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From AI to climate repair: Cambridge Festival returns with bold questions for an uncertain world



Image credit: Echo Worlds, Anglia Ruskin University

What happens when truth fractures, technology accelerates, the climate destabilises, and the world's centre of gravity keeps shifting at once?

As public trust in institutions is tested, artificial intelligence reshapes everyday life and the effects of climate change become impossible to ignore, the **University of Cambridge** is set to announce the full programme for the **2026 Cambridge Festival**, a city-wide celebration of ideas that refuses to look away from the defining questions of our time.

The programme launches on **16 February**, when tickets become available, ahead of the festival itself, which runs from **16 March to 2 April**. More than **350 events** – the majority of which are free – spanning talks, debates, performances, exhibitions, hands-on activities, and immersive experiences will bring together leading academics, writers, artists and public figures to explore how the world is changing, and what those changes demand of us.

The programme is further enriched with over 45 events from Anglia Ruskin University, alongside support from festival sponsor AstraZeneca, which is also running several events.

High-profile speakers this year include broadcaster and campaigner **Carol Vorderman**, former Astronomer Royal **Lord Martin Rees**, Stanford climate scientist **Mark Z Jacobson**, obesity researcher **Giles Yeo**, historian and filmmaker **Malik Al Nasir**, former home secretary **Charles Clarke**, and award-winning geneticist, broadcaster and author **Dr Adam Rutherford** alongside hundreds of researchers from Cambridge and partner institutions.

Across the programme runs a clear sense of urgency. Events interrogate the nature of truth in the digital age, the power and limits of artificial intelligence, the politics of health and data, the legacies of empire and racism, and competing visions for responding to a warming planet. While the United States looms large, from debates over scientific freedom and health research to questions of global influence, the focus is resolutely international, asking how societies across the world respond to instability, polarisation and rapid technological change.

Questions of truth and power are foregrounded early in the programme. In **What is Truth?**, Carol Vorderman explores how facts, misinformation and authority collide in the 21st century, while **Silenced data: the politics of health research in the USA** examines how political decisions shape, and sometimes suppress, research into the health needs of marginalised communities. A historical lens is offered by **Anti-Americanism: a short history**, which traces Europe's long and ambivalent relationship with the US, while workshops such as **Disagreeing well** focus on how to live with, and productively navigate, deep disagreement.

Closer to home, former director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research **Professor Jagjit S Chadha**, chaired by former home secretary **Charles Clarke**, reflects on **the UK's economic journey and policy pitfalls from 1990 to 2024**, offering a sobering assessment of growth, inequality and missed opportunities.

Technology and artificial intelligence form another major strand. The festival's opening night sets the tone with a special screening of **Ex Machina**, hosted by the **Evolution of Horror** podcast, followed by a discussion with **Professor Stephen Cave**, co-director of the Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence. The film's unsettling vision of artificial intelligence becomes a springboard for wider conversations about agency, control and responsibility.

In **Conscious machines?**, philosophers and scientists examine whether AI could ever be genuinely conscious, and what that would mean ethically and socially. **Uncovering algorithms** looks at how automated systems shape everyday decisions, while **Tomorrow's world in the making** reimagines today's Cambridge research as the artefacts of the future, inviting visitors to step 100 years ahead.

The real-world consequences of surveillance are explored in **Developing secure messaging**, which reveals how Cambridge researchers helped build CoverDrop, the system now used by the Guardian to allow whistleblowers to contact journalists safely and anonymously.

Climate change is tackled head-on, often through sharply contrasting perspectives. In **Climate repair: hope or hype?**, a panel debates controversial interventions such as solar radiation management, while **Still No Miracles Needed** sees Mark Z Jacobson argue that existing renewable technologies are already sufficient to tackle climate change – without recourse to speculative fixes. Grounded, place-based responses are explored in **The conservation and restoration of the world's coastal ecosystems**, which examines how mangroves, salt marshes and seagrass can protect biodiversity, livelihoods and coastlines.

The programme repeatedly returns to the human body as a site where global pressures are felt most acutely. **Giles Yeo: In a post-Ozempic world, have we cured obesity?** examines the promise and limits of new weight-loss drugs, while **The lonely planet** asks whether loneliness has become one of the most urgent public health challenges of our time. Other events explore

how environmental factors such as air pollution and heatwaves shape long-term health, and how neuroscience and psychology can inform resilience and wellbeing.

History, memory and identity also feature strongly. In **Searching for My Slave Roots: From Guyana's sugar plantations to Cambridge**, Malik Al Nasir traces his own family history through the transatlantic slave trade, uncovering uncomfortable truths about Britain's economic and cultural foundations. The talk forms part of a wider strand examining how the past continues to shape contemporary debates about race, belonging and responsibility.

Race, history and ideology are confronted head-on in **The unwelcome return of scientific racism**, the Olaudah Equiano annual race justice lecture, delivered by award-winning geneticist, broadcaster and author **Dr Adam Rutherford**. Tracing how discredited ideas of race science have resurfaced in contemporary politics and tech culture, Rutherford challenges audiences to recognise, and resist, the repackaging of dangerous myths.

While the festival tackles heavy themes, it also makes room for curiosity, play and shared discovery. Families and younger audiences are invited to explore hands-on science and creative activities designed to inspire as much as they inform. Highlights include **Ice Explorers**, a lively introduction to polar science through icebergs and penguins, as well as interactive events that turn climate modelling, engineering and technology into something to build, test and experiment with. The aim, organisers say, is to spark curiosity at every age, and to show that learning can be joyful.

Art and immersion play a key role in how the festival invites audiences to engage emotionally as well as intellectually. **Echo Worlds**, an immersive sci-arts installation, uses sound, light and scent to transport visitors into the sensory world of bats and urban edge ecologies. Other participatory performances explore climate anxiety, memory and embodiment, asking how art might help us process futures that feel increasingly uncertain.

The festival concludes by looking far beyond the present moment. In **The world in 2050 and far beyond**, Lord Martin Rees reflects on humanity's long-term prospects, from existential risks to the responsibilities that come with scientific power. It is a fitting note for a programme that repeatedly asks not only what might happen next, but what choices we make now.

"This year's festival was shaped by a sense that many of the assumptions we've lived with about truth, progress, democracy and even expertise are under real strain," said **David Cain**, festival manager of the Cambridge Festival.

"Universities have a responsibility not just to generate knowledge, but to open it up to public scrutiny and debate, especially when the stakes are this high. The Cambridge Festival is a space to ask difficult questions, to listen across differences, and to imagine what comes next, not in the abstract, but grounded in research, lived experience and creative practice."

The Cambridge Festival runs from 16 March to 2 April 2026. The full programme launches on 16 February, when tickets become available to book [here](#).

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Press images are available [here](#) | **Festival images** are available [here](#).

About the Cambridge Festival

The Cambridge Festival, a multidisciplinary event hosted by the University of Cambridge, is designed to showcase the best in research and innovation. With a diverse range of topics, from science and technology to the arts and humanities, the festival invites the public to engage with experts and ignite their curiosity.

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