



## PART 3

# The Oxford View Cones:

## Views across the Thames Floodplain

2015 Report



OXFORD  
PRESERVATION  
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Historic England



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## 3.1 Port Meadow View Analysis Summary

### 3.1.1 Introduction

The Thames lies to the west of the historic core of Oxford and flows within flat, wide alluvial floodplains. The floodplain is particularly notable for its historic commons and meadowlands, including Port Meadow, Pixey Mead and Wolvercote Common, as well as its historic wooded groves.

The open character of Port Meadow and the history of uninterrupted use as common land have been recorded in paintings throughout the last 300 years by artists, including Malchair, William Turner, James Aumonier, Sir Muirhead Bone and Peter de Wint.

The open, low-lying character of Port Meadow allows uninterrupted and expansive views towards the city. The spires, towers and domes of central Oxford are fairly distant and small, spread out across the view, and seen against a broad open sky. In front of the historic buildings are the suburbs of North Oxford, Jericho and West Oxford, mostly hidden from view now by the trees that line the canal, railway line and the

boundary of Burgess Field, as well as those in gardens. No one building forms a focal point to the view, the eye passing from point to point in the silhouetted skyline and then back to the foreground. The expanse of the foreground with its seasonal changes of colour, forms a dominant element to the view, the skyline forming a delicate backdrop.

The view is seen by many using the meadows as an open rural space to escape the urban environment of the city. The meadow itself has a high level of archaeological interest, as well as being valued for its attractiveness as an open area of historic countryside with vistas in many directions that are unaffected by modern development. As such, the impact of the recent development of buildings at Roger Dudman Way has proved highly controversial. The meadows are linked with other viewing places, via the network of footpaths, particularly the river banks at Godstow, Binsey and Medley and Wytham Hill to the west and the bridge over the railway line in Wolvercote to the north east.



*The Port Meadow View September 2013 focused on the core of buildings surrounding Radcliffe Square (compare with photo below for the wider view)*



*Oxford, Port Meadow from Medley Fields, James Aumonier, 1880 © Image reproduced with the kind permission of Russell Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth*

**3.1.2 The Viewers**

Port Meadow has been used as an economic resource, as well as a place of leisure and recreation by the people of the city for over a thousand years. The experience of viewing the city from the meadow provides a connection

with the many who have gone before. This is supported by the ability to recognise the experiences of viewing recorded by past writers and artists in our own experience of the view, adding to the significance of what is seen by providing a tangible link to past people.

**3.1.3 Present Viewers**

<p><b>A freely accessible and popular view</b></p>	<p>The view from Port Meadow is seen by many local residents as part of their daily use of the area as public open space that they have free access to for their recreation. This is regarded as the outcome of the historic right of the people of the city to use Port Meadow. The meadow provides them with access to rural open space outside the city and the opportunity to enjoy its special historic interest and rural beauty within a stone's throw of their homes. The view may provide an element of their enjoyment of the space as part of their recreation or they may be visiting the meadow specifically to enjoy vistas of the green space with its fringe of woodland and, looking towards the city, its unique historic city skyline with the connections of viewing it through time.</p>
<p><b>A view enjoyed by people engaged in sport and recreation</b></p>	<p>Port Meadow and the River Thames are used as places of sport, including sailing and canoeing, as well as kite flying, running and horse riding in addition to the gentler pursuit of walking. The views make this a special place for those who have come to the meadows to enjoy these pursuits.</p>
<p><b>A view that inspires artists</b></p>	<p>The meadow and surrounding green spaces are a source of inspiration for many artists including photographers and painters who use the vast open space with its mixture of open grassland, floodwater or rivers, wooded horizons and vast skyspace with animals or people providing points of interest and the dreaming spires a unique backdrop or a focus in themselves.</p>

### 3.1.4 Viewers in the Past

<b>The Freemen of Oxford and an unchanged setting</b>	The meadow is an ancient area of grazing land that has never been ploughed. The freemen or burgesses (townsmen with commercial rights) of Oxford held the right to graze animals on the meadow at the time of the Domesday survey (AD 1086). This may represent land granted to townfolk in return for military service by Saxon rulers in the late 9th and 10th centuries. The freemen's collective right to graze animals free of charge has been exercised ever since.
<b>18th and 19th century artists paintings</b>	The earliest recorded view of Oxford from Wolvercote is the drawing by J. B. Malchair. It was also painted by J. M. W. Turner in 1812 and William Turner of Oxford, James Aumonier, David Cox and others. As a part of the picturesque landscape movement, artists found painting views such as this, without a clear focus in the mid-ground a particular challenge and would deliberately add foreground features or activity to enhance the composition, hence the inclusion of grazing animals, trees or sailing vessels on the Thames.



### 3.1.5 The Viewing Place

The viewing place will contribute to what is seen in the view but may also have historical, evidential or communal value as a place for viewing the city that adds to the significance of the view.

