Archaeologists study the ways in which humans have exploited, harnessed and tended it. Landscape architects seek to improve and conserve it. Artists and writers interpret it. Our relationship to landscape lies at the heart of the human experience.

When the great 18th-century landscape 'improver' Lancelot 'Capability' Brown presented his plans for unifying and landscaping the Backs, he was politely but firmly sent packing with a handsome silver plate for his efforts. Cambridge likes to do things its way. Present-day landscape architect, Robert Myers (Girton 1987), a Chelsea gold medal winner, has charted the evolution of this quintessential piece of Cambridge as background for a masterplan. Its aim is to provide a blueprint for conserving this iconic landscape for future generations.

'Brown was prepared to sweep away avenues of trees and boundaries and create one unified landscape,' explains Myers. 'If his plans had been accepted, the Backs would have been remodelled to resemble parklands to a great English country house, represented by the Gibbs Building at King's. The Cam was to have been widened into a serpentine lake. This all went down like a lead balloon with the colleges which are instinctively territorial and see the Backs as their own gardens. Although in individual ownership, the Backs have a remarkable coherence. Little has changed in the last 150 years. But there is a need for a long-term vision particularly in terms of trees: they create the landscape structure. Trees die and grow too large. Dutch elm disease in the 1970s led to mass felling and now the horse chestnuts are threatened by a virulent canker.'

Donald Hearn, Bursar of Clare and former Secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society, has been the driving force behind the reactivated Backs Committee which has led to the commissioning of the masterplan. With the Capability Brown debacle no doubt in mind, Hearn pays tribute to Myers' skill in getting individual colleges to see it as a coherent landscape, whilst acknowledging that each will have their own priorities and approach to new tree plantings.
'Conceiving a plan for the conservation of such a sensitive landscape that is evolving all the time is not easy,' explains Hearn (Selwyn 1966). 'We can’t keep the Backs preserved in aspic. It works so well with its avenues acting like ladder rungs between the open spaces. Yet within 150 years, all the trees will have been replaced. The idea is that the historic feel of the Backs will be retained and enhanced with new tree plantings to provide diversity.'

Cambridge archaeologists have long been probing the local terrain. Landscape archaeology emerged as a discipline in the 1920s and the University played an important role in its development. Senior lecturer Simon Stoddart, whose own research examines links between human behaviour and the natural landscape, highlights Cyril Fox (Magdalene 1919) as a seminal figure. 'Fox’s thesis was published in 1923 as The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region. Taking objects in the Departmental Museum as his starting point, he set out to locate and study the spots where each object had been found. This topographical survey of the Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods, interpreting broad phases of landscape development, represented a major leap forward in archaeological thinking. It was to give Fox an instant reputation amongst scholars and provided a model for later regional studies.'

Largely thanks to television, digging into the past has captured the public imagination. Dr Carenza Lewis has become the public face of Cambridge archaeology through her many years as a presenter on Channel 4’s Time Team series. As well as her teaching role at the Department of Archaeology, where she specialises in the medieval landscape, Lewis has a new mission. Under the Access Cambridge Archaeology banner, she is masterminding a project to engage school-age children, and communities in general, in a major archaeological project throughout East Anglia. 'We want to learn more about how the landscape was used and how communities grew from the medieval period onwards, looking for the origins of the settlement pattern we can see today,' Lewis explains. 'With supervision from experts, small teams are undertaking a series of digs of one-metre-square trenches in villages all over the region in as many gardens and other open spaces as we can get access to. These excavations are a bit like biopsies, evaluating small samples of the subject (a rural settlement in our case) in order to build a bigger picture of what's going on. Up to a tonne of soil is removed layer by layer from each test pit and sieved to recover finds which can be dated, mapped and analysed.

'We have involved well over 1,000 young people throughout East Anglia who have dug test pits across 20 villages. Results so far mean that existing ideas about the pattern of medieval settlement Capability Brown’s 1793 Plan presented to the University of Cambridge for some alterations which would have seen the Backs become a unified parkland

Former Time Team presenter Carenza Lewis is now engaging schools in hands-on archaeological sleuthing
are having to be revised. And broadening it beyond the profession has been hugely rewarding. The hope also is that it will inspire children who may not have thought of an academic education post-16. Who knows, some may become the archaeologists of tomorrow.’

