

Midsummer Common

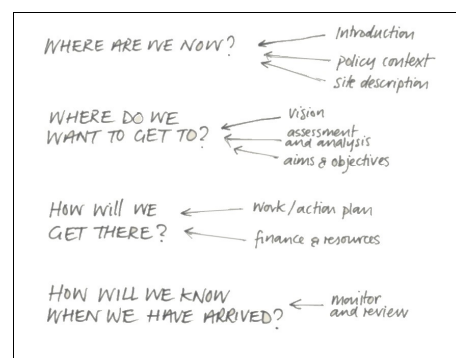
[draft] Management Plan 2019-2024

At the beginning of this century, the *Environment Sub-Committee* of the House of Commons focused attention on public parks and their significance, making recommendations about funding and their future management. The *Urban White Paper* in 2000 shared the concerns and set out the government's intentions to lead and develop a shared vision for the future of our parks, play areas and open spaces and to improve information on their quality and quantity and on the way in which they are used and maintained.

At the same time, the **Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment** was set up by the government and one of its tasks was to bring excellence to the design and management of parks and public space in our towns and cities. To achieve this, the **Commission** called on local authorities to produce Management Plans for their green spaces and published an illustrated Guide (see right) for this purpose.



The Guide calls for any Plan to hold a comprehensive list of subject areas and to present these in a logical order (see left). It goes on to show how this might be done (see right). This Plan for Midsummer Common follows the order given in the Guide.



1: WHERE WE ARE NOW

1.1 Introduction

Midsummer Common has a rich history¹. It is registered as 'common land' under the *Commons Registration Act 1965*². The Register contains the following map showing its boundary. It should be noted that Ferry House, the Fort St George pub, Midsummer House restaurant and the adjacent pound are not part of the Common. It should also be noted that a small part of the Common has been mistakenly left off the map in the Register and awaits correction³. Midsummer Common is now owned and managed by Cambridge City Council.

1. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/MidsummerCommon.pdf>.

2. Midsummer Common has the unit number CL59 in the Register held by Cambridgeshire County Council.

3. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Boundary/page.html>.



1.2 Policy context

Midsummer Common is within Cambridge Conservation Area No 1 (Central) so any development works would require planning permission and would have to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the area. The trees have protection afforded to them by being located within a Conservation Area. A series of Definitive Footpaths cross the site and are Rights of Way as recorded by Cambridgeshire County Council.

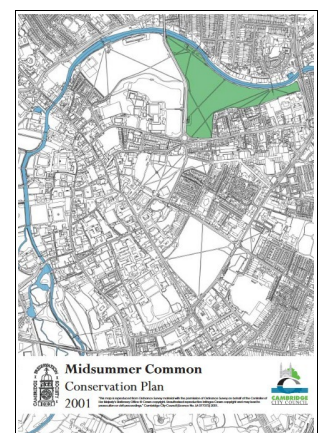
The Commons Register entry for Midsummer Common shows that the rights of common are to "graze geldings, mares and cows from 1st April to 30th November in each year to a total of 20 beasts". A local vet keeps a herd of Red Poll cows on the Common during that period.



Being 'common land', Midsummer Common is subject to national laws and policy⁴. The Urban White Paper set out the government's intentions and Cambridge City Council responded by publishing a Conservation Plan⁵ for Midsummer Common in 2001 (see right⁶). The first 4 chapters set the scene, describe and assess the site, and define the key issues. In chapter 5 the Council lists all the significant features and qualities that it considered desirable to pass on to future generations and sets down 3 Conservation policies to be followed:

1. conserve and enhance the relationship between Midsummer Common and its surroundings;
2. improve Midsummer Common as a high quality space; and
3. maintain the informal character of Midsummer Common.

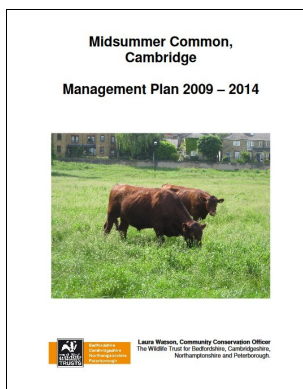
The following chapter shows how these policies might be implemented.



4. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/Legal.pdf>.

5. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/ConservationPlan.pdf>.

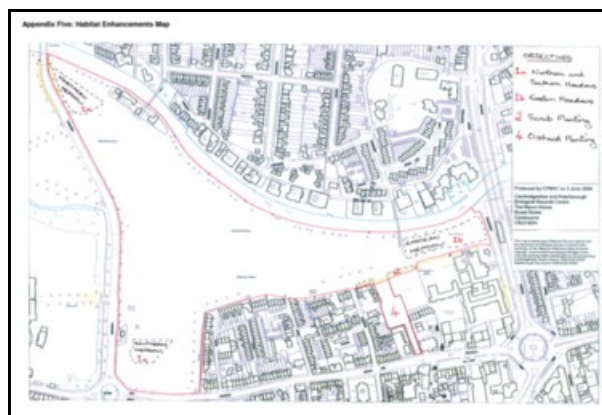
6. It is interesting to see that the map shows Midsummer Common without that part which is now the Community Orchard.



Eight years later, the Council commissioned the Wildlife Trust to produce a Management Plan⁷ for Midsummer Common for the period 2009-14 (see left). The Plan says that it "should be read in conjunction with the Midsummer Common Conservation Plan 2001". Chapters 1 and 2 describe and evaluate the site. Chapter 3 deals with site management and goes on to list and describe seven objectives:

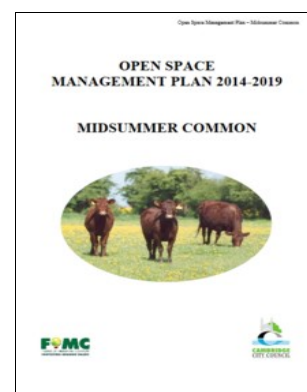
1. enhance the species richness of the grassland to achieve a more natural floodplain grassland habitat;
2. maintain and enhance the overall habitat diversity of the common;
3. maintain the trees so as to contribute to the character of the common and its value for biodiversity;
4. enhance the Pound through the creation of a community orchard;
5. maintain and improve the site infrastructure;
6. enhance the visitor experience; and
7. put in place administrative arrangements to ensure the coordinated implementation of this Management Plan.

One map in the Appendix (see right) shows how the Common might be enhanced with two meadows, a scrub planting and an orchard planting. It goes on to give a month-by-month schedule to achieve these changes. The southern meadow was created by Friends of Midsummer Common (FoMC) volunteers but failed to be long lasting. The northern and eastern meadows and scrub planting were never started. The Orchard was created, again by FoMC volunteers, and remains a very successful enhancement to the Common.



When this Management Plan expired in 2014, FoMC helped the Council produce a new one covering 2014-2019⁸ (see right). In chapter 3 there is a Vision Statement saying that "The vision for the future of Midsummer Common will be to continue to provide the quality of open space at Midsummer Common and to be led on this by the Friends group, stakeholder and local community". It goes on to list six objectives:

1. maintain and enhance the overall habitat diversity of the Common;
2. maintain the trees so as to contribute to the character of the Common and its value for biodiversity;
3. maintain and improve the site infrastructure;
4. enhance the visitor experience;
5. manage the maintenance and on-going work on Midsummer Common; and
6. put in place administrative arrangements to ensure the coordinated implementation of this Management Plan.



Chapter 4 described how these might be achieved.

7. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/ManagementPlan2009.pdf>.

8. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/ManagementPlan2014.pdf>

1.3 Site description

Midsummer Common is well shown by Google Earth (see right). It is a grassed flood plain with a surface of alluvium and river-gravel terraces. The height of the land rises from approximately 4.9m OD on the flood plain to 12.7m OD on the Newmarket Road. The solid geology on the higher ground is Gault Clay⁹.

It is bounded by the river Cam to the north, major roads to the east and west, and housing in the south. Trees stretch along the borders and some footpaths. The arrowed extension is known as the Community Orchard and is filled with young fruit trees.



