

Oatlands Road Recreation Ground & King George's Playing Field

Urban/Recreational Park Project
Oxfordshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Group

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Oatlands Road Recreation Ground looking west towards
the bridge that leads to King George's Playing Field

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COUNTY	OXFORDSHIRE	OATLANDS ROAD RECREATION GROUND & KING GEORGE'S PLAYING FIELD
DISTRICT	OXFORD CITY	
DISTRICT WARD	Osney & St Thomas	
NGR	Oatlands – SP 498 059 King George's – SP 496 059	

Two recreation grounds in west Oxford are considered together here because they are adjacent but connected by a bridge, and their histories and environments are similar. They are Oatlands Road Recreation Ground bought by the city in 1927 and King George's Playing Field donated to the city in 1935.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

Oatlands Road Recreation Ground and the adjacent King George's Playing Field are well-used recreation spaces with open grassed areas and a variety of trees and wooded scrub. Oatlands ground also offers a children's play area. Both grounds give access to the adjacent historic Willow Walk and Monks Causeway as well as easy access to the ancient Hinksey Meadows, all of which offer wildlife and archaeological potential.

Historic interest

The adjacent historic Willow Walk and the Monks Causeway have provided routes between North Hinksey village and Oxford city since the 19th century. The nearby ancient Hinksey Meadows have been managed as hay meadows over a long period and remain flower-rich meadowland.

Archaeological interest

There is potential for medieval and earlier archaeological evidence arising from the use of land immediately to the south having been used for ancient causeways for access to Oxford city.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Before the 20th century

Land to the west of Oxford is a floodplain of the River Thames and its branches. This resulted in restricted access to the city until the causeway that became Botley Road was improved and finally turnpiked in 1767. Both housing and industrial development was therefore limited, with the land on both sides of the road used primarily for agriculture.

During the 19th century, much of the land on both sides of Botley Road was owned or leased by James Morrell Junior (1810–1863) as meadow land for grazing and for hay for the horses of the Oxford brewery firm that was based in St Thomas's Street just west of Castle Mound (Allen, 1994). The enclosure map of 1853 shows James Morrell Junior and the Bishop of Oxford were the principal owners of the field called 'Oatlands', part

of which eventually became Oatlands Road Recreation Ground (see Appendix 1). The land that became King George's Playing Field was owned by St John's College. Both grounds lie to the south of Botley Road, just west of Oxford city centre.

In the 20th century

The Oxfordshire District Valuation Survey of 1910 shows that Oatlands field was then owned by the Morrell Trustees and land that became King George's Field was still owned by St John's College – fields that were both let out to other occupiers (DVS, 1910). After World War I, dray-horses were increasingly replaced by motor vehicles meaning that pastures for hay and grazing were no longer needed. Sales of land continued into the early 20th century as a consequence of the agricultural depression (Allen, 1994).

By the early 20th century, there was considerable development on the west side of Oxford city mainly because of the building of the railways. Development to the south of Botley Road had begun by the 1850s when housing was laid out on Osney Island (OCC, 2008). The Ordnance Survey (OS) map of 1876 shows housing development had begun just west of Bulstake Stream – the stream that separates Oatlands Road Recreation Ground to the east and King George's Playing Field to the west (Ordnance Survey, 1876). These roads became Duke Street and Earl Street and were completed by 1899 according to the OS map (Appendix 2). Closer to town there was housing development beginning to the west of Ferry Hinksey Road, with building starting on Hill View Road due north of the land that became Oatlands Road Recreation Ground. By 1921, the adjacent land was ear-marked for housing and by 1937, housing and commercial developments occupied both sides of Botley Road in the area that was to become known as New Botley.

