Raleigh Park View Analysis Summary

Introduction

Raleigh Park now provides the most publicly accessible example of the view of Oxford from Harcourt Hill above North Hinksey, which has been admired since the early 18th century and recommended in some of Oxford’s earliest guidebooks as one of the best prospects from which to view the city’s architectural splendour. The view has inspired numerous artists in the past three centuries, although development along the hilltop and an increasingly wooded landscape has reduced access to it. Establishment of Raleigh Park in the early 20th century preserved public access to the view. Sadly this is one of the most compromised of the city’s historic views due to the impact of later 20th century developments.

The view of the City Centre is framed by trees in the parkland. The historic high buildings in the middle distance are spread across the framed area and rise above the otherwise low scale roofscape of the City Centre. The foreground preserves elements of the rural hillside and meadows that were an essential element of the beauty of the view portrayed by artists and writers in the past - the contrast between the ‘rustic’ and ‘civilised’ forming part of the ‘sublime’ quality of the landscape. Headington Hill also preserves a green backcloth against which the towers, spires and domes are seen. Commercial and industrial development in the later 20th century has included the construction of the Osney Mead Industrial Estate and other large buildings with low-pitched hipped roofs that appear as a continuous area of development leading up and into the historic City Centre, blurring its edges and cutting it off from the once admired green setting. In the background, the large rectilinear structures of the John Radcliffe hospital sits on Headington Hill drawing the eye from the historic high buildings and detracting from the fine architectural character of the City Centre. The impacts of these past developments make sustaining the positive characteristics of the view even more important in order to sustain its contribution to the significance of the City’s heritage. Sustaining access to the view by managing the trees in the park should be a priority for protecting the view in the future.

The Raleigh Park view in the 1960s
The Viewers

This view was chosen by topographical artists to represent the view of Oxford in the 18th century and has been a widely recognised image of the city since that date. The popularity of their work guided the use of these locations by tourists during the wars of the 18th and early 19th century that prevented Britons from visiting the architectural and historical sites of the continent. The activity of walking out to view the city from Harcourt Hill is recorded in early 19th century tourist guides to Oxford, further cementing the practice of viewing the city from the hill as an important part of the experience of visiting Oxford. Later in the 19th century J. M. W. Turner painted the view of the city from above North Hinksey, continuing the tradition of the earlier topographic artists. Experiencing the view today provides a connection to the experience of these past artists both famous and obscure. In 1924 philanthropist Raymond Ffennell gave land to form a park from which the view would be freely accessible for residents of Oxford and those in the nearby suburbs. As a founder of Oxford Preservation Trust, Ffennell’s gift reflects a wider concern at the time to preserve the ability to appreciate Oxford in its green setting. The view is also experienced from the surrounding housing contributing to the quality of life for the residents of this area and adding to its attractiveness. Part of the park’s management is now undertaken by local volunteers, who help to conserve the park’s wildlife interest.

Present Viewers

People of Oxford and Vale of White Horse and visitors

This is now a freely accessible view that many residents from the surrounding area enjoy every day.

People walk out to the park from the city for gentle recreation and access to semi-natural open space that is enhanced by their access to the view over the historic City Centre, providing a link between the suburb and city.

The Raleigh Park view is popular with photographers providing an opportunity to get close up to the skyline of the City Centre.

More formal tours have brought visitors and local people out to the park to admire the view painted by Turner and others.

Lower down the hill, residents of North Hinksey Village and walkers on local footpaths benefit from views across the meadows towards the City Centre.

The Park provides part of a network of paths along the sides of Harcourt Hill and linking to Boars Hill and Hinksey Hill, which are used for recreational walks to which the view makes a special contribution.

Viewers in the Past

Early topographic writers and artists for tourists

This view was chosen by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck as the view of Oxford in their series of historical and topographical engravings published as Buck’s Antiquities in the late 1720s and 30s and subsequently widely reprinted.

It was also used by Joseph Farington in 1793 for his view of Oxford from the South.
West, published in Combe’s History of the River Thames.

John Britton, a noted early 19th century antiquarian and conservationist, in his ‘Beauties of England and Wales’ (1814) used an engraving of the view from Ferry Hinksey (North Hinksey) by E. W. Brayley to illustrate his description of the city in its setting “…The vale now expands into a spacious amphitheatre, bounded by some striking hills, in the centre of which the majestic towers, domes, and spires of Oxford burst upon the sight, appearing proudly ranged behind the thick shade of venerable groves.”

