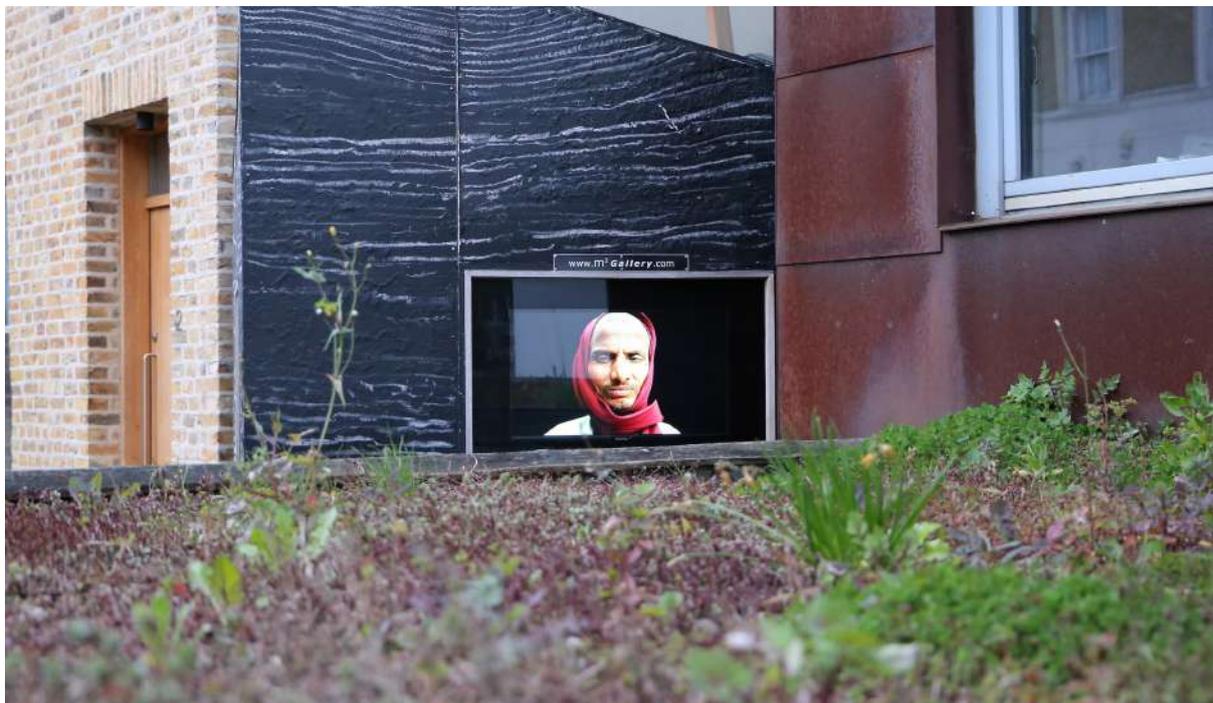


Walking with the Other: Like Shadows and Ghosts, the Urban Foxes' of South London

“...sleeping on the roadside with their human brethren, these streets dogs are more laid back and yet more wary than any out of town dog. Sharing the streets with a constant flow of strangers and with a population of street people, is more intense, more demanding but with certain opportune recompenses. And those ears, pricking, flexed, muscled, limp, constantly twitching with anticipation and with all their individual micro expression. Each Dog, welcoming, with their own way of cocking their head and saying hello.” ([Street News from Kolkata](#))

It's getting used to the silence, or what we take for it, in a city like London, a sudden lack of traffic, silence in the skies, no pubs, restaurants, places of meeting open late at night, just the occasional roar, and that blast of searchlamps from the empty night buses chasing shadows across the sleeping streets. I have left my front door, just like this, many times before, to step out into the evening and take in the stilled air. The city is a different place now, surrounded and teeming with an otherness that will not be tamed. But tonight, it is colder again, like winter has returned and I sense that the foxes I have been following over the past nights, would be less active. No takeaway bags and leftovers at the Two Sisters Indian, the shy individual I spied there has evaporated into the orange sodium mist.

They, and the other nocturnal fauna living alongside us, are the others I walk with now at night and I will make my way with them and around them, as I climb alone over Nunhead Hill and drop down toward Brockley Station. Carrying a camera to capture something of this hidden activity; I walk steadily, becoming comfortable to hearing only ones' footfall, the sound of your breathing – air chilled – circulates in your chest. Footpads, cat burglars, stalkers, hunters of the night will catch their breath like this, but I am on the lookout for the solitary, on the prowl, fox or vixen, the occasional couple.



