

CHAPTER 4 OPEN SPACE

Introduction

Reading Borough Council has identified different areas of open space within the borough. Their uses, protection and accessibility are the subjects of this chapter.

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Major areas of open space

These areas are protected from any form of development which would result in a loss of open space or jeopardise their use or enjoyment by the public. The areas are:

- Thameside Meadows (Caversham Bridge to Kennet Mouth)
- Thameside Meadows (Scours Lane to Caversham Bridge)
- Prospect Park
- Kennet Meadows (and Kennet Valley)
- Rabson's Recreation Ground and the Cowsey
- Palmer Park
- West Reading Woodlands
- Clayfield Copse
- St Mary's Churchyard
- Forbury Gardens
- Mayor's Gardens
- Eldon Square
- King's Road Garden
- Abbey Ruins/Chestnut Walk
- Reading Cemetery
- University Campus
- Town Centre Gardens

The council identifies nine major uses of these sites:

1. Walking, cycling, jogging and general exercise
2. Dog exercise
3. Children's play
4. Formal sports
5. Special events
6. Water related (e.g. angling, canoeing, boating)
7. General recreation (e.g. picnic, sunbathing, informal sports)
8. Landscape and visual amenity (including public art)
9. Habitat and conservation.

- **Thameside Meadows**

These are natural recreation areas with a long history of public access. They host some of Reading's most high-profile events. From Caversham bridge to Kennet Mouth the major areas are Christchurch Meadows, Hills Meadow, Deans Farm and King's Meadow. Some recent landscape improvements have been made through contributions from Tesco Stores, but this is only adjacent to the superstore site. The area is in need of more investment to improve its role as a riverside path. There is a children's playground at Christchurch Meadows.

The section from Caversham Bridge to Scours Lane becomes increasingly rural and open as one travels west and open recreational use is dominant. Low key recreational use predominates on the meadows further west, where existing farm use is in decline. On the northern bank here is Caversham Court Gardens, a Grade II Registered Historic Garden. There is a children's playground at the Rivermead Leisure Complex.

- **Prospect Park**

This is a major area for informal recreation such as rounders or football but there is also more formal provision. It is also occasionally used as a venue for a fairground. Prospect Park is Registered Grade II in the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. The recent refurbishment of the Mansion House as a restaurant has attracted even more people to the park and has extended its hours of operation.

Prospect Park is the largest park in Reading and has one of the widest range of uses and facilities of any park in Reading. The special qualities of the park are the opportunities it provides for:

- Organised sports
- Conservation and grounds maintenance
- Children's facilities (there is a children's playground)
- Catering
- Special events and activities (funfairs, Reading Street Carnival, ballooning, Reading Society of Model Engineers)
- Casual recreation and dog walking

Prospect Park currently provides space and facilities for a number of sporting activities including football, cricket, pitch-and-putt, tennis and bowls.

The Borough Council states that the most important quality of the park is its ability to provide a recreational green space in the middle of Reading.

- **Kennet Meadows**

These are an important area of natural open space that extends well into the fabric of the town via Southcote linear park in the north and Waterloo playing fields in the east. They provide a pleasant surround for riverside walks and wildlife appreciation.

Enjoyment of this area is mainly achieved by passing through it, on foot or bike or by boat. The last is well catered for on the canal and is not dealt with in this report. The opportunities to sit and play or picnic are limited to the parks of Southcote Linear Park and Waterloo Meadows.

Much of the pedestrian access is on tracks where no legal right of way or access agreement exists. Cyclists are restricted to the towpath from Southcote to Rose Kiln Lane, however some footpaths are cycled on.

- ***Rabsons's Recreation Ground and The Cowsey***

These provide a major area of open space in the densely built-up Whitley area of Reading. The presence of major sport and play facilities mean that this is already a focal point for leisure activities. There is a children's playground at the leisure centre.

- ***Palmer Park***

Palmer Park provides a formal recreation area and stadium and is the major public open space in the east of the Borough. Close by are Alfred Sutton School playing fields which adjoin the University Campus. Together these areas form an important tract of open space. There are children's playgrounds at Palmer Park and the East Reading adventure playground.

