

Fenscapers: First Podcast

TRANSCRIPT

DURATION:

36:40

Speaker 1 00:14

Welcome to the first podcast by the Fenscapers, a group of writers passionate about the East Anglian fenland, its people and landscapes coming together online during the early days of the pandemic in 2020 to write pieces for our blog, Leaping the Lockdown, sharing our experiences and personal connections with the natural world. These stories and poems have been created and read by members of the group for you to enjoy. Why not take our words with you into the landscape that inspired them?

Speaker 2 01:03

Colour drains away and solid water sets. Ill-fashioned furrows formed to ease cold soils in vain defiance of winter's creeping grip. A gash of dyke, sliced through layered field, careless of landform's ancient past, dismissing tribal claims to grounds once rich with pastured cattle, horn under horn. Yet, very deep, and dormant, marshland seeds await spring's sprung surprise. Sun's empowering warmth, in partnership with love's creation, yields promise of new growth, crops to feed or wilding fen, where roving bird and spirits soar. This land will live again.

Speaker 1 02:22

Cambridge-on-Sea. An old woman lived by herself. She was frail and had survived all her friends. They were now nothing more than ghosts carried in on the breeze of her memories.

Speaker 1 02:43

A gull flew past her open window that looked out onto blue sky. It screeched its deathly warning. A far away whisper slipped in through that open window and danced gently around the old woman's ears. "Come to me," said the sea, "Come to me." But in that moment, the old woman felt too weak to move

from her chair, and her crocheted blanket was thin, barely covering her knees, and tiredness seeped into her aching bones, and she snored gently as her chin lolled onto her chest.

Speaker 1 03:33

And, in her mind's eye, was a scene of a young woman out in the windy green-brown flatlands of the Fens. It was clear as day, as if it were her that had been there. She saw the young woman's brown, curly hair whip her cheeks rosy pink. The young woman could barely see a thing through her bright blue eyes for all that hair, but she strode on in defiance of the elements as they tried to stop her. Unsuitable shoes sunk into the squelchy bog as she hopped comically on one foot, and then the other, legs up and down in an exaggerated march, laughing louder and louder into the wind like a mad thing. The elements had met their match, for she too was a strong force of nature. And there again, was the whisper of the sea, "Come to me, come to me." Gulls soared above the young woman's head, high and hovering, as if someone were dangling them on pieces of string, like a puppet or a baby's mobile over a cot. And the young woman felt small and insignificant, and the scene felt unreal, like a play on a stage, everything placed just so for a reason. One gull called, loud and long. The sound clashed with the sudden chiming of a church clock striking to in the afternoon, and the frail old woman jolted from her slumber as a mumble tumbled from her lips with the tiniest sliver of spittle.

[CHURCH BELL CHIMES] 05:32

Speaker 1 05:35

She raised her weary head to look up at the sky. In the distance, the wind turbines span rhythmically, as they had always done for many years, and today, she could hear them gently whooping with each rotation. It used to be that the sound was masked by cars and planes zooming by, or the rattling of train carriages she thought. But now, it's gulls and other birds that have returned after a long absence, reclaiming their space in the trees we planted everywhere we could. "Sometimes," thought the frail old woman, "I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. Not too hard, because it hurts." And there it was again, the whisper of the sea on the breeze. "Come to me," said the sea, "Come to me."

Speaker 1 06:27

Trance-like, the frail old woman gripped the arms of her chair and thrust herself up with a hidden strength, the creak of her bones audible, if there had been anyone to hear. The crocheted blanket slipped from her knees. She opened the door and was instantly bathed in brilliant light, and a cool breeze swept her grey-white hair back from her rosy cheeks. She closed her eyes and took in the deepest breath she could manage, deep into her lungs, and the corners of her now thin-lipped mouth turned skyward.

Speaker 1 07:01

"Come to me," said the sea, "Come to me." The gulls called overhead in an encore, the frail old woman breathed in once more and, as she exhaled, she opened her eyes. They were bright blue and dancing and twinkling like they always had, reflecting the world back at itself, for there was a reason they were bluer now than ever before. That you have come to me, my sea, you have come to me.

[WAVES LAPPING] 07:38

[CHURCH BELL CHIMES] 07:44

[WAVES LAPPING, VIOLIN PLAYS] 07:46

Speaker 1 08:42

Passing Holme Fen silver birches, through a steamy window from the speeding East Coast train, I see a fox, a thin, wet, red fox, ignoring the railway noise, trotting fast, nose down, following the black peat ploughed ridges pushing through the snow. Earnest, intent in this week-long frozen landscape, determination drives the fox to track and find a meal. The train speeds on. Three fields away, 200 geese stand alert, dark against the snow. Fox cannot know they're there. Will my bedraggled friend get that far and find one goose too near the hedge or injured, slow to fly, and then gorge on warm flesh, licking his bloody grinning foxy mask. Goose or no goose, I hope the fox survives to thrill me from the train another day.

