South Park View Analysis Summary

Introduction

The South Park view exemplifies the views of Oxford City Centre from Headington Hill; a series of views from high ground east of the City Centre that have been admired since, at least, the late 16th century. This is a ‘close-up’ view of the city that allows appreciation of the architecture of the city’s landmark buildings from an attractive historic parkland setting. Belts of mature trees in the Cherwell Valley provide a green fringe that cushions the City Centre buildings and separates them from the historic low-rise suburbs of St Clements and East Oxford. The wooded masses and fields of Wytham Hill and Hinksey Hill, including the garden suburb of South Hinksey, provide a green backcloth with a prominent dip between the hills that draws the eye down to the City’s spires and domes. This is a highly democratic viewing place, enjoyed by many and photographed and reproduced in all seasons. It often forms the backdrop to public events held in the park.
The Viewers

Experiencing this view provides a connection with past viewers, including the artists who have portrayed it, the landowners who developed the parkland for private viewing and the 20th century activists who campaigned to protect it for the people of the City. How past viewers have recorded or depicted the view can reveal features that have historically been considered significant about it and that continue to have significance today. The view from South Park is the oldest view for which there is evidence of artistic appreciation and is one of the most frequently reproduced including its use by modern artists and photographers as the iconic view of Oxford (this is given further consideration below under Landscape in the View).

![George Hoefnagel's view of Oxford published in 1575](image)

Present Viewers

Residents and students

The view from South Park is enjoyed by many local people as part of their daily recreation or on everyday journeys through the park as part of footpath routes. For these viewers the view is an uplifting element that contributes to the more general amenity of the park as a valued green open space away from the busy traffic of surrounding roads or densely developed urban environments of East Oxford and New Headington. The users of the view are swelled by the many students from Oxford Brookes for whom the park is a convenient open space to relax and socialise in whilst enjoying the special views of the city. The park is also a place for more active recreation including running, casual ‘kick-about’ football and fitness coaching.

Inspiring Artists

The view of the city from South Park is used by many artists as inspiration for their work. Due to the ease of access, beautiful views of the city against the backdrop of Wytham Hill and parkland foreground with additional interest provided by groups of trees or overhanging foliage it is one of the most reproduced images of the city from its green setting.

Audiences of big events

The Park is used by the City for large events such as the Olympics torch ceremony in 2012 or the Cowley Road Carnival. The view over the city provides a spectacular and unique setting for such events enjoyed by large audiences.
### Viewers in the Past

**The earliest recorders of Oxford’s views**
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.

**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 century painters**
1777 View of Oxford from Headington Hall by J. B. Malchair (‘foremost Drawing Master of Oxford’).

**A famous view painted by Turner (and others)**
Painted by J. M. W. Turner (sketched 1799, painted 1803-4 “A view of Oxford from the South Side of Headington Hill”; see Tate Collection) and others, including William Turner of Oxford (View of Oxford from Headington, Ashmolean Collection) and Peter de Wint (“View near Oxford, Tate Collection”).

**The Morrells – a designed view**
Protected from suburban housing development by the Morrells in 1877 to preserve the green setting of Morrell Hall and landscaped as parkland with carriage drives allowing views down onto the city (but nevertheless maintained in agricultural use).

**The early 20th century conservation movement**
Early 20th century struggle to protect from development. The Morrells tried to resist attempts to purchase the land to build affordable housing in the years after the First World War. Eventually just 20% of the land was given up to build the Morrell Avenue estate.

Purchased by Oxford Preservation Trust in 1939 to protect the green setting of the city.

Given to the City with conditions to prevent its development and preserve the ability to see the view.
The Viewing Place

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 the southern end of the Headington Hill (or eastern) group of viewing places with links via footpaths to a series of viewing places along the west facing slopes of the hill that have been influential to the area’s development in the past 150 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aesthetic value of the foreground</th>
<th>South Park is a large urban park with parkland landscaping creating a green viewing place that forms an attractive Arcadian foreground to the view.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical value of the rural setting</td>
<td>The park retains evidence of the former agricultural environs of Oxford up to the late 19th century in its green open spaces and the ridge-and-furrow earthworks of ploughing. Trees within the park also provide remnants of former hedgerows. This illustrates the development of Oxford and its early post-medieval suburb of St Clement’s into the rural setting and preserved the coherence of the historic city core.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical and aesthetic value of the parkland landscape</td>
<td>The park retains evidence of the landscaping undertaken by the Morrells and, subsequently, the City Council, to turn the agricultural land into a picturesque landscape. This includes the openness of the space and the boundary tree planting and tree groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A number of ever-changing views</td>
<td>The mix of large open space and densely planted tree groups changes the focus of the view between different groups of City Centre landmarks as the viewer moves through the space.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Archaeological value of the Civil War view</td>
<td>The park has potential for the survival of remains of the encampment made by the Parliamentarian army during the siege of Oxford in 1646. Studying how the encampment utilised the views over the city could reveal more about the siege and the history of Oxford during this significant period in the city’s history.</td>
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The Landscape in the View

