1.
Dear Nathaniel Charles Rothschild

Actually - can I call you Charles for the sake of economy?
I am walking a walk created in your name, the Rothschild Way. It's a 39 miles long path that links two nature reserves you had a hand in creating.
Woodwalton Fen and Wicken Fen.

Charles you sort of invented the nature reserves.
You founded the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves in 1911, its stated purpose:
'*to collect and collate information as to areas of land within the United Kingdom which retain primitive conditions*
and contain rare and local species liable to extinction
You encouraged 'the love of nature', educating public opinion through 'nature study'.
But you were no populist – this was all to be achieved by the great and good – Foreign Secretary Lord Grey, ecologist Arthur Tansley, bankers and Liberal MPs.
You didn't anticipate the coming war or your depression growing acuter.
Wars and pandemics often upstage nature's needs.
You took your life aged 46 in 1923. how is not clear but I can sense why you did it. You'd contracted encephalitis during the last global pandemic, the Spanish flu, giving you hideous headaches; you spent much of the war in a Swiss sanatorium.
Your premature death left behind your wife Roszika and four children.
Your obituary in the journal 'Nature' said that with your death 'nature (itself)…has sustained a formidable blow'

Sorry to introduce you in such a gloomy way. I'm trying to show you're the greatest figure in 20th century conservation, the inventor of the 'nature reserve', the man who saved the fens.

Because Wood Walton and Wicken Fen are relicts of undrained fenland of which there are precisely three remaining in Cambridgeshire, the other being the tiny Chippenham Fen – which you also scheduled for preservation.
I do like that word relict with its little extra 't'.

Names can be deceptive aren't they? The Fens are now only 'the fens' in the way that Enfield is a field or Covent Garden a garden. The word points to an absence, and that absence is an effect of drainage. I don't want to strike a negative note so early in the walk, but one writer describes the draining of the fens as 'England's greatest ecological disaster'

Indeed a Government minister you won't have heard of, Michael Gove, recently described England as having 'one of the most depleted natural environments in the world'.
Depletion, from the Latin: to use up, to 'empty out'.

Or Edward O Wilson, a biologist, coined a term to name this age of Extinction we seem to be heading into as the Eremocene – the epoch of loneliness. Humans living

alone in human spaces; yes, there'll be some other forms of life but probably only the generalists: rats, feral dogs, pigeons, corvids, hardy unlovely things that thrive with us.
But the specialists will be gone, the creatures that make places particular:– the Swallowtail butterfly, lost from the fens in the 1950s, which accepts no substitute for 4-5 yr old milk parsley, or the Large Copper butterfly, lost in the 1850s because it only thrives in the wet where great waterdock grows.
You said,' the great characteristic of nature in Britain is its sharp local variety'. I want to know if that's true anymore.

Gosh – I'm not being very judicious am I, Charles, which would appall you, and probably appals the heroes of my tale, the conservationists, who stress nuance, seek partnership, see things from all sides. I'd like to be more like them, like you, which is another reason I'm undertaking this walk.

I write before I succumb to the pain
It hardens as the light comes,
when I wake in the dawn, which I invariably do, thinking of you, dear wife -
I take a little morphine
then I am calm
I think of my 'good spots' which assists me in achieving this
calm

Blakeney.
Tuddenham.
Swaddiwell.

I do not think I can continue to live
this way.

The air is as sweet as wine here, Swiss air; the high meadows alive with *Parnassius Apollo* –
you see their four red spots as they warm their wings
on the open spores of thistles
so docile
one advances on them almost without net

I have one set here – its wings hard despite exposure to direct sunlight
Splayed so, on cork.
I wish you could see it.
It is quite splendid but sad in some ways too.
Being, as it is, dead.

