

Botley Park, Oxford

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

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COUNTY	OXFORDSHIRE	Site name BOTLEY PARK
DISTRICT	Oxford City	
DISTRICT WARD	Osney & St Thomas	
NGR	SP 500 064	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

A well-used and popular recreation ground that has offered sports, leisure and play amenities since the 1920s and still contributes much social value to the local community. The historic Tumbling Bay Bathing Place is accessible to the rear of the park.

Historic interest

Developed as a recreation ground in the 1920s, the park became a popular local sports and leisure area with strong community interest, hosting sports and social events. Tumbling Bay Bathing Place, created in the 1850s, lies at the rear of the park and is accessible on land only via the park.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Botley Road is a principal route out of Oxford city and runs almost due west. It was initially a causeway over the floodplain to the west of Oxford but in 1767 it was turnpiked and reconstructed at a raised level (OCC, 2008). Housing was developing in west Oxford from the 19th century mainly in response to the proximity of the railways and the need for housing for the railway workers of two companies; the Great Western Railway opened in 1844 and the London and North Western railway opened slightly later (VCH, 1979). Osney Town on Osney Island was laid out and developed during the 1850s. Housing development continued to the south of Botley Road in the areas called New Osney and New Botley, while on the north side of Botley Road, houses on Henry Road and Helen Road (which abut Botley Park) were complete by the early 20th century.

Also on the north side of Botley Road, opposite Osney Town and St Frideswide Church, was a field bounded by water on three sides. The 1899 Ordnance Survey (OS) map shows that the east half of the field was split off to form allotments of the same area as today, while the remainder of the field eventually became Botley Park. The whole field was known as 'Twenty Pound Meadow' and is shown with this name on a conjectural medieval map drawn in 1889 (Squires, 1928; OCC, 2008). The name of 'Twenty Pound Meadow' is still retained for the allotments that occupy the same ground and are

managed today by Osney, St Thomas & New Botley Allotment Association. These allotments were originally leased from the City Council following several years of acrimonious discussion over the value of the land and its best use. Although the discussions had centred on selling the land for house building, there was also a concern that there should be recreation space for dwellers of Osney and New Botley. Agreement came in April 1890 and the land was let for allotments from May 1890, with the first show of produce held in August 1891 in the adjoining field (Oxford Chronicle, 1890 & 1891). That adjoining field, which eventually became Botley Park, belonged to Mr G. Herbert Morrell (1845–1906), MP for mid-Oxfordshire and related to the Oxford brewery family (Allen, 1994). From the 18th century, the Morrell family owned meadowland on both sides of Botley Road that was used for grazing and for hay making for the dray-horses. From the 20th century this requirement diminished and in 1913, the owner of the land, then described as 'pasture land', was Corpus Christi College (DVS, 1910).

Land for a recreation ground, which eventually became Botley Park, was bought by the city in 1922 (VCH, 1979). The 1937 OS map shows a division in the layout of the ground, with an east-west boundary across the middle. A footbridge from Henry Road is shown leading to the Recreation Ground to the north (3.3 ha) where there was a tennis ground and a bowling green. The south part of the ground (1.4 ha) contained lavatories and a pavilion, and the entrance was from Botley Road. There were swings and a sand-pit near the entrance (Graham, 1998).

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM SETTING

Botley Park lies 400m due west of Oxford rail station and 1200m from Carfax in the city centre. The park lies opposite St Frideswide Church, now Grade II* listed, which is adjacent to the conservation area of Osney Island. The ground is flat and low-lying being part of the Thames floodplain and frequently floods. The geology is silty clay alluvium (BGS, 2021).

The park is approximately triangular in form and butts the allotments to the east. The north boundary is Bulstake Stream, flowing south-westwards from the Thames. An overflow stream, Osney Ditch, runs from the north-west corner of the park in a south-east direction and forms the west boundary. The south boundary, Botley Road, is only 32m long and forms the main entrance to the park. The land area is 4.7 ha including the community centre and the small car park, both of which are close to the entrance.

The meadows on both sides of Botley Road were used mainly as hay meadows during the more recent centuries, but in the Middle Ages, some fields were used to cultivate crops by traditional ploughing, producing typical 'ridge and furrow' lines which survive

where the land became meadow. Ridge and furrows are clearly visible running east to west in Botley Park when viewed from the south with the sun low in the sky (see Appendix 2), and are also visible on Lidar maps.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance and car park is from Botley Road to the south from where surfaced paths lead to the community centre and to the play and sports facilities as far as the south bowling green. Two other entrances are from adjacent streets to the west via footbridges over Osney Ditch. At the north-west corner of the park is a narrow wooden pedestrian bridge from Helen Road. Further south, about half-way along the south-west boundary, is a concrete and tarmac vehicle-accessible bridge from Henry Road.

PARK AMENITIES

Close to the entrance is West Oxford Community Association (WOCA), a small local charity run by volunteers who organise events for the local community. The 2-storey community building has a hall and smaller social rooms, a kitchenette and a café. The park's play and sports areas lie to the north of this building, in a line running northwards along the boundary with the allotments. The children's playground has climbing frames, roundabouts and other play equipment. Further north is a multi-use games area comprising basketball, football, street-sports and a table tennis table, followed by two tennis courts and West Oxford Bowls Club (established 1924). The latter occupies about half of the area of all of these facilities and has two bowling greens, with the main clubhouse at the north-west. A possible vestige of a former pavilion or clubhouse may be the grassed mound, c. 20m x 12m, that lies in the grass field to the west of the current north bowling green, and also indicated on 1977 and 1994 OS maps.

