Doris Field Memorial Park Analysis Summary

Introduction
This is a less famous view than those from the western hills or the more trafficked areas of Headington Hill to the south. However, it has been accessed and appreciated since, at least the mid-18th century and recorded by artists including J. B. Malchair and J.M.W. Turner. In the mid-19th century routes across the hilltop were made more accessible as a result of enclosure and the construction of Pullens Lane. The quality of the view attracted development of large houses for middle class residents in the late 19th and early 20th century. In the later 20th century the potential impact of further development led to a campaign to protect the view from the last remnants of farmland on the hill, resulting in the Council’s recognition of the importance of this view and the creation of the Doris Field Memorial Park. The Park is now a much-valued local amenity. Historically the meadows of the Cherwell Valley were more clearly evident than now as low-lying pasture at the foot of the mixed woods and fields of the hill and running up to the tree-lined course of the River Cherwell. Nevertheless, the historic high buildings are still seen above the belt of trees and against the green backcloth of Boars Hill, Harcourt Hill and Hinksey Hill. A secondary view of similar quality is seen looking across Milham Ford Nature Park (formerly the playing fields of Milham Ford School), which is now a popular local park.

The Viewers
The view provides a shared experience of seeing Oxford’s landscape and architecture with others who have admired it in the past three centuries. The view is less well known than other views of Oxford but the experience of viewing it still provides a connection with past artists of local and national importance that have portrayed and popularised it as a close up view of Oxford’s historic high buildings in a green setting. Its influence on house builders in the early 20th century is seen in the positioning of buildings and landscaping of the grounds at Jack Straws Lane to exploit its aesthetic and historic value. The concern to preserve the view inspired protest and activism in the 1970s with the resultant recognition of the view’s significance in the Local Plan and the protected status of the viewing place as a memorial park held in trust, allowing many local residents to experience it and building on its communal value. The secondary view from Milham Ford Nature Park influenced the design and
Landscaping of the former school (now Oxford Brookes School of Health Care Studies) and is now a special feature of the parkland that is accessible for the whole community.

Present Viewers

A freely accessible and popular view

The view is now a democratic or freely accessible view that many local people can enjoy as part of the low-density area of Headington Hill amongst the more densely built-up suburbs of New Marston and Northway.

As it is not on a route to anywhere people using the park are likely to be visiting it specifically to enjoy the green space, wildlife and the view to the city centre.

Viewers in the Past

Artists of the 19th and 20th centuries

J. M. W. Turner’s sketchbook from 1839 includes examples of views from the northern end of Headington Hill which are notable for the close-up view of the Radcliffe Camera’s dome, with St Mary the Virgin Church spire standing to the left and the tower of St Clement’s Church in the foreground.

William Turner of Oxford’s portrayal of the view capitalised on the mixed fields and woods foreground and the dip between Harcourt Hill and Boar’s Hill, which draws the eye down to the Radcliffe Camera’s dome and St Mary the Virgin Church spire above the belt of trees on the Cherwell to make these the focus of the view.

Matthison’s postcard view of Oxford from Headington Hill shares the appreciation of the
rural foreground, and exploits the full width of the historic skyline, using Magdalen Tower to mark the eastern limit of the city against the rising shoulder of hill.

Despite the impact of development in the valley on the rural foreground the focal features of the skyline and the wooded backdrop remain such that the view seen by these historic artists may still be appreciated today.

**Early 20th century house builders**

The houses built around the northern branch of Jack Straw’s Lane, were set out with their main frontages aligned to provide vistas looking south west over the green space to the City Centre skyline. This reflects the appreciation of these views in the early 20th century and the value they added (and continue to add) to these prestigious homes as an attractive setting that provides a connection with the historic interest and identity of Oxford.

**Late 20th century campaigners**

When the view was threatened with further intrusive development, local residents, the Council and landowners came together to protect the view by recognising its special value as a preserved historic experience of seeing Oxford from its green setting. The view they sought to protect can still be experienced.

