Headington Hill, Pullen’s Lane and John Garne Way Allotments

Introduction

The view from Headington Hill has been appreciated since, at least, the late 17th century as an opportunity to view the city’s high buildings from a rural setting just outside its boundary. Following the enclosure of Headington’s open fields and the expansion of the University in the 19th century the Hill became a desirable location for new prestigious homes on the outskirts of the city which benefitted from, and were designed to allow enjoyment of, the views. The purchase of farmland by the Morrell family allowed for the preservation of the rural setting of their home at Headington Hill Hall as well as the opportunity of seeing the city from the green open landscape of the hill side. These later became allotments. During the 1970s increasing pressure for development of both housing and institutions on the open hillside prompted the Council to create an area of public open space specifically for viewing Oxford, through their Headington Hill Policy Statement (1976). Trees have grown up that obscure the view from the intended viewing point, but it can still be appreciated from points across the two sets of nearby allotments and from publicly accessible areas of Headington Hill Hall.
The Viewers

Experiencing this view provides a connection with past viewers. The views from within and around the allotments have been appreciated since the 17th century. The Rev. Josiah Pullen (Vice-president of Magdalen Hall) has been remembered for his daily walks up Headington Hill in the late 17th century which, apparently, has inspired many others to visit this spot. The point where he turned to return along Cuckoo Lane, was marked by an elm tree called Jo Pullen’s Tree and served as a popular point to view the city, although the view from the site of the tree is now blocked by the walls and tree planting of Headington Hill Hall. In around 1700 the University paid for the construction of a raised footpath that allowed scholars and fellows to take healthy exercise by walking up the hill, with a possible return route along Cuckoo Lane. The view from Headington Hill painted by J. B. Malchair in 1777 appears to be from between Cuckoo Lane and Headington Road. When the Morrells built their country house on the hill it was provided with a grand terrace and veranda that gave views over their gardens and parkland to the city beyond. They also bought the farmland to the north of their gardens in the later 19th century to preserve the rural character of the area surrounding their home. Advertisements and records of the houses built on Pullens Lane in the late 19th century record the efforts of builders to exploit the setting by providing views from the houses and their gardens over the city. Writing about Oxford and its history in the early 20th century Cecil Headlam picked out the view of the city from Headington Hill and Pullens Lane in particular as one of the finest views of the city, suggesting it was popular at this time. During the 1970s increasing pressure for development and awareness of the quality of these views led the City Council to create a special viewing place from which the public would be able to enjoy the experience of gazing down on the city. In 1986 the Council recognised the view’s significance in the local plan.

Present Viewers

Local residents and allotment users
Relatively few people have access to the views from the allotments or the nearby housing. However, for those lucky enough to have access the views to the City Centre provide a special value to the daily scenes, transforming a home, garden or allotment into part of a world famous city.

Walkers
In the 1970s the City Council set out plans for a network of footpaths to run along the hillside which would join up viewing places and provide access to green spaces for residents. This network was never fully completed and local residents in cul-de-sac streets may not be altogether keen on encouraging increased footfall, nevertheless parts of the routes do exist including the links from Cuckoo Lane to William Street, which provide an opportunity for many to see the view. The opening of the route through the grounds of Headington Hill Hall has also made the view from the terrace publicly accessible. As such these views have the potential to be publicly accessible as part of walking routes through the area given appropriate management of the viewing places.
Viewers in the Past

16th and 17th century viewers
Evidence of viewing from the hill in the 16th and 17th centuries. View of Oxford by George Hoefnagel used to symbolise the city in Braun and Hogenburg’s map of Oxford c. 1570. The construction of the raised walkway up Headington Hill c. 1700 by Oxford University responded to the use of the walk onto the hill by scholars accessing the city’s landscape setting.

The return route along Cuckoo Lane has been suggested as a continuation of Addison’s Walk through the grounds of Magdalen College.

People arriving in Oxford
The experience of viewing from the hill has been part of the arrival into Oxford along the medieval road to London (Cheney Lane) and the later Stokenchurch Turnpike on the north side of the park.

18th and 19th century artists
1777 View of Oxford from Headington Hall by J. B. Malchair.

And again in 1790 as ‘Entrance to Oxford from London’ from near London Place (Ashmolean Collection).

Sketched by J. M. W. Turner (see the 1839 Mossell and Oxford Sketchbook, Tate Collection).

The Morrells – a designed view
Exploited for the family’s ostentatious country house with terraces, veranda and balcony overlooking the city.

Protected from suburban housing development by the Morrells in 1874 to preserve the green setting of Morrell Hall and surviving as farmland until the Morrell Hall allotments were created by the Morrell Trustees in the early 20th century.

