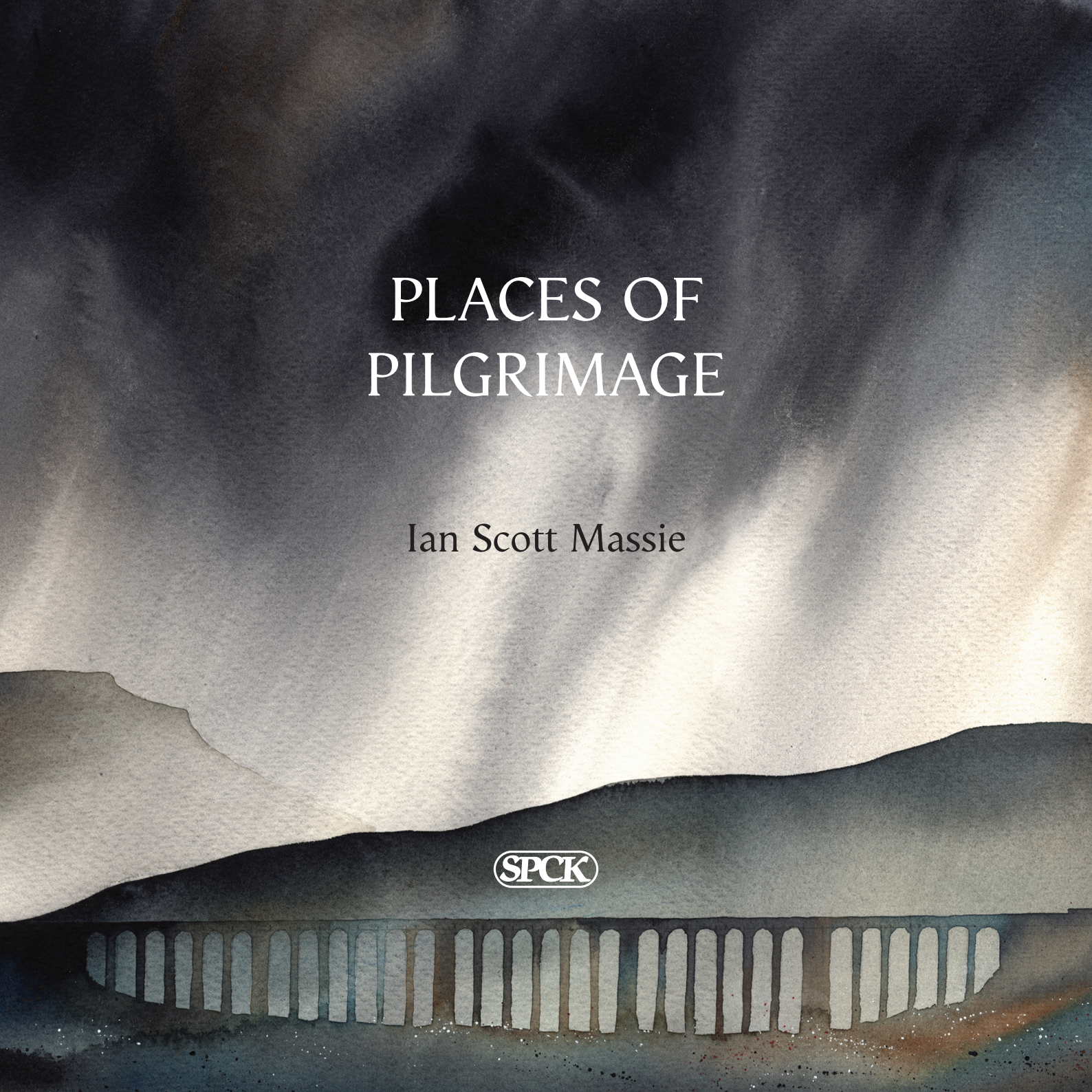


# PLACES OF PILGRIMAGE

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SPCK



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*Dedicated to the memory of Paul Nash:  
the constant companion I've never met.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Come with me.

