

A view from a bench

By Sid Stocking, University of East Anglia

Abstract

Benches are a place to sit. Beyond and wrapped around their materiality is their culture. In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate the complex and interwoven themes of death, memory, landscape, and material cultures as they have been experienced by me, and how they are situated in and expressed through benches. Benches, rather than the subject of fierce objectification, play the role of a passive support both physically and metaphorically entangled in a web of inter-relating phenomena. In another way also, the bench, much as the landscape it is a part of, is an experience of individual perspicacity informed by inter-relations of materials and memories.

1. Introduction

Turning off at the Kingsbridge junction on the A38 marks the point the windows get rolled down. It's all country lanes from here – high looming hedgerows climb into rich green tunnels; the air is cold, fresh, and ripe with the smells of cows and the product of their days grazing. We pass the landmark pine tree and California cross, and the chilli farm, each time a different voice in the car calling them out. A tangible easing and excitement combine forming an atmosphere marked by a feeling similar to arriving home. We wiggle along the last of the roads to Marlborough – not usually where we stay, but just set back from Salcombe. It is a quaint village numbered with thatched cottages, mostly unchanged since the 16th century, a church, and a village shop.



Figure 1. Marlborough, Source: Author, 2021.

Salcombe, in south Devon, is a place we have always come, in large part, due to dad. He spent many of his adolescent summers and every other school holiday likely cradling a book in a distant cove, terrorising the sweet-shop owner, and later, nestled with his friends around the corner tables of dimly lit pubs. Having passed his love of this place onto his children, wife, and friends, rather suddenly in October of 2016, he died. Following his death, a bench was commissioned for the coast path of an area he particularly loved.

Across the world there are many rituals of death. One in Western culture is the memorialisation of a person on a bench, perhaps in a place that they loved or a place that meant a lot to them. I hope to break down what the bench is beyond its physical nature, how it came to be and how it operates now.

Benches sit at an apex between several anthropological fields. I will focus on how memory works to enculture materials, drawing on the literature of anthropology and cultural geography I'll introduce the themes of landscape, memory, and materiality. Throughout this essay, using phenomenological anecdote and autoethnographic methods, I'll enmesh the intricacies of the

material culture of benches with a personal example – the story of my yearly pilgrimage to dad's memorial bench.

As to the why – I am fascinated as to how it is we come to imbue sentimental and emotional value in things and places, or perhaps how they do this to us. I want to explore the things and places in this essay due primarily to their importance to me but also because that by thinking through my own experience of place a greater clarity of the cultural landscape may appear. Memory is in the literature often a heavy subject, dense with analysis. Memory as an idea is not however something that is at the front of our thinking in daily life, it works at the peripheries, creeping in and out of our conscious experience. It is however something we can all claim to know well, its influence on our experience of the present is what verifies us to ourselves and to others, helping arrange the order of things as we all know them. In this essay I would like to reflect the vital yet liminal nature of memory through the narrative of a walk in a place I know well and a bench. To analyse experience and make the suggestions that I have would feel at least a little imposturous if I were to assume generalisability and for that reason the methods I am using and the evaluations I make are mine alone. I will however engage with literature where greater generalisations can perhaps be made. To that end, I am a white male who considers their religious extent at most agnostic having been raised in a Christian family and at most likely, atheist and my evaluations are likely to measure to that stick.

2. A Patchwork of Memories

I leave the house this morning alone, a quiet, unencumbered focus falls over me. The path out of the town passes the church. Crows circle the spire expectantly. The cottages fall away revealing a patchwork of the bright yellow of rapeseed, and vivacious green of pastures. All roads trickle down to meet at south sands. I pass the Old Walls Cottage, the old lady who lives there has sold jams and marmalades for as long as anyone can remember. Just further on the green fields turn into a view framed by the sheer headlands that mark the edges of south sands. From here you can see across the estuary at East Portlemouth, and out to sea. I look, having arrived on the beach, to the right. Up the hill is the path to bolt head, a walk we would do every year and a favourite of dads – in fact there is a picture of me being carried in a baby backpack on this very walk. There is South Sands Hotel, it has changed a lot over times gone by, and the ferry tractor, a favourite of mine that conjures affectionate memories of my childhood. To get to my destination however, I must turn left, up the hill to cross onto north sands. I am heading for the memorial bench that was built into the rock over the estuary for dad.

Looming above, upon the hill, a ghost stares, the house where my dad grew up, that has now been replaced with a white walled and glass-pimped house. Even in its changed state, I consider it still serving as a monument of what was, its absence seems irrelevant. The new building if anything, a monument to the old. What had existed here, still does, and for me through memory, will continue to.

The experience of death acts as a profound incentive to remember and makes room for culturally tied memory-making for which we have many material mediums for example, graves, trees, or benches. Derrida (1994 p.126) tells us that when we die, we pass into and are incorporated by other states and forms – although, coming from voices such as Jacques Derrida, this may be considered ‘enlightenment-based rationalisation’ (Maddrell 2013 p. 506), this echoes most religious and spiritual ideas of the afterlife and emphasises perhaps an unstratified human desire to keep selected memories alive. Material objects also acquire capacities in sustaining memory relations between survivors and the departed (Hallam and Hockey, 2020: 26). Benches embody the memory of the dead and render present that which is absent. It is not to say that the bench in its presence renders the memorialised present in the same sense of body, but the presence of the bench does allow and encourage the provocation of memory. In this nature the connection between the trauma of death, and creation and formation of memory, and the relationship between loss and recovery, bind death, memory, and recovery together.

As we associate objects with the deceased, they become points of memory, reminders of absence; material objects nourished with agency prompting us to remember but in the way that there is absence there must equally be presence. The bench is the point of memory through its presence.