**The Viewing Place**

*The Viewing Place is regarded as being the northern part of Headington Hill including the public open spaces of Doris Field Memorial Park and Milham Ford Nature Park, as well as the streets of houses on the hill that benefit from this view, either by design or through good fortune. The view from this location has inspired artists from the 18th to the early 20th century and contributed to the draw of the area for middle class housing. The protection of the view through the creation of the Memorial Park and the construction of the terrace at Milham Ford School reflect its importance for the local area. Access is via footpaths and local roads and the viewing place is linked with the views from the Headington Hill allotments to the south and Headington Hill Hall and South Park beyond forming the group of views from the eastern hills.*

The green space of the Doris Field Memorial Park preserves a fragment of the rural foreground admired by historic viewers.
Aesthetic value of the foreground
The public green open spaces of the Memorial Park and Nature Park provide a green and open foreground to views, with fringing by trees both within the parks and in surrounding gardens that provides soft, semi-natural forms and textures that contrast with the striking architectural forms and hard materials and textures of the historic high buildings.

Historical value of the green setting
The parks both have a local historic interest.

The former school fields have formed part of the life experience of many local children who attended it prior to its closure in 2003. The former school building is positioned to benefit from views over the field/park towards the city.

The campaign to protect the view over the last fields of Jack Straw’s Farm contributed to community identity within this neighbourhood of the city. This has been cemented by the park’s status as a memorial to the mother of one of the main campaigners.

Changing views
The suburbs of Oxford have grown out from the city to wrap around these public open spaces, which survive as islands of green, undeveloped land amongst the settlement. This has increased their value as opportunities to see the views of the city from a green setting.

Ecological value
Both areas of open space have been recognised for their ecological value, which has been enhanced through management programmes. Viewing the city from sites that include a high level of biodiversity interest adds to the experience of the view through the rich and changing contribution of fauna and flora on the senses of the viewer throughout the year.

The Landscape in the View
From either Doris Field Memorial Park or the terrace above Milham Ford Nature Park the viewer looks across a green open space, with a mixture of parkland and naturalistic landscaping towards the band of foliage that marks the River Cherwell, above which the historic high buildings rise against the green backdrop of the Hinksey Hill, Boars Hill and Harcourt Hill. In the foreground the pyramid-roofed houses of New Marston now create a break between the parkland greenery and the trees along the river, reflecting the early 20th century expansion of Oxford. These include attractive ‘set-piece’ developments such as the Croft Road Estate and Old Marston Road. Generous green verges and tree planting along the roads help to soften the outline of the roofscape in the views. The Cherwell Valley trees screen the general City Centre roofscape allowing the historic high buildings to be admired alone.

The Radcliffe Camera and St Mary the Virgin’s Church take a dominant position at the centre of the view, marking the heart of the University. They form a group with the two low towers of All Soul’s and the tower of All Saint’s Church (Lincoln College Library) rising above the many pinnacles of All Soul’s College and the Bodleian’s parapets. This creates a distinctive spiky skyline. Other high buildings support this group, including, the Tower of the Five Orders, New College Bell Tower and Robinson Tower. The flèche of Exeter College Chapel and the cupola of the Sheldonian Theatre form a slightly detached part of this group. The prominence of this group reflects the development of the University and colleges into the area north of the High Street between the 14th and 18th centuries. The group is
given added prominence by the dip between Harcourt Hill and Boar’s Hill, which draws the eye down to these buildings.

Although they were visible in the early 20th century, towers of Magdalen College and St Clement’s Church are now screened from this view by trees. The towers and spires of Christ Church, and St Aldate’s Church can be seen from some vantage points, but are much less prominent in these views (and therefore form a fragile element of the roofscape) due to their position on the falling ground running down to the river Thames beyond the City Centre. They are currently lost to view from the main viewpoint in the Doris Field Memorial Park.

Topography and layout of the view:

The skyline is seen from close up and from an elevated position to the north east of the City Centre

The City Centre historic buildings are viewed from just over a mile away (measured to the nearest high buildings at New College). Architectural details can be identified and are distinct.

The viewing point is elevated with the historic high buildings rising up to the eye-line of the viewer and the foreground dropping rapidly in front of the viewer ensuring that houses in the foreground are below the viewer’s eye line and do not compete with the historic high buildings.

The hills in the background form a green backcloth against which the limestone of the historic high buildings have a strong contrast, particularly when brightly lit by direct sunlight. The dip between Boars Hill and Harcourt Hill draws the eye down to the City Centre focal group.

