

[A cultural geography of Alphin brook](#)

‘Culture’ in geography has recently been conceptualised by Ben Anderson (2020) as a ‘whole way of life’. Potentially infinite in scope, Anderson’s is an attempt to bring recent developments in the discipline (and beyond) relating to vitalism, the agency of the non-human, and the more-than-representational (Lorimer, 2005), into conversation with more established ideas pertaining to meaning, symbolism, representation and power, which were of prime concern to ‘new cultural geography’ at the end of the 20th century. It is with Anderson’s position on cultural geography in mind that ‘a cultural geography of the Alphin brook’ will be made, in a way that similarly attempts to synthesise notions of power, meaning, life and agency from multiple perspectives. Harnessing the ‘topological imagination’ of Harrison *et al.* (2004), the landscape drawn out is less an image or construction of nature-culture relations, but their “very entanglement”.

I have illustrated the essay with maps and images sourced online, as well as photographs I shot while walking the length of the brook (on Thursday 8th April 2021). No critical examination of the contribution my own images make to this geographical imaginary has been made, although reflection using Rose’s (2001) methodology would have been useful with more space. Their inclusion is merely for the reader’s potential interest.

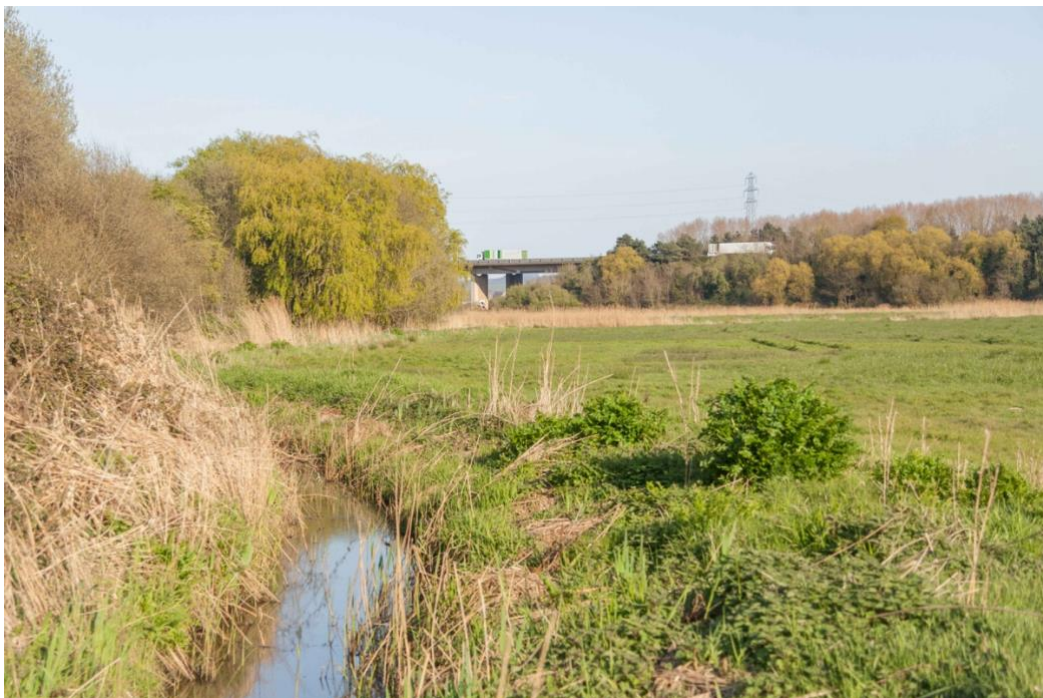


Figure 1: At the M5

As well as Ben Anderson's (2020) contemporary theorising, I will lean strongly on Kay Anderson *et al.*'s (2002) earlier work, which was published concurrently with the then nascent scholarship on 'more-than-human' geographies (Whatmore, 2002), and as such provides a useful early bridge between post-structural, constructivist and phenomenological positions with more recent ideas informed by the assemblages and 'new materialisms' of science and technology studies. In this essay, Anderson *et al.*'s (2002) concepts of culture as 'a distribution of things' and as 'meaning' lend significance to material artefacts such as buildings and water courses, as well as place names and textual/visual representations. Their notion of 'world-building' is also invoked, to reflect on how worlds are made, and by whom; an idea which begins to open the scope of enquiry to a range of actors, human and non-human, in shaping the 'world' of the Alphin brook, and – to now recall Ben Anderson (2020) - its 'whole way of life'. Finally, I will touch on geographic storytelling to notion at how knowledge of the Alphin brook should be publicly engaged.

