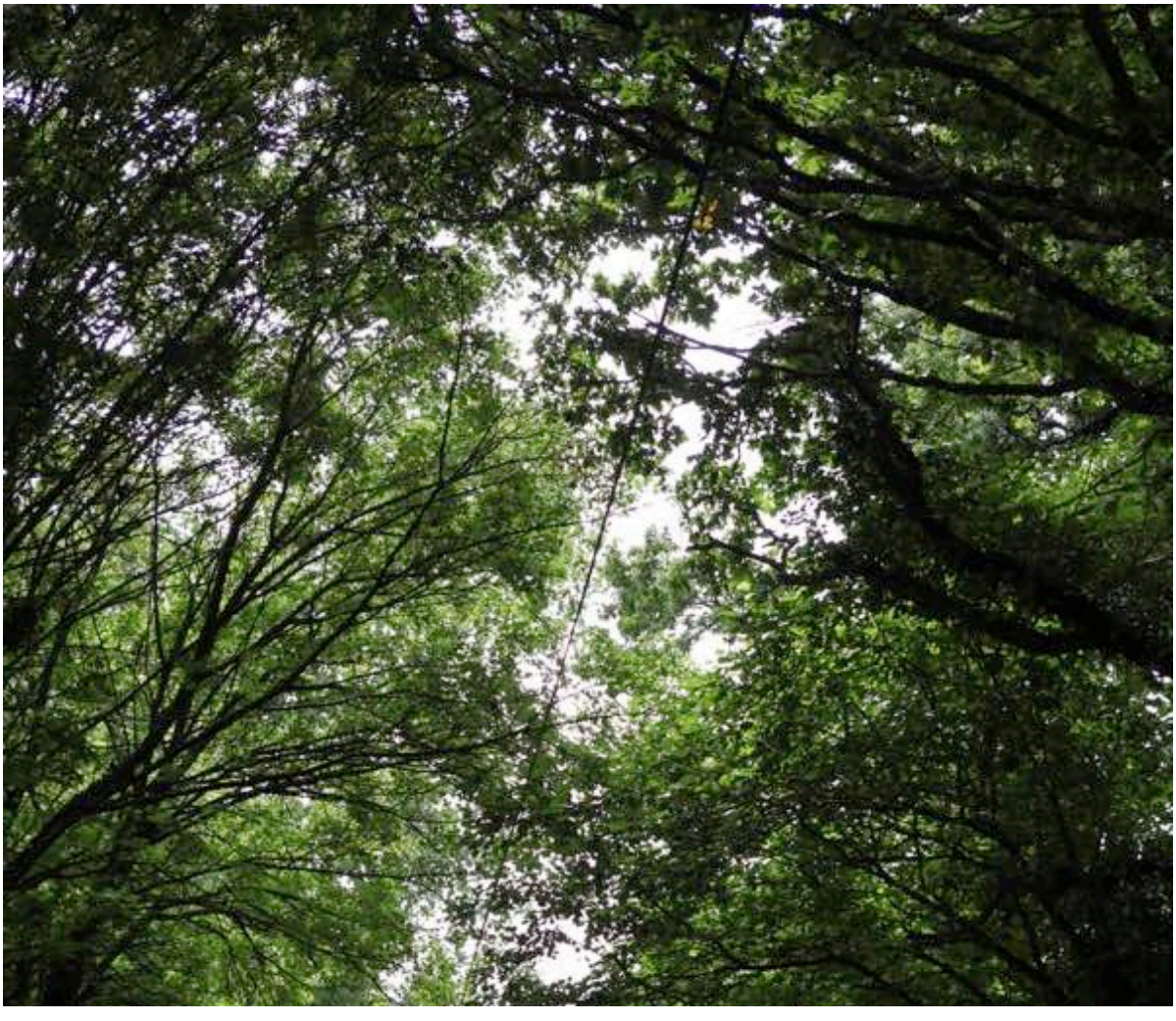
