

HEADINGTON HILL

PARK UPDATED MANAGEMENT/ACTION

PLAN 2023-28

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**1. Introduction & Overview**

Headington Hill Park is situated on a gentle slope just to the north-east of Oxford city centre (Central grid Ref: SP 530 064) and is approximately eight hectares in size. It lies on the opposite side of the main London/Headington Road to South Park, both parks having been created from historic parkland forming part of the estate of Oxford’s famous Morrell brewing family. In 1953, after a century of ownership, the family sold their grand house, Headington Hill Hall, to Oxford City Council, along with its parkland and arboretum, from which Headington Hill Park was created. Many of the specimen trees from the original 19th century arboretum survive, and give the park its distinctive character and historic setting. It’s also notable for its displays of spring flowers and autumn colours. The Hall itself is now leased to Brookes University, but this fine building can still be viewed from the upper end of the park.

The immediate proximity of the Oxford Brookes University campus, including the Clive Booth Student Village, greatly increases the number of park users, with the many students using it as a cut through to various destinations. Its circuit path around the perimeter is a popular route for the many regular dog walkers.

The park has an active Friends Group (formed in 2014) which takes a keen interest in its preservation and development, including provision and upkeep of new and existing trees and plants. They have also led on the installation of a notice board to provide visitors an interpretation of the park’s history, and information on the tree collection, including the introduction of a tree trail. The group fed in to this Management Plan and helped identify the priorities highlighted in the Action Plan below. Other priorities were identified in line with the findings of wider public consultation and other feedback.

The vision for Headington Hill Park is: To work with the community to create a world class, vibrant and safe park that promotes, health, biodiversity and learning, and is accessible to all. The park offers many activities that contribute to the national and local agendas around supporting physical and mental health:

* Opportunity for urban residents, including the many local students, to benefit from spending time in an picturesque green setting of mature trees, grassland and wild flowers
* A 0.85 km circuit path with gentle incline
* Outdoor gym equipment
* A tree trail
* Opportunities to volunteer and feel part of a local community

This document provides a concise Management Plan for the park with the key focus on an Action Plan (pages 6-7) to identify the agreed priorities for further improvements. However, it should be appreciated that obtaining funding for projects will remain challenging in the current financial climate, and projects can only be delivered as and when funding becomes available. More detailed investigations and research will also be needed before some of the proposed projects can be progressed to assess their potential impacts on the park’s historic fabric and archaeology. In some cases, the findings may prevent certain projects, or require changes to designs to mitigate impacts. In addition to maintaining and enhancing infrastructure and interpretation, there will be a continuing focus on supporting biodiversity at this time of climate and ecological crisis.

**2. The Historic Fabric & Archaeology**

Like South Park, Headington Hill contains both medieval ridge and furrow and later Civil War earthworks, though these are less obvious to the casual observer than those in South Park due to the tree cover and longer vegetation. In 2022, a Lidar topographic survey appeared to suggest subtle traces of the Civil War Parliamentarian redoubt and siege line in the central area of the park. Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics propose to undertake a geophysical survey of the area in May 2023 to confirm the initial observations. Should the investigations prove conclusive, there would be potential to provide interpretation for park visitors, which could include information from the De Gomme 1644/1645 siege map Oxford to provide the wider context.

Although the mid-19th century Headington Hill Hall now lies outside the park within the Brookes University campus, its stables, two of the lodges and the dairy are preserved within the park itself, along the London Rd boundary, having been converted into residential properties.

The park is bounded by cast iron railings dating from the time of its conversion into a public park in the 1950s. Unlike those in South Park, they are largely in good condition.

**3. The Tree Collection**

The tree collection is clearly one of the most important elements of the park and a full list of species is provided as Appendix 3. All the trees are on a rolling three year surveying schedule carried out by the ODS tree team surveyor. They were last surveyed in February 2021 and will be done again in February 2024.

Although there is a desire to maintain the range of trees, there is an increasing need to select more drought-tolerant varieties as and when replacements are required. This will require an on-going dialog between the Friends and ODS Tree Team. There is also a need to continue to manage planting to maintain open areas within the park for recreation, events and to ensure variation of habitat and food source for wildlife.

**4. Biodiversity & Sustainability**

In addition to being a public park, Headington Hill, like all urban green spaces, now has an increasingly important role to play in supporting nature in the face of climate change and dwindling wildlife. Various initiatives implemented in recent years have included the retention of standing and fallen dead wood, and allowing vegetation to grow longer in selected areas of the park. These changes have not met with universal approval as it does mean the park has a less formal and kempt appearance. However, as discussed below, a recent city-wide public consultation revealed that supporting biodiversity is now considered a top priority, and access to nature is seen as an increasingly important aspect of a visit to any public green space.

An ecology survey of the park’s flora and fauna was commissioned in 2022 to help inform steps to better protect and further enhance its habitats. In addition to 58 species of herbaceous plants and 55 species of trees and shrubs identified, 45 species of fungi were found, along with two species of lichens and 9 mosses. The report highlighted the importance of the park’s many and varied trees in supporting invertebrates, birds and bats by providing habitat, nectar and other key food sources. It also commended the management of dead wood and discussed the vital role it plays in supporting biodiversity. A calcareous spring in the centre of the park with extensive tufa-formation and a shallow peat deposit was identified as potentially most important habitat area, but the report concluded further investigation of invertebrates present and peat resource is needed to better inform its management.