<b>Aesthetic value of the foreground</b>	Port Meadow is an extensive common, used for grazing. The aesthetic of the view changes with the seasonal patterns of vegetation, wildlife and livestock. Its immense scale, seen against the small, spiky skyline of domes, towers and spires and its tranquillity has high aesthetic value.
<b>Historical value of the green setting</b>	Port Meadow has been used as common land and has not been ploughed for almost 1000 years. The ability to see the high buildings of Oxford from Port Meadow contributes to the sense of possession of the land by the city. The continuity in management of the green setting and the absence of change on the Meadow contrasts and complements the 1000 years of building history and tight urban fabric of the city.
<b>The unchanging views</b>	The expanse of open and accessible flood plain allows the viewer free access to all parts of the meadow to experience the views of the city skyline. The view remains relatively unchanged until the city's suburban development becomes more apparent in close proximity to the meadow's edges.
<b>Archaeological and Ecological value</b>	The ancient common land has protected the visible remains of Bronze Age barrows and Iron Age farmsteads from the effects of modern ploughing which provides the potential for a level of preservation of prehistoric archaeological remains that is extremely rare in the Thames valley. Also visible are the remains of post-medieval quarrying, a 17th century horseracing course and the site of a First World War airfield.  The meadow's exceptionally important grassland flora still reflects prehistoric usage.



*Port Meadow is a landscape that has preserved its character as open common land despite many uses over the past 1000 years*

### 3.1.6 The Landscape in the View

The view from Port Meadow looks across the floodplain to a long thin line of domes, towers and spires on the skyline. The view is long distance from the viewing point at Wolvercote

but public access across the common allows closer views to be experienced. The foreground and sky are dominant elements and the tree line on the edge of the meadow helps to conceal the presence of the city's suburban development.

### 3.1.7 Topography and layout of the view:

The historic city is represented by a delicate line of domes, spires and towers on the skyline, with extensive foreground of the meadow and a large area of sky.

The location of this viewing place within an extremely flat and wide floodplain and the direction of the view (looking south-east along the length of the floodplain) means there is virtually no topographical variation in this view.

The foreground of this view is formed by Port Meadow – an open area of historic meadow and common land, which is grazed by livestock but publicly accessible and without interruption by fences or hedgerows. The open space extends to the tree lines marking Burgess Field, the railway line and the Oxford Canal. The middle ground of the view is formed by the trees that line the Oxford Canal and the skyline buildings rising above the treeline. The wooded hills of east Oxford may just be seen as a distant backdrop.

The open character of Port Meadow provides an expansive view with no foreground screening. The spires, towers and domes of central Oxford are fairly distant in this view, located beyond the band of trees which contains the city. They are spread out across the view, and seen against a broad open sky.

### 3.1.8 Green Characteristics:

<b>Green open foreground</b>	<p>The character of this view is heavily influenced by its soft landscape, most notably Port Meadow, the band of trees along the Oxford Canal and the trees in the gardens of North Oxford.</p> <p>The pastoral landscape of open meadows with cattle grazing amongst mature floodplain trees is vital to the character of this view, forming a tranquil and pastoral setting.</p>
<b>Trees in the middle ground</b>	<p>The line of trees alongside the Oxford Canal, and a variety of more ornamental trees in the gardens of North Oxford form a narrow wooded middle ground from which the historic buildings emerge.</p> <p>The trees have grown since the 1960s when this view was first identified in planning policy documents, so that they now screen more of the buildings in the historic core and also more of the buildings of the suburbs.</p>
<b>Trees in the background</b>	<p>The hills of east Oxford, which may just be seen in the background, create a wooded skyline.</p>

### 3.1.9 Architectural Characteristics:

<b>Spikey features</b>	<p>Only the tops of buildings (mostly spires, towers and domes) are visible as delicate spikes, spread relatively evenly across the horizon.</p> <p>The distinctive dome of the Radcliffe Camera and the prominent spire of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin form larger elements that catch the eye and help to orientate the viewer.</p>
<b>Spires on the edges</b>	<p>Other spires are scattered evenly across the skyline, with the spire of St Philip and St James Church on the extreme left representing Gothic North Oxford and the distinctive square Italianate campanile of St Barnabas on the extreme right marking the western edge of Jericho.</p>
<b>City roofscape</b>	<p>The main materials of the city centre's roofscape are natural slate and plain clay tile, which are dark, essentially recessive and provide a strong contrast to the limestone of the high buildings which, therefore, stand out.</p>
<b>Other objects</b>	<p>The large block form of the Department of Engineering (located in the University's science area) forms an anomaly in the view being much bulkier than the spires, towers and domes that typically rise above the trees on the skyline in this view.</p>
<b>Pastoral scene</b>	<p>The expansive foreground of Port Meadow with its grazing cattle and floodplain trees is a dominant influence on this view.</p> <p>The domes and spires of Oxford City Centre form a more distant focus of the view (with the Radcliffe Camera and the prominent spire of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in the core of the view). The focus is not a conventional cluster in the centre of the view but a long line of features strung out across the skyline.</p> <p>The line of trees along the Oxford Canal forms a strong middle ground focus supported by the taller trees of picturesque North Oxford.</p>



