

Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project



NEWLANDS TREE CATHEDRAL, MILTON KEYNES

November 2018



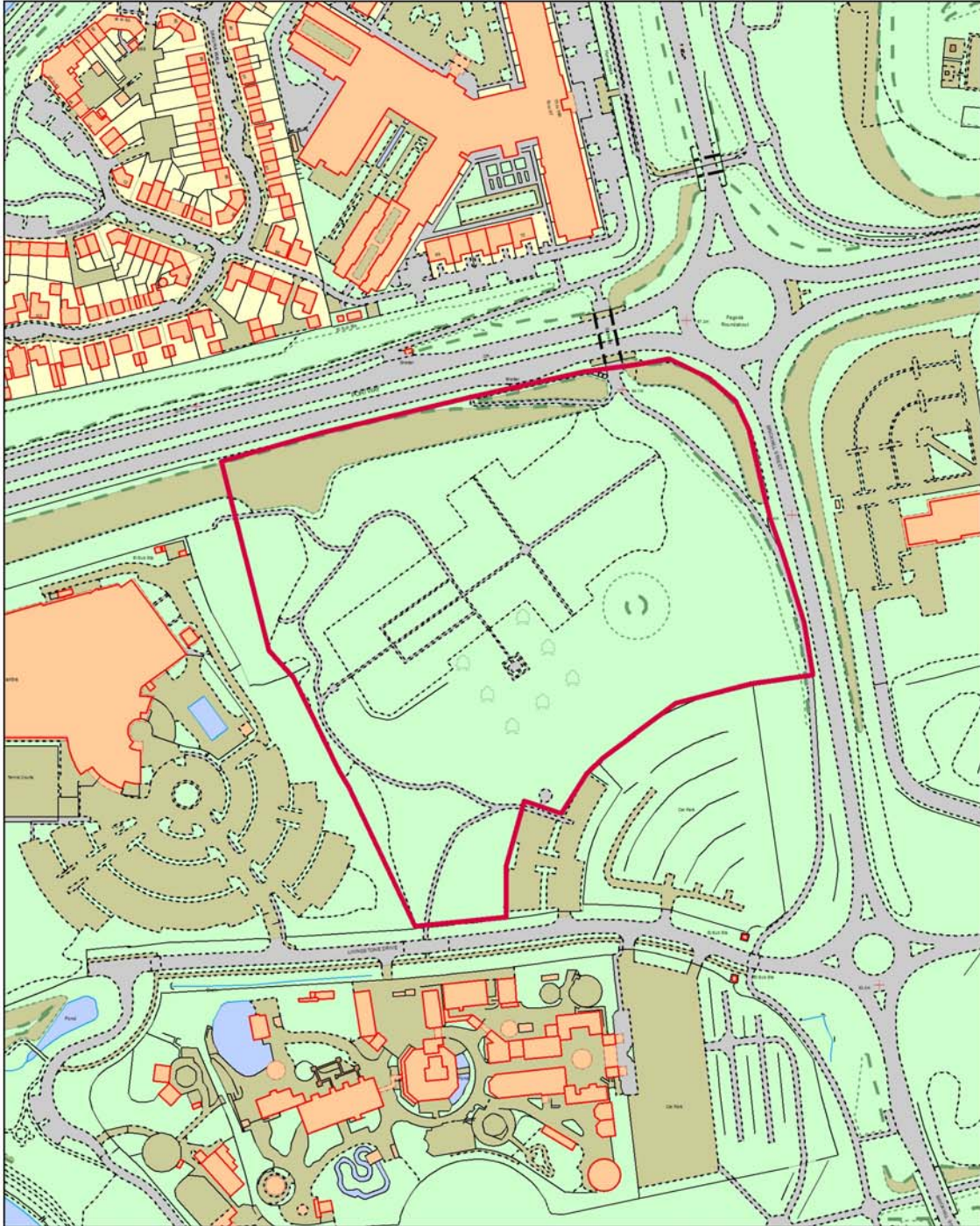
Bucks Gardens Trust



The Stanley Smith
(UK) Horticultural
Trust



HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY



Milton Keynes Tree Cathedral: boundary of historic designed landscape interest

Produced by the County Archaeological Service
October 2018

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Scale: 1:2,445 at A4



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Milton Keynes Tree Cathedral: 2006 aerial photograph