Late 19th and early 20th century residents
Wealthy citizens, including professors of the expanding University bought houses on the hill top that included views down onto the city as a designed feature that added to their value.

Early 20th century allotment users
The development of the allotments opened up the views from the hillside to many more people, including residents of New Marston and New Headington.

The Viewing Place
The contribution of the viewing place to the significance of the view includes both its aesthetic qualities and its history as a place used for looking out over the city for several centuries. This includes its associations with past viewers and the provisions made for viewing, both past and present. The view from parts of this area is currently obscured by tree growth but the potential for the view to be experienced remains subject to changes in vegetation coverage. The viewing places within this area form the central part of the views from the western hill with routes along the hillside providing links to the views from Milham Ford Park and Doris Field Memorial Park to the north and South Park to the south.
### Aesthetic value of the foreground
The publicly accessible viewing place has a naturally established woodland character of self-sown oak and ash trees that is an attractive setting for viewing the city.

### Contribution of the view to the designed aesthetic value of Headington Hill Hall and its grounds
The building and grounds of Headington Hill Hall (Listed Grade II*) including the formal garden terraces and the veranda and balcony of the building were designed to provide views to the City Centre skyline as part of their designed aesthetic value.

### Contribution of the view to the designed aesthetic value of houses and gardens on Pullen’s Lane
Several of the Victorian and Edwardian houses and gardens built on Pullens Lane were designed to exploit the aesthetic value of the views over the city. These include the Grade II registered gardens of High Wall, designed by Harold Peto (a nationally significant Arts and Crafts garden designer) in the early 20th century.

### Historical value of the rural setting
The allotments and public viewing place preserve a green setting, including trees, hedgerows, streams and a ‘productive landscape’ that preserves elements of the rural character of the area that was cut off from the countryside by surrounding suburban development in the early 20th century. As such it provides a connection with past agricultural use of the area and the green rural landscape that provided the viewing place outside the city for artists and viewers in the past.

### Detractors
Within many of the viewing places the mature tree cover now restricts views out over the City Centre. However, the density of the tree canopy is an important contributor to the historic character of Headington Hill as a picturesque Victorian and Edwardian suburb, as well as part of its contribution to views of the City Centre from the western hills. With appropriate management and perhaps some improvement or redirection of the footpath routes the viewing place created in the former allotment site could again be a place where people can go to see the famous view over the city.

### The Landscape in the View
*Although the view from the Council’s viewing place is currently blocked by the growth of woodland the view can still be experienced from the adjacent allotments. This has a high aesthetic value provided by the rough texture and detail of the allotments’ greenery in the foreground which leads the eye down to the richly coloured foliage on the lower slopes of Headington Hill and filling the Cherwell Valley. Above this a group of historic high buildings, centred on the iconic dome of the Radcliffe Camera, are the only buildings seen and mark the position of the City Centre. The suburbs beyond the City Centre are hidden whilst Hinksey Hill rises as a green backcloth in the far distance against which the buildings’ limestone, lead and copper provide a strong contrast adding to their prominence. The tallest high buildings break above the horizon of the hill’s crest whilst the massed spires and pinnacles of the roofs of New College*
create a distinctly spiky skyline to this group. Other historic high buildings, including Merton College Chapel’s tower, the copper cupola of Queens College and the pyramid of the Museum of Natural History form isolated points of interest spread out in the panorama of the view. On the extreme right of the view the Tower of the Thom building is seen as a disparate element with a bulky rectilinear form and a horizontal emphasis provided by its exposed concrete frame that contrasts with the masonry and strong vertical emphasis of other high buildings in the skyline.

Topography and layout of the view:

An elevated view point
The allotments and terraces of Headington Hill Hall and High Wall provide a vantage point that is both close to and level with the upper portions of the City Centre’s historic high buildings. These cross the level of the viewer’s eye line near the point where they break the horizon of the wooded hillside beyond, adding to their prominence, but allowing part of their structure to be seen against the darker backdrop of the hill.

The City Centre sits prominently in the mid-ground with a green backcloth of hills and a mixed foreground of allotments and trees, which merge into the green belt of trees in the mid ground in the Cherwell Valley.

The allotments and Headington Hill Park provide an open foreground area with a green character.

Beyond the open space, the tree canopy carries the eye in an uninterrupted plane to the historic high buildings of the City Centre. Taller trees in the foreground provide framing to individual views and screen some taller buildings.

Despite its elevation above the floodplain, the mass of the City Centre (as well as St. Clement’s suburb) is hidden by the tree cover, allowing the high buildings to be seen in isolation from other buildings.