The streets marvellously quiet have taken on a hyper real quality as if you are walking through a vast film lot suddenly abandoned by the cast and crew. It's not true though, this sur-real. The spectacle was only ever temporary. For now, we are entering the realm of padded feet with softened concealed claws, eye to eye, what does this vixen see? Her ears and nose alerted to the onlooker, she wears a nonchalant but wary gaze. These Vulpes are not street dogs used to interacting and serving their masters but animals surviving on their terms, across all manner of terrain. They are wild, that is, other. We will not be patting them or feeding them biscuits from the hand. These scavengers, omnivorous savage skippers have become the 'dumpster diving' masters of inner and outer London. They have no regard to law or custom, to the niceties of recycling and trash disposal. They hold to another regime – more [Skipping](#), practising their creative use of human detritus. Every morning you can see the evidence of their crafted uses of our squandering – ripped bin bags, their innards sprayed across the streets - are the forensic bone and carcass of consumerism. They regurgitate the city's waste in a night time of archaeological dismembering. In the lockdown city, humans trapped inside, will there be less discarded food waste for them to gorge on?



[M2 Gallery](#) – Still showing work to passing creatures. “Giving Back to the Streets”

When working in Marseille I was surprised to see so many people going through the bins, sometimes with trolleys, carts and filled bags, collecting and sifting a life out of others waste. Common in other parts of the world but in the wealthy heart of Europe? In France, the laws established by the Revolution allow for the right of gleaning – active use of excess produce - even in open fields and on private property collecting food that would otherwise rot is seen as a legal right, but in the Anglo-Saxon culture such frugality is usually treated as property theft. In step with the nocturnal fox we can see the world turned sideways, the world of the homeless, squeezed between buildings, in the hidden passageways, in between, tunnelled into and camped out in overlooked corridors. Somehow, they make their way alongside the ever-turning indifferent city. Of course, this gleaning is going on here but it's not something you witness so brazenly – it is definitely not encouraged – but like the 'sly' fox waiting for night to contribute to the city's eco-system, skippers play their unique role in exposing the other

daylight robbery of inequity, inequality and waste. Normally, foxes only really appear around dusk, slipping through their territories with a nonchalant ease, in search of daily food to be eaten or cached. So near to the vernal equinox they have as much time by night to enjoy, as day to relax and sleep. In the summer, it becomes more frantic, they can be found prowling around in daylight looking for a free meal, competing with seagulls, pigeons and rats.

This restless research – night into day – going out into the darkened streets to escape into wholly other world, as if I am in a dreamscape, the unconscious ripped through the surface of the everyday. I wander, with light companionable steps, following these night prowlers, drawn into their trails, down and out of back alleys, round corners, into estates I did not know with all their intricate hidden desire lines laid out across the common parts. Like the Street Dogs in India we are in the presence of animals living on the margins of human civilisation, adapted, comfortable; able to create effective temporary structures in which to survive and thrive – half in or on and half out of our self-centred anthropocentric world. And how we are taken out of selves when we see them, stopping to observe; that way of being arrested by the stranger, face to face we feel something, some thread and kinship. Half animal/half companion and nevertheless we are only ever able to glimpse this other consciousness in a reverie of acute observation.

Following, street dogs in North India I was privileged to see how:

“...the Dogs evolved but without the regime of strict domestication, closer to Coyote and Wild Dog cousins, these village street dogs that litter North India have their own way of living in the complex hierarchy of modern Indian Society. They are the true heirs of the Cynics, eating, sleeping and copulating as and when they see fit, adapting easily to the situations they find themselves in.” ([The Cynics of Rajasthan, 2018](#))

The fog of human life – the typhos the Cynics fought against, in all its unnecessary artificiality – lifts, and in night calm you begin to see the city in another light. Lucid, with a spring in the step, you can practice *eudaimonia* and sharpen your mind with revitalised lucidity (*atyfia*). Light is a factor at night in so many ways. From entering streets and passing one Borough or housing estate into another, the quality of lighting alters dramatically. It is partly the eye and partially the way the camera processes the intensity and colour saturations. As I enter Hilly Fields the light drops dramatically and you enter a night scape without street lighting. From East to West and North to South, swivelling, you can see stripes and layers of illumination. In the near foreground, on the edge of the common, terraces lit up with lamps, then a grey darkness; again, in the far distance, silhouetted on the horizon a string of red lights, the tops of skyscrapers and the cranes used to construct them pinpointed by warning lights.