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Scale: 1:2,445 at A4



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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Project

This site dossier has been prepared as part of The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust (BGT) Research and Recording Project, begun in 2014. This site is one of several hundred designed landscapes county-wide identified by Bucks County Council (BCC) in 1998 (including Milton Keynes District) as potentially retaining evidence of historic interest, as part of the Historic Parks and Gardens Register Review project carried out for English Heritage (now Historic England) (BCC Report No. 508). The list is not definitive and further parks and gardens may be identified as research continues or further information comes to light.

Content

BGT has taken the Register Review list as a sound basis from which to select sites for appraisal as part of its Research and Recording Project for designed landscapes in the historic county of Bucks (pre-1974 boundaries). For each site a dossier is prepared by volunteers trained on behalf of BGT by experts in appraising designed landscapes who have worked extensively for English Heritage/Historic England on its Register Upgrade Project.

Each dossier includes the following for the site:

- A site boundary mapped on the current Ordnance Survey to indicate the extent of the main part of the surviving designed landscape, also a current aerial photograph.
- A statement of historic significance based on the four Interests outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework and including an overview.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a site visit, based on the format of the English Heritage (now Historic England) *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd edn.
- A map showing principal views and features.

The area within the site boundary represents the significant coherent remains of the designed landscape. It does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.

NOTE: Sites are not open to the public unless advertised elsewhere.

Supporters and Acknowledgements

The project was supported by The Gardens Trust (formerly the Association of Gardens Trusts and the Garden History Society) and funded by BGT with significant grants from the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust. BCC generously provided current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record was provided by Milton Keynes Council.

The Trust would like to thank the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much time and effort to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Further information is available from: www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk

COUNTY:	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	NEWLANDS TREE CATHEDRAL, MILTON KEYNES
DISTRICT:	MILTON KEYNES	
PARISH:	MILTON KEYNES	MK HER: -
OS REF.:	SP 872 402	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

This is the most recently planted of three significant tree cathedrals in the UK. The others are in Scotland at Glencruitten, Oban (early 1920s) and Whipsnade, Bedfordshire (early 1930s) and were planted by private individuals in response to World War I. Newlands was created in 1986 by Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC), designed by the landscape architect Neil Higson and is the only municipal tree cathedral, although shaped by similar medieval ecclesiastical influences.

The Tree Cathedral is one of few such spiritual plantings, with a high quality of design and survives intact and in good condition. The plan form is based on Norwich Cathedral. Four other tree cathedrals are known in Europe including one in Germany, one in the Netherlands and two in Italy.

Archaeological Interest

Archaeological interest is likely to be minimal as the site has been subject to considerable ground disturbance in creating the layout.

Architectural Interest

Although there are no structures on the site it is of interest for its evocation of a medieval cathedral in trees.

Artistic interest

This is a very rare example of a particular type of landscape design on a large and complex scale, based on the scale and layout of a medieval British cathedral. It is particularly successful in its evocation of such a spiritual building as it has been well designed by Neil Higson and sensitively managed by MK Parks Trust. The representation of the major access routes through the 'building' in stone paving provides a strong framework, particularly the sunken central path, these being framed by various types of ornamental trees as the walls, columns and roof. These are enclosed by clipped hedges around the perimeter of the 'building' and set off by a grassy floor. The setting of the 'building' within informally planted ornamental lawns evokes the cathedral precincts in which many cathedrals stand. It is a place of tranquillity and peace.

Historical Interest

This tree cathedral continues the inspiration of others who created similar designs in the 1920s and 1930s. The Tree Cathedral in Glencruitten was created by Alexander Mackay in the 1920s as part of the patriotic response to WW1, including the extension of forestry, as well as a memorial to the dead. It was based on St Andrew's ruined cathedral. He died in 1936 and the Tree Cathedral fell into neglect. There were particular problems because, based on a ruin with no roof, there had been no plan to deal with a future tree canopy. Efforts are now being made to restore it.