2: WHERE DO WE WANT TO GET TO

2.1 Vision

In the words of the Guide:

"A vision provides a valuable reminder of the longevity of the place and at the same time an ideal view of the future of the site. While the vision must remain realistic, it should also accommodate optimism and hope, encouraging support and commitment that go beyond any current difficulties and constraints, as well as beyond the immediate aims and objectives. It should represent potential attainment underpinned by belief in the true value of the green space."

The 2014-2019 Management Plan for Midsummer Common had a Vision Statement (see above) and the reader might ask why there is a need to change it. But times change and we now see the future of green spaces in a different light. We should reflect this in a new Vision Statement:

Midsummer Common has a long respected history which should be maintained whilst looking at ways to enhance the overall habitat diversity of the green space to bring greater enjoyment to the people of Cambridge.

2.2 Assessment and Analysis

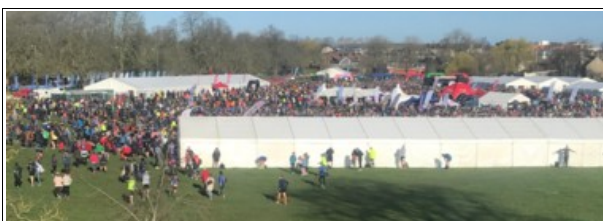
A SWOT analysis - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats - is a recommended assessment technique. It can be applied at a 'broad-brush' level across the whole site to help define the most important features. Then there is the Green Flag Award which is the national standard for green spaces and provides an excellent framework for a site assessment.

9. See "The Geology of the Middle Cam Valley, Cambridgeshire, UK" by Steve Boreham and Karolina Leszczynska in Quaternary 2019, 2, 24; doi:10.3390/quat2030024.

Midsummer Common is a long established green space near the centre of Cambridge which is open to public access. That is its primary strength. A major weakness is that the site has been of low ecological significance. The most important and valuable features of the green space are also the most vulnerable and fragile, and it is particularly important to find opportunities to make these less vulnerable. And to find ways to fend off threats that may further endanger them.

- A welcoming place;
- Healthy, safe and secure;
- Well maintained and clean;
- Sustainability;
- Conservation and heritage;
- Community involvement;
- Marketing;
- Management.

The Green Flag scheme focuses on a number of themes which are listed to the left. Midsummer Common offers a daily welcome to those walking their dog or crossing on a bicycle. It welcomes those who are assembling for a half marathon, attending a fair or circus, watching fireworks or just flying a kite. Many families come to see the grazing cows. And the Community Orchard is a place to relax and have a picnic. But it has to be remembered that many of these activities have limitations and deserve careful management.



Those who picnic on the Common or fly their kites will generally see it is a healthy, safe and secure place to be. But there are dangers. Good health is threatened by toxocariasis which is spread by dog faeces - not every dog walker complies with the law and cleans up the mess¹⁰. Trees and plants can carry pests and diseases which cause health problems to humans. The horse chestnut trees along Victoria Avenue might fall on people because they are old and suffering from the leaf miner moth and bleeding canker. The caterpillars of oak processionary moth are pests of oak trees and a hazard to human and animal health. Stinging nettles and brambles that grow on the Common are best avoided but do raise potential health risks. Vehicle movements across the Common are a safety issues and there have been serious human injuries in the past. Cyclists compete with pedestrians on the narrow footpaths and the potential conflict is magnified at night time. This is a growing danger

10. Under the law, a person who doesn't clean up after their dog may face an on-the-spot fine of up to £80. If a person refuses to pay they can be taken to the local Magistrates Court for the dog fouling offence and fined up to £1,000.

as electric bikes and scooters become more evident. Walking across the Common at night can be dangerous - should the Common be left in darkness to discourage transit or should all the footpaths be lit to expose potential troublemakers? Dogs have bitten pedestrians and cattle, and cattle have been known to kill people. All these health and safety risks need recognition and careful management.

