

Steven Coghill

Born 1961.

Life story interview by Alan Macfarlane.

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1. Childhood

I was born in London in 1961. There was no family tradition of gardening other than among those who crofted in the Shetland Islands. The germ of the idea came to me when I was 15-16, but I can trace it back long before then because I was always interested in landscapes and as a little boy was always running out into the wilds. My parents lived in East Finchley, North London, and when I was born my father was still in the RAF where he was one of the last conscripts to have to do National Service. He had just come back from sea where he was an officer in the Merchant Navy because his eyesight had failed him,

In the early 1960s North London was a ghastly place because of the smog and as I was prone to asthma we moved out to the new town of Hemel Hempstead and from there to Stevenage. Part of my fascination with landscape is from a socialist point of view, and from 1946 we had the New Town Acts, a spectacular piece of social legislation the like of which hasn't been seen since. Basically we were moving into green field sites right on the edge of the countryside.

In Stevenage I used to haunt the countryside around from an early age. Sir Frederick Gibberd who was the master planner for Harlow really brought a huge amount of the countryside into the city, so Harlow has these wonderful corridors of landscape going into the centre, now sadly being built over/ Ot is people like Gibberd who inspired the new towns and inspired a generation of youngsters like me.

I had been doing casual gardening jobs and just enjoying feeling the soil between my fingers and being outside. I started sixth form and then there was this creeping realization that whatever I did I would have to make a living. A lot of my friends were already pointing in a career direction, but I didn't; all I knew was that I didn't want to be bound within a building and that I wanted something creative, not just physically but beyond that. That was the appeal of horticulture.

I was lined up to go to Hull University to take a degree in botany and geography which would have been really good fun because I was a bit wild in the sixth form/ Despite being offered a place I decided not to take it. My parents were rather keen that I go as I would have been the first in my family to do so and at that time only 11% of school students actually went to university.

2. Writtle



Writtle College.

I was absolutely sure and instead went and worked in a nursery, landscaping and doing forestry work for a year with Peterborough Development Corporation. I then went to agricultural college to do one of those newfangled HNDs. That was at Writtle which is a village outside Chelmsford, Essex. After the war when food production and U-boats in the Atlantic became such an important thing and we very nearly starved to death as a country, the Government response was to try and improve agriculture and this resulted in a swarm of agricultural colleges across the country.

They are wonderful things and I came to work in one later on; Writtle is one of the larger ones and it actually offered higher education as well as further education, and it was higher education that I was particularly interested in. Writtle is still going strong despite the fact that most agricultural colleges have been subsumed into other general purpose HE colleges or have ceased to be altogether. At that time when agriculture and food production was seen very much on the individualistic basis we have now moved away, which is terribly sad

At Writtle, my mentor was a chap called Tony Clark; a wonderful man, very kind with lots of experience, a natural teacher and also wonderfully eccentric. His manner of speaking was quite distinct and if people who have actually been taught by him gather together you can always guarantee Tony Clark impressions breaking out. He was an old-school horticulturist and landscaper. His ideas were fundamental to what the craft is and off the back of his sort of knowledge there was a range of other tutors there who were more clued in on the technology side.

The craft is an awareness, born of learning and experience; my father had a wonderful quote which he used often when I was growing up and had fallen over: "Experience is something you get just after you really needed it". Experience is something you get as you develop your way through horticulture. We are rare and fabulous beasts now because in bygone times local authorities would train a huge

raft of us coming through via the City and Guilds day release schemes, which in conjunction with higher diplomas and national diplomas actually produced a wonderful group of individuals fascinated by gardening and horticulture.

When you get to my age you develop this sixth sense about what's right and what's wrong because you reference against all of the experiences which you have had in the past. It is a little bit like bird-watchers; sometimes a bird-watcher will see a tiny little brown bird which they call LBJs, little brown jobs, shooting by; you ask what it is and they will tell you. If you ask how they knew it was that they just say that it is what it is. That is what being a seasoned horticulturist is. It is taught but it is developed - an innate thing, a lot of it comes from inside; you can only teach the subject so far. It is a development of things like your plant knowledge, plant awareness, and referencing back to where you saw plants and how they grow together.

