

The Story of Peter Grimes

by

Andrew Beattie

The Playwrights Publishing Co.

The Story of Peter Grimes

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The Story of Peter Grimes

George Crabbe's nineteenth century poem *The Borough* is the inspiration for this one-act, 45-minute long play set during a harsh winter in a remote East Anglian fishing community. The play centres on a fisherman, Peter Grimes, a violent but lonely figure shunned by the community who suspect him of murdering - or at least killing through neglect - two of his apprentice boys. But Grimes' guilt is never proved and when he hires a third apprentice from a London workhouse, the mob round on him, baying for his blood; however, two members of the community, an elderly widow and the Borough parson, take his side against the Borough, and Grimes' rejection of their compassion leads to tragedy in one of the winter storms that batter the coast.

The Story of Peter Grimes is about the lives of Britain's rural poor two hundred years ago, about the duty of a community towards its members, and most importantly about forgiveness and compassion in the face of evil - themes which have as much contemporary as historical relevance.

Andrew Beattie teaches at Eltham College, London, and is the author of two previously published plays for children, *Ordinary Jack* and *The Looking-Glass Alchemist*. He has written a number of travel books and articles, including a book on Syria in the *Rough Guides* series.

The Story of Peter Grimes was first performed in the Theatre at Eltham College in March 1998. Principal roles were played by David King (Grimes), Nicholas Palmer (Revd. Bradwell), Jonathan Whitehead (Cromer), Sabrina Ong (Mary Glemham), David Black (Hopkins), Edward Mainwaring-Burton (the Coroner), Toby Ogden (Jenners) and Hugh de la Bédoyère (the Apprentice). James Miller, Michael Morwood, Edward Barnes and John Colgan formed the chorus and played the boys of the Borough.

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First published in 1998 by
The Playwrights Publishing Company
70 Nottingham Road, Burton Joyce,
Nottinghamshire NG14 5AL

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The Story of Peter Grimes

INTRODUCTION: NOTES ON STAGING THE PLAY

The set: This should be as simple and uncluttered as possible. A completely bare, flat stage is ideal, as it suggests the expansiveness and flatness of the sea and the Suffolk landscape. Various pieces of stage furniture can be brought on and off to indicate other locations: a simple sea chest for Grimes' cabin (scene 5), a formal table and chair for the coroner's office (scene 6), tables and benches in the pub (scene 4), and so on.

Casting: The casting is very flexible. The members of the Borough who appear as the crowd on the beach (scene 1), the onlookers and jurors in the court (scene 2), the drinkers in the pub (scene 4), and again on the beach (scene 5), can be solely male, or a mixture of males and females, depending on the cast available. Performers playing Hopkins, Mr and Mrs Jenners, the Coroner and his clerk, and the Judge, can appear as members of the Borough in other scenes. The apprentice, and the four boys, should ideally be played by boys aged 10-13.

The Chorus: The chorus parts can be played by designated performers or by those who play other roles and interchange them with chorus roles. The chorus needs to be detached from the performers, as they are onlookers and observers who form the link between the audience and the story. They could be a group of women, the wives of fishermen, if there are more female roles required; or they could be played by the same performers who play the four boys of the Borough, playing games on the quayside as scenes are set up, then delivering the lines of the poem.

Costumes: These should suggest a very poor rural community at the beginning of the nineteenth century; the play is set during a harsh winter, and many of the scenes take place outside, and costumes should reflect this. Grimes should wear a long, black coat; Mary Glemham a long, dark-coloured dress; Bradwell should be dressed as a country parson; Cromer and his constables should be in some sort of uniform which suggests their rank.

The Story of Peter Grimes

Lighting: This should for the main part be severe and harsh, with blues (and if possible an effects wheel) to suggest the sea in appropriate scenes. In Scene 4, where most of the scene is set in a pub, part of the stage must be lit in a different way to suggest an area immediately outside the pub, on the quayside, where Mary takes the apprentice and from where Grimes drags him off to his boat. Likewise, scene 5 requires one part of the stage to be lit as Grimes' cabin, with an area beyond it to indicate the area outside.

GEORGE CRABBE AND PETER GRIMES

George Crabbe (1754-1832) was born in Aldeburgh, the Suffolk fishing village which he later used as his model for the fictional fishing village, the Borough. His most famous work is the poem *The Borough* (1810), an account of provincial life which included his most famous creation, the fisherman Peter Grimes.

