

GILLINGHAM LANDSCAPES & OPEN SPACES ASSESSMENT REPORT SUMMARY

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Gillingham Landscapes and Open Spaces Assessment Report Summary

This report contains a summary of an independent survey of the landscapes and open spaces of Gillingham. It was undertaken by Richard F Burden, on behalf of North Dorset District Council, in response to comments in the Local Plan Inquiry Inspector's report. **The full report and accompanying plans and illustrations can be obtained from North Dorset District Council. The text of the report can be viewed on the Council's website (www.north-dorset.gov.uk).**

Purpose of Study

The main purposes of the study were to:

- ◆ assess the landscape characteristics of the former Buffer Zones at Milton on Stour, Bay, and Ham, and
- ◆ determine the potential for these areas to contribute to public amenity and recreation needs in the town.

The project involved:

- ◆ consideration of the landscape context of Gillingham,
- ◆ an assessment of the landscapes in and around the town in relation to the growth of Gillingham,
- ◆ surveys of existing and potential open spaces,
- ◆ analysis of the rate of population increase and the proportions of the different age groups in relation to the provision of open spaces and recreational facilities,
- ◆ consideration of the river valleys' potential as accessible green corridors, and
- ◆ the identification of opportunities for enhancements for landscape and open space via practical and policy actions.

It provides key information to assist the Local Authorities plan, manage, and seek funding for the landscapes and open space in and around the town.

The main survey work visiting and photographing sites and zones was undertaken in August and September 2002, and up to date census information became available in 2003.

Supporting Information

Landscape is assessed in physical and functional terms rather than simply the visual appearance. These include topography and landuse, cultural and built heritage, descriptions of Conservation Areas and Areas of Local Character [and details of archaeological interests and Listed Buildings], natural history, hedges and trees, rivers, detailed descriptions of designated Important Open or Wooded Areas (IOWAs), and Tree Preservation Orders. Details of the survey and analysis to support proposals, and a bibliography, are in the main report.

This summary covers the main findings and identified opportunities to enhance open space within the town. Where recommendations are made, they are those of the author. North Dorset District Council will make the report available to the public and will assess the findings in the light of public comment before making any decisions on its recommendations.



Confluence of Shreen Water and the Stour

Gillingham and its Landscapes

Gillingham has grown by over 34% between 1991 and 2001, and is a working rural town, demonstrating changing economic fortunes. It is the focal settlement of a broad asymmetrical clay vale, enclosed by the chalk of the West Wiltshire Downs to the north, the greensand heights of Duncliffe, Shaftesbury, and Kingsettle to the south and east, and the lower limestone ridge on its west that runs southward from Silton. The topography is relatively gentle, reflecting the underlying clays, and ranges from 70 metres within the town to 97 m at Wyke where there is evidence of stonier ground. Bowridge Hill, to the east, rises to 107 m.

Gillingham does not have groups of top quality historic buildings, large public parks, or significant formal, designed, landscapes. However, the River Stour and Shreen Water flow either side of the Peacemarsh ridge to the town centre, and the River Lodden skirts the east of the town. Problematically, all are prone to flooding. Many of the roads are lined by hedges, and the verges are very narrow or non-existent. The railway slices across the town, separating the historic King's Court from its original countryside setting.

Furthermore, development pressures and changes in farming now mean the pleasant rural nature of the area, previously taken for granted, is at risk. Recent development is obvious and does not always reflect the traditional styles and materials of the locality.



Gillingham High Street

Additional features of these landscapes are:

- Green and lush, largely pastoral fields enclosed by hedges
- Twisting lines of riverbank trees
- Small core of older buildings, dominated by St Mary's church tower



Footbridge from Red Lion to Waitrose

Open Space: Current Provision and Future Requirements

Current provision:

There are five formal play facilities for youngsters. New facilities are also being provided within the new developments. The main open spaces within the developed area, apart from the cemetery and allotments, are north and south of Rolls Bridge in the Stour valley, school playing fields, and the open area between Downs View Drive and Gyllas Way. There is virtually no provision for early teenage adventure play, nor junior or more adult kick-about areas. Some open space is not necessarily publicly accessible but may contribute significantly to the character and atmosphere of a locality. For example, the countryside is part of the visual amenity and landscape character of the locality, but only accessible by Rights of Way.