Whipsnade, some 20 miles south-east of Milton Keynes, dates from the 1930s and was created by Edmund Blyth from 1931 in memory of friends who had died in WW1 and after. It was inspired by the unfinished Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool and the connection between God and nature was at the heart of Blyth's vision, as an antithesis to the brutal environment of war. Blyth wanted the trees to be left to grow as God intended and not to be shaped or cut (*National Trust Magazine*, Autumn 2018). It has been owned by the National Trust since 1960.

While this tree cathedral was not directly influenced by these forerunners it is an excellent example of an unusual but effective design to evoke a spiritual building.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Tree Cathedral at Newlands was the response by designer Neil Higson, Chief Landscape Architect for MKDC (see Appendix) to the challenges faced by Milton Keynes in the 1980s of being seen as a new city, together with a repeated promise for it to be a "City of Trees". The idea came from seeing a fingerpost sign to Whipsnade Tree Cathedral, whilst driving past, but he had not visited. Inspiration for the actual form of the MK Cathedral came from Neil Higson's passion for woodlands and forests and his love of gothic churches and cathedrals. He studied the plans of several British cathedrals but the clarity and proportions of Norwich seemed to him most readily to be capable of expression in trees and Norwich also had one of the finest collections of "green man" carvings in the country.

The context for Higson's work was the development of Milton Keynes, which had been designated a New Town in 1967, with Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) as the government agency responsible. The Master Plan for the New Town was published in 1971 and the new landscape was worked out in its broad outlines from the beginning (Pevsner).

Neil Higson was appointed Chief Landscape Architect in 1977, grouping together all the landscape architects already employed and strengthening the team. According to Higson (pers. comm. 2018) MKDC had previously been dominated by architects and architecture and the Chief Architect, Derek Walker was influenced by the Modern Movement. Neil Higson by contrast was strongly influenced by the Garden Cities movement, national parks and the varied landscapes of Great Britain. On arrival in Milton Keynes he drew up park development plans and introduced central purchasing of plant material to ensure consistent quality (*Landscape Design*, August 1987). Among other developments, he is responsible for a park complex which includes the city park - Campbell Park, the Tree Cathedral and a vast swathe of adjoining parkland down to the Ouse Valley, which Pevsner states is the largest and most imaginative park to have been laid out in the C20.

The Tree Cathedral was designed and planted in 1986. Originally it was to be planted with poplars, for rapid growth, but MKDC became more confident in the project which enabled a more complex plan to be worked out relating character of species to the component elements and place structure of the cathedral. Nevertheless urgency was still critical and it was necessary to make use of semi-mature trees to confirm general belief in the project. The semi mature tree industry was not well developed at the time in Britain, so many compromises had to be made based on availability (pers. comm. Higson 2018).

When MKDC was wound up in March 1992 a charitable trust, Milton Keynes Parks Trust (MKPT), was established to be responsible for parks and green spaces in Milton Keynes. MKPT was given a 999 year lease with a property endowment to provide a revenue stream and retains responsibility for the Tree Cathedral and other parks and green spaces. The aim of the Parks Trust is to help the Tree Cathedral and the wider site and especially its trees and landscape develop into an attractive and much loved site, that will in time become iconic. The 'tree-scape', associated shrubs and grass areas will be managed in such a way that there will be an overriding and long lasting visual attractiveness and maturity about the site.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM SETTING

The 5ha. Tree Cathedral is in Newlands, with Willen Lakes to the east and Campbell Park to the west and forms part of a larger complex of parks and open spaces extending from CMK east to the edge of the city and south-west to beyond Bletchley. The immediate area of the Tree Cathedral is c.250m square. The landform is flat.

The eastern boundary is grassed to Brickhill Street, the grid road which runs north/south. This has recently been mounded to prevent vehicle encroachment. Beyond the west boundary the David Lloyd Sports Centre is screened by hedging and lawns. On the north side, the site for green burials is screened by trees from Portway, the grid road which runs east/west. To the south is Livingstone Drive, an access road with a car park and beyond this Willen Lake.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance is from the car park in Livingstone Drive, from which a path leads north-west to the west entrance. A path from the north aisle leads to Cathedral Meadow, and the green burial area. There are entrances to the stone paved paths in both the north and south transepts and beyond the sanctuary to the east. There are also entrances to the south and west boundaries of the cloister, south of the Cathedral.