It is all about associations, the way that everything associates with each other and how you want those associations to work in a way that is pleasing for you but also for the people who are employing you. It is a craft like any other where you learn by practice. The horticulturists who have fallen flat on their faces more often are almost always better for it. I think that most horticulturists who are very good at plants and plant knowledge, because plant knowledge is a fundamental of what we do, have semi-eidetic memories; in other words they can retrieve where they saw plants firstly via their visual memory, which is quite fascinating. For example, I can remember my first plant memories at Writtle College which were back in 1980. I can remember the detail of the shrubs and plants that I can even remember handling; it is a fascinating thing to have and the more you work with plants the more this skill develops.

Writtle was fascinating because it was also work experience and I spent a year working with Norwich City Council which was a lovely left wing council at the time with lots of social housing, a fantastic gardens team. I worked out of the offices where I was the supernumerary. Basically they realized that I could do more than just fill a desk space and I got to do all sorts; that really developed my interest in garden history so when I finished at Writtle I worked as a casual warden at a country park at Nene Valley, Peterborough.

3. Braxted Park



Braxted Park, Great Braxted, Essex.

I then went to work at Cambridge University Botanic Gardens in 1983. My first two weeks I stayed with Max Walters, a lovely man, Director there. His wife was a graduate of Nottingham University in horticulture, so they were fearsomely clever. I could fill a book about stories of Cambridge botanics.

Sadly I was only there for a little while; my tutor, Tony Clark, rang me and he had a consultancy at Braxted Park in North Essex which is a fascinating estate. It is a great big historic estate first mentioned in the Patent Rolls of Edward III, when it was a deer park; it then became the seat of Peter du Cane, of Protestant stock who escaped from the persecutions of the Duke of Alva on the Continent. He wasn't landed gentry who moved into the city, but did very well in the city and became Chairman of the Bank of England then moved to the countryside and bought an estate.

Tony asked me if I would like to be head gardener there; I thought it would be an amazing challenge as I was only 22, but it was a remarkable opportunity, and despite the fact that I didn't want to leave Cambridge, I had to take it. So in 1983 I had my own little cottage outside the gate houses of a spectacular historic landscape. The majority of extant features went back to the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I spent five years there and Tony was absolutely lovely. His children were about my age so I formed a circle of friends in the little villages out near the Blackwater Estuary, at Goldhanger in particular. It was near Osea Island, and at the end of the day if the tide was up we would drive down to the sea wall and go swimming.

Although I was head gardener, Tony preferred to call me the Gardens Manager as it apparently gave me more gravitas. Tony as the consultant produced a management plan that I worked to and then developed; I had a very small work-force which I developed, but it was a garden which had fallen into decay over many years. It had had a little bit of a resurgence in the 1960s and my job was to restore it as best we could with the resources that we had and would try and do things which would see the landscape and the garden fit for purpose in the future. This included planting loads of cedar of Lebanon which now would be substantial trees, and restoring a wonderful 5 acre woodland garden.

There were wonderful pleasure grounds around it that dated from the 1780s, and there was also a rich vein of documentary evidence because in 1985 English Heritage were in the process of listing all the landscapes and gardens and grading them. The Gardens History Society, which I joined, had done a cursory visit to Braxted and had completely missed the point. I spent quite a bit of time corresponding with Dr Christopher Thacker who was the gardens history advisor to English Heritage at the time, and got the garden properly registered as a Grade I historical landscape which was a real triumph. My work consisted of everything from sitting on a mower to propagating plants, right the way through to the strategic stuff.