The Cambridgeshire Fens hold many secrets and buried landscapes. Excavating holes and trenches is one approach to catching the evidence of the past but science also has a major part to play. Charles French, Reader in Geo-archaeology, and his team use micromorphology, creating thin sections of sliced soil to be analysed under the microscope. French has made a particular study of the Fens. Through analysing buried soils, he and his team have built up a composite picture of past landscape changes. ‘Recognising there was extensive preservation of buried prehistoric landscapes within the Fens was a revelation,’ he says. ‘Dry land available for agricultural use was a shrinking resource between the Bronze and Iron Ages and consequently, there was great pressure on human populations. The questions to which we seek answers are: how did they cope in an increasingly flood-prone landscape? Where could they grow crops and graze animals? How were their lives changed by seasonal flooding and rising groundwater tables?’

The Cambridge Archaeological Unit of the University has been carrying out major excavations in the Fenlands for the last 15 years, most recently a year-long excavation of a vast prehistoric site at the Needingworth Quarry at Over. This area, located in the buried floodplain and ‘delta’ landscape of the River Great Ouse, is being restored to Europe’s largest man-made bird reserve. The project has involved the excavation of three Bronze Age round barrows (2000–1600 BC) and neighbouring swaths of prehistoric settlement. One of the most exciting aspects for the Unit has been the recovery of high numbers of wetland wildlife species: beaver, crane and fish. ‘It is surprisingly rare to find such species exploited in prehistory, even in marshland contexts,’ explains Christopher Evans, the Unit’s Executive Director. ‘One of the main research strands to come out of the fieldwork is the impact of environmental change during prehistory. And in the specific case of the Fens, how the large flooding of the period from 2500–1500 BC affected not only human settlement, but also the behaviour of animals and consequently, the different patterns of their exploitation by humans.’

The big skies, rivers and farrowed fields were a lasting inspiration to Charles Darwin’s granddaughter, the artist Gwen Raverat (1885–1957) who developed a deep affection for the Cambridgeshire countryside. Period Piece, the illustrated memoirs of her Edwardian childhood spent in Newnham Grange (now part of Darwin College), becomes a Cambridge classic. Raverat was a key figure in the revival of the woodcut as an art form and was much in demand by publishers of illustrated books. According to her biographer, the art historian and critic, Frances Spalding, her wood engravings translate the texture of landscape into beautifully crafted, small, still images redolent with feeling. ‘She especially loved the glittering effect of bare branches against winter light,’ writes Spalding. ‘Gwen had an exceptional feeling for place. And the places she knew and loved best were in and around Cambridge, where she spent the better part of her life. Growing up at Newnham Grange, she had the Backs on her doorstep, knew from the trees how the seasons progressed, and watched the flow of water beneath the bridges. The river, which became a recurrent motif in her work, ran so close to the house that the sound of water running over the weir became a part of her childhood.’ In 1952, Gwen Raverat suffered a stroke and was no longer able to handle the steel tools for wood engraving. However, she was regularly taken out in her wheelchair along the Backs where she stayed all day contentedly painting from nature.

In the last few years of her life, one of the visitors whom Gwen received for tea at the Old Granary on Silver Street was the poet and prose writer, Siegfried Sassoon. His Cambridge career (Clare 1905) was cut short when he decided that he had no need of a BA and that poetry was his true calling. In his memoirs, The Old Century, he recalls a grim
session with his tutor who gave him a hard time: ‘You really must put in some solid work on the struggle between the Empire and the Papacy,’ he remarked. To which I dutifully agreed, and spent most of the next day reading The Earthly Paradise in a punt. By reading I meant that my eyes moved from line to line while I overheard rather than ‘took in’ the beautifully monosyllabic word music of William Morris, which loitered through my mind as though it were one with the riverside sounds of that golden day in early summer.’

