Michael jumped onto the relative comfort of the trailer, before Tant set off again, now flat-out into the bay. Wheels hissed on the wet sand as they traced their footprints, marking out the route. These tracks could literally become a lifeline to follow home in foggy weather, before the tide's flow floods the bay, as Tant carried no compass. A morning mist shrouded the bay, giving the illusion that the sands stretched to infinity. Soon another tractor and trailer came into view behind, and was clearly trying to catch up. Tant pointed back, shouting "Les Butler!" and we seemed to be in a race to reach the shrimping grounds. A trail of distinctive smelling diesel smoke from the exhaust heralded our progress, as we ploughed through deep channels where the water level rose to alarming heights, sometimes even above the footplate. Tant gave a rare grin and shouted "Don't start worrying 'till it comes up to the air intake!" Time stretched out as we steamed into the heart of the bay, flanked to our left by Les Butler who gradually overtook us. A veil of salt water and sand spray surrounded us. 'Surely we must be there soon?' I thought. The journey was exhilarating, and eventually, a large stretch of water emerged from the morning mist, and we drove alongside for a while before Tant stopped. We had reached the shrimping grounds in the Ulverston channel - another name for the River Leven estuary - after half an hour's travelling. The trailer was uncoupled and re-attached by a three hundred yard long rope. Both boys swung out the rusty steel tubes from either side of the trailer to form a pair of arms, to the ends of each of which a shrimp net was tied, by a much shorter rope. Each of these nets had a narrow, three yard wide, rectangular mouth with an upper bar of ash and a lower one of steel. The mesh of the net funneled back to a finer mesh tail and both of the shrimp nets were pulled out neatly either side of the trailer by Tant and his elder son. Tant remounted the tractor, and moved off again. Pulling out the coils of rope, he entered the channel at a shallow angle to the water's edge and, driving deeper into the water until it came just below his footplate, he then steered parallel to the water's edge, to keep his depth. Suddenly, the trailer snatched forward from the invisible tautening of the trawl rope and trundled eerily into the water until only the tip of the folded back towing V bar remained above the surface as a marker. The trailer did not, however, travel directly behind the tractor, but instead went automatically to one side to reach the deeper water where most of the shrimps were. This was contrived by setting and locking the trailer's front wheels to always steer itself to one side, which accounted for the towing rope being about thirty degrees out of line when trawling. The steel bars along the base of the net mouth scraped along the channel bottom, disturbing the brown shrimps lying on the sand, so that they jumped up, to be swept into the tails. Tant's first trawl took about fifteen minutes, at a slow walking speed, then he steered the tractor onto dry sand. He dismounted, and strained to lift the two bulging nets, and emptied his prize from the tails; a glistening mass of brown shrimps, which would turn the familiar pink colour when boiled. The boys then set about riddling the shrimps, firstly with a wide mesh to get rid of crabs, seaweed, unwanted fish and general flotsam, and finally with a narrower mesh to weed-out the small immature shrimps as dictated by the Fisheries Protection Laws. In any case, the pickers would not thank them for having tiny shrimps to work on. Tony suddenly picked a small silvery green fish out of his riddle and thrust it under my nose declaring "It's a cucumber fish!" I was taken aback, but had a sniff anyway and, yes, it smelt remarkably like cucumber! Having riddled all the shrimps, the nets were stowed on the trailer and Tant towed it back up the channel to begin another trawl in the same direction. Meanwhile, the boys spent some time cockling. Michael set-to on the jumbo, which he rocked to and fro, to bring the cockles to the surface, with a grim determination, and was

reluctant to let me have a go. After another two trawls, Tant decided that it was time to make for home, for the incoming tide would not wait. Our tracks were retraced all the way to Flookburgh, as cloud begun to thin and promised to let the sun through.