Cambridge City Council is responsible for maintaining and cleaning the Common although some of the footpaths and lighting is the responsibility of the County Council. There are many litter and dog mess bins and daily collection by the City Council but litter can be a problem especially when there are events on the Common. Disposal of needles from drug users is a difficult problem.

Signage is plentiful on the Common. Most entrances have signs encouraging litter disposal and banning fires and camping. Further signs warn visitors about the grazing cattle and telling them to keep dogs under control and not to feed or chase the cattle. FoMC have their own notice board and website showing community involvement. There has been public pressure over time to paint the footpaths to control cyclists - speed warnings and separation from pedestrians - but these have not gained overall public support. FoMC has also thought about signing the Orchard which is not an obvious extension of the main Common.



The Council markets the Common to attract event organisers and produce revenue. The Council has management meetings with stakeholders to monitor overall performance: conservation and sustainability are among the issues reviewed. FoMC organises volunteers to help the Council with work tasks in the Orchard and on the main Common.

2.3 Aims and Objectives

Aims are fairly general statements of intent; they provide a framework to describe the direction that site management should follow. They focus on outcomes rather than more specific outputs. Objectives underpin the aims, and describe more specifically how the people responsible for the site intend to achieve the aims.

Management aims to keep Midsummer Common in good and sustainable condition for the benefit of visitors and to enhance its ecological appeal.

The two preceding Management Plans list 13 objectives between them and they remain as relevant today as they did when first listed. But they might be presented in a different order and with some additions reflecting changed ambitions. This new Management Plan presents eight objectives under two headings:

Better manage what is already there

Objective 1. Put in place the necessary administrative arrangements to ensure the coordinated implementation of this Management Plan. Make public, through the Cambridge City website, the timing of regular maintenance activities such as grass cutting, the set-up and duration of all events and the start of any major developments planned for the Common. Consult and engage all stakeholders in the process and take notice of ongoing planning developments.

Objective 2. Maintain and improve the physical infrastructure on the Common whilst maintaining its informal character. Consult stakeholders on any proposed developments on the Common and tightly manage on-going works.

Objective 3. Maintain and improve the environment and biodiversity on the Common. Keep the grassland and trees in good condition so as to contribute to the character of the Common and its value for biodiversity. Encourage participation by volunteers from the local community.

Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council are preparing the Greater Cambridge Local Plan drawing on a green spaces evidence base study. The mapping divides the Common into areas of improved grassland, poor semi-improved grassland, floodplain grazing marsh, scattered scrub and scattered trees¹¹.

The Common is predominately grassland and the encouragement of other plants to bolster biodiversity might not find universal favour. Areas of nettle are a valuable resource for a cohort of insects, including butterfly species. Thistles provide a late summer nectar source for bees. However, their presence is traditionally viewed as a sign of poor grassland management. They must not be allowed to dominate the grassland but must be recognised as necessary to maintain and enhance the overall habitat diversity of the Common. They need to be controlled in some way.



It should be possible to restrict nettles to distinct areas of the Common as shown in red on the adjacent map; this would keep them away from events, play areas, footpaths, pinch points along railings, and in front of houses. An early cutting elsewhere in March or April would be before the majority of butterfly eggs are laid. The Creeping and Spear thistle are best controlled through an early July cut to reduce flowers and subsequent seed load; any earlier, they will bounce back. Bramble on the Common should be controlled through more regular cutting to prevent new stands establishing.



The banks between Auckland Road and Cambridge Riverside (except in front of the Orchard) are currently dominated by nettles, brambles and thistles. The first Management Plan called for these to be controlled by regular cutting of the nettles, topping of the thistles and hand pulling the brambles. It recognised that it could take a couple of years to reduce the cover of the weeds and for the banks to be ready for shrub planting. There were objections to this practice.

It is now suggested that the Council clear (outside of March - August bird nesting) and then regularly cut a 2m swath along the allotment fence and houses line to prevent encroachment. The frontage should be included in topping cuts of the Common to ensure the bramble does not encroach beyond the toe of the bank. The patch should then be divided in 3 or 4 units to be flailed in winter (post berries) on an annual rotation to promote new growth and enhanced fruit. Hopefully this means that established bramble is retained for fruit pickers and wildlife.