Oatlands Road Recreation Ground

During the early 20th century, the two principal landowners in west Oxford were Lord Harcourt who owned land mainly in and around North Hinksey (see below), and Colonel Raymond Ffennell who had purchased the Wytham estate from the Earl of Abingdon in 1920. Ffennell avidly promoted the benefits of playing fields, allotments and other open spaces across the city, and in 1926 helped to set up the Oxfordshire Playing Fields Association, of which the President and Chairman was the Duke of Marlborough (Oxford Chronicle, 1927a). Ffennell bought Oatlands field in 1926 in order to protect it from further development. In 1927, he offered to sell the field to the City of Oxford for the original cost price of £2,615 12s 4d for the purpose of a recreation ground, providing that the Ministry of Health agreed the loan to the City (Oxford Chronicle, 1927b).

The southern part of Oatlands field was to become Oatlands Road Recreation Ground. The 1937 OS map shows a 'playing field' to the south of Hill View, Alexander and Oatlands roads, occupying the east half of this field (Appendix 3). This possibly originated as the playing field for West Oxford School on Ferry Hinksey Road (Graham, 1998). The 1958 OS map (Appendix 3) shows this playing field has a building on the east side adjacent to Ferry Hinksey Road, which agrees with the position of a scout hut

that was erected there and shown on a photograph dated 1986 (Graham, 1986). The same OS map shows two long narrow structures parallel with the north side of the ground, which are likely to have been the air raid shelters built during World War II and shown in a photograph (Graham, 1998). No visible traces of these structures survive.

The west side of the field is shown as a recreation ground on the 1958 OS map, with a playground at the south side. There is now no distinction visible between the playing field to the east and the recreation ground to the west, although there is a low c. 12m x 7m grassed mound which may be the remains of the structure shown at the south-east corner of the playground on the 1958 OS map.

King George's Playing Field

On the west side of Bulstake Stream was meadowland formerly owned by St John's College. This land was bounded on the south side by the original Oxfordshire/Berkshire county boundary. The east side of this meadow became King George's Playing Field, which was given to the city in 1935 by St John's College as a playing field to mark the Silver Jubilee of King George V in the same year (Graham, 1998). Meanwhile, later OS maps show that the land to the north and east of this playing field was developed for housing and warehouses.

SITE DESCRIPTION – LOCATION, BOUNDARIES, AMENITIES

Oatlands Road Recreation Ground

The 5.1 ha ground is 700m west of the rail station and 1500m from Carfax in the city centre. The geology is sand and gravel at the centre and east side and silty clay alluvium on the west (BGS, 2021). It is flat and low-lying being part of the Thames floodplain and frequently floods. The ground is bounded by Ferry Hinksey Road to the east, Willow Walk to the south, Bulstake Stream to the west, and houses of five streets to the north. The east boundary has a concrete post and wire fence that separates it from parking bays along the roadside. This fence type continues at the east side of the south boundary whereas the longer west side of the south boundary currently has spiked iron railings. The north boundary comprises a low stone and mortar wall that separates the park from a raised walkway along the ends of the houses.

The ground is mostly open, although the most used entrances are from streets on the north side. There are informal routes from Willow Walk on the south side, across a drainage ditch. At the north-east corner of Oatlands ground is a small car park and from here a surfaced path continues across the north side of the ground to the wooden bridge over Bulstake Stream that leads directly to King George's Playing Field.

Close to Bulstake Stream there is an enclosed playing area with swings, a roundabout and a multi-play unit, and nearby there is a rocker, two high wires and a rope climbing frame. In the 1930s, playground equipment was sited at the north side of the ground, close to the houses (Graham, 1998). The open grassed field has football goals. There are two picnic tables close to the playing area, a bench seat near the bridge and another near the centre of the south boundary.

King George's Playing Field

The field is west of Oatlands ground, or 1km from the rail station. The area was originally 2.5 ha but is now only 2.1 ha owing to recent housing development at the north-east corner. The geology is silty clay alluvium (BGS, 2021) and the field frequently floods. It is bounded by Bulstake Stream to the east, Hinksey Meadows to the south, a retail park to the west, and housing to the north. The south boundary comprises a drainage ditch with trees, then wooden posts and wire fence. The west boundary is concrete walling and metal railings, while the north boundary is made up of the private house fencings.