DESCRIPTION

The official map of the Tree Cathedral (see below) provides the layout with details of the trees. There is a mix of evergreen and deciduous, with features such as the tower and the west door being evergreen. The effect varies depending on the time of year, but the scale and monumentality of the grove of trees create a significant impact. The first plantings used semi-mature trees for key elements and these have subsequently been thinned. The Parks Trust has managed tree growth to

retain the original concept, as well as to deal with tree diseases and losses and continues. Lime trees, for example have replaced diseased horse chestnuts at the west entrance (pers. comm. Rob Riekie, Parks Trust September 2018).

The architectural impact of the Tree Cathedral is reinforced by stone paths, particularly the central sunken path along the main axis of the nave and chancel, below the flanking rows of trees acting as 'columns'. The paths in the nave and flanking aisles lead from the west entrance east along the nave to the tower and both transepts, and beyond to the sanctuary to the east; further paths lead to the cloister and chapter house mound to the south. Another path leads north out to the memorial lawn beyond and round to the entrance at the west end of the nave.

The Cathedral structure is bounded by mixed hedging and the interior, apart from the sanctuary is lined with pine as an evergreen structure. The pillars of the nave are hornbeam. The lower branches have been removed to increase light and from about 2012 every other hornbeam on the inner lines was removed. Proceeding east down the nave, the tower is marked by four Wellingtonia conifers. Beyond the tower the pillars of the choir are ash and every other tree has been removed since 2011 to allow more light and space for the remaining trees. These trees may be at risk from ash die back disease, which is now in Milton Keynes (pers. comm. Rob Riekie, Parks Trust September 2018).

The sanctuary is marked by Holm oak and golden ash; two cypress spires flank the altar site in the open area beyond. Two circular chapels, north and south are approached from the corners of the choir area via narrow stone paths. These are defined by circles of lime trees and have flowering cherries and apples as their feature trees.

South of the nave is the square cloister. In the centre of the cloister lawn are four Glastonbury thorn. The cloister is enclosed by a tall clipped hornbeam hedge, which provides shelter.

Also on the south side an exit from the sanctuary at the east end of the cathedral leads to the chapter house mound (derived from a spoil heap). This conical feature with a flat top is planted with a clipped laurel hedge. It may correspond to the Lady Chapel of Norwich Cathedral, or be a feature for its own sake in the landscape, perhaps in homage to pre-historic sources, influenced by the nearby ley line (pers. comm. Rob Riekie, Parks Trust 2018). Steps lead straight to the top of the 5 m high mound from which views over the immediate environs including the cloister are enjoyed.

Recently the Parks Trust has planted daffodils and other bulbs. Plans are in hand to extend the range of shade bearing flowers in accordance with original plans to mimic the effect of sunlight shining through stained glass windows on to the Cathedral floor, as trees have been thinned and more light is available. The colour mimics the idea of stained glass windows.

The surrounding meadow and woody planting is important as the informal setting for the cathedral, providing a sense of spaciousness in the manner of a cathedral precinct. A bank planted with trees and shrubs leads from the north lawn used for burial of ashes up to the north boundary.

VISION FOR THE TREE CATHEDRAL (R RIEKIE, MK PARKS TRUST)

Tree management will be carefully considered. It will include occasional tree removals, to allow remaining trees the space to grow in proportion to their environment and surrounding trees, while allowing them to fulfil their part in re-creating the footprint of a famous English cathedral.

When selecting trees for retention and removal there will be a need to:

1. Consider the position of the tree, so that the footprint of the cathedral shape is maintained.
2. Ensure the tree is structurally safe and not a danger to visiting public.
3. Ensure that good quality and well-formed trees are allowed the space to develop, without becoming dead in their lower sections or to 'whippy' in their stature and suffer from weak stem strength.
4. Appropriately manage diseased, damaged and any dying trees.
5. Ensure the site maintains the symmetry that was originally planned.
6. Monitor progress to ensure work is regularly programmed and spaced appropriately to avoid too much change in one period.
7. Manage fixtures and fittings such as the York stone and benches, to ensure they remain an asset to the site.
8. Continue to improve the site, e.g. bulb planting and providing better paths or access.
9. Maintain surrounding hedges and features to ensure the trees that make up the cathedral are shown in their full splendour.