11. See <https://luc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=ef76bc78944c48ac98d16c3e0dc1f270>.

Objective 4. Maintain and improve the Community Orchard. The 2009-14 Management Plan called for the "creation of a Community Orchard". FoMC agreed to take on this task and presented the Council with a proposal¹².



Since it was created in 2010, FoMC has managed and worked in the Orchard under Council licence. The Council provided an initial grant of £1,500 for the purchase of fruit trees and necessary tools and equipment. It has continued to help fund maintenance costs and cover volunteer insurance at about £500 per annum. And it has given advice and helped solve problems as they arose. The rest has come from FoMC members and donations. Changes and funding need to be kept under review. And public right of access remains an outstanding issue for the County Council to resolve¹³.

Objective 5. Enforce the law and policy in controlling the movement of vehicles, bicycles and other wheeled carriers over the Common.

Laws govern the right to drive and park motorised vehicles on common land in England¹⁴. These laws are often flouted on Midsummer Common especially by the properties whose sole means of vehicular access is across the Common. The law allows residents in those properties to drive across the Common and park on their own land. But not park on the Common. Until enforcement takes place, there will be unsightly parking of vehicles on the Common and damage to the grassland. Better ways must be found to enforce the law.

Cycling is a popular way to move around Cambridge and is supported by government policy. But the volume and speed of cycle traffic on the Common is quite frightening. Those walking on the footpaths, especially with children or dogs, face a constant threat from the sheer volume of traffic. Collisions occur and more serious accidents threaten. Increasing use of electric bikes and scooters adds to the danger. The situation needs constant monitoring with safeguards ready to activate.

Objective 6. Work with all stakeholders in drawing up the annual programme of events on the Common and ensure that these are well advertised. Work with organisers to ensure that events have minimal impact on the Common and cause no nuisance to local residents. Gather and report grievances made by those attending events and by those living nearby.

Manage what might change

Objective 7. Follow national policy by increasing the number and variety of trees on the Common.

The Government published the *Natural Environment White Paper* in 2011. This paper recognises the importance of trees and woodlands in providing valuable ecosystem services. The health of trees is essential for societal wellbeing and it calls for a major increase in the area of woodland in England, as well as better management of existing woodland. In 2013, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published the Government's *Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement*. It particularly wanted to see more trees and woodlands in and around our towns and cities where they can safeguard clean water, help manage flood risk and improve biodiversity.

12. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Orchard/proposal.html>.

13. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Boundary/page.html>.

14. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Vehicles/page.html>.

Cambridge City Council has a Citywide Tree Strategy for 2016-2026¹⁵. Its integrated management approach to achieving the Council's long term vision has the following aims:□

- to sustainably manage the Council's own trees and those it manages by agreement;
- to foster a resilient tree population that responds to the impacts of climate change and urban expansion;
- to raise awareness of trees being a vital community asset, through promoting continued research, through education via the provision of advice and through partnership working; and
- to make efficient and strategic use of the Council's regulatory powers for the protection of trees of current and future value.

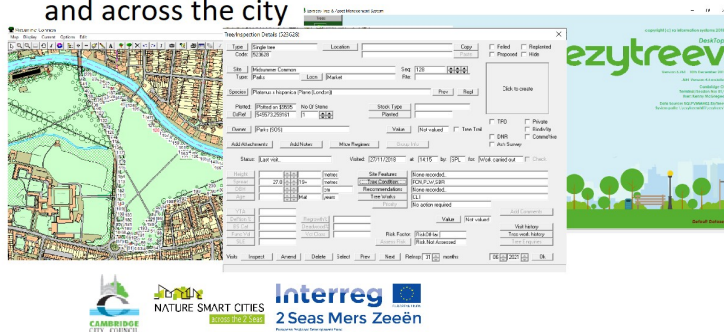
Three stated policies are particularly relevant to this Management Plan for Midsummer Common:

POLICY E1: The Council will encourage and continue to seek new opportunities for the planting of large canopy trees in appropriate locations.