In addition to its own habitats and food sources, the report highlighted that despite the nearness of roads, the network of other adjacent green spaces, including the grounds of Headington Hill Hall, South Park and St Clements Church graveyard and nearby fields, will mean good connectivity for mobile species of birds, mammals and insects, resulting in more secure populations.

The full report can be found at: (the link will be inserted in here once this report has been updated), but the key recommendations are listed below:

* Grassland areas could be enhanced for later spring and summer pollinator insects by addition of native species such as primrose, cowslip, meadow cranesbill, red clover, birds-foot trefoil, oxeye daisy etc
* Grass cutting management could be improved to increase plant species diversity. If enhanced sown flower-rich areas are planted away from tree shade, these could be given hay meadow management with a cut and collect regime if resources were available to do this
* Even continually short mown areas could be seeded to enhance provision for pollinators; with, for example clovers, self-heal, celandines, bird’s foot trefoil. These species take regular close mowing but are still useful nectar and pollen sources
* Further investigation of the central calcareous spring/seepage area is needed. Estimation of peat depth and volume will give an idea of carbon storage. Trapping or rearing of specialist wetland invertebrates from the waterlogged tufa and Pellia liverwort mats may reveal scarce or notable beetles and flies which will be important components of total site biodiversity
* If such scarce invertebrates are found breeding on site, management of the spring/seepage to favour them could be carried out. This might involve a degree of scrub reduction and tall herb vegetation cutting annually to let more light into the wetland surface, but maintain partial shade from trees. Such activity may stimulate wetland plant species to recur from any seed bank, increasing biodiversity

**5. Public/Stakeholder Consultation to help inform the on-going vision for the park**

**Stakeholders for the park include:**

* General park users
* The Friends’ Group
* Residents of the properties within the park
* Oxford Brookes University

In 2022 an independent company, Ethos Environmental, carried out a survey of all the parks and nature areas in Oxford as part of a comprehensive Green Infrastructure study of the city. Headington Hill Park was rated as excellent (assessment against the various criteria is provided as Appendix 1).

A high level of customer satisfaction was also reflected in the internal 2022 park users’ survey, where 100% of 31 respondents rated the park as good or fair. The key findings of this survey are provided in graph form in Appendix 2. Feedback from both surveys have been used to inform the priorities set out in this Action Plan, and further input was obtained through direct consultation with stakeholders. As can be seen from the survey graphs, the respondents rated the following as their top priorities:

* Nature and wildlife
* Tree cover
* General cleanliness
* Grass areas
* Shrub and flower areas
* Path condition

**Nature and wildlife:** The increased public priority around this issue was reflected in the survey results across the whole city, and reveal no apparent conflict between maintaining a park such as Headington Hill Park as a recreation space and visitor attraction, whilst also maximising its potential to support biodiversity. As a result of increasing environmental awareness, and impacts of the pandemic, the public now see access to nature as an equally important element of a visit to public green space as using a play area or playing sport.

**Tree cover:** Across the city, tree coverscored the highest it has been since surveying began in 2002 and this is presumably due to the increased public awareness of the importance of trees for urban cooling and climate mitigation. Maintaining the park’s important collection of trees remains an obvious priority.

**General cleanliness:** There appears to be a good level of satisfaction with the current standard of cleanliness, but keeping on top of the litter created by late evening student parties remains a challenge, and there needs to be on-going education to encourage students, and general park users, to take their litter home and recycle it as much as possible.

**Grass areas:** A careful balance needs to be maintained between increasing areas of longer grass as habitat and maintaining shorter areas for recreation and picnics etc. Areas of shorter grass are just as important for wildlife as they allow birds and small mammals to feed on invertebrates.

**Shrub and flower areas:** There is good scope to increase the range of flowers in the park, and a project by the Friends Group scheduled for spring 2023 will see the planting of a range of new plants designed to improve the four entrances to the park and provide pollen and nectar for wildlife. This project was funded through the Trust for Oxfordshire’s Environment.

**Path condition:** There are several sections of path in the park which need resurfacing, but significant funding is required to do this. As part of this work, the entrance onto Cuckoo Lane in the top corner of the park needs refurbishing to provide easier access for all. The current entrance through the railings is narrow and has a sharp lock off the lane making it very difficult for mobility scooters and slightly dangerous to cyclists who can misjudge the sharp angle. However, creating a new entrance and re-profiling the adjacent area of path would require removal of some of the railings in this corner which some consider part of the park’s historic fabric. Before this project could be progressed a survey of the park’s historic fabric would need to be undertaken.