We arrived back in Flookburgh, more than three hours after first setting off. The shaking journey was fatiguing enough in itself, but the work was not yet over, for the shrimps had to be boiled while still alive, otherwise they would stick in their shells, making the picking of them a difficult task. The boiling was done in an outhouse, in a hemispherical iron cauldron about two feet in diameter, set into a brick base and heated from underneath by an oil fired burner. Tony filled this two-thirds full of water and once properly, boiling poured in a box full of shrimps, then put a wooden lid on top. After a couple of minutes, he lifted a pile of shrimps out with a straining device called a ladle, gently blowing the steam away to see the colour of them. A silvery pink appearance would tell him if they were properly boiled: they were, so he scooped out the remainder into a basket. The boiled shrimps were then tipped onto a mechanical riddle - a motorized vibrating wire mesh contraption - to remove any remaining small shrimps, then spread over wire mesh trays to dry. The vapour rising from these had a warm, appetizing smell, as we picked out and ate some of the fattest, warm shrimps, which tasted far better than the cold ones I was used to. Suddenly, the steamy atmosphere flared in a shaft of sunlight cutting through the skylight. Michael had by now thoughtfully emptied out his wellingtons and removed his hat, anorak and waterproofs in deference to the sun's warmth, then went to visit, and adore, his favourite horse, Serena, in the adjoining field.

In the afternoon I met Michael again, this time in the little Flookburgh Fisherman's Co-operative Factory on the Mile Road, where he was helping his uncle Jim and his grandmother, Edna, to pot shrimps. The picked shrimps were boiled in spiced hot butter, which gave the place a wonderful aroma, then strained, and one ounce portions weighed into small plastic tubs, and finally, liquid butter was spooned on top. This rapidly solidified, thus 'potting' and preserving the shrimps. Agnes, one of the workers there, had been potting for many years, as demonstrated by her skilful manner. The end product of the shrimpers' labours soon piled up: dozens of little white tubs ready for dispatch to those all around the world, who have a taste for the famous Morecambe Bay shrimps. I have found that they are most delicious when eaten hot, on toast.

## **FOLLOWING THE SANDS**

Returning to Guide's Farm, in a cold mid-April - back to winter it seemed - I met Cedric's daughter, Jean, for the first time. She was nineteen, and had evidently inherited her mother's beauty. Cedric lay, unshaven, asleep in the armchair next to the fire with a small dog in his lap, while Olive thoughtfully offered me a seat closer to the fire. Cedric suddenly awoke and slowly focused on me. "Hello Peter," he said, in his rounded Flookburgh tones and, after a yawn, "We'll be setting off in about half an hour, at three hour's ebb." Then to Olive, "How about a nice cup of tea and a biscuit first, love?" and he disappeared upstairs for a shave. Meanwhile, Olive was sitting at the polished round oak table with her favourite Chihuahua 'Candy', so I took the opportunity to photograph them by the soft light of the window. After rejoining us a few minutes later, Cedric sat down to tell me tales of fishermen in former days who were lost on the sand and 'never heard of or seen again' along with their 'carts, horses, and all'. In the time before tractors were commonly used to 'follow the sands', horses and carts were taken out instead, right up until the early sixties. The shrimpers' nets were tied behind the carts and the animals had to pull these through the channels, often up to their necks in water. Many tragic stories tell of horses being drowned when mired in quick-sand or when the carts started to sink, dragging the unfortunate animals with them, despite the desperate efforts of their owners to rescue them. Clearly a natural story teller, Cedric then told me of how, long ago, a dead man's hand had emerged from the sands when a Flookburgh fisherman was cockling with a jumbo. Cedric had reason enough to be wary, and said that even after knowing the bay all his life, he still greatly respected its ability to take life as well as sustain his livelihood. "Surely it's possible to tell a quick-sand just by looking at the texture of the surface?" I asked

earnestly, but Cedric said that there was no sure way of telling, just from the appearance but one must also know the places where they are likely to appear, for instance around the shore margins, where underground streams occur, and up the estuaries. But even then, he claimed to require a sixth sense, evolved over many years, to detect them. Quick-sands are simply a mixture of sand and water where the sand becomes like a thick liquid or a jelly, and gets progressively thinner and more dangerous when agitated, in particular when someone walks over it. A quick-sand can mire its victim further when they struggle to get free, then set around them 'like cement'. This is no exaggeration, as attempts to drag out person trapped to the waist by sheer force could literally tear them apart. The only effective way is to dig quickly around the victim before the sand reforms. But then, the turn of the tide becomes a second enemy. Cedric told me that the best way to get out of a quick-sand is to sit down or lie flat as you feel yourself sinking, and crawl out without unnecessary movement, and above all, without panicking. All of this gave me a respect for the sands which I didn't previously have, as on a clear sunny day the sands could look perfectly benign.