At the north-west corner of the park is the 'Kingfisher Corner' wildlife area, a small piece of undulating land intended mainly for children's education and entertainment. This lies close to the bridge from Helen Road and is the location of an earlier children's playground. Now it is an area of wild shrubbery growth with small trees and fallen trunks offering wildlife spotting opportunities. A wire fence separates it from Bulstake Stream and Osney Ditch. Similar small areas of wild growth of shrubbery and small trees are continued along the stream edges of the north and west boundaries where felled tree trunks and branches are gathered in several groups.

The middle of the park is an open grassed area with football goals. In the past, the park has been used for communal events including funfairs, team sports from local social clubs, fetes, and balloon flights. Around the park there are a few modern bench

seats. At the north-east corner of the park, amongst trees and shrubbery, is the entrance to Tumbling Bay Bathing Place.

ADJACENT LAND

Tumbling Bay Bathing Place (SP 502 065) lies 400m from the park entrance, just beyond the north-east corner of the park, at the rear of the allotments. This was authorized as the second of four Corporation bathing places, in addition to 'Parson's Pleasure' in the University Parks. It was recommended in 1853, initially for men only, and extended in 1866 (jminnes, 2020; Batroy, 2007; VCH, 1979). It is shown on the 1876 OS map. Access was then via a ferry from the opposite side of the Thames. Access from the park began in 1955 (Graham, 1998) and today public access is still through Botley Park via a narrow pathway, or across the Thames.

The bathing pool is supplied by water from Bulstake Stream, now a backwater of the River Thames. This stream leaves the Thames at a river junction known as Four Streams, opposite Sheepwash Channel that leads eastwards towards Fisher Row and Castle Mill (Squires, 1928). Bulstake (or Bullstake) Stream was formerly a navigation channel before the River Thames became the main channel when Osney Lock was built (VCH, 1979). A constant water level in the bathing pool is maintained by two weirs, one at each end of the pool (see Appendix 1). Its use as a bathing place ceased when Oxford City Council closed all its Thames bathing places in 1990 – although it is still occasionally used. Traces of the concrete bases of the original changing rooms are visible within the undergrowth. The bridge over the pool and ladders into the pool are extant and useable (Batroy, 2007).

A fish race was recently created by the Environment Agency running from the Thames c. 40m north of the inlet where water diverts from the Thames to the upper weir and the pool. A bridge has been added over this stream just a few metres away from the Thames. This leads to a narrow piece of land bounded by a wire fence to fields to the north. Concrete and brick footings of bathing buildings survive here (Oxford Archaeology South, 2021).

HORTICULTURE

The north and west borders of the park have several areas of scrub and undergrowth that include a range of mature and young trees and shrubs. Many of these are self-sown suckers and small bushes. As with other wet habitats near streams and ditches, willows dominate, some of which have been pollarded or have fallen or been felled. Associated with these wet areas are alder and shrubby trees and bushes of species that have colonised the margins, such as hawthorn and bramble. There are also groups of felled trunks and dropped or cut branches, deliberately left in situ to maximise bird and

insect activity. Springtime brings meadow flowers within long grass at the park edges. At Kingfisher corner there are several mature trees to the north and just outside the park's safety wire fencing, including willow, ash and hawthorn. The undergrowth here includes saplings of these trees plus wild rose, Guelder-rose and bramble.

The park's north boundary is dominated by poplars, ash and willows, which form an almost continuous line except at mid-way where there are two ash trees standing alone (see Appendix 2). To the west of these is a larger area of scrub with mature trees including a Lombardy poplar, two mature and two younger black poplars, five willows (two weeping), an ash, alder, hazel, and hawthorn. To the east of the two ash trees there is a group of poplar and willow saplings with one mature and several younger black poplars, plus one willow and an ash further eastwards. In mid-summer, the undergrowth is extensive, including bramble, wild rose, umbellifers, burdock and Himalayan Balsam.

Circulating clockwise, immediately to the north of the bowling greens are eight Downy birch trees between two areas of scrub. Along the path near to the sports areas, and including across the south side, there are 27 staked young trees, principally fruit trees including 12 apple, nine cherry, two Cockspurthorn, and *Sorbus* species.

Within the children's playground there are three trees: a Golden Weeping Willow, a hazel and a bird cherry (*Prunus padus*). By the car park is a hybrid or black poplar. In front of WOCC are six ash trees by the drainage ditch, plus an olive tree, a Scots pine and two field maples.

By the west boundary is an informal grass path between areas of controlled scrub that include blackthorn, willow saplings and wild rose, and two areas of felled mature tree trunks placed for play. Between these two is a group of ten young trees comprising eight fruit tree cultivars (probably *Malus* or *Pyrus* such as Almond-leaved pear) and two Downy birch trees, and a single *Malus* or *Pyrus* tree. Between the bridges of Helen and Henry Roads is a curved row of seven *Malus* or *Pyrus* with a separate Downy birch. Near Henry Road bridge exit is a young specimen Weeping Willow, and a mature ash tree lies opposite the Helen Road footbridge adjacent to a park bench.

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Appendix 1



Upper weir at Tumbling Bay Bathing Place

Appendix 2



View northwards across the playing field towards poplars, willows and ash trees along the north boundary. Note the ridge and furrow lines running across the field from left to right (west to east). Top: winter. Central: spring. Lower: summer.