Wade’s walks in Oxford (published in 1817 as a guide to the city’s historic sights) describes an eminence near Ferry Hinksey where “Oxford is seen to great advantage, rising like the queen of the vale from the bosom of a thick grove, between which and the spectator the Isis rolls his mazy waters.”

**J.M.W. Turner’s later paintings of Oxford**

Turner’s paintings and sketches of this view date from the later part of his career when financial independence had allowed him to become more experimental in his art. One is an example of his pure light paintings whilst another is a detailed landscape now held in the Manchester City Gallery.

Both paintings emphasise the uneven rural foreground, the open space of meadows and river in the valley floor and the City Centre and its skyline buildings standing on a low eminence forming a focus to the landscape. The more detailed painting uses people to emphasise the rural toil of the foreground, which provide counter point to the sublime quality of the landscape and city architecture. Two dons shown walking in discussion provide an unusual feature suggesting a different relationship between the city and its rural surroundings.

**Matthew Arnold – Victorian Poet**

Matthew Arnold’s poem the Scholar Gypsy refers to the journey across the causeway through flooded fields to Hinksey and up the hill to a viewpoint where, looking back the lights of Christ Church Hall could be seen on a winter evening. This seems to be an evocative description of the journey to view Oxford from Harcourt Hill above North Hinksey.

**20th century settlers**

Houses on the lower slopes of the hill were built with frontages facing the city to get the best value from the views.

**Early 20th century conservation campaigners**

The land at Raleigh Park (27 acres) was bought by Raymond Ffennell in 1924 from the Harcourt family who were promoting the hillside for housing development. He later gave the land to the city for a park that would provide views of the famous city skyline.

Land in the Thames Valley was protected through the designation of the Oxford Green Belt in 1975 to preserve the historic setting of the city and prevent urban sprawl.
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. The park provides ‘kinetic’ views - that is a series of changing views seen as a person moves around the park, with views changing as a result of different angles, changing elevation in the park and the framing effects of trees. The park is now partly wooded, restricting the area from which views of the city are seen. Where it does provide views to the city, the park preserves a rough grassland character as a foreground with framing by hedgerow trees that reflect the historic character of the views from the city’s agricultural hinterland recorded in historic paintings. The Park lies within the Vale of White Horse District and forms part of the Oxford Green Belt, designated to protect the setting and historic character of the city.

**Aesthetic value of the foreground**

The park provides a green foreground with soft framing of views to the City Centre by trees. This provides an attractive setting to the city that provides a strong contrast with the built up area but does not contain structures that would distract from the view of the colleges and other historic buildings of the City Centre.

The park has been managed to provide rich wildlife habitat with birds and insects contributing to its attractive quality.

**Historical value of the rural landscape of the hillside**

Whilst land to the north west of the park has been developed for housing and land to the south west is expected to be developed shortly, the park preserves an area of open rural character that reflects the history of the hillside as open farmland as portrayed by artists and writers in the past.

By preserving this character it maintains its associative value with the past viewers who have used it as an escape from the urban and academic life of Oxford, including the poets and artists who have taken inspiration from the
The park has a special association with Raymond Ffennell as the philanthropist who gave it to the people of the city for their enjoyment and to preserve the view of Oxford in its green setting.

In the foreground the parkland greenery is maintained as a mixture of rough pasture and woodland, reflecting the historic rural setting of the hillside, with rooftops and the pyramid topped church tower of North Hinksey village adding to the historic rural context. Unfortunately development of woodland in the park has also screened views to the city from a large area of it.

In the village and across the meadows to the east, tall trees continue the green character of the foreground and, in the summer months, help to reduce the intrusive impact of the roofscape of the modern industrial estate at Osney Mead on the remaining foreground (see below). The green meadows and the sinuous course of the River Thames running up to the feet of the city have been a feature of the view admired by artists over the centuries. However, the tall trees on the park’s edge and beyond North Hinksey currently screen these features from view. Beyond Osney Mead, a small number of red brick industrial buildings, stand out within the landscape of development of West Oxford including Osney Mill, a 19th century mill that marks the site of Osney Abbey, as well as the brick chimneys of the Morrell’s Lion Brewery. From lower slopes in the park a more open aspect allows views northward to the area surrounding Oxford Station including the stepped spire of the Said Business School and the Victorian power station next to the River Thames. Historic high buildings in Jericho and North Oxford
can also be seen rising above the tree canopy that generally obscures views of the rooftops of these suburbs.