- ***West Reading Woodlands***

These include Louse Hill Copse, Blundell's Copse, McIlroy Park (which together are now designated as a Local Nature Reserve) and Arthur Newbery Park. They form a significant area of open space for informal recreation in the very west of the Borough. There is a children's playground at Arthur Newbery Park.

- ***Clayfield Copse***

This is a mixed urban park containing a rough meadow and natural woodland. It is the site of the first local nature reserve in the Borough. The presence of sports facilities and showfield mean this is an important area of recreation land.

- ***Town Centre Gardens***

These sites are a vital ingredient in providing a town centre. They provide or have the potential to provide attractive houses amongst the otherwise bustling and urban environment of a busy town centre.

They comprise St Mary's Churchyard; Forbury Gardens (a Grade II Registered Historic Garden); the Mayor's Garden; Eldon Square; King's Road Garden and Abbey ruins/chestnut Walk. They are formal gardens and provide important quiet areas for workers and visitors in the town centre.

- ***St Mary's Churchyard***

This is an important as a public open space for the opportunities it offers for the following:

- Public access to peaceful surroundings in the town centre
- Landscape interest
- Heritage interest
- A link to the Oracle

At present, many people use St Mary's Churchyard merely as a short-cut, as the condition and layout of the site do not encourage people to spend time enjoying the surroundings.

- ***Forbury Gardens***

These are listed on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. They are also a scheduled ancient monument. The gardens are special for the opportunities they offer for horticultural interest, special events, heritage interest and enjoyment of pleasant surroundings. In recent months many improvements have been carried out including the refurbishment of the bandstand, the installation of new fencing, new seating and the planting of new shrub beds. Many people visit the Forbury Gardens to enjoy the floral

displays and ornamental gardens. The gardens provide an attractive environment for special events e.g. family days, band concerts and dancing displays.

- ***The Mayor's Garden***

This garden provides a much needed green space in the western end of the town centre. The garden has an obvious connection with the Hexagon and much of its current usage is an extension of the theatre bar area.

- ***Eldon Square***

This is a small, discreet garden behind the buildings on London road. It is surrounded by offices and some residential housing, as well as being close to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. It therefore has a particular role to play as a quiet haven where people can come for peaceful contemplation.

- ***King's Road Garden***

This site is on the edge of the town centre and, unlike Eldon Square, has a small catchment and its usage is therefore limited.

- ***Abbey Ruins/Chestnut Walk***

This is one of the most important historical sites in Reading. It currently features as part of the new Heritage Walk, and is also used for special events such as Waterfest and outdoor theatre performances.

Neighbourhood Recreation Areas

These areas of open space are identified recreational areas which the Council seeks to maintain and improve. Each site makes an important local contribution.

- Albert Road recreation ground
- Victoria recreation ground
- Alfred Sutton School
- Part of Courage's sports ground
- Ambrook Road children's playground and Goddard's Farm allotments
- Westfield Road recreation ground
- Southcote linear park
- Waterloo Meadows
- Albert road recreation ground (which includes formal sports facilities)
- Balmore Walk (which includes allotments)
- Beech Wood
- Beresford Road children's playground
- Blagrove recreation ground
- Cintra Park (which includes both formal sports facilities and allotments)
- Coley recreation ground (which includes formal sports facilities)
- Emmer Green recreation ground (which includes both formal sports facilities and allotments)
- Fairview recreation ground
- Part of Hemdean Bottom
- Henley Road allotments
- Kensington Road sports ground (which includes formal sports facilities)
- Long Barn Lane recreation ground
- Mapledurham playing fields (which include formal sports facilities)
- Marshland Square
- Portman Road children's playground

- Robert Hewitt children’s playground
- South Whitley Park (which includes formal sports facilities)
- Tofrek Terrace playing fields
- Whitley Wood recreation ground (which also includes formal sports facilities)
- Caversham Court
- Addington Road playing fields
- Pell Street/Katesgrove Lane children’s playground

Plus sites in the Wokingham District Council area that should be treated as “neighbourhood sites”:

- Sol Joel playing fields
- Bulmershe allotments.