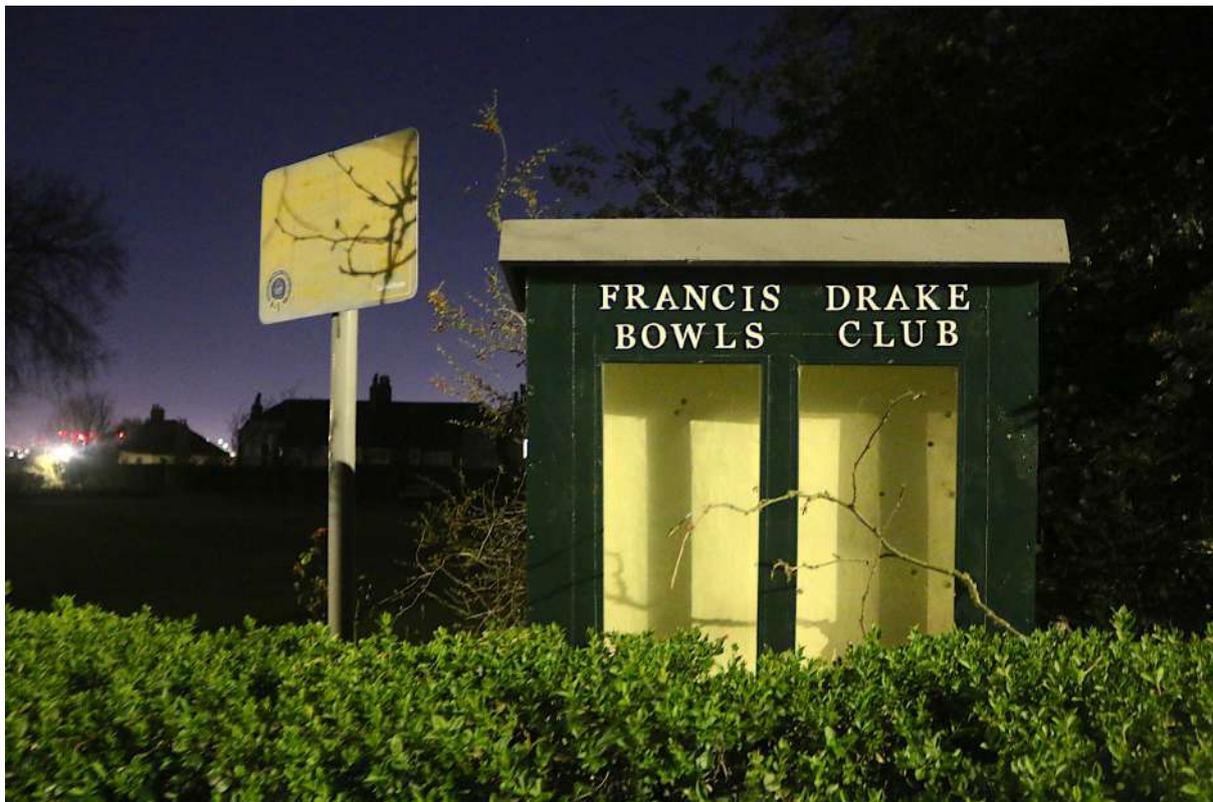
Light pollution is still prevalent in lockdown and I wonder how it might be to be here with all the lighting turned down or even switched off. Just as the skies are almost completely free of the noise pollution of air jets, why not free the night sky from its pall of pale luminescence. On a moonlit night, the human eye becomes accustomed to seeing and sensing just as the fox. Unfortunately, we do not have the same acute night vision as the cat-like fox.