The agent of the estate was a chap called Peter Innes, a lovely man, who had been a lecturer at Wye College which was one of the foremost land based colleges in the country until Imperial College did what it did to it many years later. Peter was also Chairman of the Governors of Writtle College and he thought I needed new challenges. He wrote a lovely reference for a junior lecturing position at Otley College, Suffolk's land based college. I went for an interview and got the job.

4. Otley College

My job was teaching horticulture, amenity and decorative horticulture, some commercial horticulture, and also working with the students who were on practical conservation programmes. By this time it was 1987 so we were in the period of depression under Thatcher, and we had the community programme going offering jobs because there were so many people out of work at the time, it was terrible.

Otley did an awful lot of work with these folk and they were wonderful people; they had life experiences doing other work, and there they were working for Suffolk Wildlife Trust on community programme gangs going out, involved in conservation work. After I had been there a little while I managed courses as well, and started to write courses, because at that time there was proper money available for mature students who wanted to re-train and further education was supported appropriately. Whereas these days further education has just been kicked off a cliff by successive governments and is languishing.

Teaching was a real challenge. Otley at that time was a poor place perched on a hill surrounded by heavy clay soil. We had outgrown the buildings and a lot of the teaching happened in portacabins; we worked and we grew the college with us; it was a delightful organic process that went on from 1987 until 2000 when, unfortunately, the cold winds of economic change came along.

I stayed there until 2011 but every year there was a different role. I became the Head of Horticulture in charge of whole departments which was a substantial department in those days, in 1995, and you found yourself more involved in the strategic activity which went on. That was still a period of building but as we headed towards 2000 then we had a change of Principal, and what was very orientated towards the community changed direction very suddenly and became quite an aggressive environment to be in, and it was a challenge.

There were some good years after 2000 but there were also, like so many other colleges at that time, huge challenges, restructures, and the dreadful thing of having to reapply for your job on a regular basis. But it was worth sticking with because there was still a lot more good than bad until 2011 when I thought my stint in education was done and it was time to leave.

Whilst at Otley I did my Certificate of Education, I was also working my way through a Masters via Essex University, delivered at Writtle College; that all came to a grinding halt in 2000 when the first restructures happened and I had to give up my studies in order to protect staff and myself. So I came out with a post grad. certificate when I'd really liked to have gone on further and eventually got a doctorate.

The changes to amenity and decorative horticulture, the maintenance and management of private open spaces, landscapes and gardens, also all of the public realm, were manifold; the people who work in local authorities in public open spaces love the gardens, love the landscapes; it's not something that they do it is something that they are; of course that was torn to pieces with Compulsive Competitive Tendering which came along with Thatcher; an awful lot of the public

realm in the terms of the way we manage it and ways of training just faltered and died because local authorities just couldn't afford to run training programmes any more, which massively de-skilled the sector that I am in.

We saw a fall-off of students and this was a great shame as there is a need for what we do; it is one of the civilizing elements of society to maintain the public realm for the people. There has been no improvement and things are getting worse. The austerity of the last Conservative governments didn't help. There was a resurgence when Labour were in but Labour didn't understand further education and certainly didn't understand the importance of what they had surrounding them. The situation at the moment is that local authorities have statutory responsibilities and fiduciary responsibilities.

However they don't have to carry out those fiduciary responsibilities so they have fallen by the wayside, and with austerity funding has been withdrawn from local authorities and they are now thinking of handing over parks to parks trusts to be run by the people, the folk; I think that is fine but they will need guidance and they are not going to get it. Tom Lehrer (right) my favourite performer once said that the problem of folk music was that it was written by the folk, and the same can be said with what is going to happen to parks.



There is always hope, we still have those open spaces and they are not built over, and we still have a planning structure that prevents that happening; although things aren't the way they should be you never give up.

5. Glemham Hall



Glemham Hall.

In 2011 I decided that I needed a break from education, possibly never to return to lecturing again; I got a job with a landscape architect's practice and worked doing historic landscape surveys, statements of significance, and also arboricultural consultancy which was fun.