[RICH, WARM MELODY] 09:51

Speaker 3 10:14

A respectable, well-brought-up boy. I lay in my room listening, excitement bursting like popping candy in my veins. My parents had won £300,000 on the lottery. Thoughts of new clothes, exotic holidays - indeed, any holiday - ran through my imagination as I strained my ears to listen to my mother's urgent words.

"We can get out of this flat, Doug. Give Sadie a good start in life. She's developing early - 11 years old and the boys are already sniffing around. I don't want her to end up like Maureen's girl, up the duff at 13. Sadie's a good girl."

"I was going to give up work," replied my dad.

"Give up work? What would you do all day? No. Maybe Sadie is a good girl now, but I can see she is changing. We needed to do something. We can afford to move to a good area, one with nice kids and respectable well-brought-up boys, a place in the country. She's always wanted a dog. We could get her one as a sweetener."

Speaker 3 11:30

So, six months later, in the summer holidays, instead of lazing on a Caribbean beach. I found myself taking a desultory walk through a wood with my black labrador puppy, Daisy, aka the Sweetener. There was nothing to do. I didn't know anyone. And everything was green.

Speaker 3 12:03

Daisy was busy sniffing everything, running in circles around me and getting in the way. I kicked at the grass and swore under my breath. Bloody Sweetener. Suddenly, she barked, that strange puppy bark that

still had the ability to shock her, and she shot off the path between the trees. "Daisy!" I called. "Come back. Daisy. Sweetener, come here!" Nothing. Shit. Now I would be in trouble. I wasn't supposed to let her off the lead until she had finished her puppy training. Away from the path, the grass was still wet from yesterday's rain and my trainers and jeans soon became soaked. I walked on shouting, but there was no sign of her. Then I came to a large holly bush. I could hear sounds from within it. "Daisy? Are you in there?"

[BIRDSONG] 12:03

Speaker 3 12:03

I could smell cigarettes. I sniffed and looked around. Maybe I was near to another path. A muffled bark emerged from the bush. I walked around the holly, looking for a way in. It was large and dense with no apparent entrance. I checked again, all the time shouting, "Daisy!" Then I saw it - at the bottom of the bush was a gap. I bent down to examine a green tunnel that curved away to the left. There was nothing for it - I was going to have to go in after her.

Speaker 3 13:36

As I crawled into the musty entrance, the holly scratched at my bare arms and pricked through my jeans. At the bend in the tunnel, I peered around. I could hear movement and see bright sunlight at the end. Slowly, I crawled on, head down to protect my face from the holly. Daisy's tongue greeted me with enthusiastic licks and I looked up. I'd reached the end of the tunnel and, as Daisy backed away, I was shocked to see a boy, laying on his back, smoking.

[MELODIOUS STRINGS] 14:13

Speaker 3 14:13

"Hello, there," he said, as if it was every day that you met someone in the middle of a holly bush. "I take it that this is your dog. I did try to encourage her to leave, but she wasn't having any of it. She was making friends with Oli." He pointed to the spaniel laying next to him on the rug. I stared at him dumbstruck, blond sun-bleached hair, tan skin and periwinkle blue eyes. I guessed he was about 15 or 16 years old. It wasn't his obvious good looks silenced me, it was the glossy veneer that coated him. He had a sheen, like honey, that exuded from every pore with confidence and self-assurance. So, this is what a respectable, well-brought-up boy looked like.

Speaker 3 14:40

"Cat got your tongue?" He sat up and motioned for me to sit down on the rock. "I'm Jez and you are?" "Sadie, Sadie Brown." He looked me up and down. "Well, Sadie Brown. I'm delighted to meet you. I don't remember seeing you before. Are you new to these parts or are you just visiting?" He spoke like some of the books we'd read in school. I was intrigued, but I remained standing. "I'm new, moved in last week." "Which road?" "The Greenway." He whistled through his teeth. "Great houses up there. What does your father do?" "Wow," I thought, "he's nosy." Instinct told me to hold back from this interrogation. "He works in a bank." Well, he was the caretaker in a bank, so that was true. "Splendid. So, after the hols,

which school will you be attending? I'm at St. Barts, do you know it?" I would be going into the first year at the local comprehensive. "I'm starting at Hallsthorpe." "Oh, you're going to a state school. Progressive parents, eh? Playing politics with your future. It will be a tough starting a new school just before your exams." Exams, what exams? I didn't understand half of what he was saying, but for some reason, I knew I wanted him to like me, so I mumbled and didn't ask.