What is seen in the view has been admired for centuries for both its designed and fortuitous aesthetic quality – that is, the high quality of features in the view that were intended to be beautiful and the development of groups of features by chance that we consider to be beautiful because of our taste and cultural associations. The characteristic features in the view; the green foreground, compact medieval City Centre, high buildings of architectural quality rising above the general rooftops and Magdalen Tower in a position of primacy, as well as the green backcloth of the hills beyond, have essentially remained unchanged since the 16th century providing a connection with those who have seen and portrayed this view before. Seeing the City Centre in its green setting, with St Clement’s suburb in the foreground, provides understanding of its development as a medieval urban centre at the junction of two river valleys. The high buildings of the colleges and University, with strong Gothic styling, reflect the influence of the church on the development of Oxford as a centre of medieval and early modern religion and learning. Later buildings, including the domes of the Sheldonian and Radcliffe Camera, reflect the development of classical taste in the University in the 17th and 18th centuries. The growth of St Clement’s suburb, seen in this view as the gateway to the city, reflects the importance of the roads...
from the city up Headington Hill as the route to London, with which Oxford has held a strong connection, occasionally replacing the capital as the country’s centre of government and often providing the seat of learning from which governance has sprung.

The view from the hillside looks down on the city with extensive parkland, including traces of an agricultural past in the foreground, leading the eye down to the suburb of St Clement’s, indicated by Georgian town houses at London Place. From this frontage the eye passes easily over the low-level rooftops to the City Centre, wrapped in a mantle of mature trees in the Cherwell Valley parklands. The City Centre provides a fine grain roofscape with the appearance of a consistent height, broken occasionally by the mounds of foliage of mature trees. Only the traditional towers, spires and domes of great aesthetic worth and architectural quality, signifying high status buildings of the University and colleges, rise above the general level of the rooftops and so stand out and these are limited to the carefully designed prestigious features of towers, spires and domes. Occasionally, the lower portions of college buildings are glimpsed between the Cherwell Valley trees. The city’s position on a gravel island holds it up above the surrounding valleys and screens the buildings of West Oxford in this view such that the City Centre is seen against the green backdrop of Hinksey Hill and Wytham Hill. A dip between the hills draws the eye down to the City Centre. Magdalen College Tower (originally located just outside the city) stands forward amongst the high buildings and has primacy. A group of high buildings centred on Christ Church (the Christ Church Group) stand to the left and indicate the former sites of St Frideswide’s Abbey and Cardinal College on the historic route into the city from the south. A second group of high buildings; including St Mary the Virgin Church, the Radcliffe Camera and the Sheldonian Theatre (the University Group) stand to the left and are seen to a greater or lesser extent as the viewer moves around the park, becoming screened by trees and the shoulder of Headington Hill in the east of the park.
Topography and layout of the view:

The City Centre sits prominently in the middle ground with a green backcloth of hills and a mixed foreground of green parkland, historic St Clement’s Suburb and the Green Belt of trees in the Cherwell Valley.

The park provides a large foreground area and a range of different elevations with views down onto the City Centre. Houses outside the park and trees lines within it provide a well-defined edge to the green foreground.

The dip into the valley of the River Cherwell reduces the prominence of the buildings in St Clement’s suburb and of the open spaces on the valley floor, which reduces the apparent depth of these areas in the view and allows the eye to pass easily over the buildings to the greenery and City Centre beyond.

The City Centre’s slight elevation above the floodplain adds to its prominence in the mid-ground, making it seem closer and hiding the townscape of west Oxford beyond.

The high buildings in the middle ground rise from a fine grain rooftops in the historic City Centre but appear as a row of towers, spires and domes rising in spread across the city.

The dip between the two hills in the background draws the eye down to the city centre as the focus of the view.

Changing elevation and perspectives with a progression from silhouette skyline, to rooftops and finally a breathtaking panorama.

The topography, with the rise in ground level increasing distance from the City Centre from west to east, means that moving around the park provides an ever-changing view.

From the west of the park: the towers are seen in silhouette against the sky above the rooftop of buildings at London Place, Morrell Avenue and Glebe Street.

