Built Heritage Technical Note

Ruskin Fields, Old Headington

November 2026

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 This technical note has been prepared to support the promotion of land at Ruskin Field through the local plan process. It sets out a brief overview of the built heritage constraints, their significance, and a preliminary heritage impact assessment appropriate to the stage of development. It has been informed by desk-top research and fieldwork undertaken in 2025.

1.2 The site, including the access land extends to 3.66Ha. It is identified for allocation at 'Policy SPE14: Ruskin Field'. The proposed allocation site is entirely owned by Ruskin College (University of West London). Ruskin College has partnered with Welbeck Land to promote the site and prepare an outline planning application. The site is promoted for residential development with associated public open space, landscaping, infrastructure and access from Foxwell Drive.

1.3 This assessment draws high level conclusions with regards to the potential capacity of the site to accept the quantum of residential development being promoted through the local plan process (minimum of 85 units). It is based upon the emerging Illustrative Masterplan and accompanying parameter plans.

2.0 Heritage Constraints

Listed buildings

2.1. A search of the National Heritage List for England (NHLE) reveals 12 listed buildings within approximately 250m of the site boundary (Fig. 1). Through fieldwork and desk-top survey, only the following are considered to warrant assessment:

- Walls of walled garden at Ruskin College Grade II listed building NHLE ref. 1047296
- The Rookery (Ruskin College) Grade II listed building NHLE ref. 1369369

Conservation areas

2.2 The site is located within the Old Headington Conservation Area. This was first designated in January 1971 before being extended in 1976, 1985 and 1998. It was most recently appraised in 2011 when the Old Headington Conservation Area Appraisal (OHCAA) was prepared. The OHCAA divides the conservation area into a series of eight character areas; the site is located in the 'Green Fields Character Area' (Fig. 2).

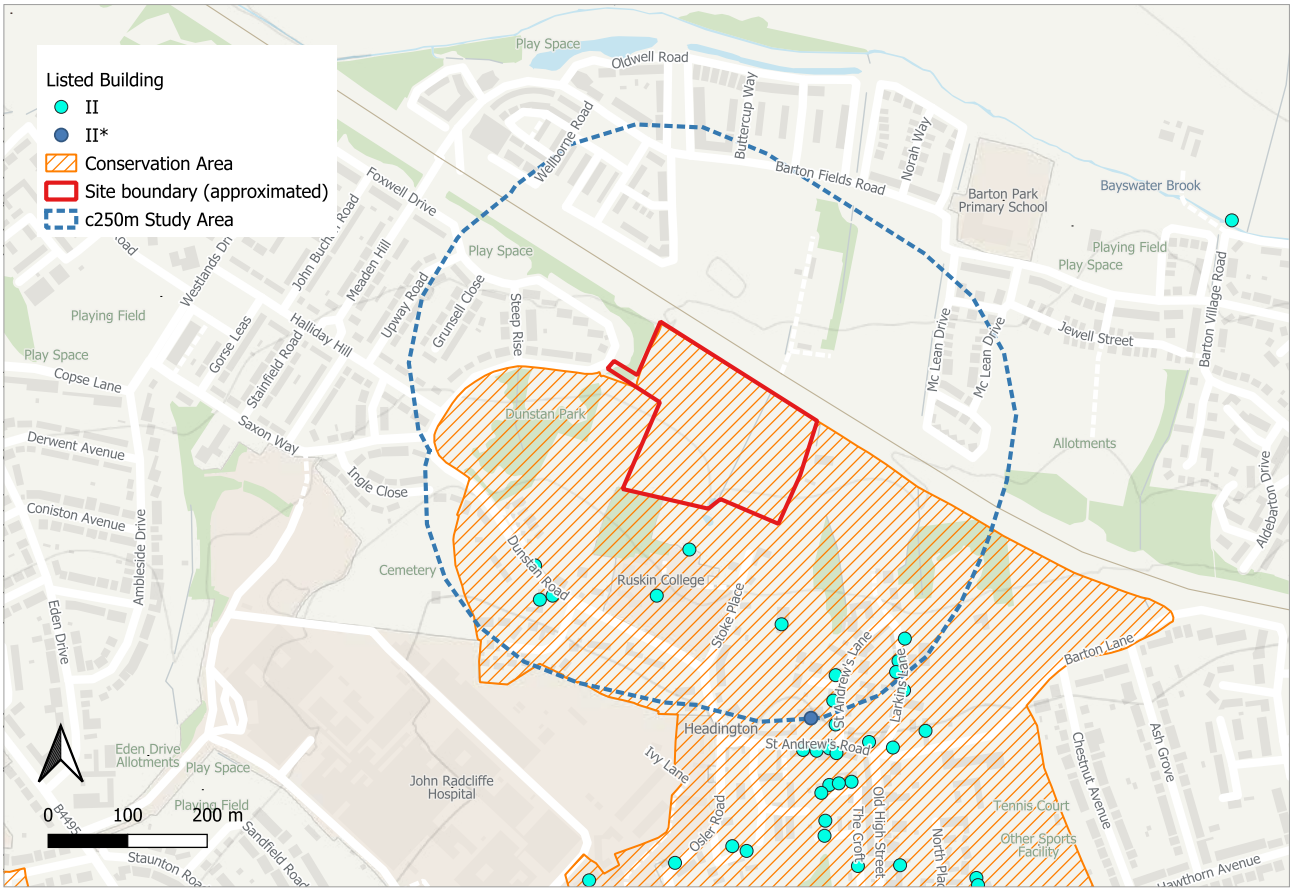
2.3 The OHCAA formally identifies views important to the conservation area, including a view from the south-eastern corner of the eastern field from Stoke Place looking north-west over the site towards the landscape beyond, and the view looking from the north-western corner of the eastern field parcel looking south-west towards Ruskin College. A third view looking broadly north along Stoke Place is identified but considered unlikely to be impacted by the proposed development.