Associated shrubs and hedges will be managed to maintain the health of plants (e.g. coppicing or regular cutting), while adding to the visual attractiveness of the site and its trees. The grass (including bulbs and perennials) will be managed to ensure the swath is attractive and an asset to the site.

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OTHER SOURCES

Comments by Neil Higson, Chief Landscape Architect, MKDC, 27/7/18 (see Appendix)

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MAPS

Plan of Tree Cathedral, Parks Trust

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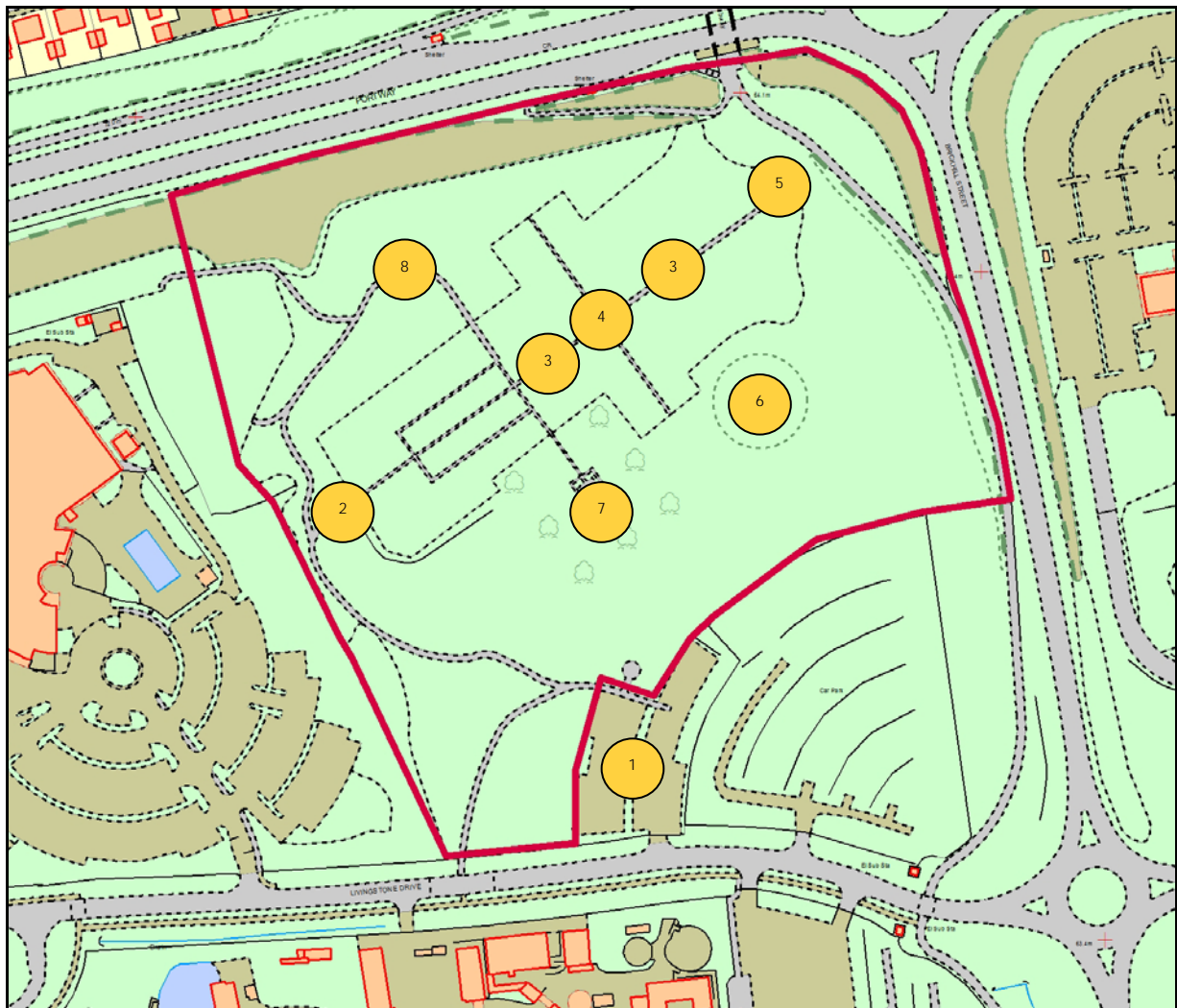
Jill Stansfield & Gill Grocott September 2018