It was now early afternoon, and Cedric groaned reluctantly out of his armchair, calling "Jean are you ready for off?" Jean appeared and protested, "Dad do I have to go, it'll be freezing out there". But with a sigh, she pulled on her blue and white woolen hat and fingerless gloves. Cedric went into the outhouse to put on the familiar yellow oilskin, then gathered a bundle of pointed six foot long ash stakes, and loaded them on the tractor followed by his stream nets, a long iron rod and a couple of cockle baskets. Jean sat herself on the tail board of the tractor as Cedric started it up. After closing the yard gate, I jumped onto the back of the tractor next to Jean. At the end of Cart lane we negotiated the now familiar level crossing, and descended the stone ramp to follow in the tracks made by Cedric the day before. A rapier sharp wind cut across our faces as we headed towards the heart of the bay, with the twin signatures of our wheels unraveling behind us. It was overcast, and the shore we left behind soon melted to a faint flat shadow in the mist, while we crossed the sand plain wilderness. In front I could see only white sky meeting the seeming infinity of rippled sand. Minutes passed, and it felt as if we were being transported into another land: there was no sound except for the diesel's roar as we traversed the ocean of sand. White spray was thrown up around us whenever we steamed through channels, shallow and deep, still onwards. Then after more than half an hour from home, a feature could just be resolved ahead; a row of thin lines etched parallel and perpendicular to the horizon. We drew nearer and turned in a neat arc to stop before them. Our destination: Cedric's fluke nets staked on ground slightly higher than that of the surrounding plain. Entangled in the fine filaments of the stream nets were flukes: flat fish with mud-brown tops and snow-white underbellies, which the last tide's ebb had gathered in. Cedric crouched over the net with a cockle basket under the crook of one arm, his hair swept back by the bitter wind. He deftly disentangled the first fluke, placing it carefully in the basket, then moved along to the next. Jean helped her father, and soon all the fish were landed. Cedric washed his basket-full of fish in a small pool specially dug for the purpose, splashing waves of water over them with his free hand. Suddenly, sun pierced the cloud and transformed wet sand into shimmering silver for an exhilarating instant. Now the hard work began. Another two nets identical to the first were to be staked out a hundred yards apart. Firstly Cedric bored holes by working a long iron rod into the stubborn sands at regular intervals, measured by taking two full paces back each time. The holes were set, not vertically, but at a slight angle so that when the ash stakes were inserted, they would all slope up into the bay to withstand the ebb's thrust. Jean hammered the stakes home into these pilot holes with a wooden beater, called a mell, so that half the length of each stake was firmly implanted in the sands. After a dozen or so, stakes had been set in line, Cedric started to tie on his stream nets, by twisting the upper and lower ropes around the wooden stakes. These ropes were run parallel to form the mouth of the net, the lower one being set slightly off the ground to avoid catching seaweed. In between, he deftly twisted in short wood spars with his strong weather-accustomed hands, to hold the mouth of the net open. Cedric told me that the sands were, remarkably, up to seventy feet deep in places - he knew this, after helping a company called 'Terre-Search' to carry out test bore holes of the sands, in the early sixties. There must be a macabre assortment of objects lying beneath the sands - devoured by them over the centuries - I thought. Whole stage coaches, boats, wartime aircraft, carts, tractors and



trailers and skeletons of dozens of the bay's victims, some two thousand years old and more, back to Roman times, when people are known to have travelled over the sands as a short cut between the south and the north shores, and the bay was called 'Morikambe.' Just one more to do and it'll be "Home James", beamed Cedric. Breathing into cupped hands to try and restore feeling to them, I anticipated the warmth of Guide's Farm. I was glad when the tractor was started again, and offered my hands to the warming diesel exhaust before re-boarding the tractor. The line of nets soon dissolved into silver-grey as we rattled our way homewards to the comfort of Guide's Farm, with tea made by Olive and a cake made by Jean. As my cheeks glowed in the warmth of the open fire and feeling returned to my outstretched stockinged toes, I reflected on the harshness of their life in following the sands, but Cedric told me that they wouldn't change their way of life for anything.

