The Friends of West Hunsbury Parks

Hunsbury Hill Country Park and Shelfleys Parks.

The Past, Present, and Future
West Hunsbury

West Hunsbury is an irregular rectangle of land in the south-west of the Borough of Northampton. It is bounded by the Ring Road to the north, the M1 to the south, the A5123 to the west and the old A43 Towcester road to the east. The area is split by Wootton Brook which flows south-east to north-west and is a tributary of the River Nene. In the south-east corner of West Hunsbury, beside the M1, is the Counties Crematorium and beside the Ring Road is the Northampton headquarters of Action for Communities in Rural England.

West Hunsbury is a residential area, although a part of the Wootton Brook flood plain accessed from the A43/A5123 roundabout has planning consent for commercial/light industrial use. Apart from a very small number of properties, building has been restricted to the north of Wootton Brook where, outside the flood plain, the land rises to Hunsbury Hill. Neighbourhood facilities in West Hunsbury include a church, doctor, dentist, chemist, shop, primary school, community centres and a public house. Close to these facilities is an area of sheltered housing.

Almost half of the area of West Hunsbury is open space and much of that open space consists of Hunsbury Hill Country Park and Shelfleys/Ladybridge Park. The Friends of West Hunsbury Parks work for the benefit of both parks even though there is a distance of almost a mile between them.

Hunsbury Hill Country Park

Hunsbury Hill Country Park is a large area at the top of the hill in the north-east corner of West Hunsbury. It is usually referred to as a country park, and is marked in road atlases as such, but has not so far been officially recognised. You will find no flower beds or surfaced paths in this park: it is, in fact, open countryside with informal stands of trees and expanses of open grassland.

Access

The main entrance and car park are situated on Hunsbury Hill Road opposite St Benedict’s Church. There is pedestrian access via two other Hunsbury Hill Road entrances and from Briar Hill, Camp Hill, East Hunsbury and the Towcester Road underpass.
Facilities

The park contains a hill fort, dating from about 500BC in the Iron Age, thought to be the original site of what is now the town of Northampton.

A historically important ancient drovers' road, known as Green Lanes, is still in use as a walking path up Hunsbury Hill and through the country park.

Adjacent to the park is the active Northamptonshire Ironstone Railway Trust, on the site of the 19th century ironstone workings. The Trust operates open days when visitors can take train rides through part of the park.

The park is a Local Wildlife Site where the trees, plants and grassland provide good habitats for wildflowers, plants, birds, butterflies, small mammals and other wildlife.

It is a natural play environment for children with its trees, open spaces and new play equipment, and also provides a well-used safe route for families walking to the local primary and secondary schools. There are benches at various points in the park and a picnic table near the play area.

Dog walkers are regular park users and are provided with an adequate amount of bins for dog-waste disposal. Increasing numbers of shoppers are using the park as a pleasant route to the local supermarket.
Hunsbury Hill Country Park is well-used by increasing numbers of people, both local and from other areas of Northamptonshire.

**Access**
There is open access to both these parks along Ladybridge Drive. Many walkways between the adjacent houses also provide access at points around the park boundaries. A gateway on Towcester Road near the crematorium also leads into the park. A large car park lies on the south side of Ladybridge Drive.

**Facilities**
The main feature of both parks is the Wootton Brook.

**Shelfleys/Ladybridge Parks**
The Shelfleys and Ladybridge Parks are in the southern part of West Hunsbury. They are separated by Ladybridge Drive and are comprised mainly of the flood plain of Wootton Brook. As in the Hill Park, you will find no flower beds, but these parks do have a slightly more "manicured" appearance and some of the paths are surfaced. There are large areas of trees and grassland which are rich with many types of wildlife, both animal and plant.

In Shelfleys Park the brook has been artificially widened to form Shelfleys Lake. The lake is visited by a variety of more unusual water birds, such as great-crested grebe and merganser as well as the more common swans, Canada and Greylag.
geese. There are benches and a picnic area in this park.

Ladybridge Park has an extensive children’s play area with new play equipment and a large open space for ball games and picnics.

There are benches and picnic tables. There are notices requiring dogs to be kept on leads at all entrances to this well defined play area. Both parks are provided with dog-waste disposal bins.