**6. Other Key Priorities**

**Survey of the earthworks and archaeology:** In addition to the planned geophysical survey works, there is a need to commission a heritage consultant to undertake documentary research in conjunction with a systematic topographic survey of all the earthworks in the park, including the boundaries. The information would then be used to inform preservation and mitigation strategies

**Signage:** There is a need to review the signage in park, including installation of new signs at the entrances which currently lack them. This will also provide an opportunity to increase interpretation for visitors around its archaeology and biodiversity. It will therefore be worth waiting until the archaeological survey work has been completed and interpreted.

**7. Five Year Action Plan**

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| **Action** | **Who** | **Resources** | **Timescale** | **2023 Review** |
| **Buildings and infrastructure** |  |
| Undertake a review of signage to inform replacement of new signage and removal of older signs.  | G&BS team in consultation with ODS and park stakeholders | In-house | April/May 2023  |  Review underway |
| Undertake a review of cycle parking provision – to include on-going observation by G&BS patrol officers and Friends regarding usage of current stands  | G&BS team and Friends Group | In-house | May 23 | This was highlighted in the customer satisfaction survey, but initial observation suggests current racks are rarely full |
| Install a decorative metal gate at the opening opposite St Clements Church | Friends Group project | Funding to be identified  | Project can only be delivered as and when funding is obtained. | Design and cost to be identified. Confirm whether Planning permission is required.  |
| Install signage to inform visitors about the blue and red list trees | Friends Group project | Funding to be identified |  | Design to be worked up and costed |
| Upgrade of hogging path down to St Clements’ entrance | OCC/ODS | Funding to be identified |  |  |
| Upgrade the current earthen path at the Cuckoo Lane entrance |  |  |  | This proposal can only be progressed as and when assessment of the boundary has been undertaken by a Heritage Consultant as part of a wider survey of the park’s historic fabric. The conclusions of the survey may preclude this proposal. |
| Create an entrance between the park and Brookes and Headington Hill campus.  | Friends initiative  | Would require significant funding  | Not a priority  | As above |

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| **Action** | **Who** | **Resources** | **Timescale** | **2023 Review** |
| **Historic Fabric & Archaeology** |  |
| Undertake a geophysical survey of the potential Parliamentarian redoubt and siege line in Headington Hill Park as identified from Lidar data.  | Abingdon Archaeological Geophysics  | Funded internally to help inform interpretation of Oxford’s Civil War defences | May 2023 | Work agreed and programmed in for May  |
| Commission a Heritage Consultant to undertake documentary research and a full survey of the park’s historic fabric | Qualified external consultant to be commissioned | Funding to be identified | Can only be delivered as and when funding is available. | It will be better to wait until the geophysical works have been undertaken as this may help inform interpretation of other earthworks in the park |

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| **Action** | **Who** | **Resources** | **Timescale** | **2023 Review** |
| **Biodiversity & Sustainability** |  |
| Increase the number of pollinator plants to enhance four entrances to the park and provided nectar for wildlife |  FoHHP Project | Grant funding (£6,565) provided by TOE | Spring 2023 | Funding allocated and work to be programmed in for spring 2023 |
| Undertake a more detailed investigation of the central calcareous spring, including a full ecology survey | Qualified external ecologist to be commissioned | Funding to be identified | Can only be delivered as and when funding is available. |  |
| Continue succession planting of trees with a greater focus given to planting drought resistant varieties |  |  |  |  |
| Continue rolling programme of surveying of all the trees in the park | ODS Tree Team Surveyor | In-house service | Next scheduled for February 2024 |  |
| Continue management of the standing and fallen dead wood in the park to provide habitat and food source  | ODS Tree Team and Countryside Team supervisor | In-house service | On-going  | Current management commended by external ecologist  |

**Appendix 1: External assessment of the park carried out by Ethos Environmental as part of a city wide Green Infrastructure Study in 2022**

The study scored 12 criteria between 1 (very poor) and 10 (exceptional). The scores for each site were combined and the mean calculated (acknowledging that for some sites, not all the criteria were applicable – for example, sites without an equipped play area were not given a play value score). The scores were then mulitplied by 10 to produce a final percentage score.



Sites have been categorised as follows:



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| **Headington Hill Park** |  |
| Welcoming | 9 |
| Good & Safe Access | 9 |
| Appropriate Provision of Facilities | 9 |
| Play Value | Null |
| Personal Security | 9 |
| Dog Fouling & Litter | 9 |
| Tranquillity | 7 |
| Maintenance of Soft Landscaping/Grounds | 9 |
| Maintenance of Buildings, Infrastructure & Equipment  | 7 |
| Biodiversity | 7 |
| Climate Change Adaptation | 7 |
| Landscape, Heritage & Sense of Place | 9 |
| Total Score | 82.72 |
| **Rank** | **Excellent** |
| Suggestions for improvement:**Some of the benches would benefit from repair and repainting****Chestnut pailing fence around old trees needs repairing****Some of the smaller entrances could be improved with new welcome/interpretation signage and repainting metal fence** |  |

**Appendix 2:**

**Key findings from the 2022 Parks Customer Satisfaction Survey**

**Graph showing areas ordered by customer satisfaction**

**Graph showing areas of highest priorities identified by customers**

**Appendix 3: Full list of all trees and shrubs**