The Borough consists of a set of verse portraits of various Borough residents, in addition to evocative descriptions of the landscape which they inhabit. The lines of poetry quoted by the chorus in the play are taken directly from the poem, as is the character of Grimes; some of the other characters in the play have been suggested by the portraits of other Borough citizens in the poem. The ending of the play deviates quite considerably from Crabbe's original text. The best current edition of Crabbe's work is published by the Carcanet Press, in a volume which includes the poetry quoted in this play.

The Story of Peter Grimes

List of Characters

Peter Grimes, *a fisherman of the Borough*

Mary Glemham, *a widow*

Justice Cromer

Revd. Bradwell, *the Borough parson*

Hopkins, *the carter*

Mr Jenners, *a publican*

Mrs Jenners, *his wife*

The Coroner

Clerk to the Coroner

Judge

A boy apprentice

Three Borough Constables

Four boys

Chorus (four performers)

Other members of the Borough (flexible; male/female; about 5-10 performers).

Setting

The play is set in the Borough, a Suffolk fishing village, during the winter of 1804-5.

Duration of play in performance: 45 minutes.

The Story of Peter Grimes

SCENE ONE: AT THE BOROUGH WATERFRONT

Very dim back lighting to give blue/grey shadows; we see little but an expanse of bare stage. Enter CHORUS.

Chorus 1

With ceaseless motion comes and goes the tide,
Flowing, it fills the channel vast and wide.

Chorus 2

Then back to sea, with strong majestic sweep
It rolls, in ebb yet terrible and deep;

Chorus 3

Here samphire-banks and salt-wort bound the flood,
There stakes and sea-weeds withering on the mud;

Chorus 4

And higher up, a ridge of all things base,
Which some strong tide has rolled upon the place.

Chorus 1

At the water's edge, one winter dawn. A tolling bell announces the ending of a storm.

The CHORUS leaves.

The Sea Shore at dawn, after a storm. Lights come up; we see the body of the FIRST APPRENTICE, lying in the centre of the stage. A bell chimes.

Enter PETER GRIMES; he looks harried and nervous, looking around constantly, as though he is being hunted. He soon finds what he is looking for; he goes up to the body of the dead apprentice, and kneels beside him, listening to his chest, seeing the body is lifeless, etc. When he realizes the boy is dead, he moves back from the scene, delivering this monologue - talking to the audience and himself, still watching everywhere with frightened eyes.

PETER GRIMES: What should I do ? Should I cover him with my coat ? *(he starts to take off his coat)*...No; a sentimental gesture. To hell with the

The Story of Peter Grimes

idea. Should I move the body ? Hide it ? Bury the boy ?...*(he goes to do this, then changes his mind)* No; he will have been found already. To pretend this hadn't happened would be futile. Dawn. People always about at this time after a storm. They come to the shore like scavengers, after the broken pieces and spilt fish, like so many vultures after a carcass - the Borough will have found him already. Most probably the law is on its way now. And they will know who the boy is. My name will already have been "spoken of in connection" with his. *(Goes up to the boy)* I want him to look at peace. But he doesn't seem so. He lies awkwardly across the shingle. Should I close his eyes ? Again, no. *(To the audience, more a sense of desperation now)* He slipped and fell. Nothing more. It was an accident. The seas were heavy. I told him to be careful. The boat was listing terribly, I thought we would tip up, I thought we were going to go down. I told him we were both fighting for our lives and that we should dump the fish into the sea, to get us higher in the water. A few loads overboard and then, one moment he was there amongst the fish, the next he was over the rails, in the sea, arms raised high above him, head tipped back. I watched as he went over, I could do nothing for him. *(goes back to the body)* That look he had as he fell - it's still there across his face - eyes as wide open as when he slipped under the final wave - he knew he was going - *(he examines the body once more)* - God forgive me for what I've done - have I killed him ?

VOICE OF A BOY (FIRST BOY, OFF-STAGE): Mrs Glemham ! Please hurry ! Please !

PETER GRIMES: Voices. People approaching.

VOICE OF MARY GLEMHAM: Where are you ? I can't see you !