Kingley Vale.
Red House.
Chippenham Fen.
Wood Walton

2.
Dear Charles,
OK, it's 20th May, 2021 - 8am; I'm at Woodwalton Fen somewhere between Huntingdon and Peterborough.
Warden John Kerr, in a Natural England t-shirt walks me up the main ride of the fen; cuckoos sound in stereo.
Oh, Natural England's a Government body, the successor of the once powerful agency Nature Conservancy which guided so much of conservation after the Second World War; this place's now a National Nature Reserve.
Yes Woodwalton's the ideal starting point, bought by you in 1911, spurned by the National Trust when you offered it to their care, because, they claimed, it only had value for the naturalist, then gifted by you to the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves in 1919, funded by war bonds from your family bank, money earned funding the Great war. Have capitalism and conservation ever come this close? But that deal saved Woodwalton's 340 acres.
There's your Bungalow: creosoted wood panels on concrete stilts to avoid rising water.

The interior's musty. Large windows screened from insects, the exhibits sepia in gloom – there's the long oak table where your committee assessed potential sites 'worthy of preservation'; your desk with field gear; your fen diorama with cracked bills and skulls; there's 'Rothschild's sunflower' introduced to lure back the lost Large Copper, ultimately fruitlessly; there you are, in necktie and high collar, eyes shy of your portraitist.

A locked hide overlooks a mere named after you, created with clay dug out to form the reserve's banks, an island above the surrounding shrinking peatlands. According to ex-warden Alan Bowley this place is 'Nature in a flowerpot' in that it needs constant re-wetting.

We head to the western floodbank, take in former farmland turned marsh. There's the dark line of Holme's birch forest marking the limit of the wetland towards which this reserve is advancing.
Ah – lapwing, oyster catchers, swallows racing over tussocks.
John notes a reduction in 'fen blows' since the re-wetting, untilled topsoil whipped by the wind into clouds of peat; locals say their washing's no longer black with it.

I head off to hear the bittern John claims is nesting here. I need the blessing of this shy bird,
Into the interior:
Low alder, dark peat, cuckoo flower, plosh of water vole, sedge, heaps of cut reed, a roe deer, then, yes:

Climate Change Narratives: ROTHSCHILD's WALK by Prof Steve Waters

A trochee of sound curving up as if in question, falling silent as you listen. The bittour bombleth in the mire, as Chaucer said.
Time to leave this refuge for ten thousand species.
How many species live out there, beyond Jackson's Bridge?

'Keep Out' 'I live here' 'Beware of the Dog' 'It Bites You Have Been Warned' 'Never Mind the Dog Beware of the Owner'
Plenty of dogs clearly
I walk into the empty chess board of fields that fall away from these 'Heights', actually 5 metres under sea-level. To the north lost lakes: Ugg Mere, Whittlesea Mere drained in 1851; a thousand scars of drainage, a blue grid of self-harm.
Ramsey Heights visitor centre is a relic of old brickpits, the outdoor classroom for the Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust, descendant of your SPNR.
I'm here to meet Henry Stanier who monitors the Great Fen's ecology. Ah, there he is, embroiled in a mist net to ensnare reed warblers; instantly he identifies a weird bubbling sound as the chuckle of a female cuckoo' as it scopes out the warbler nests where soon it'll dump its eggs.
Henry tracks bats, rings birds, counts dormice –he says when he started in conservation it was characterised by loss and fatalism but these days there's a spirit of adventure. Because Charles, the red-kites are back, (you wouldn't have seen them in your day), the buzzards are back, and cranes too
Henry's commitment to 'our last wilderness', the Great Fen, takes inspiration from your argument that we must conserve sites not species. But he notes your idea of how to define a reserve came from a Victorian passion for order, in order to stop time and change. But if time can be stopped inside the reserve, beyond it, it rages as habitat loss and climate change accelerate. To meet this constant change, the Great Fen is designed to change too, as a mosaic of habitats with no fixed destination, 3,700 hectares of 'Living Landscape'.
Charles, the problem with your scheduled spots of land is they're often the *only* examples of their given habitat now – nature has so little slack to work with beyond the reserve. Hence the 2010 Lawton Review on conservation which called for 'bigger, better, more joined up' land-use: 'making space for nature'; ten years on where are we with that?
Henry spools his empty net around its pole; I need to get on. The wind's picking up, rain is spotting.
Back into the hostile environment!
A good ecologist must think like the species they wish to conserve: as Aldo Leopold said the save a mountain we need to think like a mountain: so were I a bird or beast what would this land around me offer me?
On the next two miles to RamseyI see little life – a horse in a paddock, a dog at a gate, cow parsley– beyond this bridleway, monochrome fields give way to shimmering lakes which close to reveal themselves as solar farms, miles of PhotoVoltaic panels. I'm all for renewable energy but what would a bird or insect on its flyway make of these lakes of hot glass?