King George's Playing Field joins Oatlands via the wooden bridge at the north-east corner. Other entrances are from the streets on the north side, which join a gravel path along the north side. There is also a gravel path from an opening to Willow Walk at the south-east corner where there is a small footbridge over the drainage ditch. Another entrance lies at the south-west corner. The two southern entrances lead to Hinksey Meadows via gates.

King George's Field provides a link between New Botley and the walks available on Hinksey Meadows, Willow Walk and further afield because of the two entrances at the south. Many walkers, joggers, and dog walkers use these routes, which also provide pleasant short-cuts between town and North Hinksey and Botley. There are no play or sports facilities here, but these are available on Oatlands ground, and there is just one bench seat at the north-west corner.

ADJACENT LAND

Willow Walk

This pathway which lies just south of the boundaries of both grounds, was created as a route between the village of North Hinksey and Oxford and was opened to the public in the 1920s (Hanson, 1995). Lord Harcourt was a major landowner in North Hinksey and in the 1880s he built the Willow Walk pathway and also the Hinksey Bridge over Hinksey Stream that lies at the west end. He also improved the punt ferry to the rear of The Fishes public house where the footpath called Monks Causeway (or North Hinksey Causeway) runs to the north-east, parallel with Willow Walk (OFA, 2018). The stream is now crossed by a wooden bridge. It seems very possible that this route or one close-by formed a western approach to Anglo-Saxon Oxford, and evidence of a medieval or earlier stone causeway has been found recently south of Willow Walk (Crossley, 2018; BBC, 2017).

Willow Walk is now a surfaced bridleway and cycle track that joins North Hinksey Lane to Ferry Hinksey Road at the Osney Mead Industrial Estate. It is sometimes called Ruskin's Ride, named after John Ruskin (1819–1900) who used to ride this way from Oxford to the village of Ferry Hinksey, now known as North Hinksey. The origin of the name 'Ferry Hinksey Road' at the Oxford end of Willow Walk also derives from this route and village name.

Hinksey Meadows

Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT) owns several pieces of land to the south and the west of the recreation areas, which augment the leisure amenities (OPT, 2016). Hinksey Meadows lie immediately to the south of King George's Playing Field, bounded also by Willow Walk to the south-east, Hinksey Stream to the south-west, and Meadowside Retail Park to the north. The meadows are 13 ha in area and are thought to have been hay meadow for much of the last thousand years. OPT purchased the meadows in 1997 since when it has managed the land as a hay meadow to continue its long tradition with a hay cut in July followed by cattle grazing, which has created a flower-rich meadow. Three fields to the south of Willow Walk were bought by OPT in 1978 from the Pirie and Van Heynigen families with a proviso that the fields are maintained in agricultural use. The Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme planned for the 2020s could affect the land and flora of these meadows (OFA, 2018).

Raleigh Park

Nearby, now on the other side of the A34 ring road and bounded by Harcourt Hill and Westminster Way, is Raleigh Park. The land was purchased by Raymond Ffennell and given to Oxford City in 1924 for use as a park (OCC, 2021). It is now accredited as a Local Wildlife Site. The Friends of Raleigh Park have produced very detailed lists and plans of trees, flora and fauna.

HORTICULTURE

Areas of scrub and undergrowth dominate the margins of both grounds, and these include a range of trees and shrubs of various maturities. As in other wet habitats near Oxford streams and ditches, willows dominate, some of which have been pollarded or have fallen or been felled. Associated with these wet habitats are commonly alder, hawthorn and shrubby trees and bushes of species that have colonised the margins. Ash trees are also very common here.