Other Areas

In addition to the areas of open land owned and operated by the Council, other sites are available for public use, such as private grounds and school playing fields that are available for hire.

- Hill Primary School
- Caversham County Primary School
- Denefield Secondary School
- Downsway County Primary School
- Park Lane County Primary School
- Little Heath Comprehensive
- Calcot County Primary School
- Church End Lane County Primary School
- Upcroft County Junior School
- St Michael’s County Primary School
- Prospect School
- Wilson County Primary School
- Southcote County Primary School
- Oxford Road School
- Reading School
- St Joseph’s Convent
- Reading University
- Ashmead Comprehensive
- Reading College
- Sol Joel
- Maiden Erleigh Comprehensive
- Rivermead County Primary School
- Reading University/Bulmershe
- Bulmershe Comprehensive
- Newtown Primary School
- The Avenue School, Basingstoke Road
- Highdown School, Surley Row
- Reading Boys’ School, Erleigh Road
- Reading Girls School, Northumberland Avenue

Table 3.1 shows the extent of the dual-use of educational facilities either in or adjoining the Reading area.

Facility	Total in Reading Borough	Just Outside Reading Borough in
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		Greater Reading
Athletics	3	1
Bowls	4	0
Cricket	21	5
Football	52	30
Football (Junior)	8	4
Hockey	5	7
Multi-surface	4	0
Netball	4	19
Pitch and Putt	2	0
Rounders	4	0
Rugby	3	1
Tennis	62	38

Source: Reading Borough Council

Table 3.1 Educational Sports Facilities Available for Public Hire, 1992

N.B.: There are seasonal variations in sports demand and facility provision. The recently published Register of Recreational Land prepared for the Sports Council by Coopers and Lybrand arrived at a total of 80 football pitches for Reading. However, this figure extended to pitches that were unavailable for public use by clubs.

Protection of Open Space

The Borough Local Plan set out policies for the protection, maintenance and improvement of public open space. In essence, the policies are to resist development proposals which would result in a loss of open space or which would jeopardise the use or enjoyment by the public of "major areas of open space". Resources are to be concentrated into improving and maintaining facilities within "neighbourhood recreation areas".

The Borough Leisure Strategy, 1997, states:

"Land identified as a Major or Neighbourhood Site should be strongly protected, unless the "compensating improvements" or "replacement space" (Policy LE1 1 Borough Local Plan) offered fair exchange for the land taken, and promote the overall leisure provision in the town. For other recreational land, possible disposals should be considered on their merits, bearing in mind the current and potential recreational value of the land".

The Leisure and Arts Strategy acknowledges the threat to allotment sites, as a result of the gradual decline in allotment popularity. It states that where land is to be released for development, there should be a capital contribution from the development towards the improvement of the town's remaining allotment sites.

The Borough Council is considering a range of possible legal designations for certain areas of open space. The designations are:

- Local nature reserve
- Scheduled monument
- Fettered Land
- Open Space Charter
- Trusts or Covenants
- Sale and Lease Back

Details are contained in the 1997 Borough Leisure Strategy. Many existing sites, particularly the major sites are already covered by existing designations and covenants. Recognised designations for Reading sites include:

- Local nature Reserve - Clayfield Copse, West Reading Woodlands.
- Scheduled Historic Monument - Forbury Gardens, Abbey Ruins.
- Park and Gardens of Special Historic Interest - Forbury Gardens.

Standards of Provision

The Council's Playing Pitch Strategy considers sports facilities provision across the borough and the potential demand for sports facilities in the future. The report details carrying capacity and the quality of facilities with recommendations for improvement.

The sports pitches owned by the Council have been assessed in terms of their carrying capacity including the number of games they can support without undue wear and tear. (Analysis by Notts Sports and Landscape Development Unit). Although the analysis indicated that demand is largely met by existing supply, the view of people using the pitches is that they are overused and lacking in quality.

In October/November 1994, all the Council pitches were assessed for playing performance qualities (surface) and presentation qualities. All of the 14 sites met the standards required for playing pitches. 11 of the sites satisfied the parking requirements, and the remaining three sites were identified as having no scope for improvement.

