

The promise of geography in education¹

'The promise of geography in education?' This needs explaining.

Look at the [photograph](#). It is Royston Heath, south Cambridgeshire, taken from a field near the village of Litlington. It is a beautiful late autumn afternoon, and we are looking towards the southeast.

The boulder clay soil has been ploughed (it looks quite dry at the end of the summer) and prepared for sowing. Beyond the recently ploughed field, winter wheat seems already to be growing. On the skyline there is beech woodland – typical for a chalk escarpment in the south of England (look at its dry valley pointing to us). Some of this has been ploughed in the past. Some of this land may have been ploughed almost continuously for a thousand years or more; much of the Heath is common land and has been grazed by sheep for even longer. Indeed, amongst the greens and bunkers of the golf course (just out of view) are Iron Age burial mounds, further evidence of a long history of human occupation. Royston itself is at the crossroads of Icknield Way and Ermine Street, a legacy of Roman occupation, and to this day the Coach and Horses public house stands at the town centre.



The derelict building evidences more recent history – it was part of the US airbase established during the Second World War. East Anglia is littered with such remains (and still has several active military bases). Recently the remains of a person were found in this building – a lonely wanderer who had been using it as a shelter. He wasn't discovered for days: people who live in the villages around here usually get from 'a' to 'b' in their cars, 'insulated' in some ways from the countryside – and much else besides.

The car may be returning from the nearby Tesco with the weekly shopping to a suburban lifestyle, albeit in a 'village'. Between us and the chalk escarpment, but concealed from view, are a dual carriageway and an electrified rail line which links Cambridge to London in around 45 minutes. It is hard to tell from this serene landscape, but the area is one of great development pressure. House prices are well above the national average. The trains are packed at peak times – and are expensive. A bypass (which is where the supermarket is located) has relieved the Royston crossroads bottleneck, and suburban estates are expanding rapidly.

¹ For a fuller discussion of the 'geographical approach' outlined here, see Lambert, D. and Morgan, J. (forthcoming) *Teaching Geography 11-19: a conceptual approach*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

a different view

a manifesto from the Geographical Association



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A geographical approach

You will recognise the above as a 'geographical' account. In essence, we use the landscape as a text – a palimpsest with stories to tell as we peel off each layer. In doing so, we are applying a number of concepts used frequently by geographers: for example, we write in a way that implicitly tries to capture a sense of the place. We also draw on physical and human observations and processes to provide a deep description of the place. Crucially, we draw on knowledge and understanding that comes from elsewhere – that is, in addition to that supplied by the photograph – and we begin to interpret the picture, using the geographical concepts of place, space and spatial relations. We synthesise aspects of the physical environment (the rock and the soil) with human and social activity (farming and shopping) in order to make sense of this part of the world.

This, then, is the promise of geography: it helps us understand the world and the part we play in it. In effect, we are saying to geography teachers, 'use your geography': use it to help you engage and excite interest in young people to understand the world; use it to help you design and plan your teaching.

Professor David Lambert