Oatlands Road Recreation Ground

Along the north side by the path are 48 trees that mainly form a line just south of the path, including five younger trees in a line to the south of the others. These trees are principally ash (31) including three in the car park and another by the road. There are also five alder, five cherry, two willows, while the five younger trees are oak (*Quercus* species), probably red oaks although one may be a pin oak or scarlet oak.

The east boundary alongside Ferry Hinksey Road comprises undergrowth within which there are 23 pollarded mature willows, six ash trees and many saplings and shrubs. There are also two small cherry trees (tagged) near the car park entrance. The south-east corner of the ground has c. 20m depth of willow scrub, while the remainder of the south boundary is mostly grassed to the railings. To the west is Bulstake Stream with wide curved areas of scrub with around 20 mature willows, some pollarded, plus three ash trees and many other young trees and multi-stemmed species, including willow, alder and blackthorn. At the north-west corner is the bridge over Bulstake Stream that joins the two grounds. To the north of this is a small area with two mature willows and

around 30 young trees, mainly ash with some alder. Just in front of the bridge is a small triangular area with three ash trees.

King George's Playing Field

The north side has c. 5m depth of scrub running up to the house walls, with 22 trees including cut or pollarded willows, seven ash trees and one field maple, plus hawthorns. The east boundary follows Bulstake Stream, with c. 5m depth of willow scrub plus 12 mature trees, mainly willow, and three alder and an ash. The south side has a drainage ditch and 5m depth of scrub with 12 mature willows, one ash and many hawthorns. These trees are part of a row that has Tree Preservation Order status, which help to protect the view from Hinksey Meadows. The west side has c. 10m depth of scrub at the south end and a much deeper area to the north comprising undergrowth with up to 40 mature and semi-mature deciduous trees, mainly willow, some felled, plus many younger growths. In summer, selective mowing of paths and edges encourages a meadow to develop in the centre of the field.