- Formal sports facilities are concentrated around the Leisure Centre, and the schools, at Hardings Lane.
- There are no Borough Gardens or Town Park in Gillingham.
- Only half the open areas are fully accessible to the public.
- Much of the open space involves the river flood plains or is on the countryside edge of developments.
- There is little provision of open space within new residential developments.

The community consultation held in the autumn of 2002 identified a large number of requests from the public for more open space, a halt on development, and the provision of parks, gardens, riverside walks and green spaces.

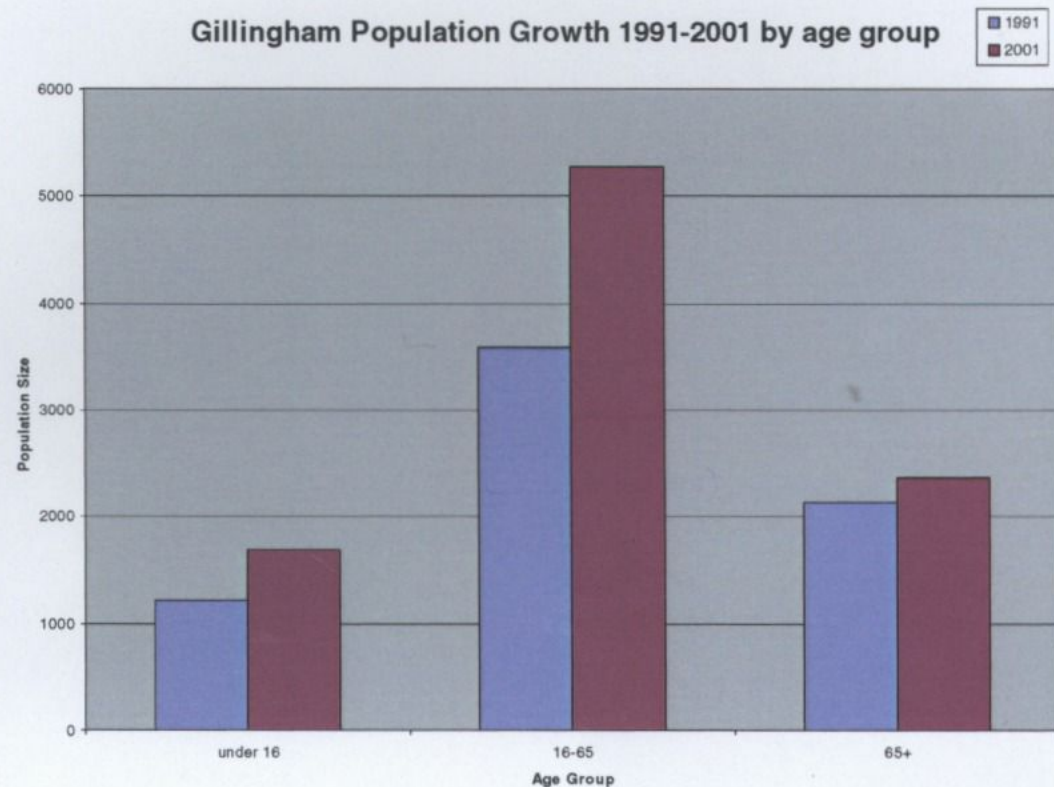
Population:

Growth 1991 - 2001 has been largely in the working age group, followed by children and then those of pensionable age. Looking at individual wards:

- **Ham** has a small decline since 1991 but new development currently under way should boost under 16's and working age groups in the future;
- **Town Ward** has low growth;
- **Lodbourne** has grown about 26%;
- **Milton** has grown about 35%, with a decline in the retirement age group; and
- **Wyke** shows the greatest growth of around 70%.

