

Boston is famous for its 'Haven', which the dictionary tells me is 'a station for ships, a refuge, an asylum'. When I'm working in the town this autumn and have an hour to spare, I take a single lane drive to my haven: a patch of tussocky grass, oozing mud and grey water down Scalp Road, past the box of Halloween pumpkins and stacks of packing cases cryptically named 'Olga'. Fossilised threshing machines hide at the edge of farmyards and wagon wheels, missing spokes, lean on axles spongy with rot. Flocks of sheep scavenge the sprouts; a puffed out thrush tops a fencepost. I come to a halt, pointing the bonnet towards the opposite bank where eight horses graze seawards. A sensibly jacketed woman drags out huge hounds on ropes from the back of her white van. Cocooned in their Astra, a couple sip tea from the cup that comes with the thermos and, at the end of the field, a stark granite pillar sparkled with mica points skywards. These are the words chiselled into it, in a livelier and less informative style: 'Here began the good ol' U.S. of A. Here the Scrooby Flock had their plans scuppered for the first time but not the last.'

The Scrooby Flock were not sheep with a fleece problem but a group of seventeenth century Separatists named after the patch of land they hailed from near the river Trent. They believed no bishop, council or sovereign should come between man and God and had been beaten up repeatedly for saying so. They must have stood near the picnic table where I'm sitting and talked about the land of milk and honey they were headed for. I imagine their wet cloaks clinging to bony thinness shaped by roots and gritty bread, hear a small boy whimpering, smell their travelled rankness and marvel at their weirdly Christ fired determination.

*'Come out from among them; be ye separate and touch not the unclean',*

wrote St. Paul and they took him at his word. History books call them The Pilgrim Fathers but on that chilly September night in 1607 they were

mothers, daughters and sons too. And they were scared. The much desired voyage over the high and risky seas to find an 'ancient purity' was about to come to an abrupt end even before their hired vessel slipped anchor.

The tide's in, which gives me the chance to watch the to and fro of ships. The Pinta, Gibraltar registered, carrying a cargo of pine trunks, eases herself slowly Bostonwards. The Union-Elisabeth slides out, empty, faster. The Rosita's high in the water. The ample sloop of the river Witham can no longer be described as a creek. She was dredged, straightened and battered into a useable wide ditch by John Rennie during the great steam powered frenzy of Queen Victoria's reign. Now she's straight as a length of steel bar from the Black Sluice to the Wash. But when the Scrooby Flock tried to make their getaway that September she was deep and sluggish. She was unpredictably devious, like the Dutch captain they'd booked. They'd made their way on carts from a quiet valley in a remote corner of Nottinghamshire, slipped past isolated farms and hamlets, kept themselves to themselves. They waited softly in the dark, shuffling their feet, and they prayed for God's help in their new life. They wouldn't have noticed the sea lavender and glasswort by the dim light of their candle lamps and if they spotted an oyster catcher, it can only have been by recognising the moon cast shadow of its sickle beak on the mud. But the salt marsh plants rustled and the waders carried on dipping under the stars, oblivious to this turning point of history.

The Scrooby Flock were 'illegal emigrants', a phrase which has no resonance for us. The Dutchman took their money and shipped them to the soldier-police, the catchpoles, who rowed out of Boston in open boats, boarded the uncaptured vessel, felt up the women, arrested the men and ripped the coins from their shirts. They flung their treasured books into the mud.

The local citizenry hung out of their windows when they reached the town's streets, woken up by the commotion. Records tell us the authorities made the Flock 'a spectacle and wonder to the multitude'. No doubt one hater poured a pot of his bodily fluids over their heads. It was a night out William Brewster and William Bradford would not want to remember, locked in the Guildhall dungeon, shivering in their own stink, definitely not on their way to a New England. Women and children trundled back to Scrooby in the carts and after a couple of unpleasant weeks underground the men were given a pompous ticking off by the Assizes before they walked back to the banks of the river Trent. But their night out at Scotia Creek strengthened their resolve. Thirteen years, and a couple more attempts later, they would finally board the Mayflower on the south coast and make it all the way across the big pond to Plymouth Rock, where they began the serious work of constructing the most powerful nation on earth. The passengers on that most famous of ships, many of them economic and not spiritual migrants, were known as 'Strangers'.

Shaggy brown cows fan out around the byre between the memorial field and the river. The Mary Angus is on her way in, a long strip of emerald green against the line of poplars. The Stump, higher than the cranes in the docks, waymarks her destination. Now all commercial vessels on the river Witham are 'conned' by Boston and Spalding pilots, who board fast launches in the Wash. That's 'conned' as in 'guided safely in', not fleeced and betrayed.

The world is fuller than ever of emigrants looking for a haven or a better standard of living somewhere over the sea. Some of them drink in 'The Stump and Candle' and 'The Volunteer' in Boston. And somewhere, by a creek at night, a mother is always breaking gritty bread for her children, shaking with fear but determined to start anew, somewhere better, somewhere else.