PETER GRIMES: Mary Glemham. I know that voice. She'll be here with one of the village boys, he'll have found him -

VOICE OF BOY: Over here ! Over behind the dunes ! This way ! Follow the path !

PETER GRIMES: Time to take my leave of this place.

PETER GRIMES *leaves, in some haste.*

The FIRST BOY runs on stage, with MARY close behind. The BOY leads her over to the body. When they reach it, MARY crosses herself and stands

The Story of Peter Grimes

aghast; the BOY turns aside and weeps. Then he looks to be approaching the body.

MARY: No - William - don't go any closer. William, please -

FIRST BOY: He was my friend - *(he examines the body)*....his eyes are still open.

MARY: Close them. Close his eyes, then.

FIRST BOY: There. I've done it.

With some abruptness, CROMER enters, with three CONSTABLES.

CROMER: Where is the body ?

FIRST CONSTABLE: Stand aside if you will, madam. Young Sir.

SECOND CONSTABLE: We have reports that the body of a boy has been washed ashore after the storms. This is now a matter for Mr Cromer here, justice of this borough. Now, will you please stand aside.

CROMER: *(pushing Mary and the boy aside; then an aside, to the SECOND CONSTABLE)* Little time for pleasantries. Your insistence on good manners is all well and good, constable, but I think you'll find that they often stand in the way of legal progress. *(to Mary)* Madam, you and your son -

MARY: He's not my son. I haven't got a son.

CROMER: No...of course not; this boy, I mean, will now leave. There is going to be an investigation. A body has now been discovered, washed ashore after heavy seas, and will shortly be removed, before the next high tide comes in, as befits established procedure. This matter is now in official hands.

SECOND CONSTABLE: Statements will need to be taken.

THIRD CONSTABLE: *(looking at the body)* Facts checked.

FIRST CONSTABLE: The possibility of any malpractice established.

CROMER: Precisely, Constable. Before any more onlookers arrive.

The Story of Peter Grimes

MARY: Who will move the body ?

CROMER: Carter Hopkins is on his way. He assured me that he will be here soon.

MARY: What, this poor boy will be taken away in that filthy cart -

CROMER: Madam, I don't think he's in much of a position to actually notice anything...Now; if you have any other suggestions.... Constable, in the meantime I think the body should be covered.

One of the constables covers the body with his coat or a blanket. Enter several others - a group of boys (2); also two fishermen (both members of the Borough). Enter also REVD. BRADWELL; behind them the carter, HOPKINS, with his hand cart.

Oh, Lord preserve us from the curious. (*seeing them, and to Revd Bradwell*) What business do you have here, Reverend Bradwell ?

BRADWELL: Only the Lord's business, Justice Cromer.

CROMER: Oh, really; well, you will be leaving very shortly, Reverend. No need to come any closer. There is nothing to interest you here.

BRADWELL: Nonsense, Cromer. I am a parson. I have every right to -

CROMER: (*To the fishermen*) This is not an event for spectators. It is not - like some sort of public execution, although it may yet lead to one.

BRADWELL: You've already decided that, have you? I thought there were at least cursory legal procedures to go through first -

CROMER: This is at present a legal matter, you are right, Reverend Bradwell. It will shortly become a coroner's matter. Your presence here interferes with the immediate progress of the law. There will be a time for prayers later. Constable, prevent the parson from approaching any closer!

BRADWELL stands at some distance, with the BOY and MARY, as CROMER looks over the body and covers it.

The Story of Peter Grimes

(to Mary) Now then, Madam - before more voyeurs come to "pay their respects" - I need to know the facts behind the discovery of the body.

MARY: I - (to the boy, pushing him forward) Tell the man, William. Tell Justice Cromer everything.

FIRST BOY: I found him. And I know who he is.

CROMER: You know who he is ?

FIRST BOY: Yes. Yes I do.

FIRST CONSTABLE: Well - tell us, then; who is it ?

FIRST BOY: His name is Sam Bellman. He was an apprentice to a fisherman, who lives along the coast. He took him out with him, yesterday, in his boat -

MARY: It was during the storm. I tried to make him stop, at least not take the boy out, but -

FIRST CONSTABLE: An apprentice to a fisherman ? Which fisherman ?

FIRST BOY: Peter Grimes. Peter Grimes is his name.

A murmur runs through the crowd of onlookers. The boys talk in hushed voices with each other.