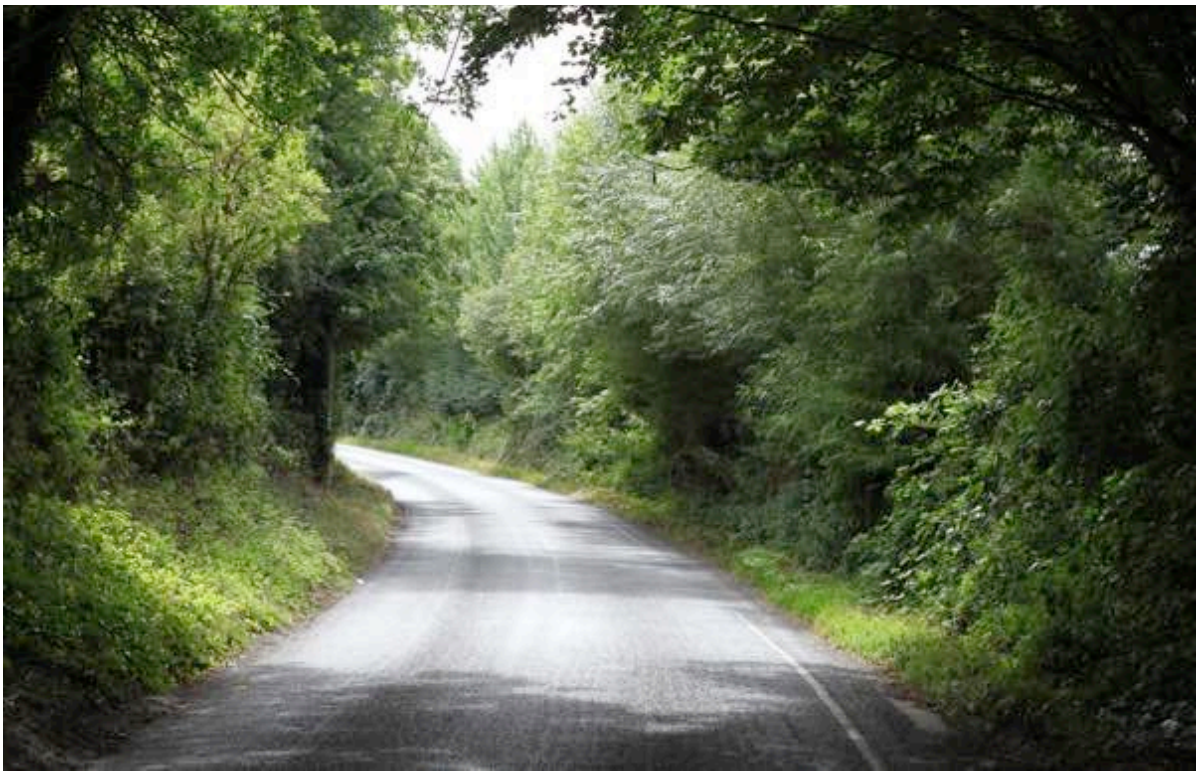
Spitalfields Life