Speaker 3 16:44

He drew on his cigarette and blew a smoke ring into the air. "Oh, how rude of me! Care for a ciggie?" He pulled a packet of Lambert & Butler out of the top pocket of his shirt, and proffered it towards me. I sat down and drew one out, put it between my lips, and he leant forward and lit it for me. I coughed. "I haven't had one for ages." "I know what it's like parents always on your case. That's why Oli and I go for regular walks and spend our time here. Oli found it and it's perfect, away from the prying eyes along the path. We have a place to store everything we need." He indicated the rug, a pile of books and an old battered trunk with packets of biscuits, bottles of Coke and cans of lager inside. I lay back and coughed my way through the cigarette, enjoying his eyes roaming over me. "You're always welcome to join me in my den. I'm here most days in the hols," he murmured.

Speaker 3 17:53

And so began the summer of the holly bush. The sweetener and I became inseparable. My parents beamed with happiness to see my newfound love of the great outdoors and Jez taught me all I needed to know about life. He was, after all, a respectable, well-brought-up boy.

[DOGS BARK, LIGHT MELODY, BIRDSONG] 18:14

Speaker 4 18:30

At first, I watched the boy's attempt at fire-lighting with fear and trepidation, afraid that the hungry flames that consumed the delicate twigs, and then the smaller branches and ultimately the logs would spread out of control, sweeping through my trees, leaving me charred and exposed. But my fears were unfounded. The boy always ensured that the fire pit was safely contained and, when he left me, the glowing embers were always extinguished by him stamping or peeing on the stubborn ones, which elicited hissing clouds of ammonia-scented steam.

Speaker 4 19:03

On occasions, he would sit in one of my grassy clearings, cooking bacon and eggs and sipping tea boiled from battered kettle, while his shadow leaped and danced on the canvass of my illuminated branches. At these times, he would watch the sunset and gaze upon the stars and it was then that I'd lose him for a while, as his thoughts seem to project beyond the limits of my trees, lost in some deeper reverie. But eventually he would return with a shake of his tousled curls, and at a glance about him as if checking was still safe.

Speaker 4 19:36

On winter nights, he would stare in pleased surprise at the circle of hoarfrost that had descended in a ring around the campfire, providing a dark sphere of protective warmth around him. Over the 12 years that I knew him, the boy grew to manhood, but he was never far from me and we had many experiences together.

[GENTLE PIANO MUSIC] 19:57

Speaker 4 19:59

I watched as he built dens from my branches, torn from me in high winds and sometimes cut from the green, but he would always do this with respect, taking no more than I was willing to give. He even took whole standing trees, chopping them by hand with an axe, but leaving a pollarded stump to regrow and prolong life. Nothing was destroyed wantonly.

Sound effect 20:23

[GENTLE PIANO]

Speaker 4 20:27

All of a tree was chopped and sawn for logs to heat the boy's house in winter as there was no central heating in those days. Smaller branches were used for beanpoles and kindling. The boy's affinity for nature was self evident from the outset. He soon discovered the foxes, though, where the cubs played in the open grassy clearing on balmy May evenings. On spring mornings, he watched in pleasure as the aerodynamically challenged bumblebees, warmed by the vernal sunshine, bounce from blossom to blossom on the pussy willow catkins. Some of these sprigs he harvested were for Easter decorations in his local church, though he rarely attended. He also collected and sold hanging basket linings from some of the moss that grew in abundance in my wetter places. Gathered with gentle care, he always left enough for regrowth, because long before sustainability became oft-quoted, but seldom honoured; he intuitively understood how to work with and for nature.

Speaker 4 21:30

He knew where every bird's nest was located, from the flimsy twigs that barely supported the pigeon's nest, and sadly sometimes didn't, to the safety of robins and Jenny wrens and, on the lake margins, the moorhens, coots and great crested grebes. The latter, like the pigeons seemingly living more in hope than intent that their flimsy grass would survive the brooding period intact.