CROMER: Peter Grimes. I see. And you were with Grimes and this...unfortunate boy last night.

MARY: Yes. As the storm was brewing.

CROMER: Thus implicating yourself in the boy's death.

MARY: I tried to stop him going out -

CROMER: This is plainly a matter for the courthouse, not for idle speculation on the beach. Constables, I think that we have done enough here. If the body remains here any longer it will start attracting sightseers from London, never mind the Borough. Hopkins, do your work.

The Story of Peter Grimes

Hopkins, *the Carter, lifts the body of the apprentice onto his cart.*

MARY: Will there be an inquest ? An inquiry ?

CROMER: Madam, a death has occurred in this parish. I am the Borough Justice and I will ensure that the correct procedures are followed. There is possible guilt to establish and truth to be sought. If guilt is established, there will be the appropriate penalties that the guilty must pay...but of course, all of that will be in the hands of my superiors. Now then - Mrs Glemham; if you'll forgive me - I am a busy man -

HOPKINS *wheels out the body of the DEAD APPRENTICE, followed by CROMER, the CONSTABLES, the two BOYS, and BRADWELL. It is something like a ramshackle funeral cortege. They leave MARY and the FIRST BOY on stage. The boy is about to follow them, beckoned by his friends.*

MARY: No, William - stay. Stay with me.

They watch the cart leave the shore and head inland.

FIRST BOY: What will happen to Peter Grimes ? Will he go on trial ?

MARY: Yes. He will be tried. But nothing a courthouse says will matter. The Borough will see to Peter's fate themselves. The Borough will demand vengeance. That is their way.

MEMBERS OF THE BOROUGH *start to enter; lights change (slowly) to the courthouse. There is a whispering as the crowd comes on - "Who did this ? Who killed Samuel Bellman ? Peter Grimes did. Peter Grimes - murderer - Peter Grimes, murderer " - JUDGE, JUSTICE CROMER, OFFICIALS and SPECTATORS are assembled as the CHORUS comes on again.*

SCENE TWO: THE BOROUGH COURTHOUSE

Enter CHORUS.

Chorus 1

With greedy eye Grimes looked on all he saw

The Story of Peter Grimes

Chorus 2

He knew not justice, and he laughed at law.

Chorus 3

And as his wrongs to greater numbers rose,

Chorus 4

The more he looked on all men as his foes.

Chorus 2

The Borough Courthouse, some days later.

Exit CHORUS. Lights up on the courthouse. JURORS arranged on benches; also spectators. JUSTICE CROMER and his CONSTABLES in attendance. The CROWD falls silent.

JUDGE: Bring forward the defendant, Peter Grimes.

There is a hissing as he is brought forward.

(banging his gavel) Silence. I will have silence in this court ! Would the Foreman of the Jury please rise, look upon the accused and give his verdict.

JURY FOREMAN: *(stands and looks at Grimes)* Sir, we find the accused not guilty of the murder of his apprentice, Samuel Bellman.

Another hiss through the spectators, quickly silenced by JUSTICE CROMER.

PETER GRIMES: *(looks relieved)* Am I free to go ?

BOROUGH ONE: He is free to kill again.

Another hiss, again silenced.

JUDGE: Peter Grimes, you have been found not guilty of the murder of Samuel Bellman, your apprentice. A verdict of death by misadventure will be recorded by the coroner. You are a free man. But I would advise very strongly that you do not get another boy apprentice; get a fisherman to help you, someone whom you will not be tempted to - mistreat. Should you appear before my court again, you will find your sentence severe.

BOROUGH TWO: Peter Grimes should hang for this !

The Story of Peter Grimes

CROMER: *(an aside - but we hear it)* A Life for a life !

General agreement.

JUDGE: Justice Cromer, Clear the court.

CROMER: Constables ! Clear this court ! Ensure that everyone leaves !

The CONSTABLES urge everyone to leave. Gradually, they do; a couple spit on him as they leave - GRIMES stays where he is. Eventually, only GRIMES, MARY and CROMER are left behind.

I know you killed him, Grimes. If you did not do so directly, then indirectly by your actions you as good as caused his death deliberately. I am disappointed that you were found not guilty by this court.

PETER GRIMES: It is a rotten court. I do not recognize any proclamation it makes, whether it finds me guilty or not.