I'm late to get to the next reserve, Wistow Wood, so I divert to the road. Is there a more hostile environment than a trunk road, verge choked with detritus? Hauliers and sales reps tear the afternoon apart as I'm driven into the roadway. I lock eyes with a flattened male blackbird, yellow eye glaring from a drainage ditch. Yet verges

like this cover as much land as the county of Dorset – if we just stopped mowing them, they might offer a home to 4 billion extra flowers.

Wistow wood's a dark mantle on the ridge; if fens are a relict in this county, woodland is equally rare. 3.6% of Cambridgeshire is wooded. And this wood is old…possibly 1000 years old, once providing timber for the monks of Ramsey abbey below. The wind's caught in its canopy, the rain's incessant slant mitigated; I wait in its transepts for Matt Hamilton, Senior Reserves Manager.

For Matt, Wistow's a portal into Darwin's tangled bank of life, into which he hurls his tall frame and I blunder after him footsore. As we thresh through understory, he apologises for sodden paths and arrested flora – it's late May, that dog mercury should be flowering. Like a barefoot doctor Matt dives into the body of the wood diagnosing it – where are the long-horn beetles that should be on that Hawthorn bush? Look at that black fungus on that splayed ash?
Oh, yes, and look at those ash trees. Wistow is an ash wood, the tree that flourishes on this boulder clay soil. He itemises them like old acquaintances – that one with a vast bole, branches gangly in their spread, how old do I think it is? Matt reckons four hundred years. But notice the thinning here, the off-shoots going black, the futile leafage. These trees are sick.
Ash die-back is rampant here, worse than feared, deeper in impact, faster in lethality. In 5-10 years, this millennium-old-wood could be dead.
The trees creak in high winds. And look who thrives in their company –
Lady's bedstraw! Wood anemones! The common twayblade orchid! The Early Purple orchid for which Matt has fashioned a mesh cage to spare it from muntjac.
Now we crunch into a glade to see a really 'underwhelming piece of good news for Cambridgeshire' - on the mossy bark of an ash is a tiny fern, an epiphyte, coiling off the tree, which should not grow here– yet here it is; Matt sees this as a sign of improved air quality thanks to the end of brick production near Peterborough.
On a day of as much bad as good news for nature I choose to be overwhelmed, my head filled with the density of life in this 45 hectares of woodland at its limit.

Has an hour passed already?

The coffee's gone cool by my bed.
I found myself dreaming of Wood Walton
In the alder woods, hawkers thick about me, reeds high as my head, earth soft as sponge,
so soft I felt disposed to unlace and remove my boots,
to allow the dark mud to ooze through my toes as I walked
as if I was dancing not walking
and I heard a cuckoo so clearly
Wood Walton
I despair of England's parsimony
I offer gifts of its natural history and it thinks of nothing but war, well, my labours are –
My dear, I must cease, I must cease, my head is very –

I leave unopened all banking correspondence.
Yes father would disapprove,
– bars of gold in the dark like - fetters –

Ah, the wind's blown the curtains open
cloud is everywhere
the sun is gone.
Thousands sent to their deaths in France and I malinger here

Parnassius Apollo
Almost as if alive, on its cork bed
I must cease, yes, I apologise, I must cease.