The high buildings stand in a narrow row across the framed area of the City Centre allowing appreciation of the architecture and historic interest of each individually.

Behind, Headington Hill provides a green backcloth of woodland and the well-wooded gardens of houses on Headington Hill and surrounding developments. Peeping from among the trees is Headington Hill Hall, the home of one of Oxford’s most successful mercantile families. The green open space of South Park is seen on the hillside just to the right of the City Centre and has further historic interest, as well as contributing to the green backcloth.

Beside the positive features there are also a number of features that detract from the quality of this view. The buildings of the Osney Mead Industrial Estate have introduced a roofscape of large shallow-pitch hipped roofs of white or light grey sheet materials that cross the framed area in front of the City Centre, drawing the eye away from the City Centre’s architectural interest. The print hall of the Newsquest building is particularly prominent as a large boxlike structure rising up above the surrounding green landscape in the foreground of the view. Other buildings with similar roofs, including the Royal Mail Building and Oxford and Cherwell Valley College Jericho Building either side of Oxpens Road, continue the intrusive roofscape up to the edge of the City Centre. The bulky, flat-roofed structures of the council offices at Castle Street and the Westgate Centre sit within the City Centre as intrusive elements that rise above the general roofscape without incorporating the pitched surfaces, and variations in height and material that characterise the more historic roofscape of the city. In the background, the large rectilinear structures of the John Radcliffe Hospital break up the green backdrop to the city and also draw the eye away from historic high buildings, sitting directly behind some of them in the view.

The view zoomed into the thin line of the City’s historic skyline in October 2010

Topography and layout of the view:

**The expanse of the view varies within the park.**

At the viewpoint most commonly chosen the trees and hedgerows in and around the park frame the view of the city’s historic core, providing an understanding of the extent of the medieval city set on its gravel ridge at the river crossings.

Elsewhere in the park more open views can be experienced that provide a
greater sense of the City Centre’s connection with its historic industrial suburb to the west. Glimpsed views between dense groups of trees focus attention on individual high buildings.

**Looking down on the city with Headington Hill beyond**

The elevated position of the park allows the viewer to look down to the city and the high buildings, which are seen as rising from the more general roofscape of the City Centre and against the backdrop of Headington Hill.

Development on the lower slopes of Headington Hill and in the Cherwell Valley do not rise up between the City Centre and the hill, preserving the sense of the city in its green setting.

**Green Characteristics:**

**Rural landscape of the park**

Contributes to both the aesthetic value of the view and the ability to connect with the historic experience of past writers and artists. This includes the rough pasture, grazed by cattle and the hedgerows and trees that frame views.

**Rural landscape in the Thames Valley meadows**

The trees in North Hinksey and in the valley beyond add to the green quality of the view, helping to set the City Centre within a green landscape. They also help to screen some of the industrial buildings built within the floodplain in the later 20th century, which intrude into this view.

**Wooded hills in the background**

The wooded gardens and landscape of Headington Hill adds to the aesthetic value of the City Centre by setting it against an attractive and contrasting green background. The greenery recalls the open countryside recorded beyond the City Centre by historic painters and writers and illustrates the development of Headington Hill as a picturesque suburb in the 19th century.

**South Park as part of the background**

South Park also forms an attractive part of the green Headington Hill background. Its open landscape preserves a section of the open countryside that provided the backdrop to the city in the 18th and 19th centuries when this view became popular. The preservation of the green space has further historic interest (see the South Park View Summary).

**Trees along the Thames and Railway line**

An area of large trees running along the River Thames and the Railway Line help to divide the roofscape of Osney Mead from that of the historic city core. They provide mounds of soft foliage above which the City Centre roofscape and skyline rise.

**Trees in the City Centre**

Notable trees in the City Centre rise within the roofscape, softening the outline of buildings and adding contrast to the predominant limestone and grey colours. Particularly notable are the trees on Oxford Castle Motte (drawing attention to this historic feature) and in Grove Quad at Lincoln College, which stand juxtaposed to the Radcliffe Camera.
Architectural characteristics:

**Historic rural foreground buildings**

The village buildings of North Hinksey including the unusual pyramid roof of the tower of St Lawrence’s Church provide vernacular forms and materials as well as unevenly spaced and oriented building that contribute to the rural character of the foreground indicating the relationship between the city in the distance and the village standing in its rural setting.