For Sassoon, remembered equally for his First World War poetry and his memoirs, both factual and fictional, landscape played a pivotal role in his life and writing. Alison Hemmegan, Fellow-Commoner at Trinity Hall, who works on the literature of the First World War, elaborates: ‘In common with many men of his class and background, he felt deeply rooted in the physical landscape of his childhood, in his case Kent, and throughout his life he expressed his relationship to landscape through hunting and country pursuits.

Then came the unforeseen — the destruction of the landscape during the war, the blistering and scorching of the earth that he witnessed in the trenches of the Western Front: the ultimate “unnaturalness”:’ As Hemmegan sees it, Sassoon and his fellow soldiers lived with a sense of landscape schizophrenia as the terrain of northern France is so similar to the Home Counties. ‘The rise and fall of land, the flora and fauna, the seasons, the crops; it’s all much the same as southern England but yet in war, it appeared entirely different.’

‘It was his later conversion to Roman Catholicism that called up a sense of the mystical for him in the underlying meanings of landscape, the natural world and the seasons. He had a complex and deep sense that human beings are part of a larger order and are desperate to be reunited with it. Yet they themselves may be the enemy of that order. The relationship of human beings to their landscape and their place in it was part and parcel of a larger argument he had with himself about art and poetry. What was it for? Was it natural or not natural?’

‘Being a painter, I have always been interested in the notion of palimpsest, the past seeping through into the present,’ explains Syrian-born Cambridge artist Issam Kourbaj who has created A Cambridge Palimpsest, part art object, part educational tool which reveals the story of the City’s evolution, to coincide with the University’s 800th anniversary. Issam, who is a bye-fellow and artist-in-residence at Christ’s, has long had a fascination with exploring the strata that make up today’s Cambridge. The idea of a multi-layered puzzle within a wooden box evolved. ‘It will overlay maps and images of Cambridge past, present, future, surviving, lost and imagined. One layer informs the next,’ Kourbaj explains.

‘You can literally peel away the layers and see how aspects have changed over the centuries, finding a meeting point between landscapes. It is not just a puzzle per se, but one which shows the underlying character of the place, revealing the hidden patterns of Cambridge right back to its geological roots.’

Kourbaj worked closely with the Cambridge Archaeological Unit which provided a wealth of background information, including such hidden gems as a foppish scholar portrayed in 15th-century graffiti on the Old School.

‘A Cambridge Palimpsest shows how working with such rich sources means we can construct something that is both educational and playful,’ explains the Unit’s Executive Director, Christopher Evans. ‘The result is an intermixing between archaeology and history coupled with a strong artistic vision.’

Cambridge and its surrounding countryside are to witness significant growth in the next 20 years, with many thousands of new homes and brand new settlements in the pipeline. Careful planning for this unprecedented future expansion calls for a need to respect and learn from the past. On this overcrowded island, landscape, in all its forms, is becoming a precious, if dwindling commodity. Before vast tracts of it are subsumed in the name of progress, an understanding and appreciation of how it has evolved through scientific enquiry is surely essential. Equally important is an awareness of how it continues to inspire creative voices who reflect its timeless value back to us.”

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Landscapes is the theme of Magdalen College’s Triennial Festival running until spring 2009. According to Director of Studies in English, Jane Hughes, who conceived the Festival, together with geographer, Tom Spencer, the theme grew out of a desire to bring together many disciplines such as archaeology, art, geology, literature and music. There will be a series of weekly conversations (rather than formal lectures) in which speakers will be invited to consider different physical landscapes including coasts, rocks, mountains, fens and bogs, woods and forests and urban landscapes. A one-day conference, open to all, is to be held on 31 January 2009 on the theme of “Aspirational Landscapes”. ‘We were very keen to give people an open invitation to speak about landscape, be it from an emotional, creative or political perspective. The aim is to open it to a broad range of people, University, alumni and public alike who are interested in joining in a debate about our responses to the landscapes around us,” says Jane Hughes.

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