Milton, Gillingham Town, and Wyke have the highest proportion of under 16s, and Lodbourne, Wyke, and Ham the highest proportion of pensioners.

Gillingham Population Growth 1991-2001 by age group



Future requirements:

Informal play facilities for youngsters should be within 200 - 400m of home and more are needed.

The prevalence of "edge of development" open space now means currently available land is not ideally placed and there is a shortage of open space within developments. Safeguarding existing spaces could lead to achieving realistic green corridors with associated play and recreational opportunities.

- In the **Wyke Ward**, which is also furthest from the recreation facilities at Hardings Lane, improvements are needed to correct a relative shortage of facilities, particularly for young people.
- Formal recreation facilities are located in **Town Ward** but there is little publicly owned informal open space.
- In **Ham Ward** open space is on the outskirts and there is a shortage of open space within the new developments. There should be links to the riverside areas and into the Royal Forest Project Area. Non-vehicular access to the facilities at Hardings Lane is extremely poor.
- In **Milton Ward** the public space around Horsefields and Cherryfields and the area alongside the River Stour, west of Peacemarsh could satisfy many needs if planned and managed effectively. Accessibility of facilities is a major issue. Adoption of a strategy of dispersal, so that sports and recreation facilities can be reached by walking or cycling could help to relieve heavily trafficked areas and improve pedestrian safety.

The Landscape Character Assessments and Proposals for the former Buffer Zones

Milton and Colesbrook

This zone is a series of interlinked areas forming a crescent of largely undeveloped land around the northern sectors of the town. The valley of the River Stour runs southward through the western sector and Shreen Water twists and turns its way along the eastern side. Hedges and riverbank trees play important roles in enclosing the landscape, channelling views, screening, and contributing to biodiversity. From the rivers outwards to the west there is a long steady slope, while to the east the ground is flattish and then rises more rapidly in a concave slope to Bowridge Hill. There is a particular rural/rustic feel to Colesbrook, partly due to the older buildings, their form, the proportions of the gardens, and the ford and its approaches. However, an air of formality pervades the Milton on Stour area with its Victorian church and spire and exotic tree planting around the village. The visual envelope is very variable, ranging from close and channelled at Colesbrook Ford and Horsefields to extensive but enclosed at the Kendalls, and expansive to the skyline west of the Stour near Peacemarsh.



Views from Bowridge Hill of Gillingham and Milton

Conclusions

- The crescent of the asymmetrical valleys of the River Stour and Shreen Water and the northern parts of the rather plateau-like central ridge between them form **a broad, patterned, green scarf** wrapping around the northern parts of Gillingham.
- **Hedge and tree protection** and management, along with additional planting, are important elements in sustaining the landscapes south from The Kendalls to Peacemarsh. Such activities should link to existing riverside trees and designated IOWAs and planting areas.
- **Colesbrook** should remain a separate rural hamlet and the rural character of Colesbrook Lane and the ancient ford should be protected, possibly as a Conservation Area.
- Every effort should be made to conserve, enhance, and **provide open spaces within** existing and planned developments.
- The **outer sides of the river valleys** provide the countryside setting for the housing either side of the central plateau, and the open countryside character should be protected.
- Maintaining the sweep of countryside from the south-west to the north-east, including the existing hedges and riversides, will be crucial to sustain the **rural character and clear countryside gaps**. In particular, those between the south-eastern side of Milton and the employment and housing development on the north side of Peacemarsh, and between Horsefields / Cherryfields, Colesbrook, and Milton should be formally recognised and protected.
- **Landscape management** is likely to become an increasingly pressing issue, particularly for the river valleys and access areas.