An Excursion To Tudeley

by the gentle author

Today I publish an account of my last assignment with Photographer ***Colin O'Brien****, who died last week, a day's excursion with a coachload of East Enders picking blackcurrants in Kent organised by Company Drinks. Details of a Memorial Service for Colin O'Brien will be announced in the autumn.*





Colin & I met at quarter-to-eight, in the cool of the morning, at Empress Coaches in Bethnal Green and were the driver's only passengers until we reached Dagenham, where he pulled up on the pavement next to the library and eager blackcurrant pickers embarked clutching their pots and bags.

Mid-morning, the coach was winding down a Kentish farm lane and all seemed well until an autocratic landowner driving a four-by-four pulled up beside us, exasperated at being unable to pass. When it was explained that we were a coachload of blackcurrant gleaners, he feigned alarm as if had caught a gang of thieves red-handed and, after a tense conversation with various agricultural employees, it became clear that we were expected at a neighbouring farm. As the coach returned down the lane, Colin & I drew great amusement in imagining this 'gentleman farmer,' breathing a sigh of relief that no 'dirty cockneys' would get their hands on his blackcurrants this year.

Arriving at our destination, we passed through the tiny village of Tudeley, lined with twisted weather-boarded cottages, before we saw the field of blackcurrants, stretched out in long lines and harbouring their purple fruit beneath dense foliage. These rows had already been picked mechanically several times, as we could tell by the thousands of blackcurrants littering the ground, but since it was no longer viable to harvest the bushes again this season we were permitted to glean the remaining fruit that would otherwise go to waste.

With barely a word, everyone set to work, pleased to be in the fresh air after sitting on the coach and excited by the prospect of blackcurrants. Pulling back branches revealed purple fruit hanging in the shade, sharp on the tongue yet irresistibly tangy. A disparate bunch, we were all unified in our delight at blackcurrants and took the opportunity to taste as many as we could, occasionally whooping with joy to discover branches heavy with fruit

concealed beneath the leaves.

Colin worked his way up and down the rows with his camera, and had no problem finding subjects who were eager to show off their precious harvest of blackcurrants, while I picked pint-sized cups of fruit which I donated to boost the haul of some younger pickers.

At lunchtime, while Colin & I took a break from the heat of the sun in the shade of a hedge, eating our sandwiches with the other pickers, I confessed to him that I had spied a beautiful country pub far away across the field and I could not resist the thought that it would a very attractive prospect to pay a visit for refreshment. Colin confided that to me that the very same thought had occurred to him and confirmed that he had taken his set of portraits. Yet we both agreed that we felt uncomfortable admitting this idea to the other pickers, even though we had effectively completed our assignment.

Consulting the map of Tudeley, while munching my sandwiches, I noticed that there was a church at the centre of the village. *'Why don't we go for a walk up the road and visit the church?'* I suggested to Colin and then, with his assent, we made our departure from the group, explaining our purpose and sloping off down the lane. *'Shall we go in and have a drink now or shall we visit the church first?'* I asked Colin once we arrived at the pub. *'Let's walk up to the church first,'* Colin decided, and I dutifully accompanied him up the hill, leaving the pub behind yet hopeful of a swift return.

The first wonder we encountered was Tudeley Hall, a charismatic half-timbered medieval pile with twisted brick chimneys and a line of old red roses blooming in the front garden. Tall trees lined our way upon either side, arching in a vault over the road and filtering the rays of the sun to spectacular effect. *'You could wait for days for the light to be as it is now,'* said Colin, as he pressed his shutter to capture a picture of the lane shimmering in hazy sunlight.

Turning off the main road, we approached the church up a path lined by well-kept cottages with gardens in flower, arriving at the graveyard dignified by ancient yews and sat there upon a bench to admire the view across the farmland of Kent in the silence of the still afternoon. We were ready to walk back down the hill to the pub, when we decided to go inside the church and take a look.

An unexpected revelation awaited us. All Saints, Tudeley, is the only church in the world to have all the windows designed by Marc Chagall. Leaving the dazzling glare behind, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the low light inside, where coloured glass gleamed with rich hues illuminating the gloom of the shadowy church.

We learnt the poignant story behind the windows – how local landowners Sir Henry & Lady D'Avigdor-Goldsmid commissioned Chagall to create the east window as a memorial to their daughter Sarah, who drowned aged twenty-one in a sailing accident in 1963, and how, when Chagall came in 1967 to see his worked installed, he fell in love with this small bare church and said, *'I will do them all.'*

Spellbound by the vision, Colin photographed each of the windows, beginning with the creation of the world from the blue void and culminating in a pair of south-facing windows executed in the golden tones of the sun, with images dissolving into light. Realising that we had to leave if we were not to keep the blackcurrant pickers waiting or miss the coach back, I only persuaded Colin to go once I had taken some pictures of him standing beneath the large east window.