Stand at the edge of England where the sands stretch across to the tidal island of Lindisfarne. Walk the sea-damp causeway until you find your feet once again on firm ground. Here the breeze weaves through the spiky, grey-green marram grass; birds hang in the salt air, riding the wind. Keep still, listen, look . . .

Can you feel it? That spirit of place?

In certain locations, the mix of invisible and tangible aspects, utterly unique and deeply cherished, move us in a manner we find difficult to explain. Our memories are filled with such places, and when we dream, these are the special locations we return to. Reading a book or a poem, our minds build on images of landscapes, villages, cities, shorelines filled with meaning: a day on a childhood holiday; a walk where we sensed the first leanings towards love; the street that suddenly felt like home.

The extraordinary thing is that many of us gravitate towards the same places. With some, the attraction is obvious, such as a breathtaking view or a heart-stopping waterfall. But often the magic is unexpected, generated simply by a certain path,

a clearing in a wood, the top of a hill seemingly undistinguished from all the surrounding peaks. Some of the locations in the paintings and screen prints contained here are places of pilgrimage in the religious sense. In Southwell, for instance, there was a sacred spring, while in Durham the earth refused to set free the coffin of St Cuthbert. The place came first; the religion came later; the pilgrims followed – and found something of that initial, urgent, vibrant sense of somewhere special. Even if religion has abandoned these spots, in many instances that sense remains.

Other images included in the book portray places with old roots, like the stones of Avebury or Men an Tol, or places which have only revealed themselves more recently, like Laurie Lee's beloved Slad or Dylan Thomas's Laugharne. Some have been known to me for a long time and have huge personal significance; others I have found in the process of making these pictures. Throughout, I have felt the constant presence of fellow travellers, each of us going in the same direction, drawn by the same emotional, spiritual pull.

Working on this book has been a wonderful journey and the best thing about it is that the pilgrimage isn't over . . . There are always more extraordinary places to explore.



*On a misty morning, with its elegant towers rising above the fenland fields, the lush trees and the mellow houses, Ely Cathedral – the Ship of the Fens – does indeed bear resemblance to a great stone galleon.*

# The EAST of ENGLAND



## CAMBRIDGE

The outskirts of Cambridge looked much like those of any city. Traffic lights and bungalows, mock-Tudor semis and parked cars . . . I followed the road towards the centre on this my first proper trip, with hazy memories of being here as a teenager. But it seemed a long time ago, and this time my senses were sharper.

I parked on Queen's Road where the broad paddocks stretch across to Trinity College. It was like strolling through a country meadow as I took the path that led to the River Cam until, on a small bridge, I stood and gazed at that iconic stretch of water. Punts glided beneath trailing willows against a backdrop of mellow stone colleges – like warm, grainy footage of an old travelogue.

Entering Cambridge between the high walls of Trinity Lane, I discovered that by great good fortune I had found my way into the heart of this beautiful city by the loveliest route.

On my right, the ethereal majesty of King's College and the tower of Great St Mary's Church. Along the

road to my left, the gatehouse of Trinity College and the Round Church. This short half-mile of astonishing architecture, from the elaborate gilded beasts of St John's to the half-timbered perfection of Queen's College, captivated me. It still does.