Figure 2.

Marlborough, Source: Author, 2021.

2.1. The Functions of Memory in the Materiality of Landscape

As I walked the road leading to Salcombe past South and North sands, there is a feeling of warmth – not quite a literal warmth but the kind of warmth that one is filled with when happy memories seem to perforate from the past. Walking along the same roads and footpaths that I have throughout my life, I am struck by a sense that memory imbues otherwise alienated materials with a liveliness, there seems some connection between me and the place, perhaps a *being with* the landscape. In a place unknown, landscape may feel as if prepositioned by random conglomerations of materials as though I am more *looking at* the landscape, a separation from the landscape when it is devoid of the meaning ascribed by memories. In this sense, place as material alone, memories are yet to be pegged onto place to produce meaningful landscapes. Memory as the vivifier and animator of dormant landscapes. The present sense of being in a place seems both the re-experience of the past but also a reworking of it – I know this road and this hedge, that house and the beach over there, I feel a comfort with it my familiarity with it, but it seems new at this moment too. I suspect the nature of me writing about this at remove and in that sense about the past removes this sense of ‘newness’, and here we can highlight the benefit of the phenomenological approach in my noticing at the time, this newness now has entangled itself into the landscape

as a past, a memory. It seems simple, that the present turns into past and experience into memory, but to stop and recognise it opens up all sorts of paradoxical caverns of living and what it's made of.

2.2. The Production and Productions of a Memorial Bench

I descend the narrow stairs past The Ferry Inn, and onto the small Victorian pontoon to be picked up by the ferry man. We share an appreciative nod and exchange the two pounds for the journey. I am near now, and the sum of the memories passed so far seem to add up to the point ahead. I arrive at Sunny Cove, just along from East Portlemouth – the tow path runs along and weaves into and out of the woods and the rocks, beach, and sea. A nervous energy ticks as I approach the bench. Critically set back from the path, the bench seems to watch over. I realise that as I have walked, the bench has followed me, I can trace my whole route, beginning to end. I look out across to North and South Sands, Bolt Head, the hotel, and the valley that conceals the Old Walls Cottage. The landscape is filled with my memories, and as I look from the bench, I can see them all. The strong slab of oak that is engraved with the initials of my father. I don't feel as though I am sitting with dad, I don't feel like I am sitting on dad either (a rather comedic image comes to mind). I am brutally aware of his absence in fact, I am in no way whatsoever with him, but I realise it is due to the very presence of the bench and the memories it draws on that I am aware of this. In this sense, benches work just as the North Sands cottage, the white walled and glass covered house, or even the bolt head walk. These are memorials, material reminders as much as the bench. John Wylie (2009) contemplates the idea of the bench in terms of an absence-presence.

Explained by Jean Paul-Sartre anecdotally as the scenario when you planned to meet a friend in a coffee shop, but they never show up. The absence-presence paradox is a feeling of 'nothingness', and of loss and absence because they are not there. But we are reminded of their absence by at once being on the coffee shop and at the same time the presence of them in our thoughts by them not being there. Where a bench differs from North Sands cottage and other reminders of loss is its temporal situation and circumstance, it is commemorating the event of and end of a life and acts as a more direct monument and reminder of the reality that the deceased are dead. The bench therefore is produced by and in, a landscape of memories. By the very absent present-ness of death in their memorialsapes, there is explicitly the suggestion that something remains. The death ends a life but a relationship with the deceased continues. Avril Maddrell (2016) posits benches as operating as a 'third emotional space' allowing for a continued embodied relationship the bereaved has with the dead mediating the dichotomy of absence-presence.

Given the relationship of person and landscape as situated in and formed through memory (as I have explored above) this mechanism of meaning making creates the grounds for the formation of memorial. Landscape as the agglomeration of place and memory produces meaning in death by accessing memories often characterised by place. Death emphasises the impermanence of social experience and elicits attempts to preserve some aspects of it in permanent form (Bronfen, 1992; Tilley 2005). The connection between landscape and the need to create some form of permanence in death produces the bench. The bench thence does not just expose memory but is the product of memory and the experience of landscape as experienced in communal memories. It acts as the critical point at which memory is affirmed in place.

Although I have been looking out to sea, only now do I focus on it. There is a fishing boat hugging the coastline. The fisherman occasionally hauls in a lobster pot and then bobs along to his next flag. My awareness of time passing becomes omnipresent. Meditations like these seem easier. Something that struck me is how different benches are as a form of memorial. Wylie (2009) discusses that whilst more common forms of commemoration such as gravestones, trees, and even ash scattering encourage the viewer to look at and in, the focus is situated at or towards the object or memorial – a centripetal orientation. A bench offers a different perspective, to sit on a bench, the sitter is encouraged to look outwards and beyond – centrifugal rays, looking out – but thinking in, Wylie (2009) talks of the once-removed nature of the bench, that whilst out of love and memory the bench is placed, it remains apart. This situation, at remove, offers the opportunity to think of the deceased, and of the more existential ideas raised by the imminence of mortality. There lacks the urgency with which a centripetal memorial guides the viewers thoughts. Benches, ‘displacing as much as placing’ (Wylie 2009 p.281) sit somewhere in between. Looking out, Thinking in. Benches harness the culture to which they are solipsistically ascribed, to stop us and allow us to love.



Figure 3. Dad's Bench, Source: Author, 2021.

3. Conclusion

It is memory which works as the mechanism through which a bench can revive the senses of living, love, and presence though it is also a reminder of our mortality, of loss and absence.

The themes presented in this essay cannot be done justice in 2000 words alone, I hope I have at least offered an insight into how benches are the product of many culturally complex phenomena through their role in the landscape of our times gone by.

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