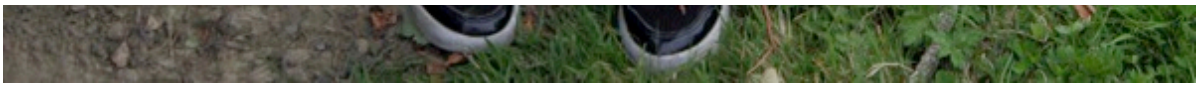
I checked my watch as we walked sharply back down the hill and, when we reached the pub, I realised it was too late for a drink but instead I went inside and asked if I could use the toilet. When I emerged from the bathroom, Colin was holding two bottles of lemonade with straws in them and we sipped upon them as we walked up the lane to the coach.

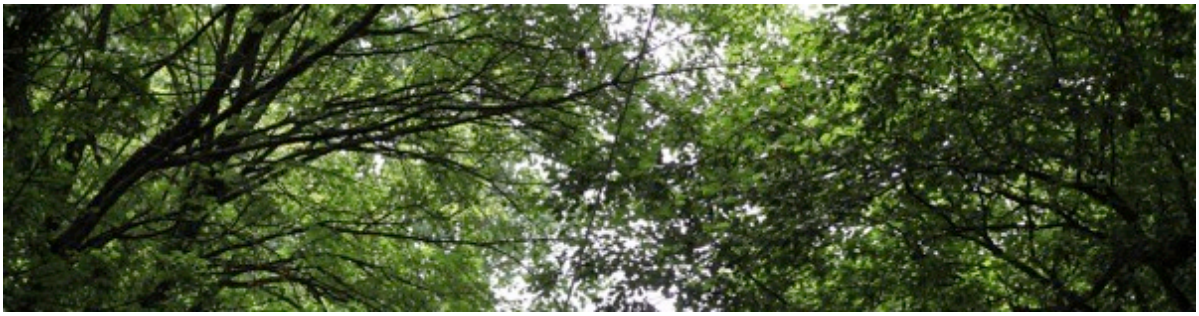
The blackcurrant pickers were waiting for us, their lips and fingers stained with purple juice. *'We know where you've been!'* they teased, as we climbed on board the coach, confronting us with the realisation of how transparent our departure from the field had been. Fortunately, Colin was able to show the photographs of the Marc Chagall windows, serving as both our alibi and as illustrations of our adventure.