Recommendations

The various sub-units of this crescent land combine to form a significant and important landscape gap between the town, Milton-on-Stour and Colesbrook. I recommend that it be protected and managed to sustain the landscape features, maintain the landscape character and retain the separate identities of the settlements. Careful consideration should, therefore, be given to policies and procedures to achieve these aims, including Conservation Area status for Colesbrook and Purns Mill House.

Bay and Lodbourne

This area is focused around a shallow bowl that is hidden and secluded either side of the course of the Shreen Water, the road crossing from Queen Street and climbing north-eastwards towards Bowridge Hill, and the fields stretching eastwards, north of the schools. North of Bay Bridge the landscape is almost immediately countryside, whilst to the west the Lodbourne houses back onto the roughly oval pasture of the flood plain of Shreen Water as the river turns south to the town centre. On the southern side, the ground rises towards the schools via the Barnaby Mead developments. On the slope down to the river, an additional development of taller, two storey houses has recently started which is raising the skyline and encroaching on the river and grassland, reducing the open area. East of Bay Farm the ground rises towards Windyridge Farm and falls gently south-eastwards to the River Lodden. Together with the IOWAs, the former Buffer Zone, and the countryside beyond the settlement boundary constitute a significant green wedge reaching from the countryside to the western side of Shreen Water at Lodbourne.

Conclusions:

- The former Buffer Zone and IOWAs form the core of a green wedge reaching westwards into the floodplain of Shreen Water from the open countryside of the Royal Forest project area, and the area links functionally and organically with the countryside north of Bay bridge.
- Additional development would further erode the calm and tranquillity of the area, and is also likely to prejudice the separateness, rural character, and scale of Bay hamlet.
- There are opportunities to enhance access from Bay Road, seek pedestrian access along the river corridor to the town centre, and make more effective use of the Rights of Way and their linkages to local facilities.
- There is scope for public use of much of the area as informal recreation space or a park.
- The former Buffer Zone and the important landscape gaps that link this area to the open countryside should be protected and managed to sustain their landscape features and landscape character.

Recommendations

I recommend that the former Buffer Zone and the important landscape gaps that link this area to the open countryside be protected and managed to sustain their landscape features and landscape character. Careful consideration should, therefore, be given to policies and procedures to achieve these aims, including enlarging IOWA 17 to extend over the area of the former Buffer Zone. I also recommend allocating the area as a publicly accessible park (see the proposal under "Major Opportunities").



Towards Shreen Water from public footpath

Ham

The former Ham Buffer Zone is a relatively small area of grassland, hedges, and pasture straddling the hedge-lined B3081 Shaftesbury road between Ham Farm and Park Farm in a rapidly changing part of the town. The new roundabout creates a significant feature within the area, with an industrial atmosphere fuelled by high wire fences, advertisements, and the builders' depot. However, the land immediately to the north-west of the roundabout forms a significant open space that provides a link between the landscaped space south-east of Saxon Gate / Kings Chase and the mature trees on the opposite side of the roundabout at Park Farm. The high buildings on the edge of Saxon Gate dominate the eastern, open grassed part. The small parcel of land at Lockwood Farm adjoins urban fringe countryside that continues, and expands, westwards. The new developments of Saxon Gate / Kings Chase have straight, bare boundaries and the new buildings, adjacent to the Gillingham Royal Forest, do not integrate and blend with their surroundings.

The topography of the wider Ham area is deceptive, with the main road on the side slope of a ridge. There is a small knoll west of Higher Ham Farm, dropping to the Lodden valley. The Park Farm ridge also tapers to the north-west, falling away north-eastwards to the junction of Fern Brook and the River Lodden. The grain of the land runs with the gradient towards the north-west, however where Fern Brook funnels down to join the River Lodden near Kings Court that grain turns westward and then heads south-west. Kings Court Wood, to the north-east, appears on the skyline. Evidence of Dutch Elm Disease is widespread.

Conclusions

The former Ham Buffer Zone:

- is a relatively small open area in a part of Gillingham that is **undergoing substantial and rapid change**, largely due to major house building schemes to the east and west of the main road.
- soon it will be the **only sizeable open space** within the developed areas south of Lodden Bridge.
- is the **only green "bridge"** across the Shaftesbury Road.