3.
Dear Charles
It's 27th May 2021 and I'm on the next leg of your walk, a walk you never undertook and which it looks like no one else is undertaking either.
I'm lost south of Warboys.
I'm walking to Bluntisham today through eight miles devoid of nature reserves. Which is good; because if the nature reserve is the controlled environment, what surrounds it is the 'control variable' – the unreserved world, what remains of nature in the hands of farming, golf courses, paintballing, glamping, garden centres.
And surely we can trust to the famous British love of nature without all those meddling conservationists getting in the way?
Look Charles, I know I am laying a lot on one walk on one day in one season – but here on this arable plain bear Pidley I'm getting worried. I'm still trying to think like a bird or a bug – given you were an entomologist Charles, the latter's especially pertinent and a world without bugs will be a world without birds. So I'm looking out for any movement – any blur at the corner of the eye, any rustle and stir, any flap of wing, any song, anything – and two miles has yielded the following:
1 cabbage white butterfly
No bees – literally, no bees
No beetles – literally, no beetles
Two confused yellowhammers
A solitary skylark
That's about it
There are plants. A mile of blazing rape. I know rape's meant to be catnip for bees, so I lie down in front of it for a while until its mustardy stench overwhelms me – I see no insects in that yellow dazzle; I try the same trick on a field of young wheat but its metallic green interior is dead.

No, no bugs.
OK, what about the ditches? Botanists call them the 'hedgerows' of the fen; I duck down to coverts of nettles and get the welcome surprise of humbug snails relishing leafage. Yet further along the drain's an algae-riddled puddle –herbicided, pesticided.
Because nature doesn't deplete itself –it needs human help; say, applications of glyphosphate or other chemicals really help with depletion.

I'm trying not to get angry Charles about what's being done to our land to feed us - these unbroken fields were here in your day, they're on the 1902 OS map, the drainage goes back to the 17th century, but the pesticidal regime simplifying them to one crop really takes off in what Oliver Rackham called the 'locust years' of the intensified farming after the Second World War.
A tractor's approaching; I feel a mixture of fear – am I trespassing? – and resentment – is this flat-capped guy accountable for the silent Spring all around me? There's no friendly wave. Look, farming's a tough business, populated by ageing farmworkers without the luxury to carp; as if to confirm this in the next field stand beige signs with text from LEAFUK – 'linking environment and farming', coyly noting that any 'treatments' here are simply to see off infection as well as treat weeds and pests.
OK. But you have to wonder what those weeds and pests might be?
Rattle, poppy, cornflower, knapweed, ox-eye daisy, birds-foot-trefoil? Turtle doves, willow tits, larks and buntings?
I see my first bee on Somersham's outskirts; in comfrey is lost in briars I hear the drone of bumblebees drunk on nectar! Who can the bees thank for this? Somersham Allotments, a shanty town of corrugated iron sheds, strips of courgette and bean. The working countryside or what Richard Mabey called the 'unofficial countryside' - given bumblebee numbers have halved in the last 50 yrs for this relief much thanks; it puts paid to the notion that where people are, nature isn't. Maybe what you denounced as 'universal suburbia' has something to recommend it…
You would have been horrified Charles at what Buglife have called 'insectinction' we face, the prospect of 40% of insects vanishing in the next four decades. You specialised in fleas, discovering the vector for the black Death in the heat of Sudan, seeking out rarity – but now even once common species are rare and none more so than your beloved butterflies, almost entirely absent from 8 miles of farmed Cambridgeshire.
I said no nature reserves today but here's a reserve: Somersham community reserve, edge of an estate, hemmed in by road, an oasis of neglect - an abandoned railway line, ground-up conservation run by villagers. Oh wow - a painted lady – butterfly number two – the signboard claims 150 insects species thrive here. It's relaxed yet kempt – not all conservation needs professional ecologists.
And that old Cambridge to March railway is the gift that keeps on giving – as I reach the path to Colne the land feels, well – lush! A meadow: grasses of a thousand colours and not rye grass either – common bent and smaller cats-tail, quaking grass and crested dogs tails… waxy buttercups, a chalkstream from which a damselfly alights…and there's the first swallow of the day; I picnic and see worlds of insect life unfolding in its stems – spittle bugs and ladybirds and lacewings.
At Bluntisham, my destination, I find another hot-spot of life: old dwarf orchards, lines of spidery apple, pear and plum trees in dishevelled rows that spread shade and supply in their heartwood habitat aplenty.