CROMER: As you wish, Grimes. Perhaps you will recognize more what the Borough as a whole has to say. Perhaps justice truly lies in their hands.

He leaves. GRIMES and MARY are left alone on stage.

MARY: What will you do ?

PETER GRIMES: I will go on fishing. I can do nothing else. But I cannot fish without an apprentice. I need help with the boat. It needs to be maintained. I need help on board. With the casting of the nets, with the sails -

MARY: Hire a fisherman from the Borough.

PETER GRIMES: The Borough is demanding my blood. You've just seen them. No-one will help me. This case - and the last one - are too fresh in people's minds. No man here would work for me. Besides, workhouse boys will work harder and faster than any fisherman hereabouts. They're harder. Tougher. That's what they're used to. They know if they don't work hard for me they'll be back in the workhouse, in the stone-breaking yard, lifting rocks and sharpening tools for the men workers. Those boys I hired - you should have seen them at first; skin gnarled to the bones of their fingers, flesh just

The Story of Peter Grimes

hanging off a skeleton, barely able to stand upright or walk. But I fed them up, looked after them, cared for them even -

MARY: "Cared" for them ? Really ?

PETER GRIMES: Yes. I was like a father to them.

MARY: And the cries which people heard at night ?

PETER GRIMES: Rumours. Cheap Borough gossip. Easily stirred up. Do you believe all the rumours ? If so why are you here with me ? Why aren't you out there, with the Borough, demanding vengeance ?

MARY: But the boys died in your "care".

PETER GRIMES: They died accidentally. Despite all my efforts they were - still weakened and thin from their time at the workhouse. They were not strong boys, Mary; that is why they died. And when they did I grieved for them, as I would have grieved for my own son. Don't you believe me?

MARY: Yes, Peter. I believe you.

PETER GRIMES: I must hire another boy apprentice. You know from your own experience - your husband and your son would go to sea together, man and boy working the sails and nets as a team. That's what I want. If I were to hire a fisherman, well...a fisherman would demand more than a boy, would refuse to budge until he was satisfied with his conditions. I need to be away three, four days at a time; anyone I go to sea with must be ready to work for that length of time without adequate sleep, with a minimum of food and water -

MARY: Surely you can't hope to keep an apprentice under those terms -

PETER GRIMES: It is how I keep myself. It is how I've always lived. It is how I was kept myself, in my own apprentice days.

MARY: Will you hire another boy apprentice ?

PETER GRIMES: Yes.

The Story of Peter Grimes

MARY: To spite the Borough gossips ? Is that why ? To show them that you don't care what they say ? They admonish you, and so you throw their judgment back in their faces ?

PETER GRIMES: It would be best to hire a boy from a London workhouse. I'm not known in London.

MARY: Someone must look after the boy.

PETER GRIMES: I will look after him.

MARY: Someone must ensure that he is clothed and fed properly.

PETER GRIMES: I can see to all that. There's nothing for you to worry about - why are you trying to interfere ? Tomorrow Carter Hopkins will travel to London for me. He is the only member of the Borough I can trust.

MARY: You can trust me. I want you to trust me. I can help you.

PETER GRIMES: What reason do I have for putting any sort of trust in you ? I owe you nothing. Why should I be having anything to do with you ? *(suddenly remembering)* The tide, the tide; I quite forgot. I must be getting ready now, or I will miss the tide !

MARY: Peter - you - you can't be going fishing - not at this time -

PETER GRIMES: *(leaving)* Why not ? The tide is right, the catch will be plentiful today -

MARY: *(dragging him back)* Let me help you, Peter.

PETER GRIMES: Help me by finding me a new apprentice. Travel with Carter Hopkins to London tomorrow. Then bring the boy to me when I get back. Meet me at the harbourside tomorrow evening with the boy, when I return. He can start by helping me offload tomorrow's catch. Mary - do this for me. Now, I must go. I must get back to sea after being confined in this place for so long. I'll miss the tide if I stay here any longer !

They leave.

The Story of Peter Grimes
SCENE THREE: THE QUAYSIDE AT NIGHT

Chorus 1

Peter had heard there were in London then
Workhouse-clearing men,

Chorus 2

Who, undisturbed by feelings just or kind,
Would parish-boys to needy tradesman bind;

Chorus 3

Their in their want a trifling sum would take,
And toiling slaves of piteous orphans make

Chorus 4

Such Peter sought, and when a lad was found
The sum was dealt him, and the slave was bound.