In an era of anthropogenic environmental change, and the need for urban socio-ecological-technical system transitions (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2014), a better awareness of the 'place of nature' (Anderson, 2021) in the vernacular landscapes of everyday life has scarcely been more important. It is in this context that the essay will explore how a range of heterogenous entities - water, industry, flood, memory, agriculture, energy, data and trade, to name but a few – become imbricated in a cultural geography of the brook. Following Gibbs (2009):

“Water flows, sits, sinks, falls, emerges, passes through, and evaporates from, where histories of interaction between humans, non-humans, water and landscape form places... Cultural, social and more-than-human geographies are needed in order to effectively govern human relations with 'nature'.”



Figure 2: At White Horse motors.

Bearings

The Alphin brook is local to the city of Exeter. It flows from a source in the parish of Holcombe Burnell, west of the city, through the eponymous suburb of Alphington, the Marsh Barton industrial estate, and alongside the Exeter ship canal, before finally emptying into Exminster marsh, on the west bank of the Exe estuary.

I take inspiration from David Matless' (2010) 'description' of a regional cultural landscape to provide a framework for navigating the brook's geography by similarly focussing on a series of sites. In this case these are 'source', 'confluence', 'mill' and 'city'; "spots where tensions of landscape become acute, where viewpoints can be taken, where contrasting pleasures meet, where anxieties surface" (Matless, 2010). However, where Matless positions his 'description' reflexively in the emergence of the landscape itself, here I simply want to use his as a format to shape what follows.

Source

There is no clear, determined source of the Alphin brook. In the hills to the west of Exeter, about 6 miles from the city centre, ‘the elusiveness of the river at its headwaters’ (Lyons, 2013) is confirmed as conflicting cartographic representations jostle.

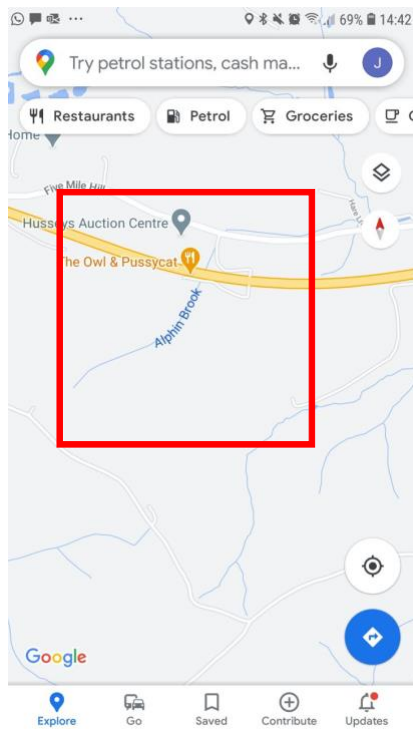


Figure 3 (L): Google Maps; Figure 4 (R): Maps.Me.

Already the geographies of the Alphin brook are conflictual, with Google and Maps.Me holding great power in defining how the places, spaces and natures (Anderson *et al.*, 2002) of the Alphin brook are represented here. Of course, no river has a single source, but if one were to follow either Maps.Me’s version of reality, or Google’s, or any other map, one could end up in any number of material places, with similarly different impressions. The ‘force of representations’ (Anderson, 2018) such as maps, texts, images or language, lies in this ability to ‘make, remake and unmake worlds’, shaping our lived experience. This is why geographers are so interested in how representations are made, disseminated, consumed, and felt.

Eventually, various streams converge to form a body of water which most maps agree *is* the Alphin brook. Rainfall, gravity and soft sandstone have been at work together here for long enough for a steep-sided valley to form - an *agencement* (Deleuze/Guattari, 1987) of non-human life, soon capitalised upon by human life: Two roads now trace the brook, an older one meandering alongside the water, and a newer introduction - the four lanes of the A30, which rushes traffic through the valley between Exeter and Land's End. On the southern facing valley, linking the aforementioned assemblage of water, gravity and sandstone with that of sunlight, energy, technology and consumption, is a solar farm. In this *agencement* of materials, agencies, forces and knowledge systems, multiple 'forms-of-life' (Anderson, 2020) pertaining to the Alphin brook - human, non-human, more-than-human - become linked through deep time geologies and future-orientated *Anthroposcenes* (Matless, 2017).



