

A Living Archive: *Common Ground*
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Oliver Rackham more than once observed that “The most difficult task in the whole of art is to draw a tree.” “Any picture of a tree,” he continued, “has to leave out most of the detail.” The same can be said of bees, otters, raptors, reptiles...all are beyond our drawing. Our record suggests that we are just too pre-occupied with our own needs, our ambitions, unable to focus politically and in detail on the other forms of life with which we share the land.

(Rackham quoted in ‘Uprooted’, Robert MacFarlane and Adrian Cooper)¹

In Crediton, on the fringes of rural Devon, my eye is often drawn towards the façade of a derelict Victorian cottage whose giant, over-grown veil of creeping ivy had clearly been plucked away, leaving only its skeletal outline like a chalked silhouette at a crime scene. The ivy is a fugitive presence. Here and not ‘here’, a ghosting of surfaces. What of the parts removed from the bricks, I ask myself, over and over. Were they now more ‘house’ than ivy, moulded into its plaster and dust, or was the house more ‘ivy’ than brick, since it left such a large imprint of itself on the walls? It was always the stencilled shape of the ivy I saw each time I passed that house, never the building, which seemed to mute itself in its shadow. Ways of being, ways of knowing. As an admirer of the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*, I suffer from an all-consuming desire to fill in those damaged bricks with a golden yolk, or perhaps some simpler kind of common ground.

Sometimes, living things leave traces and imprints in time which we can hold on to as cultural artefacts. We tend to call these demarcations, fragments, ‘collections’, or what is more commonly known as ‘archives’. Books, letters, objects of any kind, published works and private manuscripts can be held within an archive and it is our presence in the archive which, hopefully, brings such things to life again, assembling new narratives from historic threads. The *Common Ground* archives, held within the Special Collections at The University of Exeter library, remind me not of the house in Crediton I regularly pass, but the living system which deeply connects a great number of environmental writers not only across the South West, but also further afield nationally, and its radical focus on community activism and nature writing lives on through its legacy in the work of Dorset-based publisher Little Toller Books and many other cultural organisations in the UK.

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Commented [LD1]: This descriptive opening hooked me right in. It is clever to pull the reader into a specific place using poetic imagery, as it also serves to pull them into the article.

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Commented [LD2]: What if you *do* connect the house in Crediton to the living system which deeply connects environmental writers? Stating that the archives don’t remind you of the house in Crediton is redundant – it puts a wall up in the middle of your sentence. What if, instead, you reflect on the ivy-which-once-was? Ivy is inherently hardy, far-reaching and connected, and you can compare that to the literary network you’re talking about. Here you have the opportunity to argue that unlike the ivy that’s been torn away from the house, this literary network is very much alive.

Commented [LD3]: The length of this sentence lost me. Instead of thinking about what it was saying, I wondered when it would end. I would suggest breaking it up into two or more sentences to help the reader stay engaged – punctuation marks are places to breathe and digest before consuming the next pieces of information!

¹Macfarlane and Cooper, Uprooted in *The Clearing*, accessed here: <https://www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/uprooted/>

While the *Common Ground* archive is housed within multiple series and sections spanning 125 linear metres, according to the blog dedicated to its completion in 2021, it also exists far beyond this space and brings together a large network of writers, artists and academics, myself included. *Common Ground* will celebrate its fortieth anniversary in 2024. In the essay 'Vibrant Localism: The Lure of Common Ground', Jos Smith refers to an historic moment in which three debates on environmental politics were held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1984.² The debate focused on the question: 'who owns nature?' The debate caused passions to rise and 'sparks flew', as several more discussions followed; these were the first events organised by the arts and environmental charity 'Common Ground', established by Sue Clifford and Angela King, both active members of Friends of the Earth, and author-activist Roger Deakin. Deakin founded Common Ground to steer conversations away from government politics, professional, large scale environmentalism, and towards community engagement and the everyday lives of people whose connection to nature was local and ordinary:

working closely with artists of all kinds to inspire and embolden communities across the country to protect and celebrate what they valued about their local environments, putting into practice the environmental slogan *think globally, act locally*.³

What followed was the launch of an anthology of nature writing, *Second Nature*, largely consisting of non-fiction essays and artworks from forty contributors. From its outset, publishing was key to Common Ground and its environmental initiative and it is what brought its current Directors, Adrian and Gracie Cooper, of Little Toller Books.

In addition to *Second Nature*, the archives hold project proposals and planning notes, thousands of letters from people across the world writing about their connection to local flora and fauna in 'Flora Britannica'⁴ (1992-1996) and Parish Maps (1985 and 1996)⁵. Consisting of 15 sub-sections,

² Smith completed a Post Doc at The University of Exeter exploring the history of Common Ground. See also Smith, Jos, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

³ See Jos Smith, 'Vibrant Localism: The Lure of Common Ground', *Critical Quarterly* 60(2):86-102 (July 2018), p. 87.

⁴ The files also include originally enclosed material such as notes, photographs, artwork and pressed specimens of flora. Many of the letters and papers have been highlighted with a pen, indicating information that Richard Mabey (the author of *Flora Britannica*) or Common Ground found particularly interesting. Taken from the archive website here <http://lib-archives.ex.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=EUL+MS+416%2fPRO%2f7%2f2>

⁵ Maps made by people pertaining to a local parish. In 1996, the charity selected a number of examples of these parish maps to put on display in a national exhibition entitled 'from place to PLACE: an Exhibition of Peoples' Parish Maps'. It opened at The Barbican Centre in London, before going on tour to venues across the country. The exhibition led to the publication of a collection of essays entitled 'from place to PLACE: maps and Parish Maps' (1996). Information taken from the archive pages here: <http://lib-archives.ex.ac.uk/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=EUL+MS+416%2fPRO%2f5%2f2>

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Commented [LD4]: You have two sentences beginning with "The debate" here. This repetition is confusing, especially after you have mentioned that there were three debates. Did you mean to refer to all three debates? (e.g., "These debates" vs. "The debates"?). And is there a way to restructure this section to avoid repetition (e.g., combining the two sentences)?

