

Lucy and Gwen.

Gwen Stratford sucked her pencil. The curve of the Pied Avocet's beak wasn't quite right, a degree between natural and forced. The late afternoon breeze nuzzled her sketch book. Time to finish for the day, time for fish and chips.

She dumped her gear on the table, locked the door to her Gran's bubble-gum shaded beach-hut and crossed the sands. A trot along the raised-mile-walk past the ultra-modern lifeboat station turned duel as Gwen raced the narrow-gauge train returning rock-pink tourists to town.

The maltings glowed in cliched pastels. Landscape artists would be having babies, 'the light', but Gwen was content with her commissioned Bitterns and Lapwings. A tumult was going down on the quayside as a barge-crane, span a colossal sculpture into position on the harbour sands.

Gwen eavesdropped, as the harbourmaster waxed lyrical. "Raised fifteen Grand to keep it here. 'The Last Lifeboat Horse'. Five teams of two used to pull the ten-ton carriage and boat, sometimes two and a half miles to where it was launched. The horses used to race the crew to the gates at the back of the station when the alarm rockets went off."

The metal framed horse, three meters high, draped in oak beer barrels was a beauty. It spontaneously drew recollections; illustrations on dust-covers - her childhood books.

Gwen drowned her chips in vinegar and one hand on fork, one hand on phone, googled 'last lifeboat horse'.

She inhaled abruptly, raising looks from the other diners.

A straight arm pointed to a shipwreck; stage left.

The sea at a rolling boil, crashed over the fetlocks of hulking draft-horses; grandparents of the sculpture.

The crew cajoled the train. A lifeboat launched, rudder first. Lives to save.

Gwen scrolled. The Call, Aristocrats; many others.

Gwen's metier was painting wildlife; birds were currently flavour of the month but several equine canvasses grazed her studio. Stubbs, Munnings, Degas and Gericault's The Derby she knew well. She vaguely heard of Herkomer but Lucy Kemp-Welch? With a flick of her thumb, Lucy's Wikipedia page popped up as did Bushey Museum.

Gwen considered; two-hours-thirty-six-minutes, one-hundred-and-twenty-seven-miles away - fastest route A11.