I did that for nearly a year then I moved to get some more practical experience with a friend's landscape construction company which was really good fun. It was excellent because you have a whole suite of skills and you are just practising your practical skills like driving a seven and a half ton lorry. Then one of my old students rang me and asked if I'd like to be interviewed for a job restoring Glemham Hall gardens in Suffolk, and I got the job.

Glemham Hall is a remarkable place and I had four fantastic years there putting back a landscape and a garden which had been neglected by the previous owners other than Lady Blanche Cobbold. She was from the Cavendish family and her famous quote when she was Patron of Ipswich Town Football Club and was asked whether she would like to be introduced to the new Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher, at an away match at Arsenal. She said that she'd prefer another gin and tonic.

Glemham Hall was a wonderful community of people with lots of playing of music and meetings of artists and artisans who worked on the estate. Then very sadly, my wonderful boss, Raewyn Hope-Cobbold (right), who was a Kiwi by origin, a wonderful woman, fell ill and encouraged me to get work elsewhere because she didn't quite know where the succession was going. The place is now in Tom



Hope-Cobbold's hands and we are hoping that he will make a good job of it as he's a nice chap. That is when King's College came along; I applied for the job and was offered it on the same day as the interview. I was interviewed by the Domus Bursar with Steve Elstub, the Head Gardener at Clare College.

6. King's College Cambridge



King's garden is fascinating; I spent time in the archives with Patricia McGuire and Peter Jones and I'm so impressed with the breadth and depth of their knowledge. The College itself dates from 1441; the negotiations that Henry VI had with the Cambridge authorities at the time to clear what was essentially the centre of Cambridge must have been remarkable considering what went - parish churches, the precursor to Christ's College, a Carmelite nunnery, several inns, several student boarding houses, and a quay. Like any historic landscape you have layer upon layer with stories associated with each of them, as well as the physical artefacts; landscape and garden history isn't just about the artefacts, it's about the people, fashions, time, politics, everything, and that is why it is fascinating.

A historic landscape such as King's is just such a remarkable place and how would you not want to work there. The Fellows' Garden is actually quite late and there is lots of research to do there as well. Dr Walters wrote a very good little handbook on it which hasn't been surpassed yet, though I'm going to have a go at it sometime. The garden dates from the mid-nineteenth century.

Before that it was a paddock for the Provost's coach horses, and the Fellows were able to walk around on a fairly rudimentary path. Eventually, Provost Okes (right) put the horses elsewhere and that is when it started to emerge as a garden. A local management construction company managed by Robert Fuller, I think, were retained to actually do the work in the garden. There isn't a design or any sort of plan associated with it that we know in our archives. But we do have the planting lists and the nursery lists which are fascinating.



Essentially what the Fellows' Garden was originally was a Victorian pleasure garden, not formal, but you have that informality in Victorian gardens as well as the starkly formal. Victorian garden design was as eclectic as everything else from formal to rustic. A near comparison is shown in the work of John Claudius Loudon, a massively productive journalist. His wife doesn't get enough recognition for everything she did. He did design as well and took his inspiration from the later works of Humphrey Repton who died in 1818. Loudon's garden in York near King's Manor which was designed for a Worshipful company is unusual as often such gardens are destroyed, built all over, and the original purpose of that landscape or garden vanishes.



Fellows Garden, King's College Cambridge.

At King's we still have the layout, the formal structures that we actually look after, and there is a lot that we can actually do to bring it back to give it more of that Victorian look which is what we are working on. We are very lucky to have Hugh Johnson on board; he is a very talented horticulturist and is a Fellow Commoner on the Gardens committee. Now that the pergola (inspired and by him) is actually settling into the garden it is actually fulfilling a role; a central border was there prior to it, and now that it is starting to soften and the planting is emerging, as Hugh wished it to do, I think that the pergola certainly adds to the landscape.