An area of Ladybridge Park is used as the headquarters of the Welland Valley Football Club.
Day passes for fishing are available for Shelfleys Lake.

The Shelfleys/Ladybridge Parks are very well-used and busy. The attraction of the lake, brook and play area result in great popularity with families, many of whom are willing to travel some distance in order to visit.

**West Hunsbury Parks in the Past**

The West Hunsbury parks have always been appreciated and well-used by local people. However, in the past they have suffered a long-term lack of care from Northampton Borough Council and other official bodies. This resulted in a general air of neglect – un-mown grass, overgrown hedges, untidy, weed-infested copses and a listed Ancient Monument falling into disastrous decline. The Hill Park was particularly badly affected by the dumping and burning of cars and its use as a motor cycle track. It was also targeted by vandals and saw frequent incidents of anti-social behaviour. Some people stopped using the park because of this.

**West Hunsbury Parks Now**

For the past few years the Friends of the West Hunsbury Parks have worked closely with Northampton Borough Council to reverse the parks’ decline. More litter bins and dog-waste disposal bins have been installed and are emptied more regularly. Mowing is also done on a regular basis. Bulbs have been planted and benches and picnic tables installed.
The Friends have also enlisted the help of the staff and students of Moulton College, and the Community Payback Scheme, run by the Northamptonshire Probation Trust, who have given valuable help with park maintenance.

Northamptonshire Ironstone Railway Trust manages the hedges alongside their track and boundaries.

The Friends have applied for, and received, financial help from various organisations such as the Community Foundation.

The Community Champion at the Mereway Tesco store gave a generous donation of toys, drinks and sweets for the opening of the new Shelfeys play area. Our local County and Borough Councillors have been generous with their time, advice and Empowerment funding to enable the purchase of materials needed for park maintenance. With our Borough Councillor’s help the replacement of two bridges over Wootton Brook was secured.

As a result of all the above, the parks no longer look neglected and seem to be respected and appreciated by the community which uses them.

The Friends managed to secure local funding, which was used to renew and improve the play facilities in both parks.

The Future of the Parks

It is hoped in the future to make more of the important history of the Hill Park and its archaeological features. Very few of the people who come into the park are aware of the history within it. The park is a lot more than a play area for children, a dogs’ paradise or a short cut to Tesco. The Friends are now applying for a Heritage Lottery Fund Grant in order to get work done on the hill fort and to raise public awareness of its importance.
Wootton Brook is a tributary of the River Nene and should be well-maintained as a part of the flood defences of the town of Northampton. The Friends will continue to lobby the Environment Agency to ensure that this is done.

The Hill Park is a Local Wildlife Site and work must be carried out with the help of the Wildlife Trust and NBC to restore, maintain and improve the habitats of both flora and fauna, including the establishment of wildflower meadows in both the West Hunsbury parks. It is hoped that eventually the Hill Park will meet the criteria for official recognition as a Country Park.

The Friends will continue their efforts to inform local residents about both parks and try to involve them in the ongoing work of park maintenance and improvement.
Hunsbury Hill Country Park

Site Visit 12/03/2012

Matt Johnson (Wildlife Trust)
And members of Friends of West Hunsbury Parks

The site visit was made to follow up the 2011 Local Wildlife Site (LWS) survey, to discuss the wildlife value of the park and potential improvements that could be made. As highlighted in the survey the site is of value to local wildlife with a good mixture of grassland and woodland habitats. The site visit identified areas within the park where it could be further enhanced for wildlife.

Currently the day to day management of the site is undertaken by Enterprise on behalf of Northampton Borough Council, while the ‘Friends Of’ group preserve and improve the park through work with the local community and specific projects.

It was decided that it would beneficial to compare both groups’ management plans to see how they complement each other how habitats are being managed and where there are opportunities to enhance the park for wildlife.

The following ideas were also discussed during the site visit.