As the viewer moves eastward: the city’s towers and spires are seen standing within the context of the wider city rooftops, with the western hills providing a green backcloth indicating the city’s green setting.

From the eastern extremity of the park: the skyline buildings recede into the distance becoming less easily identified individually, whilst the general extent of the southern part of the City Centre can be appreciated within its green setting, although the northern half (including The University Group) are increasingly screened from view.

The view to the north is confined by the topography of the hill and tree planting. The view to the south west is more open (there is a secondary view over East Oxford towards Boars Hill including the spire of Ss Edmund and Frideswide and the rooftop chapel of St Stephen’s House as landmarks).

Green Characteristics:

Green foreground  The green parkland foreground is aesthetically pleasing and illustrates both the earlier agricultural use and the picturesque landscaped parkland of the Morrell’s
country estate, adding historical value.

**Trees in the park**  
Groups of trees frame views screening some areas of the skyline that are revealed and disappear as the viewer moves through the space.

Trees on the park’s boundaries lead the eye down to the City Centre.

**Trees in the Cherwell floodplain**  
The trees running alongside the River Cherwell and in the green spaces in its floodplain (including the grounds of Magdalen College and School, St Hilda’s College and Merton and Christ Church Meadows beyond), form a green mantle of foliage that defines the limits of the historic City Centre and provides soft green masses that complement harder forms of towers, spires and domes.

**Trees in the City Centre**  
Occasional taller trees rise amongst the spires, towers and domes and over the lower level roofscape (indicating the locations of green spaces of college gardens in the City Centre) and provide greenery and softening in the skyline.

**Architectural Characteristics:**

**Historical value of St Clement’s buildings as a gateway to the City Centre**
Terraces of Georgian and Victorian townhouses at London Place and Glebe Street illustrate the 18th and 19th century gateway to the city (reflected in the naming of London Place) creating an edge to the historic urban area. This is the entrance to the historic St Clement’s suburb, established in the Middle Ages and rebuilt after the Civil War as a distinct community.

**Low rise suburbs between fore and middle ground**
The low rise suburbs of East Oxford (mostly two-storey) and St Clements’ (mostly three-storey) provide an introduction to the middle ground with no distracting high points that would compete with the City Centre spires for precedence.

The rooftop and horse-shoe plan of Sir James Sterling’s Florey Building can be identified in the St Clement’s suburb by the distinctive Lancashire red brick walls that make it stand out from other buildings in Oxford.

**Intricate City Centre roofscape of small pitched roofs**
The City Centre roofscape is formed of a compact area with a densely developed pattern of generally uniform height and predominantly pitched roofs with some larger roofs representing historic college buildings. The large red brick gable end of Oxford Town Hall stands above the roofscape, giving this important civic building a presence in the skyline. The compact area of roofscape seen illustrates the confined nature of the medieval city within its circuit of walls.

The main materials of the rooftop bed of the City Centre are natural slate and plain clay tile, which are dark, essentially recessive and provide a strong contrast to the limestone of the high buildings which, therefore, stand out.

Occasionally the more intricate detailing of medieval college roofs can be seen including highly ornamented spirelets rising from parapets.
Glimpsed views of larger college buildings

From the south of the park some views include the intricate detailing of spirelets on the roofs of buildings at New College.

Larger buildings of Magdalen College are glimpsed through a screen of foliage running along the River Cherwell and surrounding the Deer Park and Meadow providing both historic and architectural interest.

The historic high buildings

Magdalen College Tower stands forward of the main groups of high buildings and is the first skyline building seen from the west of the park. Its prominence reflects its position outside the historic city walls, greeting the traveller from the east.

The Christ Church group of buildings (with the spire of St Aldate’s Church) is seen as an uninterrupted row identifying the location of St Aldate’s as one of the oldest routes into the city. They also represent the site of St Frideswide’s Priory (probably Oxford’s oldest Christian community) and Cardinal College before the establishment of Henry VIII’s Christ Church. As a group they rise from either side to the short spire of Christ Church Cathedral. The shape of Tom Tower stands out as having particular aesthetic value as well as its historical connection with Sir Christopher Wren.

Merton College Tower stands between Magdalen and the Christ Church group (both horizontally and in depth) and helps to lead the eye into the view.

The University buildings group appear as dispersed with buildings occasionally screened by trees in the park. They stand to the right of Magdalen Tower, with St Mary the Virgin still seen as the tallest point on the skyline. They illustrate both the long history and development of the University’s institutions from its religious origins and practices to more secular concerns and the establishment of the Bodleian as a repository of learning. In this view the dome of the Radcliffe Camera has a high aesthetic value and is one of the most immediately recognisable ‘Oxford’ buildings and so is often the focus of depictions.