[GENTLE MELODY] 21:54

Speaker 4 21:57

The course of life rarely ran smooth. From time to time, I'd sense the boy's sadness, such as his shock at finding the cubs strung up at my margin, their beautiful russet fur-covered bodies hanging down headfirst as a trophy of the hunters who resented their mother's forays to their chicken runs. I also witnessed the homage the boy paid to his pet rabbit, which was buried close to where the foxes had been strung. The black and white rabbit, Patch, was devoted the boy and followed him everywhere and would come to him

when he whistled. He would roam wild and free and often consorted with the wild rabbits that frequented my depths. Sadly, this was his downfall as he contracted myxomatosis and had to be humanely dispatched by the boy's father. This tragedy affected the boy deeply and he buried his pet with great care and reverence and each night at dusk, he would come to the graveside and stand in sad contemplation. I know not what thoughts came to him, but the sense of pain and loss was palpable to me. Nothing lasts, and even the stars cannot shine forever.

[BIRDSONG] 23:11

Speaker 4 23:14

At nineteen, the boy left my haven for the wider world and, soon after, his father's lease my plot was terminated and I was sold to a farmer who had other ideas than retaining a mosquito-ridden wet woodland that yielded little but a stable source of firewood and a wild playground for a boy who no longer came. My trees were cut down and burned and the stumps and hollows were bulldozed and in-filled with imported soil seeded with monoculture rye grass to fatten beef, and I was no more of this physical world. Perhaps my seeds still lives on in self-sets around the gravel pits, now turned to fishing lakes. But my spirit lives on, imbued within the heart of the boy who grew to a man within the shelter of my trees, the boy who lay within my secret grassy clearings, watching the clouds, who sweated when cutting my trees, given freely, who learnt the ways of nature, the need to care for the delicate lifeforce that lies within each and every living thing. I know he still feels pain, sprung from the knowledge that our living planet is existing on borrowed time if we don't wake up and heed the call of the wild.

[BIRDSONG, GUITAR MELODY] 24:27

[BIRD CALLS] 24:44

Speaker 5 25:01

My most beloved bird, winter in your wings, storm-driven feathers, ice-gleaming eyes. There is no summer softness in your plumage, just the bard echo of your nest site pylon. Scything through clouds discoloured with rain, black, slate blue, the darkness flies. Your beauty calls me with wails on the wind, ascending high, circling, dissolving in haze. Nothing temperate in your searing flight, you a hooded outlaw, blazing with intent, brutal bone-chilling frost in your glacial stare, wings crisply held, scalpel slicing the air. Your prey scatter, like chaff you have winnowed, a blizzard of panic under your gaze. Slashing rain in your stoop, lance legs extended, their last sight on earth is your glittering glare.

Sound effect 26:04

[BIRD CALLS]

Speaker 5 26:19

I stumbled across it, high on a hillside, shrouded in ivy and forget-me-not, the day before my journey home. The place was marked by an old walnut tree visible from the bottom of the slope, a sentinel under malicious sky. Obeying a dark inner urge, I started to scramble up on all fours to the beat of the

shuddering trees performing a leafy war dance. The climb was arduous, slow, my legs like blasted bone, my ears numbed by the storm surge. I crawled faster and faster, groping. Grit painted my nails dun-black, my knees, palms gravel-red, eyes closed against rose thorns piercing the skin of my cheeks until I found the green of silvered grass spread out before an ice-cold arch at the entrance.

Speaker 5 27:19

Elbowing the ground, toes bent, pushing hard against the stone of a foot-worn step, I dragged my body behind me into the diamond shelter, reversing like Alice. I climbed inside, too small, too small to stop the walls from crashing, splintering, fragmenting into a honeycombed, pockmarked battement. Dread had lulled my senses into quiet in the raging storm, so that place was beyond death. Exquisite, essential, a wasteland. There on a ledge, a petrified rose beside scratched, scraped bones with symbols I did not recognise. I rested under the vaulted ceiling, waiting for the storm to pass. I thought how rain is formed, the evaporation of rivers, streams, seas, by sun into cloud, to return as pieces of rainbow and scraps of words. Hidden in the wound is the wound itself. I thought it myself delusion, sending you off to flight another cause. Come home, come home, before you become a human statue, a stone Death's Head, crooked, like Michelangelo's Pieta in Rome, when all was possible, nothing denied.

[THUNDERCLAPS ROLL] 28:50

Speaker 5 28:53

Suddenly, the storm collapsed, hitting the ground running, strafing hailstones across the floor of the tomb. Nature was in retreat. The forest floor drew back. Volcanoes implode. Angels run for cover, garner the blasted womb. Words of rage, by their very nature, make an end of man's life in death. Then there is no end to it all, no end to it all.

