

MAIDSTONE GREEN SPACES STRATEGY

improving our parks
and open spaces

PARKS AND RECREATION GROUNDS

MANAGEMENT PLANS

COBTREE MANOR RURAL PARK

WARD: BOXLEY

MP 0606

MARCH 2006



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Management Plan for Cobtree Manor Rural Park describes the site and outlines the adopted maintenance regime. It also highlights some of the issues related to the maintenance of the site.

Cobtree Manor Rural Park is situated outside Maidstone, in the Forstal area just north of the M 20 motorway. The site slopes southwards offering views of the Weald. It lies within the Strategic Gap – an undeveloped area of countryside separating Maidstone from the Medway Towns.

It is a landscape of trees and grass, with a small pond and an area of woodland (Clay Wood) in its north-western part. It is intended for walks, quiet relaxation and informal recreation. There is a car park and a cafeteria with toilets.

Cobtree Manor Rural Park is part of a former large country estate. The estate, Cobtree Manor, was gifted to Maidstone by its last private owners, Sir Garrard and Lady Tyrwhitt-Drake, in 1956. The freehold belongs to Cobtree Charity Trust Ltd.

Cobtree Manor Golf Course, the Museum of Kent Life on the other side of M 20, and the Tyland Barn (home to the Kent Wildlife Trust) are all parts of the same estate.

Maidstone Borough Council is the corporate trustee to The Charity known as Cobtree Manor Estate. MBC has a 999 year lease of the whole estate.

The estate is managed on a day-to-day basis by the Cobtree Manor Estate Committee. Policy decisions with regards to the estate are taken by the whole Council.

When still in the private ownership, the southern part of the Rural Park together with the area south of Forstal Road were the site of the one and only Maidstone ZOO. The ZOO existed between 1934 and 1959. When it closed down, the animals were dispersed to other ZOOS in the country.

2. RELATIONSHIP TO COUNCIL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

There are a number of Council strategy and policy documents that are relevant to Cobtree Manor Rural Park:

- Green Spaces Strategy (2005)
- “Play for Today” Towards a Strategy for Outdoor Equipped Play Areas 2004-08 (2005)
- Sports and Play Facilities Strategy (2003)
- Maidstone Matters: Community Strategy for Maidstone Borough (2003)
- Best Value Review: A Clean and Tidy Borough (2002)
- The Local Cultural Strategy for Maidstone
- The Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Guidance (2005)

Those documents recognise that public green open spaces are an important part of the environment in which we live. The quality and quantity of those open spaces have an effect on our quality of life. They are valuable and free resources for recreation and education. There is need in Maidstone to further improve the access, infrastructure, facilities and the biodiversity of public green spaces.

3. VISION AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE SITE

3.1 The overall vision for Cobtree Manor Country Park is:

“To create and maintain a public green space which provides opportunities for outdoor contemplation, recreation and education.”

3.2 The key objectives for the Park are to:

- Working within the framework of the Trust, provide an interesting landscape feature and recreational facility for Maidstone.
- Ensure that the site is clean and well-maintained.
- Ensure that it is safe to use at all times.

4. THE SITE AND ITS FACILITIES

4.1 Entrances and boundaries

To the north and east the Country Park shares a sizeable boundary with the Golf Course. Much of it is demarcated by an iron railing fence.

A local industrial area lies to the west of the Park and Forstal Road marks its southern boundary.

The main entrance, both pedestrian and vehicular, is off Forstal Road.

4.2 Roads, paths, cycleways and car parks

The Forstal Road entrance leads under a height restriction barrier into a car park; the surface is broken stone.

A path out of the other end of the car park leads to a pair of large ornamental gates. These are memorial gates placed at the entrance to the Parkland Garden by the Trust to commemorate Sir Garrard and Lady Tyrwhitt-Drake.

Further on, the visitors are free to walk anywhere on the grass and along a path through Clay Wood. A bridleway cuts across the site, contained on both sides by wooden railing fences. A Public Footpath runs approximately north-south through the site.

4.3 Lighting

There is no lighting in the Park.

4.4 Grass areas

There are large swathes of grass around the car park and in the Parkland Garden.

4.5 Trees and other vegetation

Clay Wood is a small area of ancient woodland (source: K-LIS), with trees such as ash, sycamore and oak, and hazel that in the past may have been coppiced.

The Rural Park itself has a varied collection of trees of both native and non-native species. Of particular interest are numerous ornamental varieties of the native species. Between the trees there are islands of mixed species of shrubs.

“A List of Trees and Shrubs at Cobtree Manor Park” was published by Cobtree Charity Trust in the early 1990s. Since then, some of the trees and shrubs have probably been lost so there is a need to update the list and to consider replacement planting in order to retain an arboretum-like character of the site.

The area of the car park contains two elongated shrubberies consisting of densely planted trees and shrubs: hazel, Scots pine, larch, spindle tree and others.

4.6 Biodiversity

The ancient Clay Wood and the trees and shrubs throughout the site have a significant nature conservation value. They provide a diverse habitat with rich flora and fauna.

The trees and shrubs present in the Rural Park and the area around the car park offer food and shelter to insects, birds and bats.