I drop by The Lawn orchard run by Maureen Jacklin planted by her grandfather in 1898. It's thick with bees and blossom, an archive of fruit varieties: a century old apple tree called 'Sweet William' that once served a Cottenham pub; the rare 'Swan's Egg' pear tree. Rarities such as Turtle doves and tree sparrows nest in these buckled trees.

Maureen and her husband Julian prune and pick themselves, practising convivial conservation, balancing human and natural need; I promise to return to buy their fruit when its in season.

The cloud has lifted –
the *Jungfrau's* green flanks appear–
these peaks are too - too massive
I prefer my intimate English 'good spots'
I have refined my list:
Blakeney. Tuddenham. Swaddiwell. Kingley Vale. Red House. Wood Walton. Chippenham Fen.
I have written to the Treasury - what of the coffers of the British state?
I have already paid for a parcel of Wicken, I have paid for Blakeney Point, now Wood Walton. Must we Rothschilds purchase all these wild refuges lest they vanish without rescue?
This little list might save for the nation the very minimum of its bequest of life!
All of it under the plough, drained into dust, bereft of everything living there, and where will our remnant nature be found thereafter?
I must cease.

3. Dear Charles,
It's June 1st and suddenly it's a heatwave! The sky's a blue dome, the sun fierce. I'm entering the land of the rivers, walking eight miles without passing through a single settlement in the middle of Middle England. Will there be a feast of nature to answer last week's famine?

This is ground zero of fen drainage, the land once, according to Defoe, 'the sink of 13 counties' now one of the most engineered landscapes on earth. Here at Earith is navel of a process unleashed by Dutchman Cornelius Vermuyden at the bidding of the 4th Earl of Bedford. Sluice gates hang like guillotines as the Great River Ouse, trundling east from Northamptonshire, is diverted and frog-marched towards the Wash. This is landscape as geometry: water channelled, rivers hard-banked, earth trackmarked with a thousand drains.

Those Adventurers were capitalism's outriders, their adventure going on to be exported across the planet – yes, total war on nature begins here, but it met resistance by the local fen folk, the so-called fen tigers called on in the ballad, 'The Powte's Complaint', as the 'brethren of the water' who cry for 'Captain Flood' to drive out 'this great design': 'all will be dry and we must die, 'cause Essex calves want water'.