[BIRDSONG] 29:25

Speaker 1 29:30

"Life is sometimes sad and often dull, but there are currants in the cake and here is one of them," said Nancy Mitford. Partway down our garden lies a mass burial of eight cattle and six horses, adult, immature, neonatal and unborn, mostly arranged nose to tail. They were discovered in a ditch during the archaeological dig prior to the building of our house on the high lands of the fen. They have been radiocarbon dated to 40 to 230 AD, the very late Iron Age to mid Roman period. It is speculated that their burial represents a highly significant event in the lives of the ancient fenland people. It is possible it was a votive offering or sacrifice, but no close parallels have been discovered anywhere else in the country. The burial site and its mysteries are shrouded once more in Jurassic clay. Probably from the air we could detect the line of the ditch, but from ground level, there remain no signs.

Speaker 1 30:27

To reach the burial site, I pass beds of shrubs, roses, honeysuckle and clematis. I stoop to enjoy any detectable scent from each flower or the leaves, careful in case I disturb one of the many webs that spiders are spinning amongst the foliage. I'm walking on the lawn, mainly rye grass and meadow grass,

plus mosses and fungi and a medley of commonplace plants such as bristly oxtongue, buttercup, ribwort plantain, groundsel dandelion, daisy, and ragwort that have blown in or hitchhiked on birds and other creatures. Amongst the plants are scattered dozens of grey and white feathers, evidence of an unwelcome pigeon struck down by a welcome sparrowhawk. The ground slopes gradually to the boundary hedge of hawthorn, dog-rose and dogwood, which my husband planted in February sleet in the year after we moved in. In contrast, this is an exquisite mid-September day of cloudless blue sky, in which a solitary Harris's hawk or buzzard floats on the thermals, the afternoon quiet pierced only by the scolding of an unseen blackbird. The spindly branches of the crab apple are weighted with deep rosy-pink fruit. Rubbing off the waxy bloom with my thumb reveals a shine like patent leather. The many species of birch we planted in a small copse, under-planted with narcissus and snake's-head fritillary, lean from the prevailing winds and interlace their branches, the leaves of the field maple are mottling and drooping from drought. The autumn raspberries have almost stopped fruiting, but though a few hopeful bees and hoverflies are still casting about them for flowers. I pause to look beyond our garden and across the miles of open fen, one of the most beautiful views in the county. Straight ahead, opposite the house, prominent on the clay ridge, which is an ancient cliff edge above a prehistoric sea, sits the four-storey tapering stone tower of the 1803 Great Mill. Its impressive sails were removed about a decade ago for safety reasons, but successive owners have dreamt of restoring them and setting the three pairs of millstones grinding once again. To the west lies a patchwork of pasture land and ancient multispecies hedgerows in countless shades of green and brown. This fertile land, unless inundated, has been under cultivation or pasture since Neolithic times, at least 6,000 years. In the autumn, milky mists can fill the lowlands so that only the crowns of the tallest trees are visible for miles. Today, the air is as clear as I have ever seen it and the Sandy Heath TV mast and the eight wind turbines on the horizon at Graveley stand out sharply against the sky.

[LIGHT, CHIMING MELODY] 33:08

Speaker 2 33:36

One New Year's Day, in deep frost, teasels shining in the watery light of early morning, I scrunched my way along the bank, revelling in the crispness of the air, the sunlight filtering through the rising mist. I peered ahead for the familiar bend in the watercourse, old friend, yet always deep fen shy of prying eye, flanked by triple-modelled banking of early drainers, holding back the inland waters from flowing over hard-won fields, once quaking, now barely yielding a ripple to answer passing trains, unless I venture to the birch-covered bogland beyond. What is it about this autumn-hue reedbed, new-turned peat and beet-green mosaic that holds me? What draws me back once more to ponder on the glories of winter sport, fishing riches, and summer regattas played out in times past across the distant year, now echoed only in flax crops' spring-blue haze, and seed-resurrected dyke-side flowering? Can I really enter that world or imagine what it might really have meant, to all those generations of near-side dwellers, exercising common right, defying abbey rules and landlord right? Perhaps not. But the atmosphere this landscape leaks in this deep cold winter hour makes me call out again, "I love you." And I know, in this moment, I will always return to listen to its whispers.

[GENTLE MELODY] 35:27

Speaker 7 35:56

We hope you've enjoyed walking with our words. Fenscapers is a MarketPlace Creative People and Places project funded by the National Lottery and Arts Council England. To find out more about Fenscapers, visit our website, www.CPPmarketplace.co.uk