A River Small Enough to Know

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Walking the Brox/Spott Burn as groundwork for the Rights of Nature

If you take the A1 south out of Dunbar, you cross a bridge and hardly notice what passes underneath: one of the main burns of this area, ducked into a slightly deeper corridor, out of sight and out of mind. Most people (including me, for a long time) meet this landscape from roads and car windows.

This piece is the result of a small experiment in doing the opposite: leaving the roads, staying with the water, and learning the place by walking it—wet feet included. It is simple fieldwork, but it is also radical in a quiet way. In a landscape where access is repeatedly cut by fences, walls, and the atmosphere of "not welcome," choosing to follow a local burn becomes a form of activism: reclaiming relationship with land and water as the foundation for any deeper environmental healing, including what we later call "climate action."

I began with the Brox/Spott Burn because it is close, overlooked, and contested.

The letter that pushed me out of the car

Before I started paying close attention to this burn, I wrote a letter—real, but never sent—to Robert Macfarlane, after reading his book *Is a River Alive?* It was my way of naming what that book set in motion for me: a push toward the Rights of Nature question, and toward local, practical involvement rather than distant admiration.

In that letter I wrote that I want to "practice the revolution of imagination" the Rights of Nature movement is attempting—holding law, story, and ecology together so that protection can become possible. And I named what had already begun to change: involvement in river-catchment work in the East Lammermuir Hills, and the attempt to bring people to burns through wild river walks—storytelling, nature writing, and phenomenological observation.

The aim here is not to turn a river into a personality. It is to describe a burn as it can be walked and seen, and to show what becomes visible when we stop treating local waters as background.

Names, ridge, and glacial context

This little river—in Scotland commonly called a burn—changes its name quite often from source to mouth. Local hamlets and farm steadings give names to stretches of water. Lower down it is the Brox Burn; above a property boundary it becomes the Spott Burn; and further

up it splits into many small streams running down the northeast side of the Lammermuir ridge.

It drains only a tiny section of those long ridges, flowing roughly parallel to the Lammermuir hill fault line. The geology is Silurian and Ordovician greywacke and siltstones; lower down you meet Old Red Sandstone—characteristic of this part of East Lothian and Dunbar.

Upstream there is a long, narrow glacial lake—Pressmennan Lake—and the broader direction of the land is shaped by ice lobes that drained toward the North Sea. Parts of the channel and gullies still show that a much bigger flow once shaped this corridor, especially through subglacial carving.

The mouth: golf greens, eroding coast, and tide

At the coast, the burn does not meet the sea as one tidy channel. Its last metres shift with tide and flow. To reach it, you walk a narrow footpath squeezed between golf course greens and an eroding coastline of pebbles and sand.

It's a popular track, especially for dog walkers. There's dog mess. Dogs chase resting and feeding seabirds. And you keep an eye out for golf balls scattered among the pebbles.

Eventually you reach a small bridge for electric golf trolleys. Normally you cross there. But when the burn is very low you can ford it: the water fans out over the beach into several threads, and you can hop from one pebbly island to the next with dry feet.

In winter it behaves differently. There is so much water gushing out through the main channel that fording isn't realistic. At low tide the mouth tries new paths; at high tide the sea washes over the beach and dissolves the newly formed pattern. The mouth keeps rearranging itself.

The first obstruction: an estate wall and a forced detour

Turning inland from the beach, the burn runs as a "tame" channel through the golf course—then disappears behind a high stone wall, three metres, built of local red sandstone, topped with barbed wire, with a secured wooden door to the side.

This is the boundary of a privately owned estate (with an expensive wedding venue). There is no way to follow the burn through it. There appears to be one entry point from the road, but it is covered in warning signs and CCTV notices.

So you walk back—along the golf course edge, toward Dunbar, past new housing developments, and past rows of older workers' cottages in Broxburn village—until you can reach the burn again by a different track, near what used to be a mill and farmstead (now luxury housing).

Under the bridges: concrete, blockage, and floodwater

Here the burn passes beneath two long bridges: the A1 and the railway bridge. Underneath them the route is accessible on foot, even though it isn't a road that leads through.