How can nature's needs be met with these titanic forces removing water at any cost?
At Brownshill Staunch and Sluice I see one possible answer.
In the washlands, farming's replaced by extraction. I can hear a constant scream from a rusting boxed-in conveyor belt which leads to heaps of deposit in nearby Needingworth, decanted into trucks by Hanson Aggregates, off-shoot of global giant Heidelberg cement –a million tons of gravel a year scoured out to generate new roads, new houses, Development – the Cambridge/Oxford Arc perhaps. Building back better means more resource extraction, more quarries, more top soil removed, more gravel sucked out til the clay is reached.
It's awesome alright. Here is how 'Universal suburbanism' begins and nature slopes away defeated, right?
But with me is Jonathan Taylor, a former engineer, who's overseeing an audacious partnership between conservation and development – between the RSPB and Hanson. He unfolds a laminated map comprised of numbered cells; it's the masterplan for a new wetland. 16 such units are to be excavated and then 'restored' – topsoil scraped off, gravel cored out, remnant earth re-modelled by bulldozers' to achieve 'natural variety', mid-way in a thirty-year process as the firm work out their license with Cambridgeshire County Council leaving behind water, reed, and, hopefully, birds.
Charles, you probably thought the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was a minor player in conservation founded by the women of the 'Plumage League' in the late nineteenth century, appalled at the killing of ospreys for the adorning of hats. Seeking to conserve species not sites, the RSPB didn't get into the land-owning game until the 1930s; but in the last fifty years their portfolio has grown exponentially – and the Ouse Fen, this new reserve, stakes a huge claim in the county they're latecomers to. And the needs of species drive this claim – and in particular, the bittern.
Yes, the bittern, denizen of the reedbed; the year you founded the SPNR they'd vanished from everywhere but Norfolk. As England dried out, their decline continued, right down to 11 pairs in 1997, and limited to Norfolk's freshwater reedbeds, which in turn are threatened by climate change driven sea-level rise; can this new reserve offer an inland redoubt for the boomer?
As if to confirm this, as we trace the new canal feeding the reedbed, we're rewarded with an implausibly prompt boom; a male bittern, one of the ten pairs in the reserve. Yes, today nature shows up like a suspiciously well-behaved class of schoolkids in the presence of an Ofsted inspector – cuckoo, check; lapwing, check; reed bunting, check; hawker, check; damselfly, check;. Jonathan's almost embarrassed by this thumbs up.
But it's complex – because if development's good news for nature here it's unlikely to be so elsewhere; nature-based solutions here, hard-core and tarmac there; mitigation here, carbon emission there. Charles, you navigated that queasy boundary between nature's need and capitalism's drives. But Jonathan says the choice is clear – either gratifying protest or quiet diplomacy to turn growth to good effect for Biodiversity. This land's moved from a barren arable regime to a wetland haven - you'd have approved of this reversal of the four hundred year war on the fens.
It takes an hour to walk the north bank of the reedbed; its feathered reaches extend to a dusty horizon where earth-movers model lagoons;. 800 hectares of degraded

farmland filled with impenetrable reed. It would cheer you to see it Charles – it's cheered me up for sure.

I head down the East bank of the Old West river– the name of the remnant Ouse as it wriggles towards the Cam. I bother a heron which alights and settles as I approach feeling like I'm walking back in time as I follow the river's sluggish progress, away from people, away from its past as a trade-route, through a forgotten washland of thistle and cow-shit and shucked freshwater mussel shells.
A kingfisher pipes its call and darts past in a blue haze.
To my north dark and ridged fields and the heights of the Isle of Ely.
Finally Aldreth – the place of the Alders once, now no alders to be seen. Here the first English terrorist, Hereward the Wake, humbled the invading Normans by setting the reeds ablaze as they trudged towards the impossible isle of Ely. Even on a dry day you feel the folk memories of the lost fen, crossed by boat, immune to conquest, roads, development.
The air warps. In the breathless heat a deer crashes away from me, swimming in the wheat. Nature, so beaten down elsewhere, feels resurgent here.

They have brought me more letters and, mmm - lemonade.
The rain has stopped, the air is like balm.
And I know after this war
I will be back to my ledgers, back to Credit and Debit
Once more a banker not a naturalist
All I can think of is the Large Copper in wet Wood Walton
Crouched in the moonlight with lantern and net
The air lambent with life
My face brushed by a thousand urgent wings
Walking back as the Nightingale finds his song.
I must cease there
The wind blows in the curtain and the rain blots my ink
I must cease, I must cease
Blakeney.
Tuddenham.
Swaddiwell.
Kingley Vale.
Red House.
Chippenham Fen.

Wood Walton.