The pavilions were also assessed. 7 met the standards set, 4 were seen as being capable of improvement and 3 were considered unsuitable for any improvement.

The same assessment was made to cricket squares. All of the 9 sites satisfied the grounds requirements and all but one of the sites complied with the parking criteria. However, only 4 of the pavilions met the standard with the remaining 5 capable of improvement.

The council's Playing Pitch Strategy considers sports facility provision across the borough and latent demand.

Due to Reading's restricted administrative boundaries many sports groups use school sports facilities in Greater Reading, which are outside the borough boundaries. Seasonal variations in demand will, of course, affect these results.

Amount of Open Space in Reading

No one comprehensive survey of the amount of open land in the borough has been undertaken. However, the extent of the urban area is thought to be approximately 89% with 11% remaining as rural areas or open spaces within the town.

The National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) produced recommendations for outdoor play space which form a statement of the amount of land required per 1,000 population. The standard recommends 2.43 hectares (6 acres) of outdoor playing space per 1,000 population. This is commonly known as the 6 acre standard and is nationally accepted as an appropriate indicator of open space provision. This standard does not take account of land which may be required for informal recreation such as playing, walking or informal open space.

The type of open space which can be included in the calculations show that all but one ward in Reading have a shortfall in outdoor amenity space when compared with the standard. Souhtcote Ward has a level of open space in excess of the minimum standards due to the location of the largest park in the borough within the ward boundaries – Prospect Park. Table 3.2 illustrates the variations between the Reading wards.

Ward	Population 1991	Open Space (HA)	NPFA Standard
Southcote	8108	51.71	6.38
Park	8018	18.25	2.26
Redlands	7647	15.32	2.00
Whitley	9330	15.90	1.70
Battle	8458	12.90	1.53
Church	7766	11.20	1.44
Thames	8264	11.80	1.43
Minster	8334	10.07	1.21
Abbey	9444	11.14	1.18
Peppard	9563	9.50	1.00
Katesgrove	7634	6.80	0.89
Tilehurst	8208	6.87	0.84
Kentwood	8946	3.40	0.38
Caversham	9767	1.95	0.20
Norcot	9327	1.20	0.13
All wards	198,877	176.81	0.89

Table 3.2 Outdoor Playing Space Per Ward

Accessibility of Open Space

Another standard that can be used to assess open space is the Greater London Development Plan (GLDP) Accessibility Index. Many of the parks within Reading fall into the GLDP category of "Local or Small Parks and Linear Open Spaces". These are approximately 2 hectares in size and are considered accessible by foot to residents within 400 metres of the park boundaries. Both Prospect and Palmer Parks are much larger in size and fall within the next category of "District Park", which is accessible by people within 1.2km of the park boundaries.

Areas of the borough having difficulty in easily accessing parks are parts of Tilehurst, Whitley, the town centre and part of East Caversham. The assessment does show that the majority of Reading's densely populated areas have reasonable access to parks. Other areas which fall outside the accessibility limits have open spaces of some kind that are excluded from the calculation, such as, the Kennet Valley, Thameside Meadows, Emmer Green golf course, Hemdean Bottom and Caversham Park Village.

Allotment Provision

Allotments have a significant value, both in terms of amenity and local recreational provision. The Leisure Service of the council lets allotments to local residents for this purpose. Table 3.4 shows the number of allotments let and unlet in 1995.

Site	Total	Let	Unlet	Leased
Amersham Road	101	41	60	(18)
Ardler Road	6	6	0	
Ashampstead Road	8	8	0	
Balmore	26	24	2	
Bulmershe	235	212	23	(9)
Caversham Court	25	25	0	

Circuit Lane	49	46	3	
Coley Park	46	41	5	
Cow Lane	56	52	4	
George Street	6	6	0	
Goddards Farm	61	43	18	
Grove Road	30	26	4	
Henley Road Cemetery	153	117	36	
Lower Southcote	85	70	15	
Meadway	30	26	4	
Mickbeggar	20	19	1	
Newcastle Road	36	32	4	
Oakley Road	30	29	1	
Oak Tree Road	100	87	13	
Rodway Road	11	9	2	
Scours lane	140	104	36	
Victoria Road	26	22	4	
Waterloo Meadows	67	49	18	
Total	1347	1094	253	(30)

Source; Reading Borough Council
Table 3.4 Allotment Provision, 1995

Note: Amersham, Road and Elm Park have been developed for housing.