On Hilly Fields the inspiral trail falls toward Lewisham, to the gentle cut made by the Ravensbourne River. As I cross the fields, pass the café shed, I see a single fox gliding across the grass. Too dark to film but I stay stock still, watching. It stops, it must have my scent, turning its head quickly, freezing. He/she has seen me and darts quickly away in to the scrubby copse. Foxes can run at over 45 miles per hour, springing and jumping, as agile as any feline. But unlike the cat they are monogamous, and here, just behind, cantering across the turf comes his/her partner. Working together, they look out for each other, backing up and calibrating danger, dissolving into the darkness, they can disappear in an instant:

“an adult fox can get through a hole 10 cm square, and scale a 2 metre high wall or fence with comparative ease.” ([Birmingham & Black Country Wildlife Trust](#))

In the urban forest, it is less other predators or lack of food, but disease, unexpected encounters with traffic or dogs that cause most grievous injury or even mortality. The myths and prejudice against the urban fox as a threat: hunting in packs, attacking people and killing indiscriminately, has a long tradition – the cunning fox as scapegoat¹. It was headline news in London - on a hot June night in 2010 a fox had apparently attacked two children in a house by Victoria Park. This article – [Invasion of Urban Foxes](#) - written for the Guardian gives a fair idea of the panic and hysteria attending such rare encounters. Foxes though curious and cheeky are not ordinarily aggressive in this way, only defending themselves if cornered, whereas dogs bred for their aggressive fighting behaviour can turn on anyone or anything without warning. There is something of the human in domesticated dog behaviour that a wild ‘dog’ like the *vulpes vulpes*, shy, cautious, opportunists never display. Nevertheless, or precisely because of their ‘nature’ they remain convenient scapegoats for our more destructive aggressions.

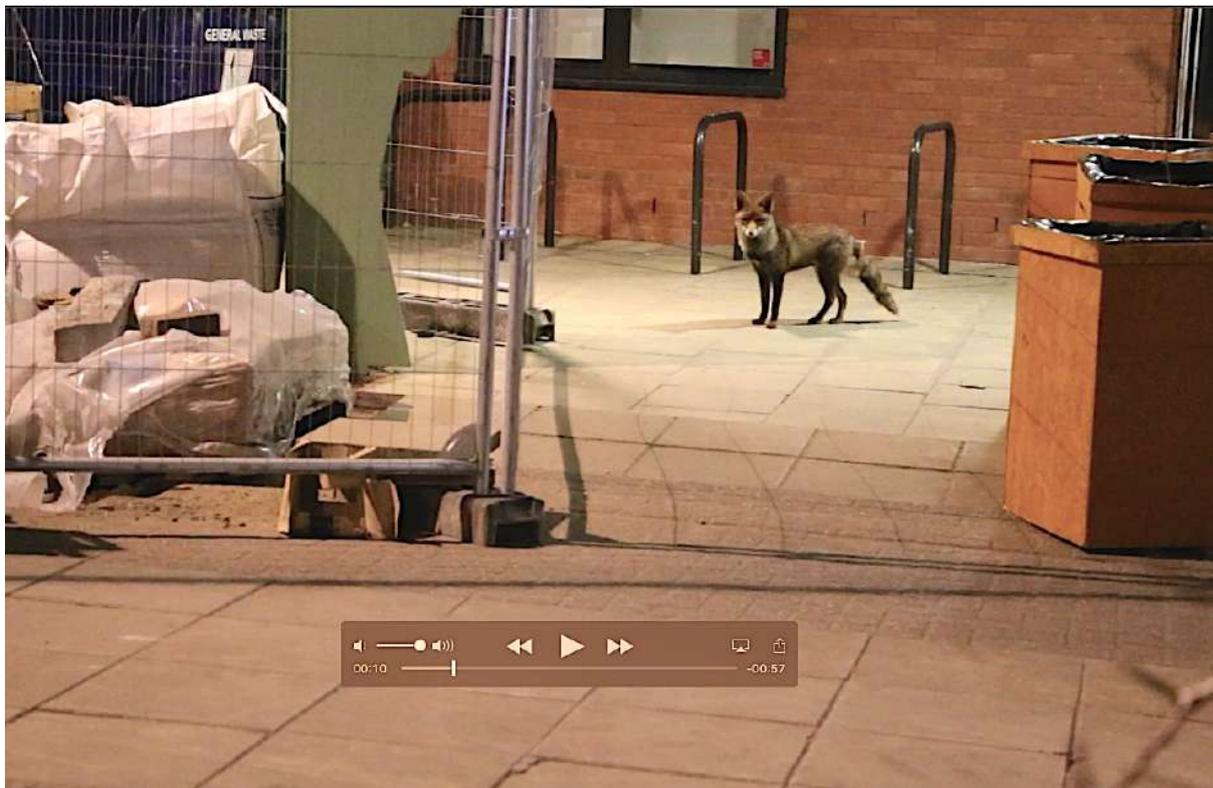


Here near Elverson Road I turn back toward home. I am returning along the side roads towards Brockley Cross. Who else is out at the is hour. I have seen no rats or other rodents, the occasional cat, straying onto the emptied streets. It’s only then that I disturb an old fox