Commented [LD5]: This would be a good place to tie the introductory paragraph back into the narrative of your article. Your introduction very clearly illustrates your own connection to local flora, or the lack thereof; it would be a pity not to weave in your personal connection to the piece! If not here, then somewhere else you find appropriate.

the archive comprises a wide range of material created and collected by the charity in the course of its activities between 1982 and 2013; according to the online guide to the collection, this organisation reflects the archive's original order and the way these records were used by the charity. 'The Campaign for Local Distinctiveness' presents a record of Common Ground during its earliest period, encompassing leaflets and notes including a publication of '15 ways in which we might begin to recognise and reinforce local distinctiveness and resist the march of uniformity' and essays on 'Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity and Identity' (Common Ground: 1993). 'Field Days' documents a project launched in 1995 which encouraged communities to restore and uncover the original names of fields in their local areas; 'Trees, Woods and the Green Man' aimed to raise awareness of the spiritual and cultural significance of trees, winning a Prudential Award for Excellence and the publication of 'Trees Be Company: An Anthology of Poetry' (1989 and 2001), 'In a Nutshell: A manifesto for trees and a guide to growing and protecting them' (1990), and a special edition broadsheet newspaper 'Pulp! with contributions from actors, authors, artists and cartoonists (1989)', as well as a range of leaflets and postcards. Several other sub-sections include the work of projects such as 'England In Particular', 'Producing the Goods', 'Rhynes, Rivers and Running Brooks', 'Apple Day' and 'Confluence'.

Physical presences, indeed life itself, falls out of the archive as pressed flowers and Mabey's handwriting appears below vivid descriptions of wild daffodils, edible greens, fig trees, snowdrops, orchids, hogweed and ivy. While the *Common Ground* archive is an impressively large collection of work created by local communities in response to nature, it is also an archive of place and of the localism which Smith writes about, of the 'everyday'. [The activist intentions of the initiative marry literature to the environment in a way that calls to mind the current work of the Urban Tree Festival, organised by Neil Sinden, a Director of *Common Ground*,⁶ *Writers Rebel* (part of Extinction Rebellion, led by number of authors including Monique Roffey, Toby Litt and James Miller)⁷ and 'Right to Roam', a campaign to bring back the right to roam in England, founded by illustrator-author Nick Hayes (*The Book of Trespass*)⁸ and the AHRC project Speculative Nature Writing: Feeling for the Future which funded a symposium on Decolonising Nature Writing and a mentorship with Jessica J Lee, editor of *The Willowherb Review*.⁹

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Commented [LD6]: This is another quite long sentence that can be broken up to avoid confusing the reader.
Suggestion: "...organised by Neil Sinden. Sinden is a Director of *Common Ground*..."

⁶ See <https://urbantreefestival.org>

⁷ See <https://writersrebel.com/about/>

⁸ See <https://www.righttoroam.org.uk>

⁹ See <https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/projects/speculative-nature-writing-feeling-for-the-future>

The spirit of *Common Ground* lives on through the work of local and national environmental initiatives, many of them closely connected to literature and cultural creativity. In 2016, Smith, Luke Thompson and the artist-archaeologist Rose Ferraby ran a community project which led to the publication of *Tree Tales*,¹⁰ inspired by the 'story of a plane tree in the grounds of the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital that was grown from a seedling brought over from the island of Kos where Hippocrates first practiced medicine (it was after Hippocrates that the doctors' 'Hippocratic oath' was named)'. The hospital also has on permanent display photographs of orchards around the West Country, commissioned by *Common Ground*. Under the stewardship of Little Toller, *Common Ground* continues its commitment to literature as a means through which communities, and artists, can express their relationship to place, a canon of nature classics including Mabey's memoir, *Nature Cure*, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789), Clare Leighton's *Four Hedges* (1935) and recent modern classics such as Pamela Petro's *The Long Field* (2021) and Dara McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist* (2020). *Common Ground*'s board of trustees also includes Tim Dee, a BBC radio producer, author of *Four Fields* and co-editor with Simon Armitage of *The Poetry of Birds*.

Forty years on, the *Common Ground* archive can be seen to represent an essential part of the history of eco-political writing, activism and cultural production which now constitutes much of the UK's literary landscape.

Bibliography

Clifford, Sue and King, Angela and Mabey, Richard, *Second Nature* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984)

Clifford, Sue and King, Angela, 'Losing Your Place', in Local Distinctiveness, ed. Sue Clifford and Angela King (London: Common Ground, 1993).

Macfarlane, Robert and Cooper, Adrian, 'Uprooted' in *The Clearing*, accessed here: <https://www.littletoller.co.uk/the-clearing/uprooted/>

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Smith, Jos, and Ferraby, Rose, *Tree Tales* (Common Ground Press, 2016)

¹⁰ A detailed description of the workshops and community events held as part of this initiative can be found here: <https://www.commonground.org.uk/tree-tales/>