This is also where hard engineering appears: a wall of concrete and huge boulders placed to hold the burn in its course. On a calm day that looks excessive—because the burn can look harmless.

After rainfall it becomes a force. After stormy weather this whole section can flood. A large drain becomes blocked with debris—mainly trees and branches—and the water rises until it spills onto the concrete strip beneath the bridges. The strip becomes the burn's new temporary riverbed.

At those times the water can run up to your knees. It comes through reddish-brown, full of debris, carrying runoff from freshly ploughed fields.

The dene: a bedrock gorge, and the first clear property line

After the bridges, the burn enters a deep gorge cut into bedrock—locally called a dene (pronounced "dean"). It is wooded, and parts of it are clearly recent planting: tree guards still stand, and there are dead trees that didn't make it.

Sycamore has come up strongly, with some ash. The growth is dense enough to feel impenetrable. Lower branches have died back; dead wood racks across the understory. The ground is soft with thick undergrowth, and it reads like floodplain—used repeatedly by high water.

Not far in, a high stone wall appears again: no gate, nothing. Across the river there are old gates and bits of ironwork, apparently meant to keep sheep from crossing. They're damaged and broken; in low flow sheep can get through easily. Whatever the practical effectiveness, the wall signifies a boundary line. And exactly here the burn changes its name: above it, it is the Spott Burn.

Middle reaches: fields, drains, and a corridor that keeps being taken away

From here the burn meanders through a valley bottom with wide grassy verges, grazed by sheep. In high water you see fresh erosion. In low water the burn can almost disappear—stretches that look dry, as if the flow is slipping into cracks in bedrock or running deeper through coarse boulder layers, reappearing later.

A parallel burn further south is locally called the Dry Burn, named for the same feature: in summer it can run dry at the surface because it flows deeper within coarse rock.

What dominates this middle section is pipework: large field drains, some of them looking like old lead or iron—possibly a century old—crossing the corridor again and again, sometimes no longer meeting the burn neatly because the channel has shifted. These drains serve the big arable fields of the fertile east: wheat, barley, and also vegetables, including cabbages and potatoes where limestone comes up locally.

Walking here, you can read land use directly in the water: algal bloom, slimy coatings on pebbles, and after rain that deep brown-red colour of runoff—fertile soil and fine sediment carried off exposed ground. There is little buffering: thin, depleted hedges and then straight into the next field edge. The burn becomes vulnerable to extremes—very little water in dry spells, and then too much water after heavy rain—because so little retention happens on the land around it.

Access makes all of this harder to learn, because access is repeatedly denied. There is no public footpath simply following the river. You have to find your own way, often unsure if you are trespassing. In Scotland there should be open access, yet the corridor is cut by fences you have to climb. Former farmsteads have become expensive houses with polished gardens and clear signals that walkers are not welcome.

A little further on, just below the village of Spott, there is a holy well beside the road: St. John's Well. It was once known beyond the immediate region. It is said that monks from Coldingham came here on an annual procession, and in some accounts it lies on routes connected with pilgrim movement between Lindisfarne and Iona, and toward St Andrews. The well was regarded as healing.

Around 1767 or so, this "good water" was piped in lead pipes to provide drinking water for what was then the small town of Dunbar.

Middle reaches: the accessible pocket—and the long blocked stretch

There is one stretch where you feel a little safer, partly because the valley is deeper and the sides are wooded or bushy, so you are more hidden from view. The bottom is often waterlogged. The vegetation shows heavy grazing pressure: lots of gorse, and no natural regeneration.

Here the local community has made an effort to make access possible: a bridge and wooden steps over flooded ground. There is even a sign for a public circular walk.

But if you continue beyond this pocket, you again have to move almost like sheep would: ducking under low branches, catching on gorse, squeezed between fences, barbed wire, and stone walls. Often there is simply no way through.

The longest stretch still has very limited access. In many places private property reaches right up to the burn, and sometimes over it. The burn is incorporated into the grounds of houses and larger properties and fenced off completely. You cannot follow the water; you cannot even linger with it.

There is, however, a single-track road that comes near enough that one can at least try to move along the corridor, at times almost pretending you are a deer or a badger, crawling through thorns and sliding along the edge. The road fords here. A nice feature, most of the year, safe for cars, but often covered with debris, and after rainfall there can be a lot of water over it, enough to make you wonder whether cars avoid it simply for cleanliness—or because it is genuinely easy to slide off into the burn.