lurking under a car perhaps with some prize morsel – the fox’s eyes fixed on me with a wizened look; two foxes together, one territory. We back away from each other, slowly, slipping away from each other. This practice of walking with strangers or walking in order to encounter strangers has very little to do with urban flaneurie, a particular night walking, in the pleasure of encountering the nocturnal city bustle, illuminated by glistening artificial light. No, it is a kind of shadow walking, on the edge of human vision, outside the curfew:

“The city at night in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries became flamboyant. In Europe’s main thoroughfares, the demise of the curfew was dramatically confirmed. During a visit to London in 1786,..., the German novelist Sophie von La Roche – positively marvelled at the sight of the ‘eternal stream of coaches; and the mass of people processing along Oxford Street at 11 pm.”

In the easy fog of night – one now must make the best of a curfew – out of this miasma the question becomes how much one should collaborate or openly resist current strictures, or to balance one’s response somewhere in the in-between. In Donna Haraway’s philosophy of animal companionship the need for mutual interaction is counter-balanced with the desire to overcome the strangeness of our relationships with animal otherness through acts of enthusiasm and over-exuberant coupling, but without anthropocentrism – echoing with deep ecology or deep listening. When we enter this web, there is nothing that is not possible, nothing too outlandish or preposterous. From the melancholic vista of anthropocentric extinctions comes a vision of cross-species fertilisations and parasitic graftings. (John Russell – [SQRL text & film](#)). How then to take account of this radical thinking in the real? Intervention and perambulatory discourse? How to make our steps light enough to make some real difference, and yet to leave no unnecessary mark or impress.



Film Still: of Fox skipping at building site ‘General Waste’

I have noticed a particular dancing move that all the foxes seem to make in our encounters – as they stare at you, fixed in wary concentration, they suddenly turn their bodies 180 degrees; then pausing backs turned for an instant, swivel their heads 180 degrees with eyes fixed

directly back toward me. Then they retreat, and sometimes do this manoeuvre again and again, until they slip away out of sight. This must be some signal they use to say - backing off peacefully on my terms - and it is a lovely technique, of feinting to go and then checking back on what you are doing. It's very like the movements of a human attempting to steal up on someone, or another animal, that rapid movement then stillness - like children playing blindman's bluff. Perhaps something of the daft unfathomable, that we humans share with foxes, as we walk through our cities?



[International Day of the Smile](#): approaches to laughter (rire), and underlaughter (sourire)

On the following night, I return along segment 6, running toward Peckham and skirting Burgess Park where I stop to let a couple pass. Looking up I observe bats, pipistrelles hunting high above the old Baptist Church, now converted into a mosque. A group of men are drinking outside at the football club's open air changing room. I pass without acknowledging them. As I emerge from the park, I spot a fox sniffing through the cars parked at the back of the old North Peckham Estate. A taxi driver – in his Addison Lee people carrier, ticking over – sits looking at his mobile, oblivious. The shadow flits and dissolves. Through the new housing around the Damiola Taylor Centre I wander briskly toward the centre of Peckham, a Jamaican Takeaway - Soul Food and Jerk Chicken - is still open. Somewhere at the back there, someone is talking very loudly on their mobile phone, across the darkness an aggressive glowing. I think, soothingly to pass by Persepolis – an [I Love Peckham](#) institution – maybe I can buy some millet flour? Thinking how Persian New Year was celebrated - on 20th March - but in what circumstances? The images of masked artists painting giant eggs on the streets of Tehran swim into view. How is Iran coping with this? The news cycle is now shutdown to any objective information, filled only with inane press conferences – offering a cynical diet of half-truths and platitudes. At least the Iranian Health Minister wore a mask when broadcasting to the nation.

Sally Butcher the spirit of Persepolis – [Persia in Peckham](#) one of the most enthusiastic and welcoming collaborators on social art work; my favourite and arguably most successful ‘community’ art project - [SMILE MORE PLEASE](#) –survives as a poster in the shop window for over ten years. This mantra poster inspired by the commentary in Sally’s first Persian cookbook. The poster is now entirely obscured by the dark green shutters. I attempt to take a picture through the grill – but I am startled as walk on to see Sally and her husband at the shop entrance. They are not apparitions. I say a half-hello of greeting but they seem startled – who is this shadowy figure out at night? Later I look online - the shop has been shut since the 20th March. A trilogy of emotion floods from me: Smile More Please Laugh Now Please, Cry Less Now, thinking of those we have lost on the way: we are nothing without feeling.