2.4 Other conservation areas nearby, including the Central Conservation Area, Headington Hill, Headington Quarry, and Marston have been considered but scoped out based upon desk-top review informed by a Zone of Theoretical View (ZTV) which has demonstrated that the potential visual impacts to the south of the A40 are localised to the area around the site. There is unlikely to be any inter-visibility with these conservation areas, with the exception of Marston which may experience glimpsed views but not to a degree likely to materially impact its significance also taking into account its distance (1.5km+) and intervening development.

3.0 Heritage Significance

The Rookery (Ruskin College)

3.1. The Rookery (hereafter Ruskin College) was first listed at Grade II in January 1954. The list entry reads as follows:



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Fig. 1. Heritage asset plan.

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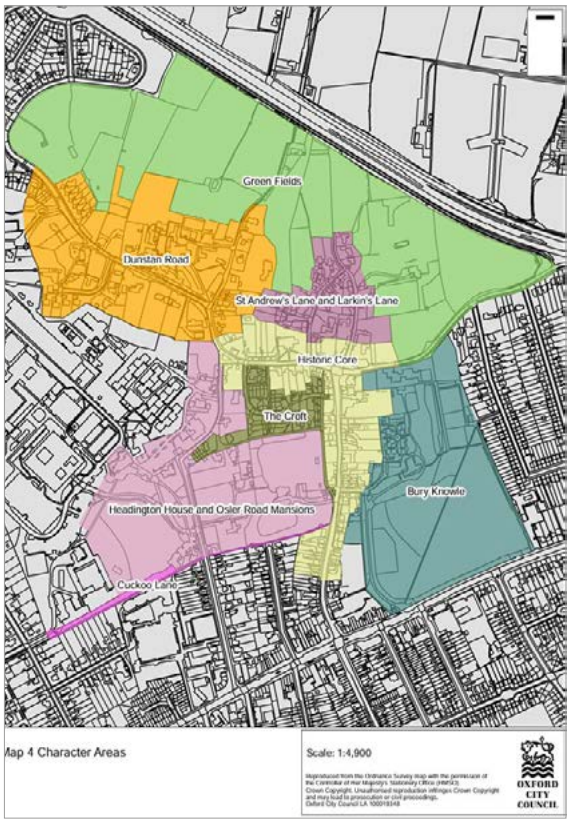