Tight focus of historic high buildings in the middle ground
The view is wide and expansive with little framing. The strength of the focus of the view on the historic high buildings is a result of the tight cluster of buildings which break above the tree canopy without other high buildings competing for the viewer’s attention.

Green Characteristics:

Green foreground (allotments)
The allotments preserve the characteristic of a ‘productive landscape’ and a more open viewing foreground that illustrates the area’s rural past. The numerous plots with varied crops provide a richly textured foreground with rising and falling masses of foliage in numerous colours and shades of green,
yellow and purple, as well as areas of exposed rich brown earth. The numerous poles and temporary supporting structures for plants provide further texture and vertical emphasis that leads the eye up to the horizon and the focus of the view. Allotment plots running down the hillside draw the eye forward towards the City Centre.

Green Foreground (Headington Hill Hall and Park)

The green garden and parkland foreground of Headington Hill Hall is aesthetically pleasing and illustrates the picturesque landscaped parkland and formal gardens of the Morrell’s country estate, adding historical value.

Trees screening foreground buildings in the view

Trees in Headington Hill Park and on the edges of the allotment help to screen surrounding buildings, including the student housing blocks built off John Garne Way, preserving the character of the foreground as a green and undeveloped landscape beyond the urban area of the City Centre. They include numerous ornamental varieties that add to the rich variety in colour and texture of foliage in the view.

Trees in the Cherwell floodplain

The trees running alongside the River Cherwell and in the green spaces in its floodplain form a thick mass of woodland that conceals the city beyond and rises to form a rough textured blanket of foliage that seems to fill the valley.

Trees on Hinksey Hill

The suburb of Botley is seen as a tree covered area on Hinksey Hill with trees dominating the character of the hillside, despite the dense suburban development they represent. This provides the green backcloth to the historic high buildings in the City Centre.

Architectural Characteristics:

Hidden buildings between foreground and middle ground

Buildings between the viewing place and the focus of the view have been concealed by foliage but are also sufficiently low for this effect to be achieved. These include intentionally low-scale buildings such as St Catherine’s College, designed specifically to avoid impact on the view.

The low-rise school building at the foot of the hill is sufficiently plain as to avoid drawing the eye away from the historic high buildings. It is balanced by green open space surrounding the school and the thick tree line that bounds this.

Although they are large buildings, the John Garne Way buildings are screened from view both by foliage on the boundaries of the allotments and by being set lower down the hill. Other buildings surrounding the allotments have a utilitarian character, generally being small, single storey buildings without eye catching ornament that would draw attention away from the focus of the view.
The City Centre roofscape is hidden by foliage allowing the historic high buildings to be seen in isolation.

Historically, Magdalen Tower, Christ Church Cathedral Spire and Tom Tower were seen as a group creating a focus to the view from the hill (see the view by Malchair above). This grouping is now only visible from the terrace at Headington Hill Hall due to the thick cover of parkland trees lower down the hill. The Tower with its pinnacles, the short spire and the ogee cap of Tom Tower form a group spanning the 13th to 17th century and representing development of the University from a religious institution in the Middle Ages into a post-Reformation centre of learning with royal patronage, as well as the durability of the Gothic in Oxford.

The University buildings group appear as a cluster of buildings with a strong juxtaposition of forms. These include the highly detailed roofscape of New College and All Soul’s as well as the Towers of The Bodleian Library and New College Bell Tower, along with the juxtaposed spires of St Mary the Virgin and All Saints (Lincoln College Library). In the background other spires add to this group, including the spires of Nuffield College and The Wesley Memorial Church and the Fleche of Exeter College Chapel, which all rise behind the mass of the Old Bodleian. The white paint and copper cupola of the Sheldonian Theatre provides a bookend on the right edge of the group.

The dome of the Radcliffe Camera provides a large mass within this group and is seen particularly in juxtaposition with St Mary the Virgin spire as two strongly contrasting forms that are icons of Oxford. Both break above the skyline of the hill beyond, whilst the large dome is probably the most instantly recognisable landmark in the view.

As a group these buildings represent the spiritual and academic heart of the University, representing its history from the 13th to 18th century.

These historic high buildings share a common palette of materials and colours, as well as providing a strong vertical emphasis (predominantly limestone, lead and green copper) uniting them as a group despite their variety in form and design.

The rooftop of the New Bodleian Library also rises above the tree canopy in materials and is united with the group through its materials and adding to the story of the University in the early 20th century. However it has a more horizontal mass, making it distinct from the focal group.

The Museum of Natural History and Merton College Chapel rise up above the tree canopy outside the main focus of the view, providing an indication of the extent of the historic City Centre and of buildings associated with academic activity. They have aesthetic and historical value individually but as part of the wider view also contribute to the cumulative value of the skyline.