There is a large amount of close mown grass and across the park which could provide a better habitat for wildlife with more variety. Suggestions include leaving areas of longer grassland alongside the hedgerows and identifying flower rich areas and leaving these to flower through the summer, with no mowing between May and July. The fort grassland is currently maintained by rabbit grazing and the grassland to the northeast has a good variety of longer and shorter areas. The schools wildflower bed in this area could be planted with a wildflower mix (see www.pictorialmeadows.co.uk).

The grassland in the northwest of the park surrounded by the railway line was identified as having the potential to be restored as a wildflower meadow. It currently has a good variety of grasses and wildflowers. However it has been unmanaged for a number of years and would benefit from management to prevent the coarse grasses from becoming dominant. Management would be either through a hay cut or grazing. Due to the interesting tussocky nature of the grassland, grazing would be preferred. The site could be fenced through the Wildlife Trust’s Inspiring Meadows project and native sheep used to graze for a month in spring and autumn. Around 20-30 sheep for two month-long periods would be recommended. The site could then be further enhanced with wildflower seed or green hay.

Besides the grasslands, one the priorities for the next few years would be the restoration of the pond areas which have almost dried out. These are an important habitat, as they provide the only source of water in the park. The ponds need dredging and trees removed from within the ponds and some from the surrounding edges to prevent over-shading.

The main woodland areas were planted as a nursery and are very dense. Thinning, followed by planting native shrubs and wildflowers in some of the cleared areas would improve the habitat. A woodland trail could then be created and bird boxes put up in conjunction with local schools/communities.

The fort area is an important asset to the park. Any future ideas to improve it should consider its wildlife value, however, a reduction in rabbit numbers and thinning of trees would be beneficial.
Work Plan

Short Term Aims
(12-24mths 2012/2013)

- Work with outside organisations to help with the maintenance of the parks and the preservation of the history within them. This will involve continuing the work with contacts already made with English Heritage, the Northamptonshire Probation Trust, and Moulton College;
- Hold open meetings in order to encourage more people to use their interests, hobbies and talents for the benefit of the Parks;
- Use the outcome of the public meeting to set up groups to carry out flora and fauna surveys within the parks, and to liaise with appropriate bodies, such as the Wildlife Trust;
- Improve the signage at the entrance to Hunsbury Hill Country Park; Organise small events in the Parks to coincide with national and local themed events, with the possibility of involving other local groups.
- Hold a Fund Raising event;
- Continue to work with Northampton Borough Council in an effort to improve their management of the Parks.

Long term Aims

(24-36mths)

- Continue to improve public access to the Park, and provide more information for the public;
- Assess effects of short term aims;
- Following this assessment, refine and continue those projects that have proved effective;
- Produce a leaflet which gives results of surveys carried out in first year.
“Friends” Aims and Objectives

The “Friends” is a non-political group of local residents committed to safeguarding the future of the parks through the protection and enhancements of its amenities, for the benefit of all.

The broad aims and objectives of the “Friends” are:-

- To provide a voice for all users of the parks, encouraging local participation and acting as a sounding board for new ideas, activities and developments;

- To promote and encourage the recreational use and enjoyment of the parks;

- To improve and extend the parks’ facilities to all;

- To promote the preservation of the parks through better planned management;

- To enhance and conserve the historical and natural features of the parks (including the Scheduled Ancient Monument Hunsbury Hill Iron Age Fort) and reverse its decline;

- To advance education in the parks and acknowledge its historical and environmental qualities;

- To secure funding to develop and promote better public use of the parks;

- To act as a link to Northampton Borough Council to ensure that the “Friends’” opinions (and thus those of interested parties) are taken into account when decisions are made regarding the management of the parks and their amenities.
Organisations that have helped and worked with the Friends.

- Northampton Borough Council;
- The local County Councillor;
- The local Borough Councillors – past and present;
- The Enterprise team from the Camp Hill Depot;
- Moulton College;
- The Community Payback Team from the Northamptonshire Probation Trust;
- Northampton Community Foundation;
- English Heritage;
- British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV);
- Northampton Volunteering Centre (NVC);
- Tesco Mereway Community Champion.

Without the support from these people and organisations, either through funding projects, working in the parks, or in an advisory capacity, the Friends would not be able to continue to work towards making our Parks a valued part of the local community and Northampton as a whole.

Our grateful thanks go to all of them.