**3.1.10 The Influence of light and the Seasons:**

<b>Changing contribution of foliage</b>	The trees in the middle ground change colour through the seasons, changing the character of the view. In late spring vast areas are carpeted with buttercups, bringing colour to the foreground.
<b>Livestock and wildlife</b>	Horses, cattle and geese graze the meadow and many birds can often be seen.
<b>Flooding</b>	For parts of the year areas of the meadow are flooded, bringing flocks of migratory birds and changing the character of the foreground landscape, creating opportunities for reflected landscape and adding to the mystery and timelessness of the meadow.
<b>Sunlight</b>	<p>Different weather conditions also influence the view. On a sunny day the light-toned buildings of the city core are more prominent than on a cloudy day and certain building glow in the sunlight, notably the ochre of the Radcliffe Observatory.</p> <p>In the late morning, midday and early afternoon (on a clear day) the sun is largely in front of the viewer so that the skyline appears in silhouette.</p> <p>During the late afternoon and early evening, the buildings are lit from the right hand side, casting shadows on the left and helping to pick out some of their architectural detail.</p>

**3.1.11 Detractors:**

<b>Bulky Towers</b>	The bulky modern building of the Department of Engineering (Thom Building) and the adjacent Denys Wilkinson Building (Department of Physics) compete with towers and spires for prominence. They detract from the fine grain detail of the buildings behind and either side. The eye is drawn towards these buildings and away from the historic buildings in central Oxford.
<b>Suburban edge of North Oxford</b>	The cluster of red brick buildings in the near middle ground act in the same way, drawing the eye away from the more intricate buildings behind.

**3.1.12 Sensitivity to change:**

<b>Change to the green open space of the floodplain</b>	<p>On first sight the green open spaces of Port Meadow and Wolvercote Common appear to have remained unchanged for a thousand years. However both have seen significant changes, including the creation of race courses, use as waste disposal sites and an airfield, as well as the creation of allotments. What is evident is that in the last fifty years the meadow achieved a great deal of beauty as a rural space beyond the city where the public can roam at will, walking alongside the river or choosing their own path across the broad plain, and look back at the city. The absence of development or hard surfaces and traffic is all part of the attractive quality of the space.</p> <p>Change to this foreground is extremely unlikely to result from development, although changes in management or the effects of climatic changes could affect it. During the past few, wetter winters a large part of the meadow has remained inundated for a long period. This has served a valuable function in dispersing flood water that might otherwise have affected the city, but it is also resulting in changes to the environment of the meadow, whilst measures to manage water could introduce channels that affect both the survival of archaeological remains and the unbroken views and routes across the meadow.</p>
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<b>Change to the green edge of Oxford</b>	<p>The impact of the development at Roger Dudman Way has demonstrated the potential impact of new development on the fringes of the open plain to affect the quality of views across the meadow to the City Centre. New development that is obtrusive and draws the eye away from the historic skyline and the green open quality of the meadows would be considered to harm the view by affecting its aesthetic value. Given the absence of framing to the view and the westward extension of the skyline by development such as Nuffield College and the Said Business School the potential area where development could impact on the view spreads well beyond the tight confine of the view cone in the local plan.</p> <p>The green fringe of trees beyond the meadow, above which the historic high buildings rise has grown up considerably since the 1960s when the view cone was first identified as significant. Where the urban edge of the city was once plainly seen across the canal these are now screened by trees, making an important positive contribution to the attractiveness of the views, with the spires and domes rising above the foliage. Development that makes the urban edge more apparent or loss of the trees that now provide this horizon surrounding the meadow may detract from the aesthetic quality of the views.</p> <p>However, the trees are already threatening to screen the views of the historic high buildings and without considered management there is potential that the view will be lost to the foliage.</p>
<b>Change in the suburbs</b>	<p>The suburbs are inconspicuous in the views. Their presence is mainly indicated only by the historic high buildings that rise from them, including the spire of St Philip and James' Church and the tower of St Barnabas' Church. This allows the historic high buildings to act as a focus to views beyond the edge of the meadow, connecting the historic meadow and City Centre as parts of Oxford's historic landscape. Development in the suburbs that competes with the prominence of the historic high buildings in the City Centre as features of the skyline would be regarded as harming these views.</p>
<b>Change in the City Centre</b>	<p>Similarly, it is the historic high buildings with their graceful or slender forms that make up the unique and historically valued skyline that unites the meadow with the historic City Centre. Development in the City Centre that intrudes into this skyline and detracts from its characteristics by introducing discordant forms, detracting from the prominence of the historic high buildings or screening the buildings from view would be regarded as harming the view and the significance of the City Centre as well as impacting on the significance of individual heritage assets.</p>



*The Port Meadow view in 1962*

Figure 3.1.1



*Photograph of the view from Port Meadow*

Figure 3.1.2



*Illustration 1: Simplified render of the view from Port Meadow*

Figure 3.1.3  
Illustration 2:  
Annotated render  
of the view from  
Port Meadow





