

Planting and Maintenance of Trees on Midsummer Common

In 2001 the Council published its Conservation Plan for Midsummer Common which said that "with a few notable exceptions the condition of the trees on the Common is generally poor". It went on to say that "there is considerable scope for enhancing the aesthetic quality of the Common and its setting, particularly in relation to the tree planting which is so important to its character". It concluded by saying that "a really comprehensive planting and maintenance programme is needed urgently". That was 9 years ago.

In 2007 the Council commissioned the Wildlife Trust to produce a Management Plan for Midsummer Common. The Trust set the Council 7 main objectives one of which is "to maintain the trees so as to contribute to the character of the Common and its value for biodiversity". It went on to say that "the management of the trees on Midsummer Common requires careful planning and specialist knowledge of the site and the trees already present". That was 2 years ago.

Since then, some of the trees have lost branches or been blown over by the wind; some have been felled, pollarded or pruned by the Council; many have become badly damaged or diseased; some have been removed for safety reasons. A few new trees have been planted (with the help of funding by the Cambridge Preservation Society and Friends of Midsummer Common) but the total number of trees on the Common has declined to just over 120. All of these trees should have protection afforded to them by being located within a Conservation Area.

Guiding Principles for new plantings

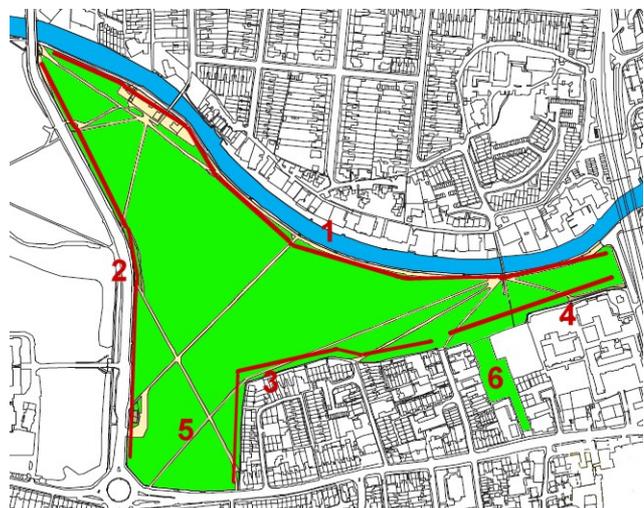
It is important to maintain the informal and rural character of Midsummer Common whilst making room for public recreation, events and cattle grazing. The Conservation Plan says that "there is considerable scope for enhancing the aesthetic quality of the Common and its setting, particularly in relation to the tree planting which is so important to its character". It sets down certain guiding principles for new tree planting:

- trees should be restricted to the perimeter of the Common;
- all new tree planting should use native species; and
- there should be a diverse age range within the tree stock.

What does this mean in practice?

Trees should be restricted to the perimeter of the Common. Peripheral planting serves both to retain the vista for those on the Common and to leave open space for recreation and events. Any future planting should continue to follow this approach and maintain open views of the Common. There are four distinct boundaries.

The trees planted along the river tow path (1) emphasise the curve of the river, provide broken shade for walkers and those sitting watching the river, and integrate the various building styles of the boathouses to form the



visual boundary of the north side of the Common. The Wildlife Trust points out that these trees "are part of the important Hayling Way willow habitat extending from Waterbeach to Cambridge" and "are an important ecological feature as they provide roosting sites for bats and are home to a wealth of invertebrates". According to the Conservation Plan, these trees "are in a really poor state ... they are either young and badly damaged or over mature and in need of heavy pruning to maintain safety".

The Council planted 85 horse chestnut trees along Victoria Avenue (2) on the western boundary of the Common back in 1890 and, in the words of the Wildlife Trust, "these large trees create an impressive boundary to the Common". Many are old and, according to the the Conservation Plan, "over half have serious defects". The Wildlife Trust recommends that replacement trees should be planted prior to the removal of the horse chestnuts to ensure the tree-lined avenue is maintained and any loss of aesthetic impact is minimal.

The southern boundary of the Common was once bounded by a continuous line of trees; many of these have since disappeared leaving a sparse and unsatisfactory mix that lacks a sense of cohesion. In front of the houses (3), the Conservation Plan is against strict perimeter tree planting and recommends that "a buffering effect against the intrusion of the urban fabric can be achieved more effectively by setting trees away from the edge in an informal fashion without intruding into the open central area". This would allow views over the Common to be retained.