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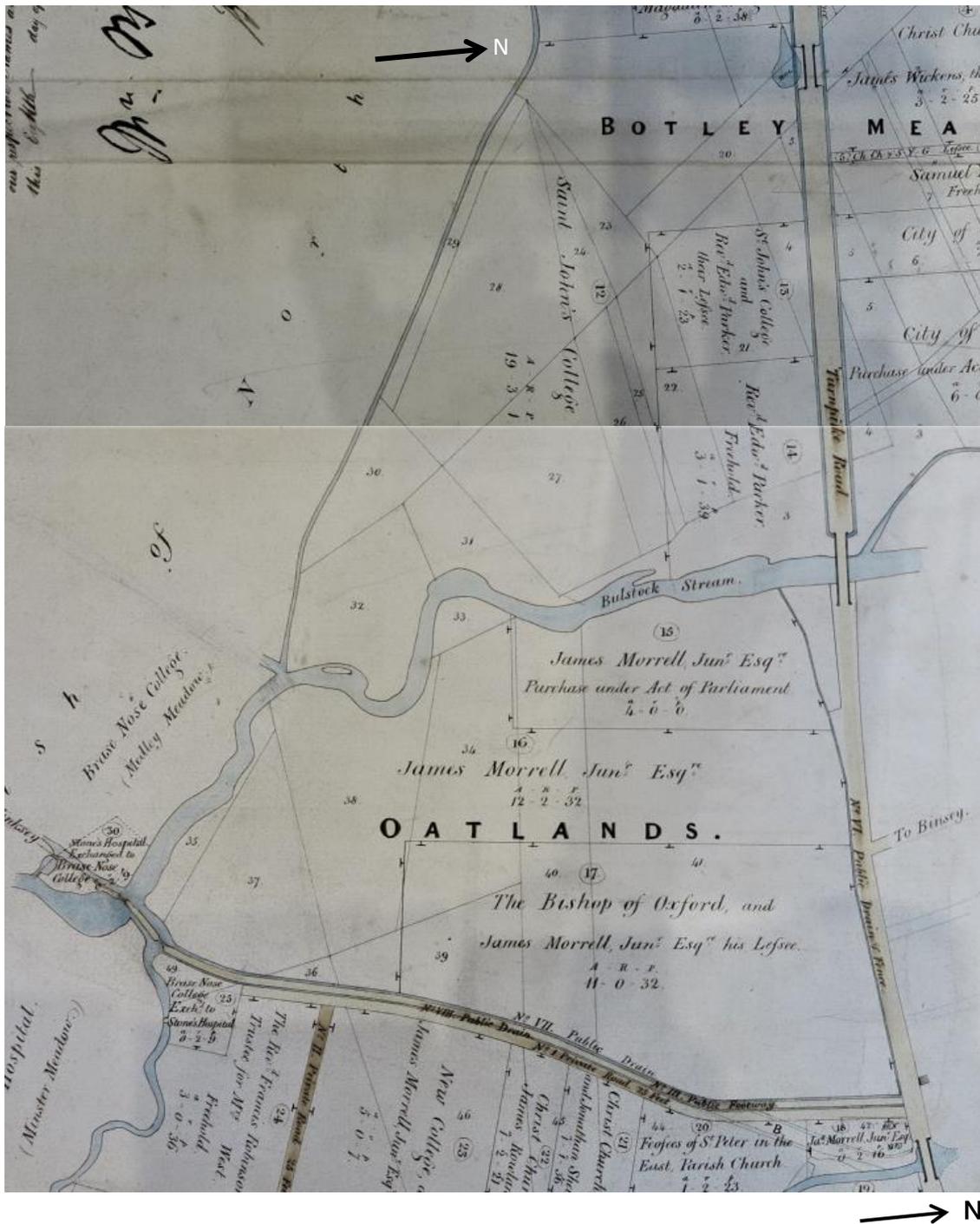