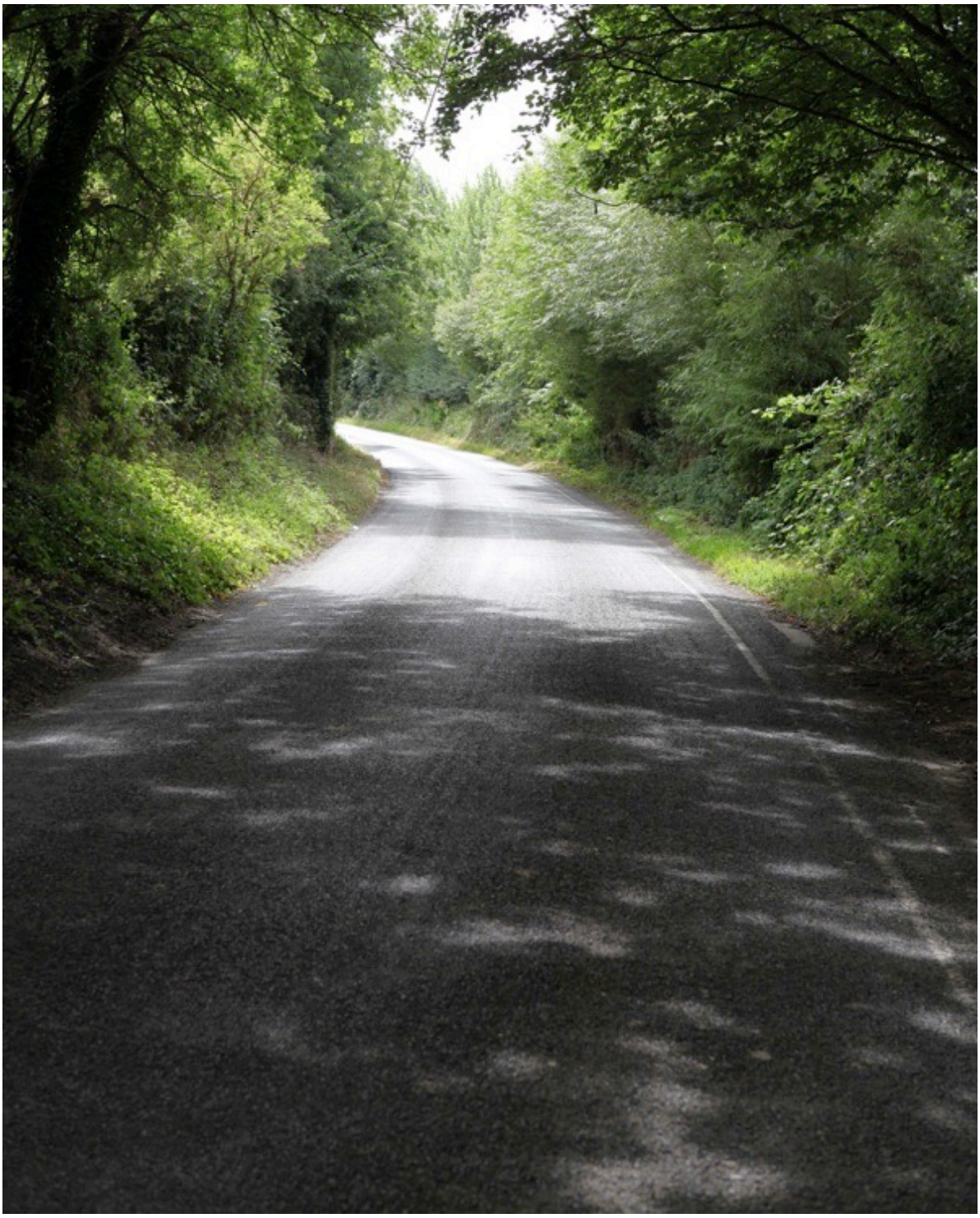
I was thinking what a lesson the day had been – that the instinct to stray was one that should not be resisted because you never know what wonders you might discover – when I fell asleep. Colin & I woke up in London and he descended from the coach at Hackney Downs, where the days' harvest was delivered to be cooked and bottled with lemon juice, prior to being made into blackcurrant soda. I stayed with the coach until it reached the depot off Mare St and walked back from there to Spitalfields, with my plastic box of blackcurrants in my bag.

