

Soft Estate Research Fellowship
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<http://www.edwardchell.com/soft-estate-the-bluecoat/>

Soft Estate is the term used by the Highways Agency to describe the natural habitats that line our motorways and trunk roads, (some 30,000 hectares of land nationally). Whilst roads play a major role in opening up land for housing and economic development, their attendant verges offer a genuine refuge for wildlife and a modern form of wilderness in the midst of intense urbanisation and agro-chemical farming. Our road network, the site of some of our most carbon-intensive activity, is flanked by Britain's largest unofficial nature reserve. The principal subject of this practice-led research is to visually investigate these under-represented areas of roadside wilderness, both as ecological and metaphorical spaces and as reflectors of the complex and changing relationships between travel, the environment and landscape imagery within British culture. In framing this research I will draw on the English Landscape and 'picturesque' tradition of the 18th Century, which informs popular understanding of landscape even today.

While early tourists travelled to areas such as The Lakes to capture images of wild places, in today's countryside uncontrolled wilderness only springs up in the margins of our transport networks and the semi-derelict grid plans of industrialised corridors. I believe these Edgelands invite a new kind of tourist, new ways of looking and new forms of visual representation. In drawing on the landscape tradition, and capturing details of the flora and fauna of the verge, my work will engage viewers with landscapes that appear familiar and uncanny, traditional and strangely futuristic.

Equipped with a Claude Glass, the 18th C tourist would capture particular views and aesthetically tame them. Today, for instance, the rear view mirrors of automobiles have an equivalent framing effect and would inform images conjured from a contemporary perspective. Modern motorway design incorporates 'Clothoid' or transition curves, features that focus drivers' attention so that they stay alert. These have the effect of smoothing the landscape reminiscent of eighteenth century parks, where curved carriage drives managed the experience of the landscape. Motorways arguably represent the modern equivalent of the spectacular re-sculpting of the landscape undertaken by Capability Brown. This was not without its 'picturesque' opponents. Tour writer and landowner Uvedale Price rejected Brown's projects, describing them as 'levelling', Price no doubt being aware of the political ramifications of the term. These verges are powerful signifiers of environmental degradation, urban development and our increasing separation and alienation from the land itself and at the same time, of optimistic progress. Roads open up access to landscapes they despoil. Through drawing on the picturesque tradition in making this work, I aim to open up new ways for people to visualize and connect with these landscapes.

Eclipse, an exhibition of roadside plant silhouette paintings at the Beaney Museum Canterbury (June to September 2013) formed an additional outcome for this fellowship, accompanied by an artists' book *Eclipse* with essay by historian Jenny Uglow (funded by Arts Council England).

The main fellowship outcomes are *Soft Estate*, an exhibition at Bluecoat Liverpool (December 2013 to February 2014) and accompanying book of the same title with essays by the artist, environmental campaigner Richard Mabey and curator Sara-Jayne Parsons. Bluecoat is running a programme of associated film screenings, talks, readings and a guided walk exploring Edgelands. *Soft Estate* tours to Spacex, Exeter (March to May 2014).