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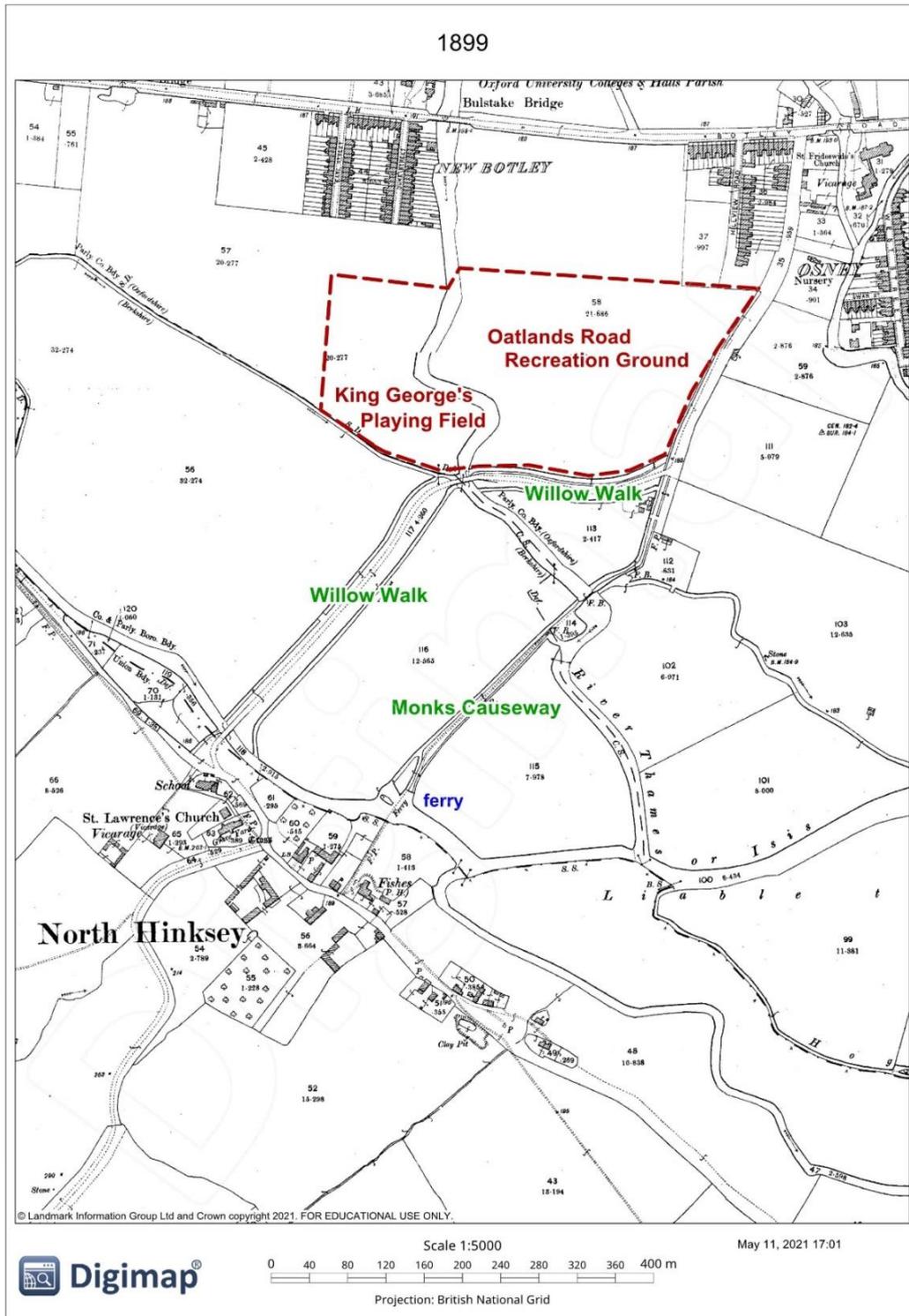
Appendix 1



