

Internal heritage advice, made on the 24th January 2012 on the scheme as originally submitted.

Port Meadow View

Port Meadow is an ancient area of open, grazed meadow (and common land) between the Thames and the Oxford Canal which has changed little since prehistoric times and allows for unimpeded views to the skyline of Oxford. Port Meadow is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a Scheduled Ancient Monument and a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC), and contains well preserved archaeological remains such as ring ditches, barrows and associated enclosures, mainly dating to the later prehistoric period (2000-50BC).

There are views from various parts of the common, as well as from the Thames towpath, enabling a dynamic viewing experience. When moving along the towpath the view remains essentially the same, although immediately from the west of Oxford the skyline buildings are slightly wider spaced than when viewed from the north.

Only the tops of buildings are visible as delicate spikes, spread relatively evenly across the horizon. There is the distinctive domed form of the Baroque style Radcliffe Camera and the prominent spire of the University Church of St Mary's in the centre, Other spires are scattered evenly across the skyline, with the spire of St Philip and St James Church on the extreme left marking the location of Gothic North Oxford and the distinctive square Italianate campanile of St Barnabas on the extreme right marking the western edge of Jericho. The light colour of the buildings means they stand out against the dark band of trees.

This is a low lying, distant and expansive view across the Thames Floodplain towards the centre of Oxford, enjoyed by visitors to Port Meadow and walkers on the Thames Path National Trail. There is virtually no topographic variation in the view except for the wooded hills of East Oxford which are just visible in the background to the left of the view. The open and historic grazed common land of Port Meadow plays an important part in the character of the view, providing an historic green setting to the city. The line of trees along the Oxford Canal and a variety of more ornamental trees in the gardens of North Oxford reinforce this green setting, from which the 'dreaming spires' emerge, seen against the open skyline. The green fore and middle grounds contrast with the colour and texture of the buildings on the skyline, enabling the skyline buildings to stand out in silhouette. The bulky form of the Department of Engineering and the adjacent Denys Wilkinson Building (department of Physics) detract the eye from the fine grained scale and slender form of the spires, towers and domes that are characteristic of the skyline in this view. The

cluster of red brick buildings in the near middle ground act in the same way, drawing the eye away from the more intricate buildings behind. The expansiveness of the view means that the spires, towers and domes appear relatively small and could be easily dominated or obscured, compromising their pre-eminence.

Impacts

Photomontages show that from some parts of the meadow the view of the St Barnabas campanile will be obscured with the long unrelieved roof line cutting across in front of it. This impact will be more noticeable in winter months without leaves on the trees.

The assessment of the view explains that the sky line is fragile and its significance harmed by new buildings that would compete by virtue of their scale and form or by obscuring views if their height breaks through the layers of greenery within the view.

In either instance this would be a harmful impact that on its own would erode the heritage values the view holds and if repeated elsewhere would have a far greater cumulative impact.

There is no justification for this harm (it is accepted that this likely impact has only just come to light following a request for this aspect of the proposal to be evaluated) and so the proposal would conflict with the advice and guidance in PPS5 (policy HE.6, HE.9). Additional landscaping, if it was possible to achieve, is unlikely to be sufficient mitigation – simply hiding an object in a view may temporarily help to reduce a visual or aesthetic impact, but it does not resolve the conflict with the sites evidential, architectural and historic values.