

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

THE UNIVERSITY PARKS, OXFORD

Auteur(s) : Historic England <https://historicengland.org.uk/>

Name:	THE UNIVERSITY PARKS, OXFORD
County:	Oxfordshire
District:	Oxford (District Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.760726 Longitude: -1.2491434 National Grid Reference: SP 51919 07160 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001651 Date first listed: 11-Nov-2002

## Details

Mid 1860s suburban park, with playing fields laid out in the 1870s, and an associated pleasure walk (1865) alongside the River Cherwell. The site was laid out by the University of Oxford for use principally by the staff and students but with access also for the residents of Oxford.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1853 Oxford University started to negotiate with Merton College for the purchase of a parcel of land lying west of the River Cherwell, this area having formerly been part of the University Walks. Some 8ha was purchased in 1854, 2ha of which was used for the site of the University Museum, built from 1855 to 1860. A further 29ha were bought over the next five years, together with the 1.5ha spur of land leading south alongside the Cherwell towards King's Mill standing at the north end of Magdalen College's land (qv). In 1860 the Committee of Parks Delegates was formed to oversee the development of the University Parks, and it reported that the Parks should be set out as an arboretum and place of recreation for the University. James Bateman, who had laid out his own garden at Biddulph Grange, Staffordshire (qv) in the 1850s, was invited by the Committee to provide a design for the Parks (WPBeta/13/3; GA Oxon a 64). The elements of the plan were described in the First Report of the Parks Delegates (3 June 1863), who referred it to Sir William Hooker of Kew and other eminent authorities for their opinions. The Delegates proposed that Robert Marnock of the Botanical Gardens, Regent's Park should provide professional supervision to oversee the execution of the plan, the cost of which was estimated to be £9475. This plan was rejected by Convocation, and in January 1864 the Delegates resigned en bloc.

The Parks was then laid out from 1864 in a simpler fashion for a new body, the Parks Curators, the work being supervised by William Baxter (1815-90) of the University Botanic Garden (qv). Baxter was subsequently appointed Superintendent in 1866, a position which he occupied until just before his death in 1890.

The area was fenced, paths and belts were laid out, and an arboretum of exotic species was planted. The Mesopotamia Walk, leading south-east from the Parks to King's Mill, was created in 1865 as part of this work. In February 1867 a report was received from a Mr Field of Merton Street, who had surveyed the open central part of the Parks with a view to siting sports pitches. An undated plan made by him at this time, showing the possible sites for the pitches, also shows the initial path layout

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and structure of the Parks, which bears little resemblance to that proposed by Bateman. Two lodges were also erected at this time, and the Cricket Pavilion, designed by the architect T G Jackson who also designed the University Examination Building, was erected at the centre of the Parks in 1880.

A section of the southern part of the Parks was lost during the mid to late C20 to the development of the University Science Area. The remainder of the Parks continues (2002) to be owned by the University and open to the public.

#### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** The University Parks lies at the northern edge of the centre of Oxford, c 750m north of Carfax. The c 30ha site is situated on largely level land with a slight fall from west to east. It forms a buffer between that part of the city to the south where many of the medieval and later colleges are situated, including New College, and Wadham College (qqv), and the mid to late C19 largely residential development of North Oxford, including the Norham Manor development immediately to the north-west, and the Park Town development (qv) beyond this. The approximately triangular park is bounded to the north-east by the River Cherwell, and beyond this by water meadows leading to Marston. To the north-west the Parks are bounded partly by the substantial, individually designed houses of Norham Gardens (1860s and later), standing in their own spacious plots, together with, to the north-east of these, Lady Margaret Hall (1880s and later) standing within its own grounds at the north corner of the Parks. To the west it is bounded by Parks Road, leading south-east from the Banbury Road, with the polychrome brick Keble College (William Butterfield 1868-72) standing close to the south-west corner. The western section of the south boundary is formed by the University Science Area buildings, at the south-west corner of which stands the gothic University Museum (B Woodward 1855-60, listed grade I), which formerly stood at the south-west corner of the Parks and was the dominant building. The Science Area is bounded to the south by South Parks Road, lined with mature lime trees, which until the mid C20, when many of the Science Area buildings were constructed, marked this section of the south boundary. The east end of the south boundary is marked by college buildings and playing fields, divided from the Parks by the north-west end of Mesopotamia Walk leading from South Lodge to a bridge over the Cherwell. The Parks' boundary is marked largely by iron railings and gates, except to the east where the river forms the boundary. The setting is suburban and collegiate to north and south respectively, and rural to the east, with views in this direction across the water meadows towards Marston and Headington Hill.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main pedestrian approach from the town centre is at the west corner of the Parks via the north end of Parks Road close to where it joins Banbury Road, c 400m west-north-west of the central Cricket Pavilion. At this point the entrance from Parks Road is marked by a two-storey stone lodge (H W Moore 1866, listed grade II), built in Tudor style with a massive central chimney stack. A further entrance is marked by South Lodge (1890s), a brick and tile-hung house which stands on the south boundary, c 400m south-east of the Pavilion at the main vehicular entrance to the Parks. There are several further pedestrian entrances, including those from Norham Gardens, c 250m north of the Pavilion, from Parks Road at the south-west corner close to Keble College, 300m south-west of the Pavilion, and from Marston via a track from the east which crosses the Cherwell via the single-arched, concrete High Bridge (1923-4) and enters the park c 250m north-east of the Pavilion. The north-west end of Mesopotamia Walk extends east-north-east from South Lodge alongside the east section of the south boundary, including the south edge of Parson's Pleasure bathing place. The Walk leaves the Parks c 600m south-east of the Pavilion, carried across the Cherwell by a small, concrete single-span bridge (1949, listed grade II). Here the path splits in two, leading east to a track giving access across the water meadows to Marston, and south continuing as the Walk. The bridge is thought to be the first pre-stressed arched bridge of its kind. The Walk to the west of Parson's Pleasure formerly lay within the boundary of the Parks, but in the 1990s was separated by an iron fence although it remains included within the area here registered.

A further C19 lodge, West Lodge (now, 2002, gone), formerly stood c 350m south of the Pavilion, to the east of the Museum and marked another entrance to the Parks. This was removed in the C20 with the construction of the Science Area.

**PLEASURE GROUNDS** The University Parks is of a simple design, laid out with a network of largely gravel paths enclosed by an informal gravel perimeter path, which also encloses open lawns on which lie playing fields.

From the main, west entrance at North Lodge the perimeter path extends to the north-east and south-east. The north-west arm of the path is known as North Walk and the area between it and the north-west boundary is occupied by a belt planted with mature conifers and broadleaved trees, underplanted with evergreen shrubs including laurel and yew. At the north corner North Walk meets a 1920s pond (formerly circular, enlarged late C20) which is partly encircled by rockwork retaining walls. To the north and north-west lie the grounds of Lady Margaret Hall, at the west edge of which stand the college buildings. The perimeter path continues south-east from the pond as Riverside Walk, overlooking the river to the east and beyond this the meadows and Marston. At the south-east corner, known as Cox's Corner (named after Charlie Cox, a former keeper of Parson's Pleasure bathing place) and formerly the site of the Parks' rubbish dump, the path turns west to skirt the Science Area, at the north edge of which stands the Observatory (1874) and associated brick-built building, which when built stood isolated towards the middle of the southern half of the Parks. To the east of the Observatory lie two croquet lawns. To the west of the Observatory lies a further pedestrian entrance which gives onto the Genetic Garden, a mid C20 experimental garden established by Professor Cyril Darlington to demonstrate evolutionary processes. Some 300m south-west of the Pavilion at the south-west corner of the Parks the path turns north to follow the west boundary, here being known as West Walk. It is flanked by an avenue of holly bushes and ornamental borders before arriving at North Lodge.