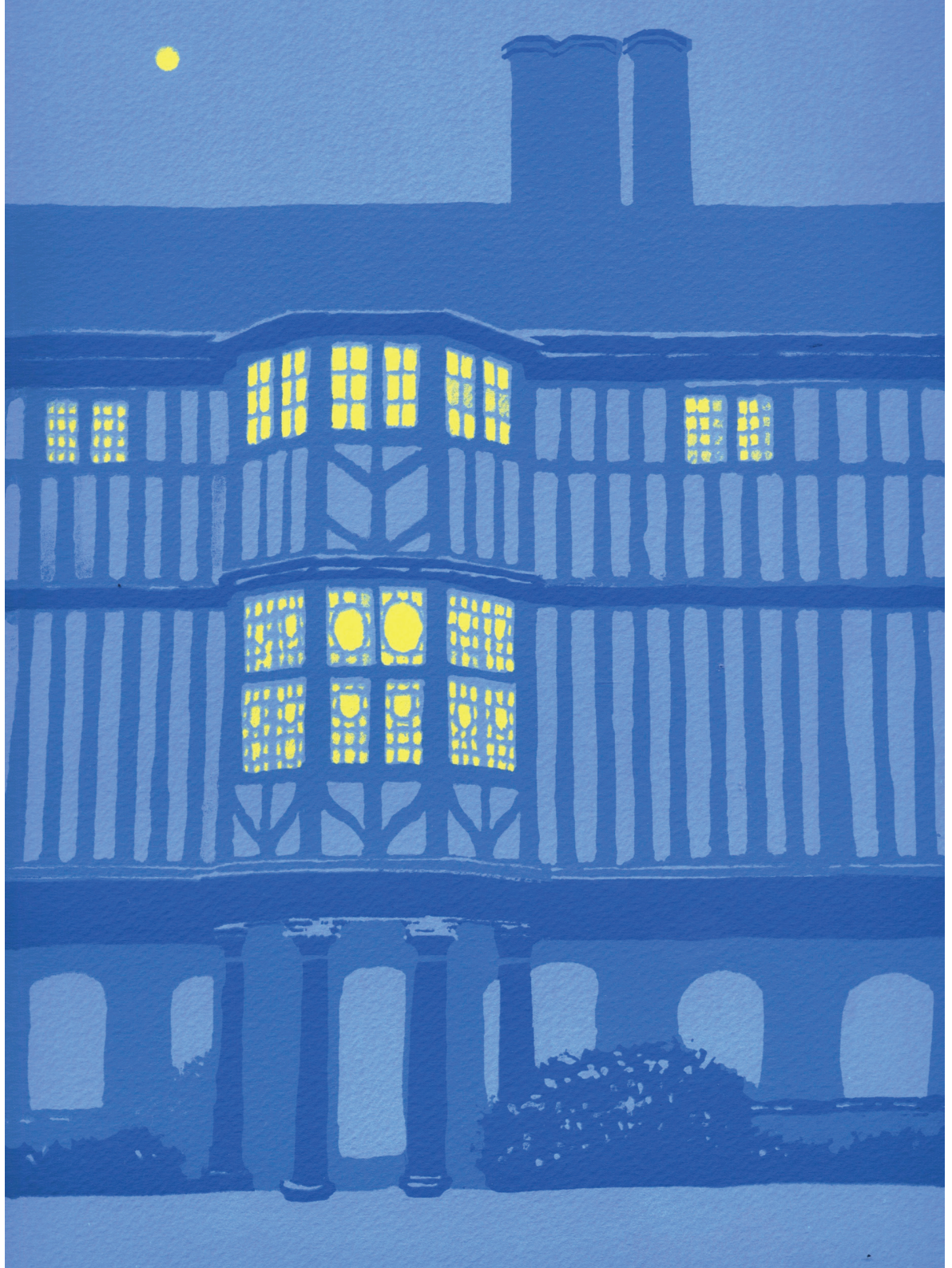
But Cambridge wears her jewels lightly. The atmosphere, even when this street is at its busiest, is relaxed. Shadows span the narrow spaces, sun falls on warm stones and bicycles of every vintage glide between the buildings.

Many people strive to come here: to study where their heroes have studied, to benefit from the huge well of knowledge deepened over centuries, to tread the hallowed boards of the university's famed Footlights Society, where Fry and Laurie, Mitchell and Webb, and so many Pythons and Goodies have learned their trade.

For me it is a place for browsing in bookshops, for lingering over a coffee, for picking up a pencil and sketching a Georgian cupola, a Baroque pediment, a Tudor tower. If you are an architectural pilgrim or an artist, Cambridge is close to heaven.



*Queen's College, Cambridge*



## BLAKENEY POINT

On a muddy creek, bordered by acres of salt-water reeds, is Blakeney Quay – a grand name for a few planks of weathered wood, green with seaweed. We're gathered here for a trip to Blakeney Point, a shingle spur which almost closes off the entrance to the harbour. As our blue and white, low-sided boat waddles through the creek and out into deeper water, the chug of diesel becomes part of the background, for everyone is watching intently for their first sight of a seal.