**City Centre rooftops**

North of the Westgate Centre, the City Centre is seen as a narrow band of fine-grained rooftops of small pitched roofs of natural slate and red clay tile rising to a consistent level or ridgelines and above which the numerous historic buildings rise.

This view is notable for the high number of smaller towers that are visible in the north and west part of the City Centre, representing the many medieval parish churches in the city, as well as Oxford’s Castle.

South of the Westgate Centre areas of fine-grained rooftops are seen, representing the ribbon of historic development along St Aldgate’s and the area between the west end of High Street to Blue Boar Street. Occasionally the longer pitched roofs of buildings of colleges and churches are seen amongst these reflecting the concentration of colleges in the south east quarter of the historic City Centre.

**Oxford Castle**

The long elevations of Oxford Castle’s historic prison buildings stand out on the western edge of the City Centre marking the edge of the historic city and drawing the eye to this important historic feature.

**West Oxford buildings**

The larger rooftops of historic industrial buildings help to illustrate the development of this area as Oxford’s riverside industrial suburb, part of its character that stretches back to the Middle Ages and continued into the late 19th and early 20th century. These tend to be red brick buildings of up to three and half storeys. Osney Mill, recently renovated, stands out as a red brick building with traditional pitched slate roof with cornered gables.

**The high buildings**

The historic high buildings stand above the general rooftops and form the focus of the view. The two groupings of high buildings seen from the east are also discernible in this view (The University Group focused on the Radcliffe Camera and the Christ Church Group focused on Tom Tower). These reflect the two foci of investment in prestigious architecture by patrons including Kings of England, bishops and magnates, among others. Both provide attractive groupings of historic buildings with a juxtaposition of attractive architectural detailing.

Other high buildings are spread across the historic centre of the city illustrating the extent of Medieval and Early Modern Oxford, the presence of numerous medieval parish churches in the City Centre and the extensive spread of the historic colleges, each with their own prestigious buildings competing for prominence on the skyline.
Oxford Castle’s St George’s tower acts as a marker for the early locus of civil administration and Norman overlordship as well as marking the historic entrance to the city from the west.

The Influence of light and the Seasons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breadth of sky varies but balances the enclosed character of the foreground</th>
<th>The openness of the skyscape varies at different points within the park. From the apex of the view cone the surrounding foliage provides a frame that constrains the skyscape and focuses the view toward the City Centre roofscape in the valley below. As such it generally balances the contained open space within the park. From lower down the slope the foliage is less constraining on either side, with a wider skyscape that provides more of the open rural character that it has been valued for in the past.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optimum view conditions</td>
<td>The optimum conditions for viewing are in mixed cloud and sun in the late afternoon in high summer, when the light illuminates the limestone high buildings with the dark green foliage of Headington Hill behind providing a strong contrast. From October until May the loss of tree cover makes the intrusive impact of more recent developments more dominant in the view, whilst in overcast or misty weather the focus shifts to the foreground and the City Centre can become indistinct.</td>
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<td>Less favourable view conditions</td>
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Detractors:

| Osney Mead Industrial buildings | The industrial buildings of Osney Mead have replaced the former open rural character of the meadows that formed the middle ground of the view up to the edge of the City Centre. They tend to have large low pitched areas of sheet roofing that are either white or of a light colour that are very reflective, drawing the eye to the foreground and away from the historic high buildings of the City Centre. They have reduced the extent of the rural setting to the city that was historically part of both its aesthetic and evidential value and historic and artistic interest. The buildings are seen cumulatively as a quilt of roof surfaces extending right across the middle ground of the view, although the tree cover provided in high summer helps reduce their visual impact. The print hall of the Newsquest building is particularly intrusive, rising well above the general roofscape of Osney Mead with conspicuous blue cladding. From the main viewing point in the park it is in line with the buildings of Christ Church and competes with them for attention, marring the low level character of the middle ground of the view. |
| West Oxford Buildings and the | Several buildings on the edge of the city and running into its centre continue the extent of the intrusive ‘quilt’ of low-pitched large roof surfaces established by Osney Mead. The Royal Mail building (King Charles House) and Jericho Building |
Westgate Centre of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College both contribute to this roofscape. These blur the visible edges of the City Centre, reducing the distinctive sharp edge between the historic city and its rural setting that was historically part of its historical and aesthetic value and artistic interest.