4.7 Provision of seats and bins

There are many seats scattered around the Parkland Garden area. Many of them have been acquired through sponsorship.

Several picnic benches have been placed near the Cafeteria.

There are litter bins in the car park and by the ornamental gate, and two dog litter bins in the car park area.

4.8 Signage

There is a board outside the main entrance advertising the services of the Cafeteria. Other than that, there are no directional signs outside or within the park. The

interpretation is restricted to the board summarising the history of the site, placed by the former Elephant House. A public footpath crosses the site but the only signs are on the site's boundaries. It is difficult to find the path when coming from the car park.

4.9 Provision of recreational and other facilities

Cobtree Rural Park is intended for informal recreation: walks, quiet relaxation etc.

It has a cafeteria with picnic tables on grass. The cafeteria building also contains a toilet that can be used by the public.

The cafeteria is run by a private firm, under licence from the MBC. It is open seven days a week from 8 am till 3 pm. Apart from selling refreshments to the visitors to the Park, the cafeteria also caters for the employees of the nearby business park.

Two buildings remain from the former ZOO: the Elephant House and the Llama House.

Apart from the seats and bins, all the other 'facilities' on the site are natural: the flora and fauna, the views of the Weald from the upper end of the Park, and extensive lawns for picnicking and informal games.

5. MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

The Parkland Garden and the area around the car park are maintained by a MBC grounds contractor (Glendale).

5.1 Cleanliness

Litter is collected and litter bins are emptied every day in and around the car park. Litter is picked from the whole site prior to each grass cut.

Dog litter bins are emptied twice every week.

5.2 Safety and security

The site is not overlooked by roads or residential areas. Instead it is quite remote and secluded, apart from the area around the Cafeteria. This can provide opportunities for antisocial behaviour.

Visitors can report problems:

- general – to the park's staff or to MBC parks hotline on 01622 602747
- anti-social behaviour – to the park's staff or to Community Safety Officer on 01622 602598
- any crime should be reported to the police.

5.2 Maintenance of infrastructure and facilities

The Cafeteria's tenant contributes to the cost of the maintenance of the whole building and its direct surroundings.

The ornamental Gateway, the Elephant and Llama Houses are the responsibility of the Council (the Property Section).

The rest, i.e. paths and the car park, trees and shrubs, seats and bins are the responsibility of the Parks Section of the MBC and the grounds maintenance contractor.

5.4 Horticultural management regimes

The grass areas are cut following the amenity regime, i.e. 15 cuts a year, the frequency of cuts depending on the weather and the speed of grass growth.

The woodland area does not receive regular maintenance, other than ensuring that the paths are passable at all times.

The trees around the car park and in the Parkland Garden were inspected in 2004 and the work identified as high priority has been carried out. Additionally, in response to complaints from the public, trees are assessed by a Tree Officer and work is scheduled as required. In the autumn 2006 a Tree Management Plan will be published, with the adopted routines and methods of response to call-outs.

6. FORTHCOMING IMPROVEMENTS

The Cobtree Manor Trust is currently investigating various options for improvements in the whole area of the Cobtree Manor Estate.

Medway Valley Countryside Partnership is in the process of enhancing the extensive stretch of the countryside by the river Medway, known as The Medway Gap, and the Cobtree Rural Park borders the project area.

7. FUNDING

Some of the projects aimed at improving green spaces may be eligible for external funding. A selection of currently available sources are outlined below.

Planning obligations – Section 106 agreements on new residential developments can generate funds to improve existing public green spaces directly related to those developments.

Awards for All – give grants towards projects aimed at improving quality of life of local communities. Grants of £500-5,000 are available to community groups, parish/town councils, schools and health bodies.

Safer and Stronger Communities government funding stream – is aimed at tackling crime and anti-social behaviour through improving the condition of streets and other public spaces.

Landfill Tax Credit Scheme – for projects within 10 miles of a landfill or extraction site, aimed at provision and maintenance of public amenities. Grants £250- 25,000.

Local Heritage Initiatives – assist local communities in the preservation of their environment, landmarks and traditions, including archaeological, natural, built and industrial heritage. Projects like an exhibition on the history of the site, or a repair of a feature; funding up to 100% for project costs of £3,000 to £25,000.

English Heritage offers grants for historic parks and gardens.

Private sector funding – for specific projects to be sponsored in exchange for a plaque or local media publicity.

9. RESULTS OF QUALITY AUDITS

Quality audits are carried out in parks and open spaces at regular intervals. Various attributes of each site are given points between 1 and 5, where 5 is the maximum score.

COBTREE MANOR COUNTRY PARK					
ATTRIBUTE	AUDIT DATE AND SCORE				
	2003	2004	2008	2010	
Main entrance	3	2			
Boundaries including hedges, gates etc	5	4			
Roads, paths, cycleways and access points	3	3			
Parking	5	5			
Availability of public transport	-	-			
Lighting	2	2			
Cleanliness	4	4			
Planted areas (trees, shrubs, floral displays)	2	2			
Grass areas	4	4			
Litter and dog litter bins	1	1			
Seats	-	4			
Toilets	-	-			
Health and safety	-	4			
Nature conservation value	-	3			
Access for disabled	-	3			
Information	2	2			
Sustainability	-	-			