## THE ROYAL CARRIAGE CROSSING

This much heralded event, was to be the first horse drawn crossing of the Morecambe Bay Kent Sands since the days when regular stage coaches ran from Morecambe Lodge, Hest Bank, to Ulverston, over a hundred years ago. The event was organized by Lord Cavendish from Holker Hall, to mark the tenth anniversary of their horse trials. The special attraction was to be HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, who would lead the dozen carriages of various sizes with a carriage pulled by his four magnificent Cleveland horses. Cedric, being guide to the Kent Sands by royal charter, was approached by Holker Hall and given the responsibility of guiding The Duke safely across. On the day before the event, Cedric walked and set out the route from Silverdale shore to Kents Bank station, west of Grange Over Sands, with markers of laurel branches called brobs, which he implanted in the sand. Press and television were already around, and eager to interview the guide.

The day of the crossing arrived, May 30th, 1985. A delicate morning mist promised to burn off to reveal a summer's day, as I turned up at Guide's Farm. Cedric had organized two tractors and trailers on which were set a line of straw bales to serve as seats for the Fleet-Street press, and me! By early afternoon it had become a surprisingly hot day, as our circus-like procession of tractors and trailers and pick-up trucks carrying an assortment of excited children from Cedric and Olive's family hauled itself up the steep hill of Carter Road. The expanse of the ebbing bay revealed itself as we climbed. Turning left down Kentsford Road, we were soon bumping over the railway crossing at Kents Bank Station to reach the shore just the other side. This was to be the finishing point. Guide ropes were being set out on the shore, and a fair number of people had already gathered. We waited there and gradually the photographers and journalists arrived and scrambled aboard including most of Fleet Street, the BBC, ITV, various foreign film crews, local radio and local newspapers. As soon as all were crammed on the trailers, we set off across the firm sands to our vantage point on the west side of the River Kent channel opposite Silverdale, where we waited in the afternoon sun. From here we hoped to get a good view of the highpoint of the event, the crossing of the River Kent channel. The thin line of Silverdale shore cottages could just be made out in the rippling haze surrounded by the tiny multi-coloured specks that were people: hundreds, maybe thousands. While we waited, there was a buzz of anticipation and a holiday atmosphere, as the Fleet Street chaps joked amongst themselves.

Cedric had planned the setting off time to be three o'clock, seven hours ebb, to allow the firmest sand for crossing. The starting time came, but no signs of movement could be seen. Twenty five minutes passed and presently, the white and coloured specks appeared to shift and converge, and could soon be resolved as a trail of about a dozen carriages. The procession did not, however, head directly toward us, but instead turned left, then right, in a meandering path to follow the safest route under Cedric's guidance. Soon the individual horses, carriages and drivers could be clearly seen. Cedric sat next to The Duke in the lead carriage which was pulled by his four majestic horses, which entered the water of the River Kent channel first, with the remaining carriages spreading out to the left and right, a manoeuvre ordered by Cedric. This prevented carriages from following in one another's tracks which might produce quicksand. The line of carriages ploughed the water

impressively towards us, with the smaller horses immersed almost to the neck. Two, sinister, black figures, rode at the centre: the mounted police guard. Alarming, The Duke's four-in-hand carriage thundered axle deep directly towards me, it seemed, but then passed just three yards to my right. The sheer size and power of his Cleveland horses was awe inspiring. Soon, the following carriages reformed behind their leader once more and strained to match his pace. Having reached firm ground, The Duke briskly set course directly for Kents Bank. I stepped off the trailer to photograph the historic silhouette of carriages against the shining sand, but in doing so was left behind by the tractor. I ran towards the trailer, and thankfully the driver saw me, and slowed down to let me catch up, but I still had to leap onto the moving platform. Our driver now set full throttle, and we gradually came alongside The Duke's carriage about a hundred yards to our right. We, photographers, snapped away, needing appreciable skill to hold our cameras steady while remaining on board. Very soon, it seemed - actually fifteen minutes later - we were slowing down and approaching a several thousand strong crowd at Kents Bank which soon surrounded the leading carriage. I jumped off the trailer and, running round to the front negotiating my way through the crowd, I photographed Cedric next to The Duke. Both were presented with an engraved crystal tankard to commemorate the event. The television news people were eager to interview The Duke. 'Wasn't he worried about the treacherous quick-sands?' But The Duke said that he had 'full faith in his guide' pointing, with a smile, towards Cedric. The procession moved off once more, parting the crowd-lined stone ramp to cross the railway tracks. On the other side, Cedric jumped down and bade farewell. The Duke waited a while in the welcome shade of the trees at Kents Bank, then briskly set off up the hill to Holker Hall, just four road miles ahead. The whole event seemed to be over so quickly - actually three quarters of an hour - but it was certainly a day to be remembered. Back at Guide's Farm, Cedric was received like a hero by friends and relatives.

