

The Country Under the Fishing Grounds

PASSAGE · NON-FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Critical analysis

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 28 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about eight minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

In the winter of 1931 a trawler called the Colinda was working the Leman and Ower Banks, some forty kilometres off the coast of Norfolk, when its net came up carrying a lump of hard black peat. The skipper broke the lump open and found inside it a shaped point of antler, barbed along one edge, of the sort a hunter would have fitted to a shaft. It was not a curiosity dropped from a boat. Peat forms in bogs, not on the floor of a sea, and a tool sealed inside peat must have been lost on dry land. The North Sea, it followed, had once been somewhere a person could walk.

Fishermen had been hauling such material up for generations and calling it *moorlog*, bog-wood, without troubling over what it implied. Then, in 1998, the archaeologist Bryony Coles gave the drowned ground a name — Doggerland, after the Dogger Bank — and published maps that treated it as a country rather than a gap between two coasts. On her maps it has rivers, estuaries, reedbeds, lakes and low chalk hills. For thousands of years it was among the better places in northern Europe to be a hunter, and it joined eastern England to the European mainland.

Mapping it in detail became possible because of an industry with no interest in antler points. Companies prospecting for oil and gas had shot three-dimensional seismic survey across tens of thousands of square kilometres of the southern North Sea, bouncing sound down through the seabed to find structures far below anything a hunter ever saw. From 2001 a team led by Vince Gaffney, at Birmingham and later Bradford, began reading the uppermost few metres of that data instead. Out of it came a river they named the Southern River, traceable for dozens of kilometres, with lake basins, tidal channels, salt marsh and island shorelines.

The drowning was not a single event. As the last ice sheets melted, sea level climbed — at times by more than a metre a century — and a plain with almost no gradient drowns in an unnerving way. A metre of water can take kilometres of ground, so a family's fishing camp could sit inland in a grandfather's youth and under salt water by his old age. By

about eight thousand years ago the great plain had been reduced to the Dogger Bank, standing as a long island in an open sea.

Then, roughly eight thousand one hundred and fifty years ago, an enormous slab of the continental slope away to the north-east gave way and slid into deep water, displacing enough sea to send a wave south. Geologists know it from a signature rather than a record: a sheet of marine sand lying where no sand belongs, sealed inside peat bogs in Shetland and in coastal lake beds down the eastern seaboard of Britain, in places several metres above the shoreline of the day. In 2020 a core taken offshore, from the old Southern River valley, produced the same intrusive layer.

Two readings sit on that layer of sand. The first makes the wave the end of Doggerland: a low, waterlogged island struck by a surge that salted its soil, wrecked its camps and finished what the sea had been doing slowly. The second points out that most of Doggerland had already gone, that the island was by then small, and that in the 2020 core the marine sand is overlain by freshwater sediment again — ground that went back to being ground. On that reading the wave was one terrible morning in a long retreat, and the final separation came later, quietly, at millimetres a year.

What keeps the question open is the shape of the evidence. There is no excavated settlement to work from; the cores are a few centimetres across and stand in for a country. Radiocarbon dates carry uncertainties of a century or more, useless against an event that lasted hours, and the sediments that would settle it lie beneath metres of mobile sand in a busy shipping lane. Teams now sieve the mud for ancient DNA and read hazel, oak and grasses out of it. The trawlers, meanwhile, still bring up moorlog. Most of it goes back over the side.

Cover the passage before you start.
Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A **Tell it back**

Write down everything you can remember about Doggerland — what was found, how the drowned land was mapped, and why the argument about the wave has not been settled. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B **7 questions**

- 1 What was pulled up off Norfolk in 1931, and what was it inside?

- 2 Why did a tool sealed inside peat tell archaeologists something that a tool simply lying on the seabed would not have told them?

- 3 The passage says geologists know the wave “from a signature rather than a record”. What does the word signature suggest about that kind of evidence?

- 4 The passage ends by saying that trawlers still bring up moorlog and most of it goes back over the side. What tone does that ending create, and why might the writer have chosen it?

- 5 Weigh the two readings of the sand layer against each other. Which is better supported by the evidence you were given?

- 6 Almost everything known about Doggerland's landscape comes from data collected by oil and gas companies for an entirely different purpose. Evaluate what that does to the reliability and the limits of the picture.

- 7 Suppose a team announced that a single new core had dated the sand layer to within twenty years. Using the passage's own reasoning, say what that would settle and what it would not.

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • The trawler Colinda brought up a lump of hard black peat from the Leman and Ower Banks, about forty kilometres offshore, and sealed inside it was a barbed point of antler — a hunter's tool.
- ☐ 2 • Peat forms in bogs on land, so anything sealed inside it was buried while the ground was dry. A tool lying loose on the seabed could have been dropped from a boat at any time, but one encased in peat must have been lost before the sea arrived, which dates it to a period when that part of the North Sea was walkable land.
- ☐ 3 • A signature is a mark something leaves behind that identifies it, rather than an account of what it did. The sheet of out-of-place marine sand proves the wave came through and is unmistakably its mark, but it carries no detail about the event itself — no duration, no height at any given place, no description. You can identify the author and learn almost nothing about the deed.
- ☐ 4 • It is deliberately flat and unexcited, and it carries a quiet irony. After seismic surveys, ancient DNA and a long scholarly argument, the oldest source of evidence is still being thrown away by people who have other work to do. The writer refuses to turn it into a lesson or a lament, which leaves the reader with the sense of an enormous subject still mostly unexamined.
- ☐ 5 • The second reading is better supported on this evidence. The passage establishes that sea level had already reduced Doggerland to a single island well before the slide, so the wave cannot have done most of the work, and the 2020 core shows freshwater sediment returning above the marine sand — direct evidence that the land was still land afterwards. The first reading is not baseless: the surge was large enough to leave sand metres above the shoreline hundreds of kilometres away, and salted soil and wrecked camps would matter enormously on a low island. The fair conclusion is that the wave was a severe episode within a drowning that was already nearly complete, and that calling it the end confuses a dramatic cause with a sufficient one.
- ☐ 6 • It makes the picture unusually broad and unusually uneven. The surveys cover tens of thousands of square kilometres, far more than any archaeological budget could, and because they were shot to find deep structures nobody chose the coverage to suit a theory about rivers or camps — which removes one kind of bias. But the resolution was set for targets far deeper, so the top few metres are read at the edge of what the method can see: large features such as river valleys and lake basins appear, while anything the size of a dwelling or a hearth cannot. The result is a reliable map of a landscape and almost no evidence of people in it, which is why interpretation has to lean on stray finds like the Colinda point.
- ☐ 7 • It would settle the timing of the wave at that one spot, and so tighten the comparison between the slide and the broader record of sea-level rise — useful, because the current uncertainty of a century or more is wider than the event itself. It would not settle the argument. The question in dispute is how much the wave changed, not when it arrived, and a core is a few centimetres of a country: one precisely dated column cannot show how far the surge reached, how long the soil stayed salt, or whether people returned. By the passage's logic the decisive evidence would be many cores across the old island showing what happened above the sand layer, not one date, however exact.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY **Compress then expand**

When you have finished reading, force the whole passage down to a single line — nine words, no more — and write it out. Then cover the passage, put your line in front of you, and expand it back into everything you can reach. Compressing makes you decide what the centre of the material actually is, and expanding from your own summary shows you precisely which parts you had not taken in, because those are the ones that refuse to come back.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Where do you already compress something down to one line before you use it — a match, a film you recommend, a week you describe to a friend? What tends to drop out when you do, and is it always the unimportant part?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your student read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, tone and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.