This is not a framed view. Rather the groups of high buildings draw the eye to particular points where they rise above the canopy of trees in the Cherwell valley and meet the viewer’s eye line.

Green open spaces within the suburbs

Both the Doris Field Memorial Park and Milham Ford School are experienced as open green space, with evidence of attempts to provide naturalistic planting and the remnants of older hedgerows surrounding them. This makes an important contribution to the quality of the foreground, whereas in many surrounding streets the views out are enclosed by houses or mature tree planting.

The bowl of green

The joining up of the greenery of the foreground, the trees in the Cherwell valley and the background sets the city in a bowl of greenery that has been described by writers since the early 19th century.

Green characteristics:

Green foreground

Both viewing places provide an opportunity to experience Oxford from a green setting that resembles the historic rural setting from which past viewers have portrayed it.
Foreground trees

Trees in the parkland and elsewhere on Headington Hill preserve some of the rural character that existed before the area’s suburban development in the 20th century. Nevertheless, they are a part of that suburban development and make an important positive contribution to the area’s character.

Trees in the middle ground

The line of trees alongside the River Cherwell, and a wide variety of ornamental trees in the parkland that wraps around the eastern fringes of the City Centre (continuing into college gardens) provides a mantle of greens and purples above which the historic high buildings rise. The tree canopy helps to hide much of the lower level roofscape of the city making the high buildings more prominent.

Trees in the background

The hills to the west of Oxford create a wooded skyline with patches of fields providing a variety of greenery.

Architectural Characteristics:

The focal group of buildings

The historic high buildings in the north eastern quarter of the City Centre, which is closest to the viewer (defined by High Street to the south, Turl Street to the west, Holywell Street to the north and Longwall Street to the east) are the most prominent and provide the focus of the view.

This group of historic buildings of outstanding historic and architectural interest are seen to mark the location of the City Centre and are viewed against the backdrop of the green hills without other buildings interrupting the background.

They have a uniformity in their materials (limestone ashlar), which draws them together as a group. The multiplicity of spires and pinnacles creates a highly ornamented and complex roofscape. Above this the spires of St Mary the Virgin and Lincoln College Library and the towers of New College and the Old Bodleian provide a series of features that attracts the eye. Changing roof materials respond to the forms created, but are mainly restricted to the palette of limestone or lead.

Together they help to tell the story of the University’s growth as an institution along with notable Colleges from the 13th century (the University Church of St Mary the Virgin) through to the 18th century (The Radcliffe Camera and Lincoln College Library) with every century between represented by a building of great interest and beauty.

The distinctive dome of the Radcliffe Camera and the prominent spire of the University Church of St Mary’s are larger elements that catch the eye and help to orientate the viewer.

The City Centre roofscape

To the right (north) of the focal group the land in the City Centre rises gently and the spread of rooftops in the northern edge of the City Centre is seen, including the area between Mansfield Road and New Road. Those seen are mainly larger roofs of University and college buildings. The greenery of mature trees in the
Oxford View Cones Assessment: Doris Field Memorial Park

streets, colleges, recreation grounds and University Parks rises amongst these buildings masking lower ones (which are indicated mainly by chimney stacks) and softening the outline of taller ones.

At intervals this roofscape is punctuated by groups of historic high building including the Sheldonian Theatre’s cupola and Exeter College’s chapel spire and the cluster of Nuffield College, the Wesley Memorial Church and the lower spire of Hertford College and the bell shaped cupola on the corner of No. 32 Cornmarket Street.

At present trees in the foreground of the view from Doris Field Memorial Park screen the buildings of Christ Church College and Magdalen College. However, these were recorded as a feature of this view historically and should be expected to form a positive element of it in future.

**Foreground buildings**

The early 20th century suburban houses that have replaced the rural landscape of much of the foreground are low buildings allowing the viewer to view the City Centre from points within the viewing places. Their roofs are relatively shallow pitched, allowing the eye to pass over them without interruption, whilst the use of mainly red clay roof tiles provides a contrast with the lighter coloured limestone, lead and copper of the historic high buildings, helping the latter to stand out.

**Edges**

The view has no clear edge to the right, continuing to views over the tree canopy that marks the North Oxford suburb, which is otherwise marked by the squat spire of the Church of St Philip and St James.