The dome and minaret of the Centre for Islamic Studies have been carefully
Oxford View Cones Assessment: Headington Hill and Allotments

**additions**

designed to fuse traditionally Middle Eastern architectural forms with the Gothic character of Oxford’s architecture. They, concealing the latter in this view.

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

**Skyscape**

It is seen to great effect at mid-morning, with the sun in the south east and clouds emerging over the hills to the west adding a dramatic skyscape, whilst bright sunlight is reflected by the limestone of the high buildings.

The quality of light at sunset provides an attractive silhouette of the city with mist gently falling into the valley, blurring the rooftops and emphasising the high buildings (this effect is often reproduced in painting and photography, and contrasts with the daytime view).

Early or mid-autumn, when the treescape provides the greatest variety of colour in the foreground and middle-ground (also the time when the allotments will have reached a stage of annual maturity) provides one of the most interesting viewing experiences. This also allows low angled sunlight to pick out the architectural detail of the buildings in the focus of the view.

**Detractors:**

**Thom Building**

The tower of the University's Engineering Department (the Thom Building) is seen on the extreme right of the view as a disparate element in the view, rising above the trees with a bulky top heavy form that is given horizontal emphasis by its exposed concrete frame, contrasting with both the materials and vertical emphasis of the historic high buildings.

**Sensitivity to change:**

**Change in the foreground**

The allotments, school playing fields and parkland of Headington Hill Hall and Park provide an attractive green foreground that is an important element of both the beauty of the view and the historic relationship between the green open viewing place and the historic city centre. This view cone was designated partly in response to the loss of the green space to student accommodation blocks on the lower slopes of the hill that threatened to rise into the views from higher up. Development that introduces built forms that detract from the green and open character of the foreground, disrupting the expanse of space that leads the eye to the trees in the Cherwell Valley and the city centre beyond would be regarded as harmful to the view.

The specially created viewing place on the former allotment site is now so overgrown with self-sown trees that the view can no longer be seen from it, resulting in a significant loss of the amenity this space was designed to provide.
Whilst it is desirable to maintain and enhance the ecological value this area of woodland provides there is potential to open out a viewing area through selective tree thinning and management, as well as creation of walks with better signage that would be beneficial in provide better public access to the view.

**Change in the middle ground**

The tree canopy in the Cherwell Valley provides an attractive blanket of greenery that conceals any development between the green foreground and the historic high buildings of the City Centre. Loss of the tree canopy, or development that rises above it, introducing built forms within this area that distract from the views to the historic high buildings would result in harm to the views.

The construction of the Centre for Islamic Studies has provided an example of the inherent difficulties in trying to introduce new tall buildings in this area. The choice of a mixture of Middle Eastern forms and Gothic detailing and use of limestone ashlar has helped to provide an approach that introduces delicate forms and locally distinctive materials that complement the historic high buildings in the skyline. In views from the allotments or Headington Hill Hall it stands to one side of the main view as an isolated high building. Nevertheless adding more than isolated example of such buildings would result in a districting clutter that would be harmful to the view.

**Change in the City Centre**

This is one of the closest views to the City Centre in which the detailing of the historic high buildings and other buildings can be clearly discerned. From this angle the City Centre skyline includes a ‘jumble’ of towers, long college roof areas with parapets and pinnacles and copper clad cupolas in addition to the taller spires and Radcliffe Camera’s Dome. Whilst new development could add to this jumbled mass without detracting from its character, very careful consideration would be required for choices of form, materials and detailing to create a fitting addition to this mass of buildings. Development that rose above the general level of the City Centre and did not conform to the characteristics of this roofscape would be considered harmful to the view.

**Change in the setting of the view**

The view cone has a broad setting to the north with the arc of view extending well to the right of the view cone as seen from the allotments. The impact of the bulky and conspicuously coloured Thom building demonstrates the potential for new development to detract from the wider view by drawing attention away from the main focus of the City Centre skyline. Nevertheless, the finer spires and pyramids of buildings such as the Museum of Natural History demonstrate that higher development outside the City Centre can be complementary to the main focus of the view.

**Change in the background**

The historic high buildings rise against an unbroken green backdrop of the western hills, revealing Oxford’s location in a broader countryside setting. Development that introduced conspicuous built forms between the historic high buildings and the green hills that did not continue the positive characteristics of the City Centres roofscape would cause harm to the view.
Oxford View Cones Assessment: Headington Hill and Allotments

Example of the view from the John Garne Way Allotments near the apex of the View Cone

Illustration 1: Simplified rendering of the view from John Garne Way allotments
Illustration 2: Simplified rendering of the view from the John Garne Way Allotments with analysis notes