Every so often the heads of these wonderful creatures, which look like aquatic Labrador dogs, break the water. And as the boat turns the Point and the open sea comes into view, suddenly there are seals everywhere: basking on the shingle, flopping across the pebbles, splashing in the shallows. They are beautiful animals, gracefully turning around the boat, moving at speed through the green water, their big eyes gazing as they pause to watch us watching them.

For a little while we're enchanted, delighted to be out of our element. This lovely place always seems to be bathed in sunshine . . . There is a tangible feeling of disappointment when the time comes for us to journey back to real life, leaving the magical beasts of Blakeney Point behind.



*Blakeney Point*





Ian  
Stott  
Massachusetts

## FLATFORD MILL

I think of John Constable as a genius. There are very few artists who manage to paint nature as it is, but he did. When you get up close to his work, it isn't in the least bit photographic. There are stabs of colour, the sweeping curves of brush marks, splatterings of white oil paint and always, somewhere, a point of burning red pulling the foreground towards you, while the cold blue of the cloud shadows pushes the sky away.

He practised hard. His watercolours and oil sketches start small then get bigger and bigger. For some of his six-footers he made six-foot sketches, so by the time he began the final stage of a painting, he was relaxed, he knew his lines, and he just had to paint the picture that was in his head.

A lot of what he portrayed he knew well. Flatford Mill belonged to his dad and it became the centre of a series of works including his most famous picture, *The Hay Wain* – or, as Constable called it, *Landscape: Noon*.

*The Hay Wain* was painted in Constable's London studio from a full-scale sketch made with a palette knife. The sky, the trees and the water all have the colour, the movement and the light of a Suffolk landscape, yet there is a looseness to the whole composition which relaxes the viewer. It's a remarkable piece of work.

In the painting are echoed Constable's comments on his Suffolk home: 'the sound of water escaping from mill dams . . . willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork, I love such things.'

Much of Flatford, including Willy Lott's Cottage, which features in *The Hay Wain*, remains unchanged. The trees are different, but they're just the children and grandchildren of the originals.

And people still come here. Not only to visit the scene of his great composition, but also to paint. An unassuming group of buildings by an unremarkable river. But, as Constable has shown us, there is beauty here. Just look.



*Willy Lott's Cottage, Flatford Mill*

## ELY CATHEDRAL

Ely Cathedral is blessed with a charismatic second name: the Ship of the Fens, which conveys pretty well the way the great Norman church seems to float across the flat lands of Cambridgeshire. On a misty morning, with its elegant towers rising above the fenland fields, the lush trees and the mellow houses, it does indeed bear resemblance to a great stone galleon.

Some cathedrals have been designed and built to a medieval formula. You can almost hear the master mason mutter: 'You want one of these central towers, a couple of these transepts, and three . . . no, maybe five of these lancet windows,' and so on. But some cathedral builders simply tore up the conventional rule book and did their own thing. Like at Ely.

The Norman cathedral was to be a replacement for an earlier church containing the shrine of

St Etheldreda. The builders started with the best of intentions, following the usual patterns, but soon got the message that these weren't going to work. So when the central tower collapsed, instead of replacing like-for-like, they built a beautiful and unique octagonal lantern, decorated with the most gorgeous vaulted and painted wooden roof.

Off to the side of the north transept, a large Lady Chapel was constructed and extensively adorned with carved stonework. Although much of this was subsequently damaged during the dissolution of the monasteries – on the orders, it is thought, of the bishop, Thomas Goodrich – what remains is very impressive.

Indeed, the whole abbey is a riot of colour, a visual feast, from its dynamic geometrical floor patterns to the exuberant decoration of its organ pipes. Surrounded by the tranquil streets of its little city, it is an amazingly uplifting building.