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

Trees form a major element of this view and their changing colours through the seasons provide different contrasts with the materials of the City Centre’s high buildings.

On sunny days the limestone of the Radcliffe Observatory, St Mary’s Church and the buildings of All Souls’ and New College in particular is illuminated, drawing attention to these buildings. An optimum time of day for this effect is late morning when the buildings are lit from the left, picking out the masonry and architectural details, whilst providing shadows that help to reveal the curving forms of the domes and spires of the buildings.

At sunset the skyline is seen to particularly good effect as a silhouette from the terrace above Millham Ford Nature Park.
Detractors:

Intrusive buildings  The bulky modern building of the Department of Engineering (Thom Building) and the adjacent Denys Wilkinson Building (Department of Physics) form part of the northern continuation of the view. They detract from the fineness of detail of the historic high buildings but do stand apart from the main focus of the view. Nevertheless, the eye is drawn towards them due to their scale and reflective materials.

Intrusive roof materials on the edge of the City Centre  Growing use of profiled sheet roofs which have narrowly spaced ribs and a higher reflectivity than the older lead roofs in the area around Mansfield Road is starting to create an area of different character that draws the eye away from the historic high buildings.

View at Sunset (late September) from Milham Ford Nature Park

Sensitivity to change:

Change in the foreground  The foreground is comprised of a mixture of the green open spaces of the parks and the surrounding houses of New Marston. The survival of publicly accessible pockets of green open space and the rural character of the hedgerows on their boundaries make these views particularly special. The surrounding housing has effectively replaced the wider rural foreground and there may be some latitude for change within these areas, including change to the roofscape that would be considered harmful to the view. However it is likely that development rising significantly above the existing roof level, that is conspicuous in the views, drawing attention away from the historic high buildings as the focal feature of the views could be considered harmful to the view.

Change in the middle ground  The middle ground is made up of the tree canopy of the Cherwell Valley, including belts of trees along the river channels and within the grounds of Magdalen and St Catherine’s College. No buildings in this area obtrude above this canopy (St Cat’s is effectively hidden from view) allowing an unhindered view to the historic high buildings and roofscape of the City Centre. New development that broke above the canopy, arresting the eye and competing with the historic high buildings of the City Centre would be regarded as harmful to the view.
Change in the City Centre

The City Centre rooftscape in this view is made up of the graceful or slender forms of the historic high buildings, with the lower rooftscape of the pinnacles and parapets of New College, All Soul’s and the Bodleian and the whale-back of Exeter College Chapel, as well as limited areas of surrounding domestic buildings. These provide the focus of the view and, together the distinctive character of the University City for which Oxford is famed. Development within this area that disrupts this character by introducing discordant forms or materials or blocking views of the historic high buildings would result in harm to the view.

Change in the background

The background of green hills completes the setting of the City centre and historic high buildings. Development that rises up between City Centre and the hills, disrupting this relationship is likely to result in harm to the view unless it is seen as a natural continuation of the fine grain roof surface of the City Centre. Change to the green character of the hills in the background is likely to result in harm to the view, although at this distance small scale development are unlikely to have a significant impact.
Example photograph of the view from the apex of the Doris Field Memorial Park View Cone

Illustration 1: Simplified render of the Doris Field Memorial Park View
Illustration 2:
Simplified render of the Doris Field Memorial Park View with annotations

Christ Church buildings hidden from view at present but could be more visible in future

A tight cluster of the City's most significant historic buildings forms the focus of the view representing the heart of the University and the Colleges that expanded into the North East of the city in the 14th and 15th centuries. The juxtaposition of their aesthetically pleasing forms is particularly attractive.

The dip between the two hills draws the eye down to the city centre's historic high buildings. Only a small number of historic high buildings break through the skyline, giving them extra prominence.

Small groupings of historic high buildings continue to the right (north) standing up above the general roof level of the city, continuing the view away from the focal point.

Behind the high buildings the view to the green hills is unbroken by other intrusive structures.

Trees break up the foreground and provide some framing and contribute to the rural character of the viewing place.

The viewer can easily see over the rooftops in the foreground to Cherwell valley treescape and the historic city skyline beyond.

Trees in the Cherwell Valley mark the edge of the city and provide a colour of greenery above which the historic high buildings rise.

Green parkland foreground is the successor to the rural pastures of the past.