edited SR November 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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KEY FEATURES



Key to Features

1. Car Park	2. Entrance at west end of nave
3. Central path	4. Tower crossing with transepts to north and south
5. Sanctuary	6. Chapter house mound
7. Cloister	8. North lawn, burial of ashes

APPENDIX

CATHEDRAL FOR MILTON KEYNES (Neil Higson 27 July 2018)

Driving home to MK after a day of meetings I must have passed an entrance path to the Whipsnade tree cathedral. I saw a fingerpost – “To the Tree Cathedral “. At the time Milton Keynes was struggling with two presented images To be acknowledged in its stated aim to be a new city, and the repeated promise for it to be “The City of Trees”. Political issues made the former seem a long way off and the 1975/6 drought period cast serious doubts on the latter.

The concept of a Cathedral of trees for the City of Trees seemed inspirational. I did not, and have never been to the Whipsnade tree cathedral. I wanted to avoid confusing both motives and concepts - but MK’s cathedral owes its existence to that fingerpost.

Inspiration for the actual form of the MK cathedral came from my passion for woodlands and forests developed during my first job in Kent involved in County Council tree preservation efforts and my love of gothic parish churches and cathedrals.

There was considerable urgency to strengthen belief in Milton Keynes as a city and the dream of it as “The City of Trees”.

I studied the ground plans of several British Cathedrals including St Pauls and Canterbury, but the clarity and proportions of that of Norwich could, it seemed to me be most readily expressed in trees, ground shape and complimentary vegetation. Norwich also had one of the finest assemblies of “green man” carvings in the country.

I presented a paper to the Executive Management Committee with somewhat romantic references to the gothic majesty of Beech and Oak forests and their parallels with the great gothic churches and cathedrals of Britain, together with rapidly prepared concept plans of an interpretation in trees inspired by the Norwich plan.

In view of the urgency and anticipated budget constraints at this time the first plans prepared were for the cathedral to be composed of combinations of rapid growing Poplars with distinct growth habits.

The presentation went so well however that confidence grew in the concept and it became possible to work out a much more detailed plan relating character of species to the component elements and place structure of the cathedral.

Nevertheless urgency was still critical and it was necessary to make extensive use of semi mature trees to confirm general belief in the project. The semi mature tree industry was not well developed in Britain so many compromises in species choice had to be made based on availability.

Beyond these quasi political and practical considerations a parallel set of motives behind the design came to the fore. Essentially our aim was to make a place of peace, tranquillity and meditation without an altar and free from the structures and strictures of organised religions. We hoped to create an assembly of places which people could relate to their own hopes and needs, (and perhaps

find their own answers) all held together in a beautiful place which was powerfully natural yet beyond wilderness.

I also felt that Landscape design was frequently sidelined by other design professions yet it's possible role in creating a successful and civilised city was of fundamental importance, not least because it influences all parts of the public realm. "The labyrinth of freedom" as I summed it up.

When we presented the scheme to EMC- I put up a context plan with the tree cathedral placed on it. We were delighted that the central aisle of the cathedral aligned precisely with the line of Midsummer Boulevard. The forces of nature, serendipity or accident?

The construction process began. First ground shaping was carried out to make platforms for the various sections of the plan. Early impact was essential so it was necessary that we selected impressive reliable species of significant size, even if these were not in accordance with first designs. The important thing was to achieve the composition of atmospheres appropriate to the underlying concept.