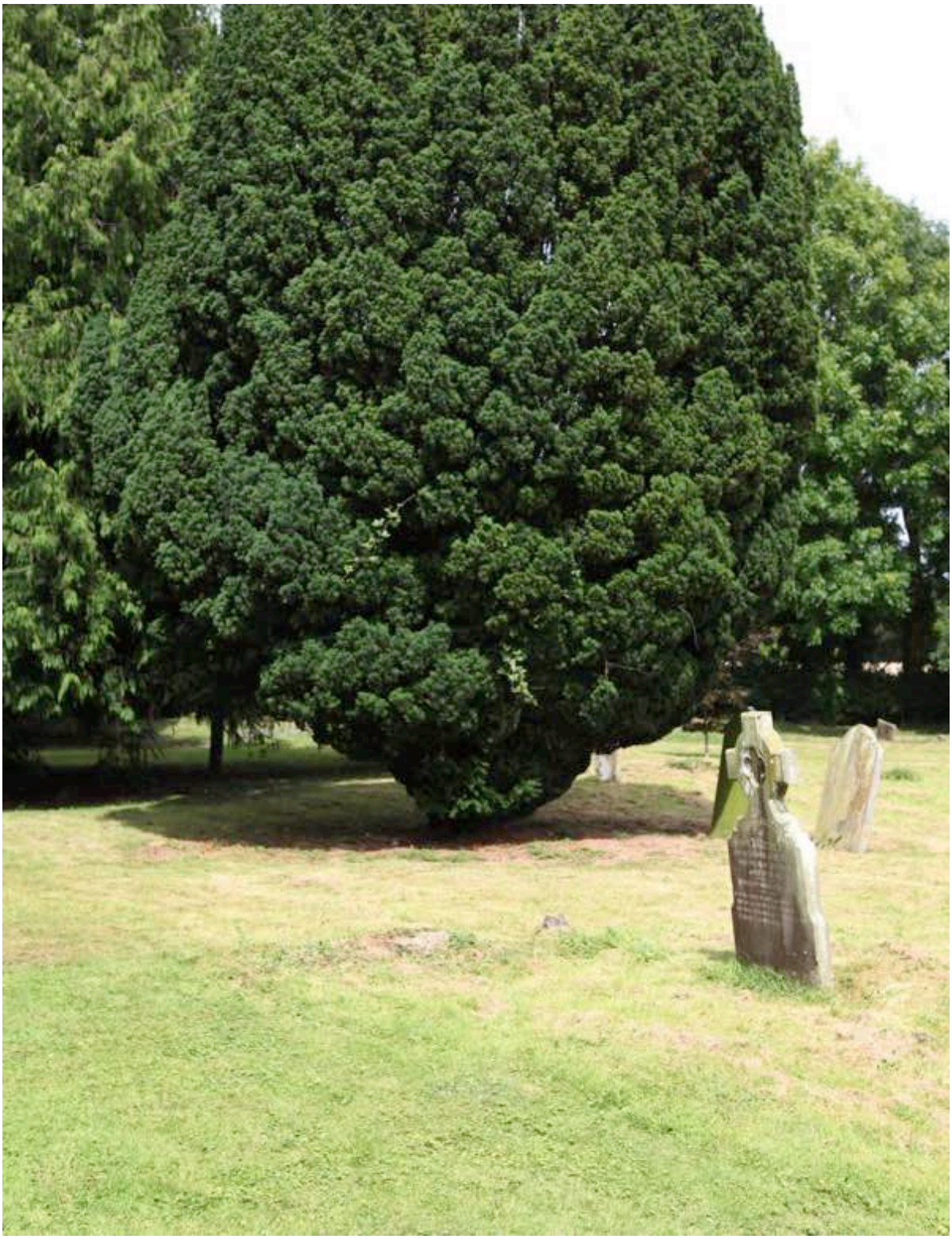
The excursion to Tudeley was our final assignment, our last day together and the last time I saw Colin O'Brien.

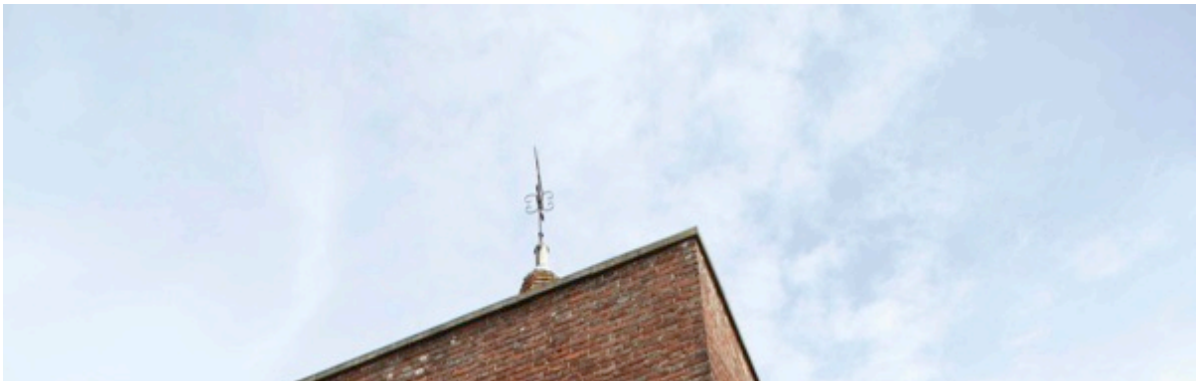
OH! BERT











MARC
CHAGALL

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Movements, Deals & Drinks *is a project by international artist group Myvillages, founded in 2003 by Kathrin Böhm, Wapke Feenstra & Antje Schiffers. The project was commissioned by* ***Create*** *and is registered as a Community Interest Company with the name Company Drinks. Company Drinks is supported by the* ***Borough of Barking & Dagenham****.*

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