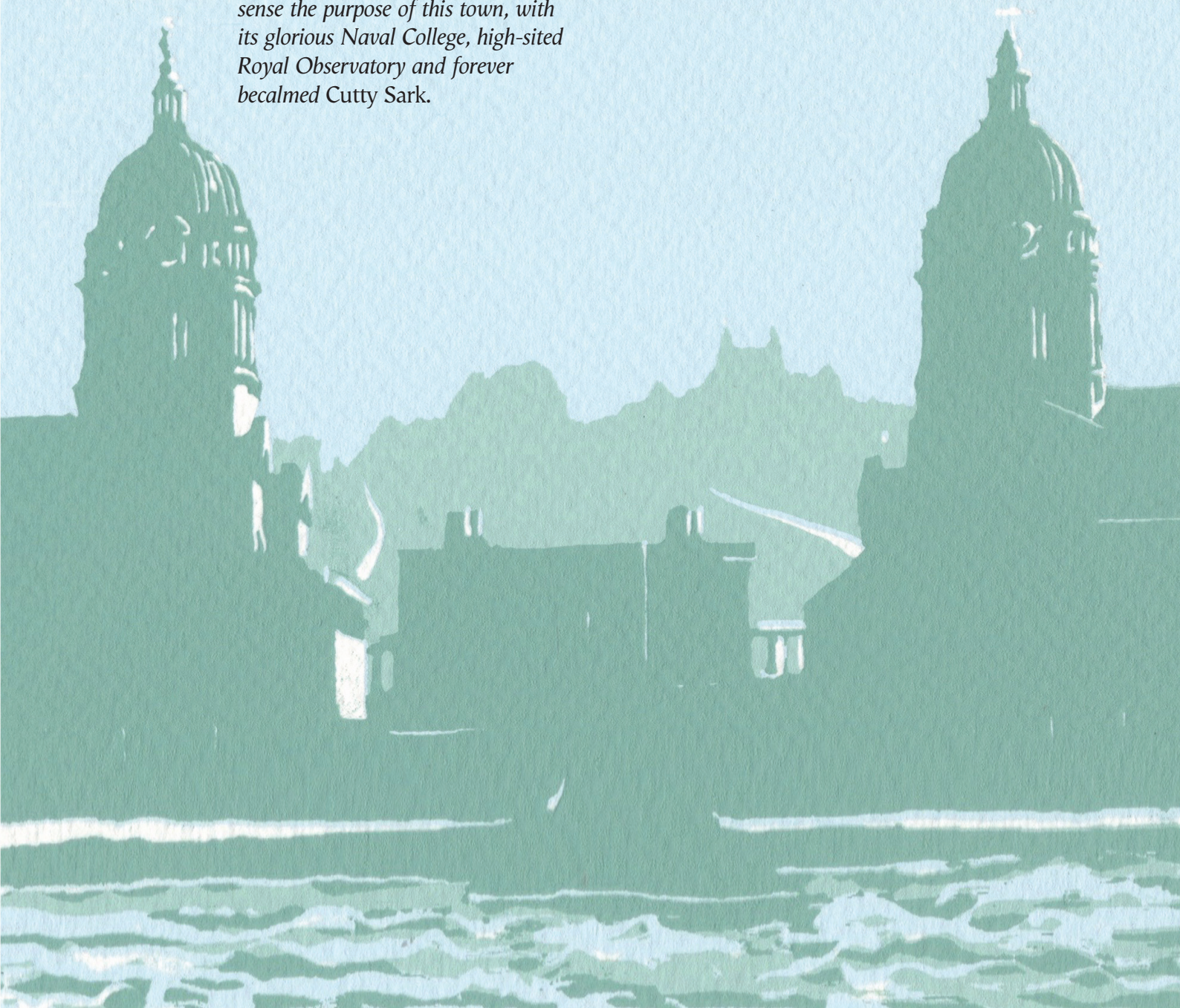
*Ely Cathedral*





*The proper way to arrive at Greenwich is by water. Only from the river do you sense the purpose of this town, with its glorious Naval College, high-sited Royal Observatory and forever becalmed Cutty Sark.*

# LONDON



## CAMBRIDGE

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