Nuffield College spire stands at the rear of the focus of the view, marking the western edge of the City Centre, beyond which West Oxford is mainly hidden from view.

The materials of the city’s high buildings (and their colours) are predominantly limestone, lead and slate with, occasionally, green copper, which helps to create a group value amongst these structures despite their variety in form and design. They also stand out against the rooftop ‘bed’ of the City Centre and the greenery of the hills behind.
Infrastructure:

**Headington Road**

- Headington Road – St Clements Road provides a key area of movement with traffic into and out of the City Centre.

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The Influence of Light and the Seasons:

**Optimum Viewing**

The view is seen to great effect at mid-morning, with the sun in the south east and clouds emerging over the hills to the west pushed by the prevailing wind 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. Often this is accompanied by a blanket of mist that lies in the floor of the valley through which the historic high buildings rise gaining greater prominence above the indistinct rooftops of the City Centre. This effect is often reproduced in painting and photography, and contrasts with the daytime view.

Spring and summer provide the most green and verdant setting to the city buildings. During the winter months the London Place and Magdalen College buildings become more evident as the screening effect of the trees is reduced. The parkland in snow or a heavy frost provides an alternative white image that also contrasts the white foreground with the grey and limestone buildings.

Detractors:

**Pylons**

The line of Pylons and high level electric power lines running between the hills directly behind the City Centre is a jarring feature that distracts from the historic interest of the City Centre. They have an engineered and industrial character and scale as large structures of loose steel frames that contrast with the compact stone structures and rural greenery of the city and its setting. They are particularly prominent in this view as they break above the skyline of the hills in the background.

Sensitivity to change:

**Change in the park**

The management of the park makes an important contribution to the quality of the view. This includes the protection of the historic ‘ridge and furrow earthworks’ that provide evidence of the area’s agricultural past, and although extensive could easily be harmed by overuse of the park by vehicles supporting large events.

Maintaining and adding to the tree stock of the park is part of the City Council’s ongoing management of the area as a public amenity. However, in managing this tree stock, maintaining visibility of the views over the City Centre will need to be
considered as a priority to preserve the park’s special historic interest and character.

**Change in the suburbs**

Development that rises above the general roof surface of the suburbs of St Clement’s and East Oxford that is conspicuous and draws attention away from the historic high buildings of the city centre would result in harm to the view. Some isolated examples of higher buildings of particular significance to the local area, such as the tower of St Edmund and St Frideswide’s Church and the rooftop chapel of St Stephen’s House are not considered to detract but would not be considered as a precedent for high scale development.

**In the Cherwell Valley**

Development that detracts from the character of the Cherwell Valley as a zone of mature trees wrapping around the City Centre would result in harm to both the attractiveness of the view and its historic interest as a city rising from its ‘ancient groves’.

**Change in the City Centre**

Change that disturbs the characteristics of the City Centre rooftops of dense short, steeply pitched roofs above which only the historic high buildings rise is likely to result in harm to the view. This is due to the thinly spread nature of the historic high buildings, each easily discerned rising above the lower level roof surface.

**Change in the background**

There is an opportunity to enhance the view by removing the pylons and overhead wires in the background of this view through ‘undergrounding’ the power lines.

Development that introduces tall building that stand out as bulky structures in the background to the historic high buildings would result in harm. Seacourt Tower in Botley is seen as a background feature in some angles from the park, creating a high skyline feature in an area that is otherwise characterised as the green background. Similar development that pushes the apparent city spread into the green backdrop would be regarded as harmful to the view.

The hills in the background include the suburban areas of Botley. These long established suburbs now have a canopy of trees that breaks up the mass of buildings and sustains the green characteristic of the background. Nevertheless, further development that increased the spread of housing along the hills in the background would detract from the characteristic of seeing the City Centre against the backdrop of the green hills that represent the city’s rural hinterland and would be regarded as harmful to the view.
Example of South Park view from the apex of the View Cone

Illustration 1: Simplified rendering of the South Park View
Illustration 2: Simplified rendering of the South Park View with analysis notes

- Large skyscape balanced by large open foreground and hills beyond the city centre
- Magdalen College Tower centres the view
- compact medieval city centre
- the background hills draw the eye to the city centre
- parkland trees frame the view and draw the eye down to the city centre
- the eye passes over the suburbs without being distracted by features that draw attention away from the city centre skyline
- London Place seen as historic urban edge
- glimpses to other historic rooftops between trees
- large, green parkland setting