We eagerly awaited the national television evening news reports, first from ITV, then the BBC. Both tried to inject drama into their coverage, by talking of 'a race against time, tide and the treacherous quick-sands' which amused us all. A race against the incoming tide it was not, and if there had been any real danger, Cedric would not have allowed the crossing to go ahead.

## **A MORECAMBE BAY WALK**

Eleven o'clock at Morecambe Lodge, Hest Bank, on the southern side of the bay, and a very hot, cloudless, July day. People were gathering, aged five to eighty five; families, school parties, charity walkers, scouts, guides and ramblers. Wearing trainers or just in bare feet, shorts or bathing costumes, many with rucksacks. A special event was about to take place; a walk across the sands of Morecambe Bay, the eleven miles to Kents Bank, just west of Grange Over Sands. Looking north across the bay, the shimmering white dots set on the Grange hillside seemed much closer than the eight miles as-the-crow-flies. Behind Grange, the range of Lakeland Mountains stood as a majestic back drop. An atmosphere of excitement built up amongst the several hundred strong crowd, which became more restless as the official starting time of eleven-thirty passed. Suddenly, the familiar smiling figure of Cedric arrived in bare feet - which Olive described as 'very beautiful' - carrying his trusted ash stick, and wearing jeans and a small rucksack. Many recognized him immediately, and crowded around. Cedric, standing on high ground, addressed the hushed crowd. Remarking on the fine weather he joked that he 'hasn't lost anybody on the sands yet' and told everyone to 'keep behind the guide', reminding them that this would not be a race, and would take over four hours. He clearly loves this part of his job, and guides about a dozen such walks each year between late April and early October, doing this completely free of charge, just for his own pleasure. Cedric then set off across the Hest Bank salt-marsh, with the multitude filing behind him in a chattering carnival-like procession.

Many of the children were eager to keep up front with the guide, and asked him when they would find some quicksand to get stuck in, and, 'how far is it to the water crossing?' We made our way happily into the bay across the smooth, damp sand. It felt wonderful to be walking barefoot on this velvet ground, but we soon

encountered hard ribbed sand which was not so comfortable. This regular pattern of ridges will have been set at right angles to the direction of the last tide's ebb which sculpted them; just like wind does to a sand dune. The line of walkers now stretched out behind Cedric, as the midday sun beat pleasantly on my back, but stung the calves of my legs after a while, because the sands intensified the sun's rays. Children at the front ran on as they caught sight of the first stretch of water, but Cedric called them back. This was the channel of the River Keer, flowing out from Carnforth, and today running very shallow as it had not rained for two weeks. Cedric stopped before the water to gather up his followers. Declaring the channel safe, he allowed the children to race each other into the water and they splashed joyfully into the warm stream. On the other side, our guide called a welcome ten minute break for stragglers to catch up, while the children enjoyed the water to the full.

Our party set off again, now heading for Jenny Brown's Point, a limestone rock outcrop on the Silverdale shore. Suddenly, we came to a brack - a break away in the sand - leading down to a deep dyke containing glassy wet sand. Cedric halted the crowd and went down to probe the glistening surface with his stick, ordering us to spread out so we did not follow in one another's tracks, which might dangerously soften the sand. As we hurriedly crossed, the sand shifted alarmingly, like jelly, under my bare feet, squeezing between my toes. The adults looked worried, but the children squealed delightedly at the experience. All of us safely climbed the other side, and after another half-hour's walking we reached our half way mark, Jenny Brown's Point, for lunch. Many of the boys were, however, more interested in the pool of liquid mud they had discovered just below the rocks, and enthusiastically competed with each other to see who can submerge himself most completely in imitation quicksand. Parents looked on disdainfully, but Cedric was not concerned, as he knew that there was no danger in this particular spot. After a twenty minute's rest, we climbed a rocky outcrop to avoid an area of real quicksand at the shore margin, which Cedric heeded well, then down the other side onto smooth safe sand again, heading for Kents Bank. We soon we reached within a hundred yards of the highlight of our adventure, the channel of the River Kent. Cedric blew his whistle twice and shouted "Can we have a gather up here?" A small boy earnestly enquired "Do you blow your whistle when you want to have your picture taken?" Our guide walked on ahead into the channel, probing the river floor with his trusted staff, decided it was safe, and returned to his charge, instructing them to spread out for added safety. Children ran to be first to thrash screaming through the water. The startling coolness of the River Kent contrasted with the warmth of the previous shallow channels. We waded across with water just above our knees, balancing against the river's flow, and all of us safely reached the far side, where children were already happily flinging wet sand at one another, and paddling the surface to bury their legs in wet sand. Cedric called to the children around him, and pointed to a patch of transparent penny-sized objects shining like jewels on the sand. "They're tiny jellyfish", Cedric told them, "We call them jujubes." After nearly three hours, came the last stage of our journey. We headed towards Kents Bank station, crossing a wide ankle-deep water filled channel, which was once the course of the River Kent before it shifted shore-wards, and this again delighted the children. Looking to the east, haze-blue Pennine mountains provided an impressive backdrop to the Kent estuary. After another hour's walking, Kents Bank station was now clearly in view, five hundred yards ahead. A few children at the front suddenly broke rank, and raced each other to a triumphant finish.