Figure 5: At Five Mile Hill solar farm.

Confluence

The brook forms and re-forms parish boundaries as it progresses, delimiting Whitestone, from Holcombe Burnell, from Exeter. Perhaps the river once mediated ‘constructions and experiences of the everyday’ (Anderson, 2020) through this socio-material boundary. Perhaps it still does. Eventually, it meets the Nadder brook, and the latter’s representational geographies are surrendered at the confluence. Waters, sediments, microbes and pollutants continue on into new spaces with new cultural inscriptions, but the name, *Nadder* brook, is dammed. It is perhaps a trivial matter in context, but the ethical importance of questioning who has the power to decide which names are allowed to continue, and which are not; who has the power to ‘do’, and who doesn’t (Anderson *et al.*, 2002), far exceeds the Nadder’s burbling extinction.

A little further downstream from Old Wheatley Farm, the topographic extent of the Fordland brook’s cultural sphere meets a similar end, at a junction marked by a collection of bridges; material artefacts that prompt us to ask “how exactly we understand the relationships between the patterning of those artefacts, and the values, livelihoods, beliefs and identities of the cultures who have produced them” (Anderson *et al.*, 2002).

Well, ‘This bridge was erected by Richard Brewer... 1692’ reads the inscription on one, a stone arched structure thought to be of medieval origin (Historic England, 2002). In *History of Alphington* (1952), WJ Harte writes that “probably the village originated in a group of Saxons who settled by the Alphin brook, by an ancient British track way.” Harte’s history places the origin of the surrounding social world at the intersection of culture and nature, where flows of water and tracks of travellers met. Also remarking how at the time of Domesday the area was on ‘folk land’, as opposed to ‘book land’, Harte’s (1952) work allows a tentative socio-economic history to be made: As ‘folk’ land, it was owned by an Earl; Royal property, yet to be ‘booked’ and become a chartered item of transferable ownership (Baxter and Blair, 2005).

Movement across the medieval bridge was limited to pedestrians only, physically and de facto, with the arrival of the A30. Its size, speed and volume sets it somewhat in isolation from the surrounding landscape, but nonetheless, the road connects distant places topologically to the topography of this one; a landscape ‘infrastructure’ (Carse, 2014) which “reworks ecologies in ways that serve specific political and economic priorities”. A second bridge, spiralling between the trees in an incongruous curve of 20th century modernism, whisks pedestrians up and over the road, between the village of Ide and the pub on the Alphin brook. “I’d only ever seen the Twisted Oak [the pub] from a passing car,” writes Elizabeth-Jane Burnett in *The Grassling*

(2019), a book of place, memory and Devonian lives. Her words no doubt outline an experience of the locality shared by many, but Burnett is drawn into an ethically receptive ‘being-with’ (Braun, 2008) the river in the passage that follows.



Figure 6: At Ide.

“The meeting of Fordland and Alphin brooks seems a significant moment for some internal, bodily reason I cannot fathom, and I feel drawn to follow this thickened water on, on, towards Exeter,” Burnett (2019) writes, perhaps sensing the aforementioned histories that have come to pass at this place, before taking a dip. Burnett’s poetic rhythm moves between embodied experience (“As my shoulders go under, cold claws like a crow”) and emplaced memory (“As I look back towards the island, it seems familiar yet alien all at once, as the water channels me back to another dream”), articulating a transformation that simultaneously unifies the self, the social, and the landscape: “As I lift myself out, I have the uncanny sensation of having disturbed more than the water” (Burnett, 2019).

This embodied landscape ‘performance’ (Pearson, 2011), oscillating between phenomenology, memory, the Alphin brook and wider region, the prose her travels evoke, and the material,

spatial dimensions of the book itself, is an act of world-building (Anderson *et al.*, 2002). It is a world which straddles multiple geographies, linking the individual to the social, the local to the far-away, history with the future, and thus sheds light on the ethico-political import of relationality (Massey, 2004) in the worlds we can make, simply by taking a spontaneous dip in a local body of water. Such ‘quiet’ acts of ‘everyday politics’ (Hankins, 2017) provide an opportunity to reflect on the kinds of worlds – material and immaterial – which are always being made and unmade in a ‘volatile future’ (Carr and Gibson, 2016) that was already present in the past (DeSilvey, 2012).