Enclosure map 1853. Part of the Enclosure map of 'Botley Meadow, Oatlands and Osney Meadow in the Parish of Saint Thomas' 1853. West at top.

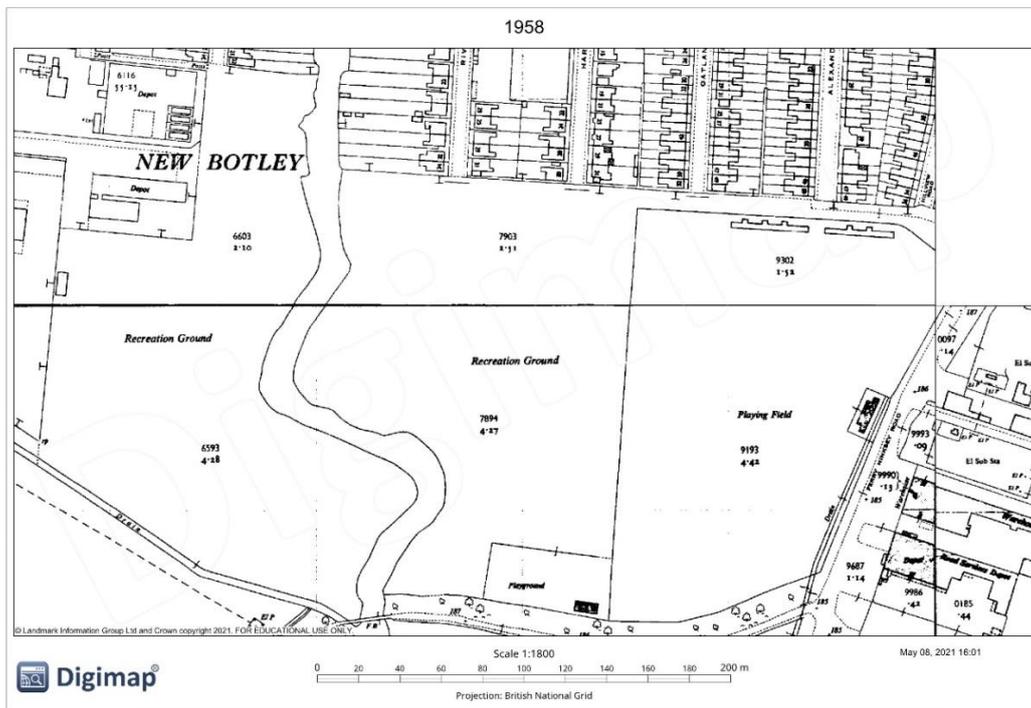
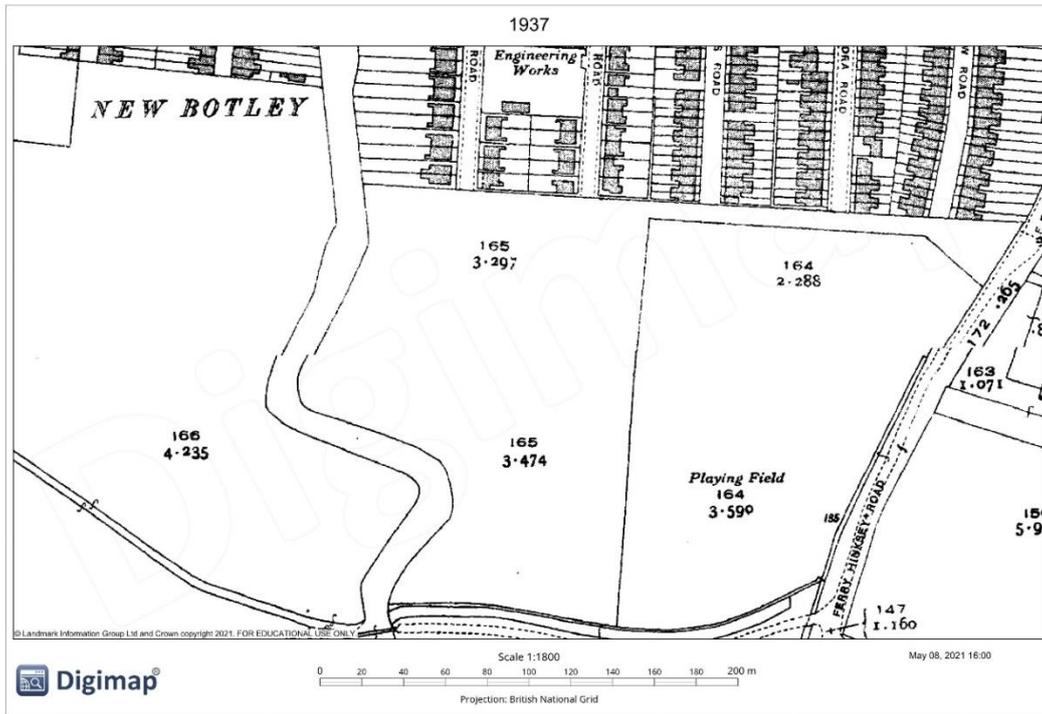
Oatlands Road Recreation Ground occupies the south side of 'Oatlands' (left side of this map) whereas King George's Playing Field is on the west side of Bulstake Stream. This image was reproduced with permission from the Oxfordshire History Centre.

Appendix 2



Ordnance Survey map 1899. Locations of Oatlands Road Recreation Ground and King George's Playing Field superimposed by the author. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2020). All rights reserved (1899)

Appendix 3



Ordnance Survey maps 1937 (upper) and 1958 (lower). King George's Playing Field is to the left of Bulstake Stream and Oatlands Road Recreation Ground to the right. © Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2020). All rights reserved (1937, 1958)

Appendix 4



Top: Oatlands Recreation Ground looking west towards playground
Centre: King George's Playing Field looking south
Lower: Willow Walk from Bulstake Bridge looking east
(Photographs, author 2021)