Upper reaches: splitting burns, the Herring Road, and a wide source area

In the upper reaches, what looks like the “main” burn begins to disappear, splitting and splitting again into lots of little burns. One can be followed for a short stretch on a public footpath before it climbs steeply up into the hills.

At some point it meets the old Herring Road. The local story is that the fishermen of Dunbar—or, as it is often told, the wives of the fishermen—carried heavy baskets of herring over the Lammermuir Hills to the market of Lauder. It is hard to imagine doing that in a single day; it must have been many days’ tiresome walking.

One stream seems most likely to continue the direction of the middle reaches and ends up at Pressmennan Lake, a popular walking area with woodland and public access. The burn there can be beautiful; sometimes you see a kingfisher. But beyond that the burn breaks into the hills.

Up there you meet many little channels—like ditches in the landscape. Often there is no water. Sometimes there are trickles; after rain there can be a lot of water, but you don’t hear a clear continuous flow. The source area is larger than it looks on the map: if you walk it, it takes a full day to circle the upper catchment and visit around twenty small beginnings. Often they don’t feel like “sources” at all—the water simply starts to run down at some point.

I haven’t found a single perennial spring with the clear presence of a source. It seems mostly like surface water and natural drainage from bare hills. There are no trees unless you count private or farm plantations, common here—supplying firewood and building wood, serving as windbreak.

This is also pheasant-shooting country. Farms around here breed pheasants and release them in their thousands. The landscape is organised around that: shooting butts, blocks of cover and managed parcels. Alongside it you find rough grazing for sheep and occasional cattle; further up, heather and patches of woodland where the grouse moors begin.

Even though the source area is not high—about 200 to 250 metres—it is still a climb. And it is rewarding. From there you have wide views over East Lothian: across to Dunbar and Belhaven Bay; Bass Rock glistening white in early spring; weather passing over golden fields in late autumn; landmarks like North Berwick Law and Traprain Law; and the Firth of Forth with the Fife coast beyond.

After this long walk—only about twelve miles, possible in a day, but still taking hours because you cannot simply follow the riverline—you end up tired. And then, suddenly, the burn connects into the wider landscape. You arrive at a place where it becomes part of what you call home, not as an idea but as lived experience: you used your limbs, you walked, you sweated, you engaged in observation.

Along the way you drink its water—not directly from the burn, perhaps, but from the holy well, which still trickles. When there hasn’t been heavy rainfall it can seem clear, still, and of good quality. It only clouds up after a lot of rain.

What this experiment taught me

The learning is simple and, for me, unsettling.

Relationship begins to grow the moment you leave the road—the "permission" that comes with marked paths—and trust yourself to stay with the burn. Doing that changes everything: you stop treating water as scenery and start meeting it as a living line through land use, history, and power.

That is why I call these **wild river walks**. "Wild" here does not mean remote. It means allowing yourself a capacity that modern life trains out of us: stepping off the track, getting wet, paying attention, and holding your ground.

Doing it in groups matters. A group can decide: *We have the right by law, with the Open Access Code. Let's walk with the burn.* If someone challenges you, you are not alone. You can talk. You can stand there.

And this is where the activism becomes clear. In places like this, the environmental crisis is not only "out there" in melting ice or distant fires. It is also here, in the ordinary mechanisms that sever relationship: private ownership, property lines, intimidation, and the quiet removal of water from common life. It is here in fields engineered for maximum extraction, drained and ploughed to the edge, with runoff written into algal slime and brown-red water.

If we want anything like a Rights of Nature to take root, it cannot begin as a slogan. It begins as belonging—earned by walking, observing, and learning the local facts. That re-engagement is not sentimental; it is foundational work. It is the ground from which better law, better land use, and deeper climate healing can grow.

Access to rivers, I learned, is not only legal. It is emotional. Do you feel safe? Do you feel welcome? Do you feel at home?

This burn—at the coast, under the bridges, through the dene, across fields, behind fences, and up into many beginnings—became for me a way to practise that question, step by step, until the place began to answer back.