On the Backs, Capability Brown (right) worked at St John's and he produced their wilderness garden initially. Brown getting excited by the work he did at St John's then decided it would be a great idea if he produced an English landscape-style garden all the way along the Backs but completely ignoring the boundaries between various colleges which blurred and vanished, using the Gibbs



Building at King's as his "country house". You can imagine how that went down. All the riverside colleges affected got together, very politely thanked him with a silver plate in recognition for his work, and nothing was ever done; the plan is still in the library.

King's is a fascinating landscape and is a series of vignettes as you move through from the front to the Fellows' Garden and beyond. Various elements in those gardens represent different times in the history of the College. What we haven't got within the College is anything that is contemporary with the times that we are in now. I felt that what the landscape and gardens of King's needed was something that reflected what happened in the twentieth century and as we move through the twenty-first century. Also there are discrete areas within the College grounds where you could develop a garden without impinging on the austere nature overall.



Xu Zhimo, 1897 to 1931. Author of the poem 'On Saying Goodbye to Cambridge'.

The germ of an idea came because Xu Zhimo was a very famous poet for the Chinese and they want to pay homage to him when they come to this country. The stone is absolutely lovely, but I felt associated with the stone we could produce a landscape that would give visitors an opportunity to reflect. There wasn't really any opportunity for them to do so as they are on a footpath with people passing all the time. It would also give recognition within the landscape of a particularly important time in the College; because it could be done in a subtle and discreet manner. That was the impetus that would allow me to negotiate with the Gardens Committee to see if it were possible.

After a period of intense negotiation and a lot of diplomacy, the merits of this scheme were seen to outweigh the demerits, and it was given the go-ahead. What I have needed to do is just to demonstrate that this would enhance the landscape and actually be a historic note about a part of the College's history. Michael Proctor, the Provost, has been superb. He would have made an ideal eighteenth century patron to anyone. The Daoist symbol that we are using has a hard side and a soft side; Xu Zhimo had a foot in both Western society and China, and he revered both. By dividing the garden into two using the yin and yang symbol doesn't actually reflect the reforming zeal that Xu Zhimo had but at the same time it also demonstrates it's own resonance.



Xu Zhimo Memorial, King's College Cambridge.

By acknowledging Xu Zhimo in this way we are hoping that we are demonstrating his love of his home culture and also his adopted culture. The city of Haining and Zhejiang province where he came from has plants that will grow perfectly happily in our climate, and a lot of the plants we grow here have their origin in China which has the most remarkable flora. We will be growing the sort of plants that he would have found at home but are regularly grown here too.



We are starting to collect the plants, and tomorrow my propagator, Kevin, is going out to select plants that are appropriate and it will be exciting gathering them all together. There will be a fair proportion of plants that Xu Zhimo would have instantly recognised, but as we move outwards from the centre the garden will bleed out into the landscape using native trees and shrubs from this country. So you will approach through Europe into China and go from China back into Europe.

There will be a path dividing the yin and yang where we are going to have carved in stone tablets the first and last verses of his famous poem 'On saying goodbye to

Cambridge'. Also between the stones with the poem carved in English there will be laser-cut Mandarin calligraphy of the same poem; so the path will take you through the poem in both languages, which is very exciting. Then the path terminates in a bespoke seat in the shape of a crescent moon.

So it will give visitors not only the opportunity to reflect but also to read, which I think will be special. There is a drainage ditch which runs beside the Cam and then there is a spit of land that separates the Cam from the drainage ditch which is owned by Queens College. We will be asking their Head Gardener very nicely if we can just trim up the willow which is on their side so that we can get views in. The elms that ran along our side have just been removed because of Dutch elm disease, so that will allow views of the garden and hopefully a slight glimpse of the stone as people are punting along the Cam which will be lovely.



And in 2020 Steven Coghill led a project to plant a section of the Backs with wild flowers.