Fig. 2. Extract from Old Headington Conservation Area Appraisal (2011) showing character areas (Oxford City Council)

Now a hostel of Ruskin College. The central range of the house is C16-C17 but there have been alterations and on North and West some additions. 3-storeyed ashlar and rubble with a modern brown tiled roof and yellow brick stacks. The South elevation has 5 C19 sash windows in plain stone reveals, a stone porch and moulded parapet. The North wing has a modern modillioned eaves cornice and contains some 3 stone mullioned windows of 3 and 4 lights and a rubble gable end. Interior: RCHM page 186b. Includes 2 stone fireplaces.

3.2. The walled garden was listed later in June 1972. The list entry reads as follows:

Garden walls at Ruskin College. C18 and later. Stone and brick garden walls form four sides of a walled garden where the northern, east-west section comprises an C18 crinkle crankle wall.

3.3. The heritage significance of Ruskin College and its associated walled garden is principally derived from its architectural and historic interest as an example of a country mansion house of middling status that was aggrandised in the 18th and early 19th centuries with the construction of the walled garden and 1800s principal addition. The character of the house is predominantly Classically inspired polite architecture derived from its Georgian front elevation. The form of the building has changed substantially in the early 21st century with the construction of a four storey extension that wraps around the rear and eastern elevations of the main Georgian phase.

3.4. The walled garden dates from the 18th century. It has a broadly square plan and features a crinkle crankle northern wall; this is somewhat unusual in being zig-zag rather than serpentine in its form and is thought to have been for structural reasons.

Setting

3.5. Ruskin College sits within landscaped grounds bounded from the street by a stone wall. The cartographic evidence suggests the area to the south of the house was historically used as pleasure grounds/gardens, with land to the north being in more productive use. The house is orientated southwards towards Old Headington, although its set back from the road, landscaping and boundary treatment mean that the building itself is not a feature within the streetscene. The main entrance from Dunstan Road travels through a landscaped forecourt that has now largely been given over to parking; the mature planting however is a reminder of its former landscaped setting and once domestic use.

3.6. To the west is a series of 20th century accommodation blocks previously in use as student accommodation and now rented as nurses' accommodation serving the John Radcliffe Hospital. These have been constructed within the former pleasure grounds to the house and further reinforce the institutional as opposed to garden character of its setting.

3.7. To the north of the building is the walled kitchen garden (separately listed); they share a close historic associative and functional relationship such that each makes an important contribution to the significance of the other.

3.8. To the north of the walled kitchen garden is a considerable area of open ground extending around to the east.

3.9. To the north again lie the three field parcels that form the site. The central and eastern fields parcels have a known associative link with the house having been recorded in the same ownership in 1910. There is no evidence that they have ever formed part of a designed landscape. They form part of the rural hinterland that has historically surrounded Old Headington.

3.10. The walled garden and landscape parcel to the north sit on a slight plateau, with the field parcels to the north comprising the site situated at a lower level and sloping down northwards towards the Bayswater Brook. There is also extensive vegetation along the southern site boundary which combines with other vegetation both within and outside of the site to filter views across the three field parcels; the open space within the north-western field parcel is not discernible from Ruskin College. The change in levels together with the vegetation create a physical as well as appreciable sense of separation and difference between the immediate grounds of

Ruskin College and the site.

3.11. As a result of the extension, none of the principal spaces within the listed building retain any views outwards over the site to the north. For this same reason, the historic form of the building is obscured in views from the north looking south.

Summary: Contribution made by the site

3.12. The site has a peripheral relationship, set at a lower ground level beyond open space north of the walled garden and behind a mature field boundary. There are no key views northwards from the principal rooms of Ruskin College over the site as a result of the large extension, and vice versa the historic form can no longer be appreciated in views from within and across the site. The site makes some minor contribution to Ruskin College by virtue of it forming part of the wider landholding expected of a mansion house of some status; it is not however considered to comprise a key attribute of its setting. It is not considered to make any material contribution to the significance of the walled garden.