The Conservation Plan highlights the importance of new plantings at the eastern end of this boundary (4) where the ground rises. Existing and planned buildings on the edge have several stories and could "destroy the semi-rural nature of the long view".

A more relaxed approach to planting positions can be adopted in Butt Green (5) and the small pound off the Newmarket Road (6). There are a number of major underground services running beneath the Common, some of which may limit the choice of future tree planting positions.



To emphasise the rural character, ensure that all new tree planting in the main body of the Common, apart from the horse chestnuts, uses native species. The current range and distribution of tree species on Midsummer Common have been mapped at <http://midsummercommon.org.uk/papers/TreePage.html>.

The trees planted along the river tow path (1) are predominantly willow, poplar and London plane. The Conservation Plan says that " ... the choice of willows and poplar trees along the river should be maintained". In the case of willows, these should preferably be of local provenance with cuttings taken from the Hayling Way trees. In the case of poplars, the opportunity could be taken to plant the native black poplar, rather than the hybrid form, because this rare tree is thought to have originated in this area.

The trees along Victoria Avenue (2) are all horse chestnuts, most of which are old and diseased. Ideally they should be replaced with further horse chestnut trees to maintain the avenue effect from the road. But chestnut trees are suffering from the leaf miner moth (*Cameraria ohridella*) and bleeding canker (the pathogen, *Pseudomonas syringae pv aesculi*), for which there are no known cures. Any replacement trees will need to provide the same level of impact so large-leaved limes (*Tilia platyphyllos*) would be a suitable choice. Extending this tree planting around the new toilet building on Butt Green would ease its visual intrusion. A different tree picture is emerging between Victoria Avenue and the Fort St George pub with new chestnuts bounding the paths and a mixture of rowan, plane, elm, lime, and willow trees infilling the spaces.

There is a mix of trees on Butt Green (5) and in front of the nearby houses (3). Along Maids Causeway and on Butt Green itself there are six London planes, one Norway maple, one oriental plane, two Huntingdon elms, twelve silver pendent limes and one horse chestnut. In front of Brunswick Walk there are two Wych elms, one common lime and two London planes. In front of North Terrace and further west there are two horse chestnuts, one common lime, one Crimean lime, one silver pendent lime, one silver birch, one common walnut and one Tree of Heaven. In the words of the Wildlife Trust, the choice of species here "seems illogical". New plantings in these areas could include non-native trees (including oak and hawthorn) but small-scale trees and ornamental varieties would be inappropriate for this semi-natural space. The tree line in front of North Terrace has become fragmented where trees were not replaced and the Wildlife Trust recommends that "this line could be reinstated with horse chestnut or elm trees to complement those already present".

Berkeley Homes are redeveloping the southern boundary of the Common at the eastern end. The new residential development will have a pronounced visual impact on the Common itself. The old line of trees would have given a mellowing effect but only three of these trees now survive and most of those on the development site have been felled. Careful thought should be given to the planting of new trees in this area (4) to recover the informal and rural aesthetic quality of the Common.

Linking the main Common with the Newmarket Road is a small pound (6) that the Wildlife Trust suggested could be enhanced through the creation of a community orchard. FoMC, with Council support, has taken on this task. Nineteen apple trees have already been planted and nurtured there and a further 14 plum, gage and pear trees will be planted in the autumn (see <http://midsummercommon.org.uk/papers/Orchard.pdf>).

Management should strive to develop a diverse age range within the tree stock. There is the opportunity, with careful management, to have long term trees which achieve a great age and therefore carry the biodiversity associated with veteran trees. The Wildlife Trust points out that, because of the intensive use of the Common, the trees are "managed to minimise the risks associated with dead wood and comply with Heath and Safety regulations". But it goes on to say that "pollarding creates a habitat of old and new wood on the same tree" which is unnatural but a characteristic that is valuable for the environment. The Conservation Plan makes the point that "adequate resources for frequent inspection and remedial work are needed to extend the useful life of the most significant trees". It is for the Council to maintain the condition of trees on Midsummer Common for the benefits of all City residents.



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28 June 2010