

Speech to tree-planting ceremony, 2 December 2016

A very warm welcome to everybody here on behalf of Friends of Warneford Meadow. It's gratifying to see so many of you.

I'm specially pleased to welcome Andrew Smith, our local MP, who will plant this mulberry tree shortly. I first met Andrew, or Secretary of State as I then had to call him, across a table in the Cabinet Office: I'm sure he's enjoying himself much more representing the people of East Oxford full-time, even as he regrets the change of government that brought this about. I'm also very pleased to welcome Jane Fossey and other representatives from the Oxford Health Trust, who manage the Warneford Hospital; also representatives from NHS Forest; from the Council to Protect Rural England, who gave us valuable advice in the course of our campaign; representatives from the Headington Care Home adjoining the Meadow; and some of our local councillors.

I had a short speech ready in case it was wet; but as it's fine – just – you'll have to suffer the long version!

Look around you at this lovely meadow: a slice of countryside in an increasingly densely built-up city.

If Friends of Warneford Meadow hadn't acted as we did ten years ago, where you are standing would probably have been covered in tarmac, or at best a narrow green corridor overshadowed by blocks of student housing.

Proposals for building on the Meadow were first included in the Oxford Local Plan in around 2003. It was probably a mistake in retrospect, but local people didn't get very agitated at the time. Most people don't realise that it's the Plan that matters in determining what gets built, not just the planning application.

However, when applications for planning permission were actually submitted, in summer 2006, for a wide mix of alternative uses including student housing and offices, many local residents became very concerned at the threat to their much-loved open space, which had been protected from development since it was bought by the then Warneford Asylum in 1918, partly precisely to protect it, also to grow food and provide open-air therapy for the patients.

Many people submitted objections to the planning applications; but the key breakthrough was when we discovered that we could apply to have the Meadow registered as a Town Green, on the grounds that it had been freely used by local people – as it had been – for at least 20 years for outdoor recreation: children's games, dog-walking, apple- and blackberry-picking.

The process of securing registration was long and arduous. We had to undergo fifteen full days of a public inquiry before an Inspector, a specialist QC appointed by the County Council. Over 20 local residents gave oral evidence of the use they had made of the Meadow for recreation. We had to raise over £60,000 from generous donors to meet our legal fees and other costs. Even once the Inspector had recommended – in a 70-page report – that the Meadow should be registered as a Town Green, we had to see off an application for judicial review of the decision in the High Court.

A very large number of people helped with the campaign. I'm bound to offend someone by not mentioning them; but I will mention, from the early days, Kerry Paterson and Floris van den Broecke, both of whom have left the area but I'm pleased to welcome back today; Floris will play his guitar and sing for you later; Laura Elliott and Becky Miles; Paul Deluce, who put his name to the Town Green application; and above all Graeme Salmon, Sietske Boeles and Andrew Carter, who in different ways did vast amount of work helping to prepare for the public inquiry. Helen Ganly donated her paintings to raise funds; and I should mention in particular Mick Ganly, who can't be with us but who organised work parties clearing scrub on the Meadow and who has arranged and paid for digging this splendid hole in which we are about to plant the tree. I should mention Alastair Wallace, our hard-working solicitor; and Ross Crail, who presented our case to such good effect; of course she'd have done just as good a job for the other side, but that's barristers for you. Helen Marshall and her team at CPRE gave good advice, as did Tony Joyce of Oxford Civic Society and Nick Moon of the Ramblers. Elizabeth Mills of Divinity Road Area Residents' Association and Harry Edwards of Highfields RA helped build local support; and we drew on advice from Jo Cartmel of the campaign to save Radley Lakes from being filled in, and from other campaigners. Many other people helped, too many to mention.

Finally, in 2010, Oxfordshire County Council registered the Meadow as a Town Green. This protects it from almost all forms of development, essentially from anything that would interfere with using it for recreation. But there followed a rather nervous period. The landowners, the Department of Health, largely lost interest once they couldn't sell it as development land. The Meadow might be safe from development, but who would look after it? Might we have to manage it ourselves, or even buy it? We weren't confident we could cope.

Meanwhile we did what we could, mowing the Meadow for the first time in 20-odd years, and cutting back brambles and other scrub, especially in the orchard so people could get to pick the apples. But there's a limit to what can be done with volunteer labour.

We were therefore very pleased when, in 2013, the Oxford Health Trust decided to acquire the Meadow, with a view to using it for outdoor therapeutic activity with patients, just what it had been meant for nearly a century before, and consistent with public access to all the Meadow. We were pleased that the Trust quickly developed an ecological management plan to enhance the Meadow's appearance and its role as a habitat for wildlife. And we've been generally very pleased with the steps the Trust has taken so far to put those plans into practice.

We look forward to more initiatives from the Trust, in particular to improve the paths around and across the Meadow. There are some important decisions to take, such as how far to allow the continuing encroachment of oaks and other trees on the central part of the Meadow. We look forward to discussing those with Jane Fossey and her colleagues. Meanwhile local people remain very willing to help, with advice and with volunteer labour.

I know that some people have criticised our campaign, arguing that what Oxford needs above all is more houses. Yes, people in Oxford do need more houses; but arguably there are better sites – derelict land, inaccessible land – not far away. The Meadow is a publicly accessible open space, but better than a park, because it's semi-natural, half-wild, not just close-mown grass like South Park. We were right to protect it.

So look around you and feel happy that the Meadow should still be here and giving pleasure to local residents and to patients at the hospital in another 100 years.

After Andrew Smith has spoken, Floris will entertain you by playing his guitar and singing, then you're all welcome to join us for coffee in the Golf Club. I'll now hand over to Andrew, who will say a few words then formally plant this mulberry tree to celebrate 10 years since the start of our campaign to save Warneford Meadow.

Chris Dunabin

2 December 2016