POLICY E2: The Council will continue to ensure and encourage a diversity of tree species and ages.

POLICY E5: The Council will educate and encourage the community to participate in promoting and maintaining Cambridge's urban forest.

How the Tree Team works on Midsummers Common and across the city



The Council Tree team keeps a record of all the trees on the Common, monitors their health, manages their pruning and any felling, and arranges new plantings.

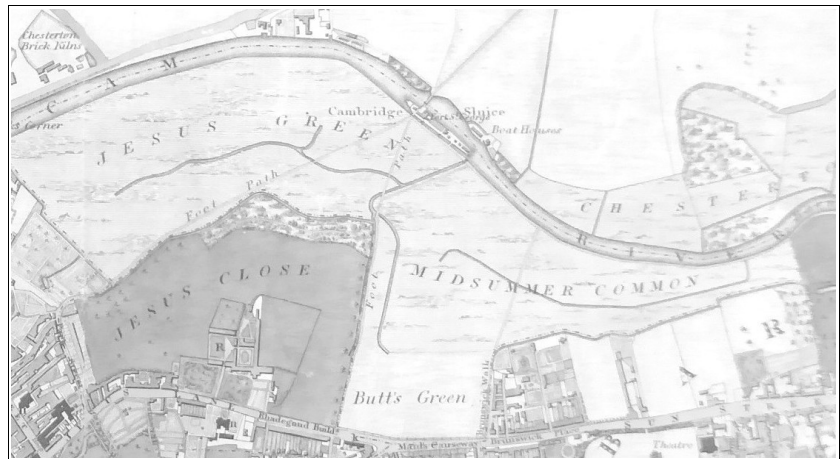
The tree planting on the main Common has been kept to the perimeter with the exception of a small avenue leading to the buildings by the river and a denser infilling of Butt Green to soften the surrounding urban development. The 2001 Conservation Plan said that "with a few notable exceptions the condition of the trees on the Common is generally poor". It went on to say that "there is considerable scope for enhancing the aesthetic quality of the Common and its setting, particularly in relation to the tree planting which is so important to its character". Some planting has taken place but ways must now be found to increase the number and variety of trees on the Common.



15. See <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/tree-strategy>.

Objective 8. Enhance the species richness and diversity of the grassland to achieve a more natural floodplain habitat. Consider opening up a drainage ditch running under the Common.

Baker's 1830 map of Midsummer Common (see right) shows drainage ditches across Jesus Green and Midsummer Common. Most of



of the ditches have been covered over leaving only a narrow strip of water visible between Jesus College and Jesus Green and stopping just before Victoria Avenue. The City Council have allocated s.106 funds to enhance the downstream end of this ditch for wildlife by removing the existing concrete bank and increasing aquatic plant diversity.

The water from this ditch flows under the road and Midsummer Common ending up in the river Cam somewhere below the Fort St George pub. It should be possible to re-expose this ditch, in whole or part, by breaking into the pipe and grading a naturalistic ditch following the historic lines to the existing engineered outfalls. Something similar has been done on Logan's Meadow (see right). Some sections of pipe could be retained to enable grass crossing points for people and cattle to move around the Common¹⁶. Limited planting of native willow pollards along the length could be considered to further enhance the floodplain landscape and ecology. Species likely to colonise or make use of the new habitat include water vole, various dragonfly and Damselfly species, Moorhen, Kingfisher, Soprano Pipistrelle bats etc.



This project would enhance the species richness and diversity of the grassland but not without significant changes to current activities on the Common. People and vehicle movements would be impaired and events could be seriously affected. A careful appraisal and SWOT analysis is necessary. If potential problems can be overcome and the public and stakeholders are in favour, the City Council could include the project within its new Biodiversity Strategy (currently being drafted) and in future budget allocations.

3: HOW WILL WE GET THERE?

- 3.1 Work/action plans
- 3.2 Finance and resources

4: HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN WE HAVE ARRIVED?

- 4.1 Monitor and review

¹⁶. Section 38 consent from the Planning Inspectorate might be required as linear features like a ditch are considered a barrier to access.