Jean and her elder brother, Paul, were waiting on the shore with a stall set out on the back of a small trailer, selling certificates of the crossing plus drinks, sandwiches and Cedric's first book 'Sand Pilot Of Morecambe Bay' - which I can recommend. Weary, but happy, walkers thanked Cedric, and cleaned their feet in the clear rock pools, then sat along the stone ramp leading to the station, waiting for the next train, or their coaches. For all it is an experience they would never forget, and many will return to do the crossing in future years, and discover that no two walks are ever quite the same. I walked with Cedric, the fifteen minutes along the shore beside the railway track to Guide's Farm, where Olive was preparing a spread of salad for tea. We ate out on the front lawn, in the strong sun, like a childhood remembered summer's afternoon.

The sun mellowed, and the time soon came for me to catch the little diesel pay-train around the bay. Having less than ten minutes to get back to Kents Bank station, I hurriedly bade farewell to the Robinsons, then took a

different route back to the station. This time, I walked on the Guide's Farm side of the railway track along the triangle base of the butter-cup-and-daisy fields, through the hand-smoothed rusty iron gate at the end, then up and down the limestone wall flanked footpath. A warm scent of wild garlic drifted up from the unkempt undergrowth as I climbed over the railings, down the embankment, through an unofficial track between nettles and brambles to the railway line. Hearing the train's whistle in the distance, I started to run along the brown sleepers, the three hundred yards to the station, leaping onto the end of the platform just as the two-carriage train squeaked to a halt. I dropped into a window seat on the left hand side, to wave happily to the Robinsons as the train clattered past Guide's Farm two minutes later, with the contentment of a day lived to the full.

## AUTUMN COCKLING

By Autumn the following year, 1983, called 'the back end' by local fisher-folk, Guide's Farm was like a second home and I regarded the Robinson's as a second family. Jean was now married to Chris Jackson, a farmer's son, from Claughton in the Lune Valley, and they were living in the converted attic of Guide's Farm. She had coaxed me into doing her wedding photos, although I had never photographed a wedding. On the day, however, despite wind and rain, my pictures turned out well. Chris was happy to help out around Guide's Farm, and regularly went out on the sands to help Cedric fishing. Jean was not too concerned about Chris taking over her assistant's role, as she was well occupied in looking after the half dozen horses and ponies on the farm, which she took trekking in the warmer months, to earn some extra cash. I looked out through the living room window which gave a magnificent view of the bay on this unusually clear day; from Jenny Brown's Point, round to Holme Island. Olive came in to say hello to me, and told Cedric that she had just had an order for two bags of cockles, but there were none to sell. Cedric and Chris agreed to go out on the sands the same afternoon, to collect some, and looking at his tide tables, Cedric declared that they should leave at two-thirty. I eagerly asked to come along and take some photographs. We set off for the sands once more, on a crisply cold, but sunny afternoon, with Chris and I riding on the trailer. This time, however, we could not use the usual railway crossing, as Eva was in hospital. We turned instead up the steep hill of Carter Road in first gear, then gently down-hill the one mile to Kents Bank station. We crossed the railway tracks, then rumbled down the stone ramp to the glutinous mud of the foreshore, and set course for the cockle beds near the end of Cartmel Wharf; just about as far into the bay as you can go. Cedric laughed as we careered into the first steep-sided channel. I could clearly see the entire arc of the bay from the top of Blackpool Tower beyond Fleetwood, to Heysham, Morecambe, Warton Crag, Silverdale, Arnside Knott and then round past Grange to the silhouettes of the castle ruins on Piel Island, and the distant ship yard cranes of Barrow In Furness - familiar places seen from an unfamiliar and ever-shifting viewpoint.