Old Headington Conservation Area

3.13. Old Headington Conservation Area encompasses a large area; the site is located within the northern portion and forms part of the most recent extension added in 1998.

3.14. The site is located with the 'Green Fields Character Area'. This character area encompasses a large swathe of land along the northern edge of the settlement (Fig. 1). It is appraised at pages 62-64 of the OHCAA; the key positive characteristics are given to be as follows:

- *The last remnants of the green fields that once ran up to the edges of the village, now cut off from the countryside by the ring road.*
- *Views from the public realm across green open spaces with visual connection to the South Oxfordshire countryside beyond the Bayswater Brook.*
- *Footpaths and sinuous lanes with grass verges and banks and hedgerow boundaries preserve the rural character of the village's setting.*
- *The green spaces in this character area are important in views to the conservation area from outside its boundaries.*
- *The Grange provides another example of the large houses in parkland grounds built by wealthy Oxford merchants in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.*
- *The green bridleway at Stoke Place was identified as a particularly valued feature by respondents to public consultation on the conservation area appraisal.*

3.15. Since the OHCAA was prepared in 2011, a significant degree of change has taken place on the conservation area boundary with the development of Barton Park currently under construction immediately north of the A40. This has significantly changed the character of views outwards (northwards) from within the conservation area, including those from Stoke Place. Where the character area would previously have extended across the A40 linking to the countryside beyond, Barton Park has introduced development of a considerable scale and urbanity in the view. The visual impacts of this development coupled with the traffic noise from the A40 is a constant reminder of the wider built context in which the site is now located.

3.16. Barton Park has also altered the relationship between the site and landscape beyond in views into the conservation area from north of Bayswater Brook. To appreciate the views into the conservation area one needs to travel further away in order to see the site over the top of the Barton Park development. As a result, the connection that the site once shared to the open countryside of South Oxfordshire beyond is not as strong

as it was at the time of the preparation of the conservation area appraisal. In views from further distance, the site is visible but at this distance the settlement of Old Headington cannot be readily distinguished from the wider built context.

3.17. It was also evident on the site visit that the western side of Stoke Place is now well vegetated which heavily filters views across the site even in winter; it is presumed that the foliage has increased since the preparation of the 2011 appraisal. The view from the bridleway looking across the site from the south-eastern corner identified in the OHCAA is particularly localised, and in summer would be closed down further by the foliage screen.

Preliminary Impact Assessment

3.18. The following factors are considered to reduce the sensitivity of the site with regards to its future development and the potential scale of impact on Ruskin College, walled garden, and Old Headington Conservation Area:

- There is a significant buffer of green open space immediately to the north of the listed structures and the southern boundary of the site. This will sustain a green, open character to the immediate setting of Ruskin College and the walled garden, and in the foreground of views outwards to the north from these assets.
- The site is offset behind this retained open space, behind mature landscaping that provides a degree of screening and set at lower level such that it feels separate from the immediate setting of the listed buildings rather than an extension of the open space that immediately surrounds them.
- The extension of The Rookery has significantly changed its relationship with the land to the north (and east). It has enveloped the principal core of the building to its north and east, such that views northwards towards the site from principal rooms are no longer available. Important views outwards from within the listed building will not therefore be affected by development on the site. Vice versa, views southwards towards Ruskin College from the north are dominated by the extension; the historic form of the principal historic element cannot be appreciated or experienced in these views.
- Notwithstanding, longer views towards Ruskin College from the north are well filtered from some locations by mature vegetation even in winter.
- Ruskin College was orientated to face southwards, away from the site. Its principal elevation comprises the southern elevation, and it was historically approached from the south. Views to the front elevation and what survives of its designed landscape setting to the south will not be affected by proposed development by virtue of the orientation and intervening distance, structures and vegetation.
- The immediate setting of Ruskin College has already changed significantly. Notwithstanding, it will continue to sit within large grounds that, together with the walled garden, complement and reinforce an understanding of its status as a former mansion house.
- The key attribute of the setting of the walled garden is its relationship to Ruskin College rather than the wider landholding. The proposed development would not be visible from within the walled garden from where its significance can be best appreciated.
- The construction of Barton Park has introduced a significant quantum of development in the longer views out from Ruskin College and the Old Headington Conservation Area and vice versa. It has introduced development of a significant scale in the view which, together with the A40, has physically disconnected the site from the countryside beyond. It has eroded the legibility of the field parcels as an extension of the countryside edge in favour of a suburban context.
- The site does not comprise the entirety of the Green Fields Character Area but rather forms part of a much larger tract of undeveloped land south of the A40; the character of the land outside of the red line boundary

will remain unchanged.