4.
Dear Charles

Climate Change Narratives: ROTHSCHILD's WALK by Prof Steve Waters

June 7th is unseasonably hot - but what does 'seasonable' even mean now? You had no inkling of the climate disruption we face.
Spring's cancelled, summer violently brought forward in a phenological mismatch – migratory birds arrive after the party is over, oaks flowering too late to succour the Blue Tit – everything's out of kilter.
But I'll be positive today!
It's my final walk, Charles, to Wicken Fen where this story began when you gave land to the National Trust to hedge against unknown futures like the future we're living in now, all of us creatures.
But like all quest stories I undergo an ordeal to get there.
It starts well enough; I'm encouraged by an improbable cuckoo.
Then things go tits-up. I've a meeting at 9.30 but I'm lost; the raised path disappears into waist-high nettles; I disappear into the land itself: where the hell I am?
Three figures stand proud of the wilderness; sweating, stung, covered in burrs, I flounder towards them.
Howard Jones is from 'the New Life in the Old West' project –.; Howard's part of Cambridgeshire Acre, an agency set up in the 1920s to develop rural life, now contracting him to breathe new life on the Old West river. But what might that mean– well, below us is a patch of washlands he's converting to a scrape; apparently there's too little water here for life to thrive despite the river, which is shallow, weedy, given to eutrophification as it gathers run-off from vast fields, stirred into turbidity by boats. Yet the groundwaters of high quality; Howard's surveyed the drains and found a rare diving beetle. There's life in the Old West yet it seems – can a few hacks ease the passages of beings through a hostile landscape? Because species are on the move, Charles, for good and ill; if they get trapped in a reserve surrounded by impassable terrain they will be doomed.
Richard and Erika, two former agronomists, show me a willow grove they planted out in 2006. We descend to its neat stands, tree varieties beloved of bees: some full grown, flowering, some pollarded stumps with poles ready to prune and weave. The trees hiss and shiver, offer relief from the sun. All three people are softening this land at its fringes; but the need for something bolder hangs in the air – no one wants to point the finger at individual famers, but the power of Big Farming, predicated on cheap food and low margins can't be reversed at this scale.
But it's time to get back on the walk Charles…
I see darters, hawkers, a small copper Charles, I see Vipers bugloss but mostly I see unwalkable path, unreachable river, receding horizon.
Then the A10. Your path vanishes forcing a hot flog up a busy road; drivers gesticulate at me as if I'm mad; well, maybe I am.
Five mad minutes later I re-find the river – but I'm out of patience with your walk Charles, out of patience with the old west, out of patience with, fields of solarpanels and by the time I reach Stretham Old Engine I am *mutinous* – more signs explain again the necessity for the drainage of the fens; has a landscape ever needed to be so explained? I opt for road in the basin between the Great Ouse and the Cam, stomping through Big Farming's masterwork. Fields ripple with miles of fleece. Massive irrigating pivots hiss and flicker fed by yellow spools of pipe, monstrous machines pummel the soil. A solo lapwing seems to say, ' Turn back, you are entering the Eremocene, no Living Thing is welcome here'.
Across the Cam life returns; I reach Kingfisher Bridge Nature reserve.