We headed steadily towards Heysham, passing the grassed limestone outcrop of Humphrey Head, said to be where the last wild wolf in England was shot. After another quarter of an hour of brisk progress, Heysham did not seem as close as I expected, as distances viewed across the bay could be deceptive. Another fifteen minutes passed, then, without warning we stopped on an area of sand which at first seemed to be like any other, but Cedric knew we had arrived at the cockle beds. We unloaded our apparatus, and Cedric pointed to tiny brown filaments sprouting from the sands; "Cockles are rank here" he declared: rank means plentiful in the Flookburgh dialect, also whee-at means small or immature cockles, I learned. Cedric hauled his jumbo across the sand and set to work. He rocked it to and fro on the sands to soften them, causing the cockles buried an inch or so below the surface, to float upwards into view, where the cockles could be flicked into a hand-held net, using a three pronged hand fork called a craam. Some Flookburgh men were able to pick up a hundred or more, cockles a minute by this method, but on his day, Chris used a short handled rake to gather them, while Cedric energetically rocked the jumbo, pulling it back after every five or six rocks to prepare a strip of sand for Chris to work on. The expression, 'rocking the jumbo' belied the back breaking effort involved, especially when the sand was relatively dry and hard, as I found when Cedric let me have a go. Chris

raked the cockles into a riddle, and poured them into baskets, then washed and filled the shellfish into plastic sacks.

The yellowing sun touched the horizon, as the last load of cockles was added to top up the second bag, although it had only just turned five-thirty. "That's enough for one day", beamed Cedric, his normally ruddy face appearing even redder in the sun's afterglow. Looking at Cedric in the twilight on the lonely bay, I suddenly felt a real affection for this friendly man, with his bright yellow oilskin bound at the waist by a length of string. After a few minutes, I turned around, and discovered a full moon sitting on the hills to the east, as if displaced in perfect opposition to the setting sun. Using an upturned bucket on top of the jumbo handle, as a makeshift tripod - Cedric's idea - I photographed the moonlit bay, which was an unforgettable sight. The scene seemed appropriate, as without the moon there would be no tides and without the tide's ebb and flow, this unique way of life would not exist. As purple dusk rapidly gathered itself in around us, a string of orange street lights could be seen, stretching round the coast road from Heysham to Carnforth. To the north, a tiny cluster of bright pin points that was Flookburgh, and just east of this, an array of lights on the Grange hillside. Cedric steered for this beacon on the homeward journey, passing Humphrey Head once more, which this time loomed as a menacing black silhouette. Soon, we thankfully reached the gates of the Kents Bank crossing, but had to wait, stranded, for a cold ten minutes before the keeper emerged. Olive was relieved when we at last returned, by the light of the moon, after four hours away. She soon gave us a meal of roast chicken and Jean's apple pie, accompanied by last year's home-made damson wine. Thereafter, Cedric, Olive, Jean and Chris soon yielded to sleep in front of the flames in the heart of Guide's Farm.

### **The End**

I would firstly like to thank Cedric Robinson, Olive Robinson, Jean Robinson, Tant Wilson, Tony Wilson and Michael Wilson (whose name is the same as that of the new sands guide, from 2019, also from Flookburgh), I could not have created this book without your kind help. Now in 2022, Cedric, Olive, Tant and Tony, have since sadly died, so I hope that my book, and my new website [MorecambeBay.com](http://MorecambeBay.com) - with 62 of my colour photographs about the bay - serves as a tribute to them.

I would also like to thank my English teacher at The Philip Morant School, Colchester, Miss McAlpine, for checking my original text. She was the one person who *really* taught me how to write, for which I am very grateful.

This is a 10,500 word version of the 1986 text in the book 'On Morecambe Bay' by Peter Cherry, edited and updated by him in 2022 with 1,800 words added, mainly to the introductory chapter, which now serves as a brief visitors' guide to the wonderful Morecambe Bay Area.

Copyright Peter Cherry FRPS 2022