Mill

In an attempt to decentre human epistemologies, the poet Alice Oswald has spoken of the knowledge of water - how it knows the land, and the impediments and passages of flow within it (Oswald, 2012). This non-human knowledge was harnessed by human industry from the 18th century, when a mill was erected close to Alphington village, and a leat was channelled to power it; the water seeking out the alternate pathway and braiding into course (fig 7).



Figure 7: Alphington tithe map, 1836 (Devon County Council, 2021).

Hydro technologies being utilised and developed concurrently across the whole of Greater Exeter ensured that flows of production and capital began to pick up in both pace and distance, as wool made its way to Europe, and paper to India (Greaves, 2020). As populations grew, and

demand for food with it, corn produce from local agriculture was channelled into the mill, to be met with machinery powered by the agential, knowledgeable water flowing through the other door. Thus, in the “partially connected unfolding of worlds” (Blaser, 2014), different forms of life and knowledge became entangled with different forms of power (Anderson, 2020), and the Alphin brook began to flow through the Industrial Revolution.

‘The Old Mill’, as the name on the side of the building reads, still stands today - on Mill Lane, which connects to Wheatsheaf Way, and then to a cul-de-sac, Corn Mill Crescent. Such toponymics might be suggestive of meaning to those sensible towards them, and scholars in the new cultural geography school of landscape might be interested in the power relations underlying this signification (Anderson *et al.*, 2002; Wylie, 2007): who had the power to retain this legacy of the mill? What was their motivation? Which cultural memories were left *unremembered*? The implications of such questions are important, but it is also worth considering the materiality of the land itself, for it is only since the development of another visual technology, the satellite image, that the fields’ non-human memory of the mill race are made sensible to us, and another question is raised: What histories – and futures – still remain beyond human cognition?



Figure 8: Mill race, OS Six Inch 1888 / Bing Satellite (National Library of Scotland, 2021).

City

“We think about the city as a modern entity. Modern infrastructure was supposed to exclude forms of nature from the city and create more forms of control” (Bulkeley, 2019).

If the Alphington mill was an example of humans working *with* the agency of the brook, then its lower stretches – canalised in defence of floods in the 1960’s – typifies a human struggle against it. Flooding in the 18th century forms a large part of Alphington’s scant written history (Harte, 1952), and after the same occurred in the 1960’s “something had to be done” (National Rivers Authority, 1991). Today, the Exeter Green Circle walking route booklet describes a route tracing the canals and levees through Alphington, the ‘tamed’ brook having been ‘separated from the city’ to ‘protect its modern neighbour’ (Exeter City Council, 2020). Except of course, we have never been modern (Latour, 1993), and in the overlapping worlds of human and non-human, flooding and industry; restriction and growth;

“We recognize that cities teem with life forms, technologies, agencies, materialities and ecological associations and niches whose concatenations comprise a characteristically diverse more-than-human politics” (Franklin, 2017).



Figure 9: At Alphinbrook Road culvert.

Photos posted on the *Exeter Memories* Facebook page – of the brook “before it was converted into a concrete culvert,” where “I used to play watching catfish keep their place in the lee of stones,” opposite “the thatched cottage that caught fire and was never rebuilt” (Exeter Memories, 2015) – evoke an outpouring of collective nostalgia, brought into being through an emergent digital culture. These pixelated images – *remediated* in a future-present, *participated* with through a new digital public (Deuze, 2005) – provide a space for stories of cultural memory and environmental futures to meet. For sure, mourning over an apparently lost idyll will not bring Alphin brook back to life any more than the imposition of more concrete flood defences. But such stories might also have the potential to link the individual to the social, the local to the far-away, the playful with the political, the past with the future, and thus orientate attention to the “materialisation of new realities” (Cameron, 2012). As Donna Haraway (1994) says about narratives; “The point is to get at how worlds are made and unmade, in order to participate in the processes.”

Word Count

2492

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