As the tree framework settled in it was apparent that some areas required stronger definition, occasional trees were unsuccessful and some trees were very slow to establish.

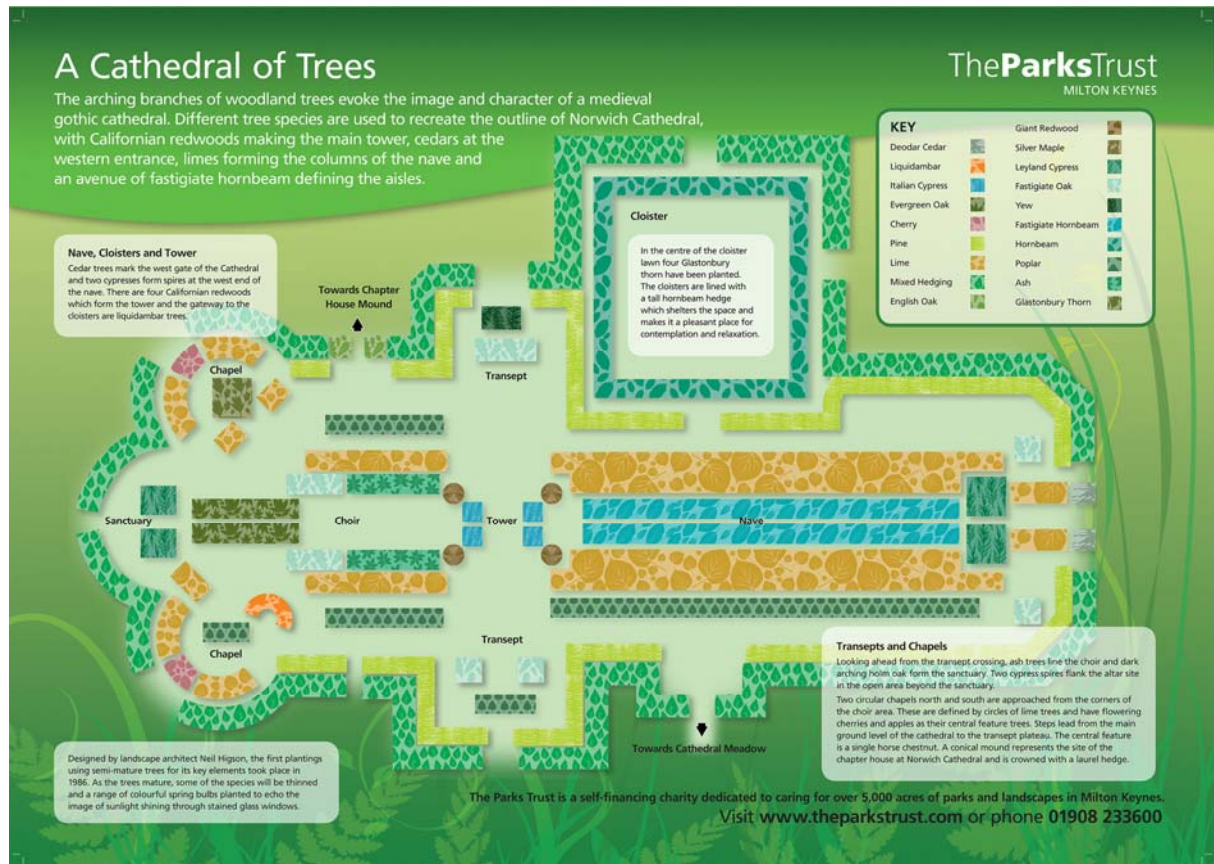
Mainly native shrubs were added to give clearer definition and clarify some boundaries and we resorted to rapid growing poplars to strengthen a few places.

As people began to use the cathedral it became apparent that hard surfaced path and gathering area surfaces were required. A relatively economical scheme was implemented using York stone and a concrete paving unit of similar colour. The whole was a non-invasive addition to the cathedral which increased its use.