Recommendations

- The former Ham Buffer Zone and associated land provide an undeveloped open space and landscape gap that offers the opportunity to create a "gateway" feature at the entrance to Gillingham. This should be given protection as an IOWA.
- The area also offers potential as a bridge linking the Royal Forest to the Lodden Valley. Opportunities to open up public access should be explored.
- Urgent action is needed to integrate new developments with the adjoining countryside, especially the interface with the Royal Forest, and greater attention should be given to scale, sympathetic designs, landscape treatment, and appropriate materials.



New roundabout and builders merchant from Park Farm

The Landscape Character and Proposals for Riverside areas and associated Green Corridors within and adjoining the Town

As well as examining the landscape characteristics and potential of the former Buffer Zones, the report also examined other opportunities to improve open space in the town.

The three river valleys provide the main tentacles of green or undeveloped land which thread through or around the urban areas. Although some are linked to pedestrian Rights of Way not all the sections are publicly accessible, for example, the Stour valley north west of Wyke Bridge, Shreen Water from Bay Bridge to Town Mills, and the River Lodden from Kings Court to Lodden Bridge. Rights of Way frequently provide green routes, and other green corridors or broader green wedges include the former buffer zones, playing fields, the cemeteries, and Chantry Fields.

Assessment and Comment:

- Opportunities for open space provision and activities could build upon the start made by "**The Three Rivers Project**", but taking a **wider focus** than walking and wildlife, and the rivers.
- **Chantry Fields** and the **green space between Lodbourne, Bay**, and the open countryside are wedges of undeveloped land that perform similar physical and visual functions, and they have **potential green space roles**.
- Along the rivers, designated IOWAs link together to form physical, visual, and wildlife corridors. On the edge of the built up areas these act as links to the countryside. Furthermore, these **river-based green corridors reach right into the centre of the town**.
- Not all parts of the green corridors are accessible as of right, so efforts should be made to **secure pedestrian access** along all three rivers.
- In order to minimise trespass and disruption to legitimate farming activities **additional access** along the River Stour and Shreen Water north of Peacemarsh and Bay should be **on the town rather than the countryside banks**.
- Although the Local Authorities own sections beside the rivers, in some areas **ownership is unclear**. Ownership and management responsibilities should be clearly identified to enable open space and recreation opportunities to be planned and realised.
- **Links between Rights of Way** should be considered to enhance countryside access around the town and into the open countryside itself.
- Projects could involve **linear parks, formal play facilities, and paths and cycleways** to link to sports facilities, as well as site management and biodiversity enhancement. Cycleways could double as routes to work and school.
- As the **railway** currently has a single road crossing point it may be necessary to consider using the **under bridges** near Kings Court and the Sewage Works for pedestrian and cycle routes. The road bridge under Le Neubourg Way is likely to become a more important feature in future.

Three Major Opportunities:

- The potential for a **Town Park** is identified on the site between the **Red Lion** and the Library.
- There is scope in **Chantry Fields** for **organised sports and community facilities** close to the existing built up area, with informal activities grading out to countryside and wildlife interests to the south and beside the river.
- Either side of the **Shreen Water at Bay** there could be a **park** with additional access, areas for informal play and relaxation, links to other parts of the town and adjacent countryside, and management to enhance the biodiversity.

What happens next?

This summary leaflet and the full Report are now being made available to the public. North Dorset District Council will consider the comments of the report as well as any future community input when reviewing policies on Open Space/Recreation needs in the town. **Copies of the Report** (incl. Plans) are available from the Planning Policy Unit, North Dorset District Council, Nordon, Salisbury Road, Blandford Forum DT11 7LL (price £20.00 + £3.50 p&p). The text of the Report may be freely viewed on the council's website (www.north-dorset.gov.uk).



Footpath through Chantry Fields