Three main cross-paths traverse the Parks, two running parallel to the river, south-east to north-west, with the third at right angles to this connecting the entrance at the south-west corner close to Keble College with High Bridge to the north-east. Towards the centre of the park stands the University Cricket Club Pavilion (T G Jackson 1880, listed grade II), a substantial two-storey building in Picturesque style, with a five-bay verandah onto which open french windows, and a balustraded cupola. The Pavilion overlooks the cricket pitch to the north, and is placed at the centre of the ten winter sports pitches which occupy much of the Parks' open space. Apart from the perimeter belts of trees there are many clumps of trees and single specimens planted in the open areas between the sports pitches. A service area stands within a clump of trees 200m north-east of the Pavilion. A loosely planted group of seven Wellingtonias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*, planted c 1888) stand at the west corner, close to North Lodge, and there are many other conifers throughout the Parks, including cedars and pines.

Until the mid C20 (OS 1938) the site of the Parks was approximately square, with the south corner being directly overlooked and dominated by the University Museum which stood in its own grounds. This relationship was largely severed when the Science Area was constructed from the mid C20 onwards.

At the south-east corner of the Parks the perimeter path gives access to the east to a bathing place known as Parson's Pleasure. The bathing place consists of a level lawn bounded to the north and east by the Cherwell, to the west by the Holywell Mill Stream, and to the south by Mesopotamia Walk. Parson's Pleasure, probably named after a local businessman (W Sawyer pers comm, March 2000), formerly contained changing rooms and associated buildings (OS 1938), these having been removed in the late C20. From the far side of the concrete bridge at the south-east corner of Parson's Pleasure the Walk continues south-east for 750m, raised on the narrow bank known as Mesopotamia, to the King's Mill (late C18, listed grade II). The path is flanked to the south-west by the Cherwell, and beyond this by various college water meadows, including Music Meadow, Great Meadow, and Long Meadow, and to the north-east by the King's Mill mill stream and beyond this the water meadows leading to Marston. The bank is planted with various deciduous trees including many willows, and several bridges cross the mill stream giving access to paths across the meadows to the north-east. The two-storey, stone former mill stands to the north of Magdalen College Fellows' Garden (qv), 750m south-east of Parson's Pleasure, on the east side of the mill stream, across which it is reached via a bridge. From the mill a track leads east between college sports grounds to Marston Road. The path along Mesopotamia Walk was improved at approximately the same time as the Parks was being laid out in 1865. It was named after the strip of land between the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq, the name deriving from the Greek for, 'between the rivers'. Views extend north-east across the meadows and sports grounds towards Marston and Headington Hill, and south-west across the college meadows to further sports grounds and college buildings, with the spires and towers of some of the central Oxford churches and colleges also visible.

#### REFERENCES

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Oxford University Gazette, 1 (1870) N Pevsner and J Sherwood, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), pp 276-82 M Batey, *Oxford Gardens* (1982), pp 146, 168 *Oxfordshire Parks and Gardens Review Stage 1*, (Colvin and Moggridge 1997) Maps J Bateman, *Unexecuted plan for the University Parks, Oxford, 1863* (GA Oxon a 64), (Bodleian Library, Oxford) Mr Field, *Plan of the University Parks*, nd (c February 1867) (WPBeta/13/3), (University Archive, Oxford)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1887 2nd edition published 1900 3rd edition published 1922 1938 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1876

Archival items Material covering the laying out and maintenance of the Parks including the Parks Delegates' Minute Book, the Parks Curators' Minute Books and a folder of miscellaneous papers including Field's plan of 1867 (University of Oxford Archive)

Additional information *The University Parks Oxford* (2000), at [www.parks.ox.ac.uk](http://www.parks.ox.ac.uk)

Description written: March 2000 Amended: November 2002 Register Inspector: SR Edited: October 2003

## Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.