- The existing mature field boundaries provide a degree of visual containment, the north-western field parcel in particular is visually well contained.

3.19. Further mitigation has been embedded through the design process to date as shown on the draft Illustrative Masterplan and parameter plans to reduce the potential scale of heritage impact further, including:

- A landscape-led development that includes substantial parcels of green infrastructure to reduce the impacts of the introduction of built form on the open and green character of the site.
- Use of extensive green infrastructure to soften the impact of the introduction of built development in longer views towards the site from the north, sustaining an element of its green character in such views.
- The green infrastructure includes a corridor extending north-south through the site that will sustain a visual connection from Ruskin College and the Old Headington Conservation Area to the higher ground north of Barton Park, and vice versa.
- Retention and enhancement of the site field boundaries will retain historic field boundaries, and provide screening/filtering effects in views towards and across the site.
- Retention and enhancement of a significant area of landscaped public open space within the eastern parcel including a significant offset from Stoke Place and the northern site boundary to retain a green foreground to the identified key views, and reduce the impact of the introduction of built form on the parcel's open character.
- Low density and careful control of scale (limited to two storeys) to built form within the eastern parcel to reduce the visual impact of the development on the field parcel and Stoke Place, and to retain a visual connection to the higher ground beyond the conservation area boundary to the north in the identified view from the south-eastern corner.
- Careful control of building heights within the western half of the central parcel to minimise the introduction of built form in views outwards from Ruskin College. Building heights have been reduced to 2 storeys along the southern site boundary. Where the built form will address the green corridor, it has been limited to 2.5 along much of the length to provide a comfortable transition and edge to the open space, rising to 3 and 3 with undercroft as the ground level slopes downwards towards the northern site boundary.
- This careful control of scale also ensures the development in the western parcel will not be unduly prominent or dominant in the identified view from the north-eastern corner.
- Emerging use of character areas which seek to interpret some of the characteristics of the conservation area.

3.20. There will be further opportunity through the reserved matters stage to secure a high quality form of development that responds to the local context of the conservation area, thereby ensuring it reinforces local distinctiveness.

Conclusions

3.21. Taking the above into account, it is considered that there is capacity within the site to accept the quantum of development proposed with only limited impact.

3.22. It is recognised that the currently undeveloped character of the site contributes to some of the key characteristics of the Green Fields Character Area in which it is located, and makes a minor contribution to the significance of Ruskin College. Development of the quantum proposed will change the land use character to a degree, which is likely to result in some erosion of what survives of its rural attributes. The mitigating factors and mitigation by design set out above has ameliorated the scale of the potential impacts, with opportunity for any residual

harm to be further reduced through detailed design.

3.23. With regards to the Old Headington Conservation Area, the scale of impact when set within the context of the designated heritage asset as a whole can only be considered to be modest. The site is part of a larger character area which extends significantly beyond the site boundary; these other parcels within the character area will remain. The character area is itself one of eight across the conservation area, such that it is only a subset of a much larger heritage asset. On this basis, it is considered that the scale of harm to the Old Headington Conservation Area would be low.

3.24. With regards to the Grade II listed The Rookery, the site is a peripheral part of its setting. Sufficient land outside of the site which forms the immediate grounds of the college together with the walled kitchen garden will continue to enable it to be understood as a property of some status. The historic associative relationship will remain in the documentary record. On this basis, the proposed development is considered to have only negligible impact. The proposed development on the site is not considered likely to give rise to any harm to the significance of the walled garden.

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