The Westgate Centre forms two large blocks that rise up within the City Centre landscape. These have a distinctive rectilinear form that detracts from the pattern of steeply pitched rooftops that are characteristic of the City Centre beyond. The white painted cladding elements on the upper floors of the building draw the eye, highlighting this element of the building, which competes for attention with the high buildings in the historic core of the city beyond. This impact is partially mitigated by the steeply pitched pyramids that form part of the building’s roofscape, helping to break up the horizontal mass it creates in the City Centre roofscape.

John Radcliffe Hospital The earliest structures of the John Radcliffe Hospital were built on a hilltop location outside the City Centre to provide access to fresh air. Nevertheless the buildings constructed in the 1960s and more recently have not generally been considered as having any aesthetic value. Early staff members referred to it in derogatory terms as ‘The John’ due to its appearance. The buildings break up the wooded slopes of Headington Hill that form the backdrop to the City Centre with a large mass of white rectilinear surfaces that draw the eye away from the historic high buildings marring the architectural character of the view.

Pylons The line of Pylons and high level electric power lines that runs from Hinksey/Botley across the view and then down into the city introduces a jarring feature that contributes to the modern intrusions of industrial development to the formerly rural foreground of the view.

Tree management Trees within the park have grown to a point where they screen the view of the city from the majority of it. Maintaining views from within the park towards the City Centre need to form a consideration for future management that reflects the origins of the park as a place for viewing Oxford from its countryside setting.

Sensitivity to change:

Change in the viewing place The growth of trees in the park has resulted in a gradual loss of the view of the City Centre and the small cluster of historic rural buildings of North Hinksey village at the foot of the hill. Further unmanaged tree growth threatens to further reduce the visibility of the view and would represent harm to the view that is likely to result in under appreciation of its importance when considered in decision-making. Conversely, there is potential to enhance the view through gradually revealing views from other parts of the park by careful tree thinning.

Loss of the rural character of the viewing place either through change within it, or by increasing the visibility of surrounding developments would result in harm
to the significance of the view.

**Change in the middle ground - Osney Mead and Oxpens**

Further development that extends the coverage of the area of large shallow-pitched roofs between the viewing place and the historic City Centre or makes it more visibly prominent would have a negative impact on this view. The impact of the Newsquest Print-hall rising up from the industrial estate demonstrates how increasing the prominence of these buildings detracts further from the view.

However, there are also opportunities to enhance the view by reducing the prominence of the industrial estate’s roof-surfaces. This might include using darker or less reflective materials for roofs when they are replaced or using tree planting to break up the area of roof-surfaces.

**Change in the City Centre**

New development that detracts from the prominence of the historic high buildings, or that reduces their visibility would be regarded as having a negative impact on the view. Development that detracts from the positive character of the city centre rooftops as a mass of steeply pitched small roofs would also be considered to detract from the view.

The long side elevations of the Westgate Centre are noted as detracting from the view at present. Breaking these up through use of shorter lengths of different materials to reflect the finer grain of other roof-surfaces in the City Centre could enhance the view.
Verified view from Raleigh Park

Illustration 1: Simplified rendering of the Raleigh Park View
The sky is balanced by the green foreground and the mass of Headington Hill behind the city centre.

Large, white, recilinear structure of the John Radcliffe Hospital are prominently located on the skyline behind the high buildings detracting from the architectural character of the view and sense of Oxford in its green setting.

The historic high buildings are seen against the green backcloth of Headington Hill, contributing to their prominence and providing a green setting that defines the extent of the historic city centre.

The University and Christ Church groupings of high buildings are particularly notable for the juxtaposition of attractive historic structures rising above the city rooftops.

Trees in the park frame the view to the city centre.

Historic high buildings are spread across the framed area of the city centre.

Large commercial buildings with extensive shallow-pitched roofs create a plateau of undistinguished big, modern rooftops in the foreground that blur the definition of the historic city centre and compete for prominence with the historic high buildings.

Rooftops of buildings in North Hinksey village represent part of the historic rural foreground.

Trees lower down the hill, along the Hinksey Stream and surrounding fields in the Thames Valley, help obscure Osney Mead, but also hide the meadows and rivers that are part of the historic foreground.

The park is rough grassland, reflecting the historic agricultural setting of the city.

Osney Mead extends right across the framed area of the view.