This was once 250 hectares of farmland – in 1995, its owner let it revert it to wetland to secure a future for, yes - the bittern! - laying out reedbed; and in 2003 for the first time in seventy years a bittern fledged in Cambridgeshire.
Here's James Moss, reserve warden. We last met on a freezing day in March when the former fieldscape's clear beneath returning meadows, reedbed, shallow lakes, lime grassland. Now green floods into the bruised land, its ground verdant with a plant once nearly extinct in Britain: Water Germander. In 1995 it was down to 12 plants here; now it's here in uncountable millions, thanks to roving grazing konik ponies spreading the flower's seeds, water buffalos crashing through reed. The germander laps up this rough treatment – it likes a landscape in flux, veering between drought and flood; extremes prevent its rivals such as thistle from thriving. By August this scrub will be a purple blaze.
Miracles can happen, Charles!
This small reserve is a bridgehead for lost fen life– here lurks the reed leopard moth, the ringed plover
Fed by lunch and good news, I brave the last three miles to Wicken Fen. In the heat I fantasise its approach, intone a prayer of thanks to the Wicken villagers who fought off the Adventurers seeking to drain their land in the 18th centurt.
Charles, you gave 2 acres in 1899 to the newly formed National Trust; then in 1907 when there was talk of the fen being 'reclaimed' you gave a further 30 acres of nearby Burwell Fen. What a seed you planted in that gift – no capital invested ever had such returns!
As fens vanished from Cambridge's outskirts, Wicken became a honeypot for science. Darwin fossicked here. This is the birthplace of ecology –Arthur Tansley brought students here amongst them Harry and Margaret Godwin whose peat coring revealed a lost arboreal past underfoot. Godwin begat William Thorpe begat Norman Moore begat Max Walter begat generations of coleopterists ornithologists lepidopterists aquatic biologists begat thousands of papers that meant the 800 acre core site is the most studied patch of ground on earth.
Spinney Bank – the fen's to my south I feel the air wettening; the grass glitters with shards of blue glass – damselflies. As I hit Drainer's Dyke I throw myself into the reed-gap, plunge my hand into the warm wet, splash my face– to cool myself, yes, but also to receive the fen's blessing.
I can make out Godwin's plots where reed is cut in varying regimes – a century old experiment confirming that to preserve nature it might be necessary to manage it; What makes a fen a fen?. Yes, the waterlogging, the seasonal flooding, the arrested decomposition, the layers of peat from reed, sedge and rush. But there are so many forms of fen – there in Breed fen, mown fen with flowering rush, blunt flowered rush; five types of vegetation that range from carr to litter to reedbed all based on regimes of cutting.
I'm within minutes of Sedge fen proper – walking its edges only compounds its mystery. We visit nature reserves blithely, nod approvingly at their flora and fauna – yes all there, all present and correct; but don't they lure us into a false sense of security? Approaching them from their hinterland reveals the depletion they hold off. But Wicken Fen's greatest surprise Charles is not its present state but its future prospects.
Because the fen's not shrinking, Wicken's growing Charles – like its sibling, Woodwalton; at the start of this century the Trust announced a plan to grow it into 56 km squares of wetland by 2100. In its steady march towards Cambridge, Wicken's

laying siege to a landscape of paddocks, polo pitches, turf-farms, onion and carrot fields. How many harvests remain under this regime?
The Vision land's lightly managed Charles; on acquisition the first act is simply to stop drainage; let the fen be fen; clay pipes under the soil are broken; the water table finds its level. The next stage is equally simple: the land's given to browsers and grazers –konik ponies simulate the disruption of the lost wood pasture of this country; highland cattle mimic the scrub reduction of the aurochs. …the fen's allowed it to weather out this unpredictable new era, to change with that change.
And this is a working landscape, as profitable as the fields encircling it. Yes it's bursting with returning life in a warming world; but also it's capturing the very driver of climate change itself – carbon. These wetlands are serious sinks of emissions; the farmed-fens may be responsible for 4% of the carbon emissions of farming in the UK through peat loss. Suddenly hammering the soil and sinking deeper under sea-level whilst pumping emissions into the air looks far from rational.
I've reached Wicken – I'm not a pretty sight Charles; I buy an ice-cream and retreat into the shade and gaze into Sedge Fen. A million reeds wave in the breeze as if breathing. Yes Aldo Leopold once suggested we should think like a mountain. But how might we think like a fen? We might move more slowly, retain, recycle; stir in wind and shiver in rain, wince at the cutting and thrive in the cut; harbour life, exult in its diversity.
Charles, I wouldn't be here without your deeds a century ago. I know so little about you, but today your gift's enjoyed by thousands of people who know even less and thousands of species who would have vanished without it. Your vision then needs visions now to answer it – well, here's one. Let's connect the fens again – let's allow the rivers to break their banks and relax into the drained lands around them from here to Woodwalton. We berate those who destroy rainforest but we have wilfully, systematically destroyed the fens. So I say let them return, alongside the network of waterways that once fed and sustained them, a corridor linking Wicken, Kingfisher Bridge, Aldreth, the Ouse Fen, the lowlands of Ramsey, the lost seas of Ugg and Whittlesea; let their edges be woody carr and alder marsh; their boundary zones wet meadow. I don't want to live in the Eremocene; I want to live convivially, to live with nature wherever we live, so that nature can thrive and we thrive with it.

Charles, let us unleash your vision into this dry land again; let's bring back the fen.