The Borough Council estimated in November 1998 that there were 1296 plots available for rent at the beginning over 1998, of which 259 were currently vacant.

Loss of Open Space

Open space has been identified by the Planning Service as an important local resource which contributes to local environmental quality. As such, planning applications which affect open space in some way are monitored to determine loss as well as gain.

An assessment of new development between 31 March 1993 to 1 April 1995 illustrates that housing development in the borough has resulted in a loss of approximately 114,127 square metres (11.4 ha) of open land that has not previously been built on. This land had previously been used mainly as allotments, open space, and part of a private sports ground.

Housing development on these sites has however secured environmental improvements and new leisure facilities for existing areas of public open space and the addition of 5,838 square metres of public open space.

Site	Previous Use	Development	Area Lost (m ²)	Area Gained (m ²)
1993/1994				
Amersham Road	Allotments	Housing	14,700	73
Deans Farm	Floodplain	Housing	1,350	4,990
Ambrook Road	Allotments	Housing	7,770	300
Swallowfield Drive	Park	Housing	10,750	0
Garnet Hill	Vacant/Infill	Housing	2,000	0
Monks Barn	Children's Home	Housing	13,000	0
Northumberland Ave	Infill	Housing	500	0
Whitley Wood Road	Backland	Housing	3,500	0
Morgan Road	Backland	Housing	3,000	0
Courages	Sports Ground	Housing	20,000	0

Liebenrood Road	Open Space	Housing	1,000	0
TOTALS			77,570	5,363
1994/1995				
Kiln Road	Open Space	Housing	9,100	0
Richfield Avenue	Open Space	Golf Building	857	0
Bennet Road	Vacant/Infill	Commercial	6,000	0
Scours Lane	Sports Ground	Gold Building	400	0
Whitley Wood Lane	Allotments	Housing	10,000	475
Caroline Street	Open Space	Housing	1,200	0
The Cowsey	Open Space	Housing	9,000	0
Sub Total			36,557	475
TOTALS			114,127	5,838

Source: Reading Borough Council
Table 3.3 - Loss of Previously Unbuilt Land to Development 1993/95

Note: Some of this data was updated in November 1999.:

Open Space Gained

- Deans Farm (Caversham) - open space gain of 4.3 ha
- The Cowsey (church) - open space gain of 0.9 ha
- Courage Sports Ground - open space gain 1.75 ha (including two football pitches)
- Adjacent to Wandsworth Court, Kiln road (Peppard) - open space gain of 0.9 ha
- Shipnells Farm - open space gain of 6.77 ha plus 3.58 ha riding school/open space
- Whitley Wood Allotments - open space gain of 1.02 ha

Main Issues

- To protect and manage public open space in accordance with the policies in the Borough Local Plan
- To ensure where possible that no development is allowed which would jeopardise the use or enjoyment by the public of "major areas of open space"
- To improve and maintain facilities within "neighbourhood recreation areas"
- To maintain, protect and improve playing pitches according to the details contained in the Borough Council's 1995 "Playing Pitch Strategy"
- To maintain, protect and improve public open spaces according to the details contained in the Borough Council's 1997 "Leisure and Arts Strategy"
- To maintain, protect and improve the woodlands in Reading according to the council's "Woodlands Plan".

Key contact(s)

For further information, please contact Adrian Lawson on 0118 939 0376.

Reference Documents

- Reading Borough Council Local Plan. Adopted 14 October 1998
- Reading Borough Council “Leisure and Arts Strategy”. January 1997
- Reading Borough Council “Playing Pitch Strategy”. October 1995
- Reading Borough Council “Woodlands Plan”
- Reading Borough Council Agenda 21. October 1996.