Chorus 3

The harbourside of the Borough, very late the next night.

The CHORUS leaves. The Harbourside, at night. The FOUR BOYS are playing quietly at the side of the stage. Enter JUSTICE CROMER and the THREE CONSTABLES.

FIRST CONSTABLE: Quiet night out tonight, Sir.

CROMER: Yes. The Borough is sleeping peacefully tonight. No-one about. In fact - perhaps it is better if the three of you were to leave me here at the harbourside; split up, why don't you; patrol in other parts of the town.

SECOND CONSTABLE: Aye Sir, very good.

After a moment's discussion, the CONSTABLES split, going different ways. One of them shoos away the boys. CROMER remains on stage alone, sitting at the water's edge. A clock chimes midnight.

CROMER: Past midnight, and Grimes is not yet back. This is where his ship is usually tied. The water laps contentedly against his berth. Calm out, but cold; wind might be getting up, they said in the Cross Keys. Catches aren't good at the moment though. Any fisherman who sets sail needs to be at

The Story of Peter Grimes

sea for a long time to make it worth his while. I think...I think it would be worthwhile to watch out for his return. (*He walks up and down for a while, banging his gloved hands together in the cold*). Bellman - the boy who was found dead at the water's edge some days back - was his second apprentice. The first was a wretch of a boy; he lived in hunger and pain, for three years it must have been - threatened and mistreated throughout that time, the Borough say; there were rumours, questions asked - how hard was he worked ? how little was he fed? how often was he beaten ? The Borough suspected much, but proved little; Grimes seemed unmoved by any of the gossip and rumours. Then, quite suddenly, that first boy died. Grimes said he found him lifeless in his bed. The remorse came only after Grimes learned of the suspicion afoot, the curses placed against his name. Now there are rumours that he has hired a third apprentice; that Carter Hopkins is bringing him from London today, that Mary Glemham will help Grimes to look after him. He is trying to hide this from the Borough; the court found that his first two apprentice boys both died by misadventure; but the Borough thinks he killed them, deliberately or through negligence, and they want his blood. And Grimes knows that they are after his blood.

During the last part of this speech, REVD. BRADWELL has emerged from the shadows. He approaches CROMER.

Reverend Bradwell. Unusual to find you out at this hour of the night. (*sarcastic*) Attending the sick and needy ?

BRADWELL: Justice Cromer.

CROMER: Cold out tonight, at any rate. But I expect that a clergyman's work is uninterrupted by a mere chill.

BRADWELL: Quite. It is certainly too cold for anyone but a half-crazed wretch to go fishing. (*pause*) You must be waiting for Peter Grimes to return.

CROMER: What rumours have you heard ?

BRADWELL: Only those that you have, I would imagine.

CROMER: The Borough will not stand for it if he takes on a third boy. They know he killed the first two.

The Story of Peter Grimes

BRADWELL: They think he killed the first two. The court found differently.

CROMER: The court can say what it likes. The Borough are the principal arbitrators in this matter.

BRADWELL: Are their feelings justified ?

CROMER: I am the Justice of this Borough and so I am part of the law. But I am also part of the Borough first and foremost, and if the Borough feels it needs to act when the law has let it down...

BRADWELL: You seem to have very little respect for your own position.

CROMER: I am guided by what I feel, not what I ought to feel.

BRADWELL: Thank God that not all of us think that way. Would you condone any action the Borough took ? Surely Grimes deserves our sympathy and a chance to start again ?

CROMER: And if he hires another apprentice ?

BRADWELL: He needs help in the boat; he cannot work alone.

CROMER: If you think that then you must help him yourself. You, and Mary Glemham, and the carter, will be the only ones on his side. And so you all must take the consequences too, if the Borough seeks vengeance against Grimes. They will seek vengeance against you, too.

BRADWELL: I think you are confusing punishment and vengeance, Justice Cromer. You seem to give covert support to the latter, which, for a Borough Justice, is both a worry and a surprise. I thought that the law was supposed to be above popular opinion...*(looking out to sea)* There is a boat approaching. Out by the harbour wall.