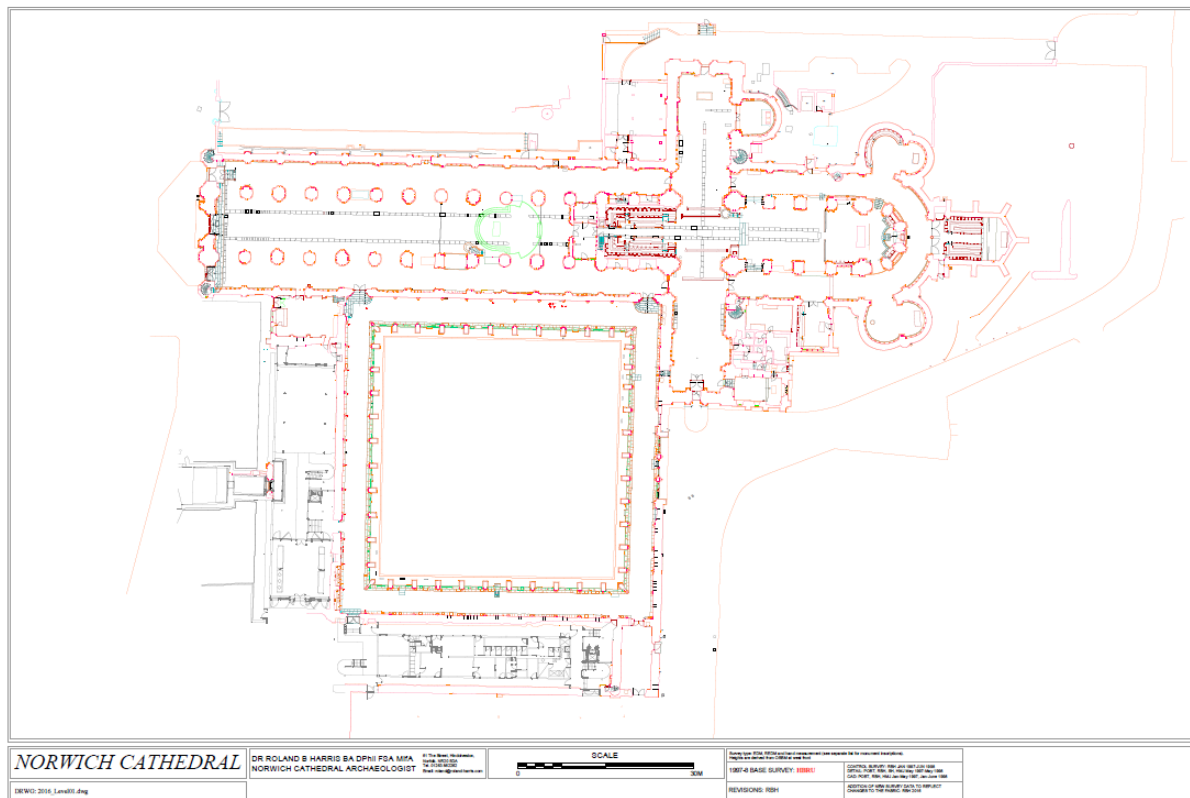
The immediate surroundings of the cathedral were designed as grassland with substantial tree groups and small areas of woodland to soften the impact of nearby land uses and traffic.

Originally the Newlands grid square, in the north east corner of which the cathedral is located, was planned as a recreation high street. It was hoped that this would be an assembly of privately operated recreation facilities combining to make a lively richly varied "Tivoli Gardens" kind of place. Unfortunately this plan paved the way for the Gulliver's land theme park which has been a difficult neighbour for the Tree Cathedral.

The Parks Trust is developing the cathedral and its immediate surroundings for ashes burials and ashes strewing as well as weddings. It is to be hoped that this will at least secure its permanence as an Icon of "The City of Trees".



Interpretation plan – north at bottom (Milton Keynes Parks Trust)



Layout of Norwich Cathedral (by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter, Norwich Cathedral)

CURRENT IMAGES



Aerial photograph (north at bottom)



West entrance to nave



Nave crossing with transepts, east, north to memorial lawn and south to cloister



Nave, views east to sanctuary and west



Aisles and mound/chapter house



Mound/chapter house and aisles; path to cloister



Cloister to south and memorial lawn to north of nave



Other features south of nave outside the cathedral 'building'