So, now I turn up Peckham High Street hopefully, passed a butcher’s shop still open – carcasses hanging in the garish fluorescent light. A woman in a mask sits in her car waiting for her order. All the other shops seem to be shuttered and its nearly 9pm, but passing under the Station Bridge, Khans Bargains the cornucopia of all shops is still open for business, and its art-deco interior and ceiling gleams with fresh paint. This gem of a shop, stretches back perhaps 40 metres and was scheduled for re-development in the 1990’s but remains a haven of Afghan hospitality. I get talking to the cashier and ask him how’s it’s all been going? He sees I have my camera and insists I take his photo. Obliginglly I try my best, so here Savgand is your portrait and thanks to the card you wrote on [‘Khans – The Store of the People’](#) I have your email address to return.

Just as the street dogs of London, such shops survive against the odds: such are our urban foxes, transplanted from the country, watching and waiting, observing shrewdly, surviving on the city's profligacy, they hover around us silently, mostly ghostly figures that in Spring burst into our dulled consciousness with howl, cry, yip and scream. How the margins then, become centre stage, with growls and joyful shrieks. Long may Khans and all the small independent shops of Peckham remain open and long life to all our fellow creatures, the foxes of South London, inshallah.

Savgand's Portrait:



Postscript:

This walk is for you Baptiste and for you Paul – Metropolitan Trails – with all that restless spirit of enquiry, looking forward – [wildprojects](#) and the wild coupling Lanaspeze & Lavessière. All of this, no longer wild or quite so marginal... walking antidotes for all life by moving towards our futures together, in shadow step, with other lives.

Reflections on Midnight Walking - Tuesday 31 March; following Wednesday 1 April on Segment 11 & at dusk on Friday 2 April 2020 on Segment 6.

Over the next weeks counterproductions will write and send a walk-a-week to all our friends in MTAcademy.



Charlie Fox (all photos © counterproductions 5 April 2020)

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Elkin, Lauren (2016) *Flaneuse – Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*, Vintage.

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Haraway, Donna (2016) *Staying with the Trouble; Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press.

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Lanaspeze, Baptiste (2012) *Ville Sauvage – Marseille: Essai d'écologie urbaine*, Actes Sud.

Lavessière, Paul-Hervé (2014) *La Revolution de Paris*, Wildprojects.

Lives and Writings of the Cynics -

http://lucianofsamosata.info/wiki/doku.php?id=cynics:cynic_lives

Urban Fox life & welfare.

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/jun/07/invasion-urban-foxes>

<http://www.nfws.org.uk/>

ⁱ I have first-hand experience of this apparent phenomenon – my daughter, Marguerite and her friends were attacked and gored by an animal, while camping outside, in a terrace garden near Loughborough Junction. They had gone to sleep late but sometime after midnight one of her friends re-entered the house, now covered in blood. Still half asleep and possibly in shock it was obvious something strange had happened. The tent they were in, was found to be covered entirely with blood, in the bedding and on the lining, mostly from the child's head wounds, but also from a deep bite wound on Marguerite's arm. This punch mark on her wrist, a classic double puncture - fang tooth mark like a vampire bite - was considered too wide for a fox by the A & E doctor who later tended to the wound. But despite this evidence, everyone insisted it must have been a fox attack. Even when Marguerite drew a picture of the animal that had entered their tent - she had woken up, and startled by her it had left the tent – the image had an uncanny likeness to a classic pitbull terrier. That night two doors down a party had been attended by a number of dogs including a pitbull and one had been seen in the back of the garden. At that time I remember reading this article to see if foxes really were likely or capable of such unprovoked aggression – Invasion of the Urban Foxes – “scavenging pest that is now responsible for a shocking attack on two babies asleep in their beds” (Patrick Barkham, [Guardian online 7 June 2010](#)). I will always maintain that the perpetrator was undoubtedly a dog – a terrier – having myself been attacked often by dogs of all shapes and sizes, and been tracked by a pack of dogs on two separate occasions I have first-hand knowledge of their menace and aggression.