

Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project



WILLEN LAKES, MILTON KEYNES

JANUARY 2019



Bucks Gardens Trust

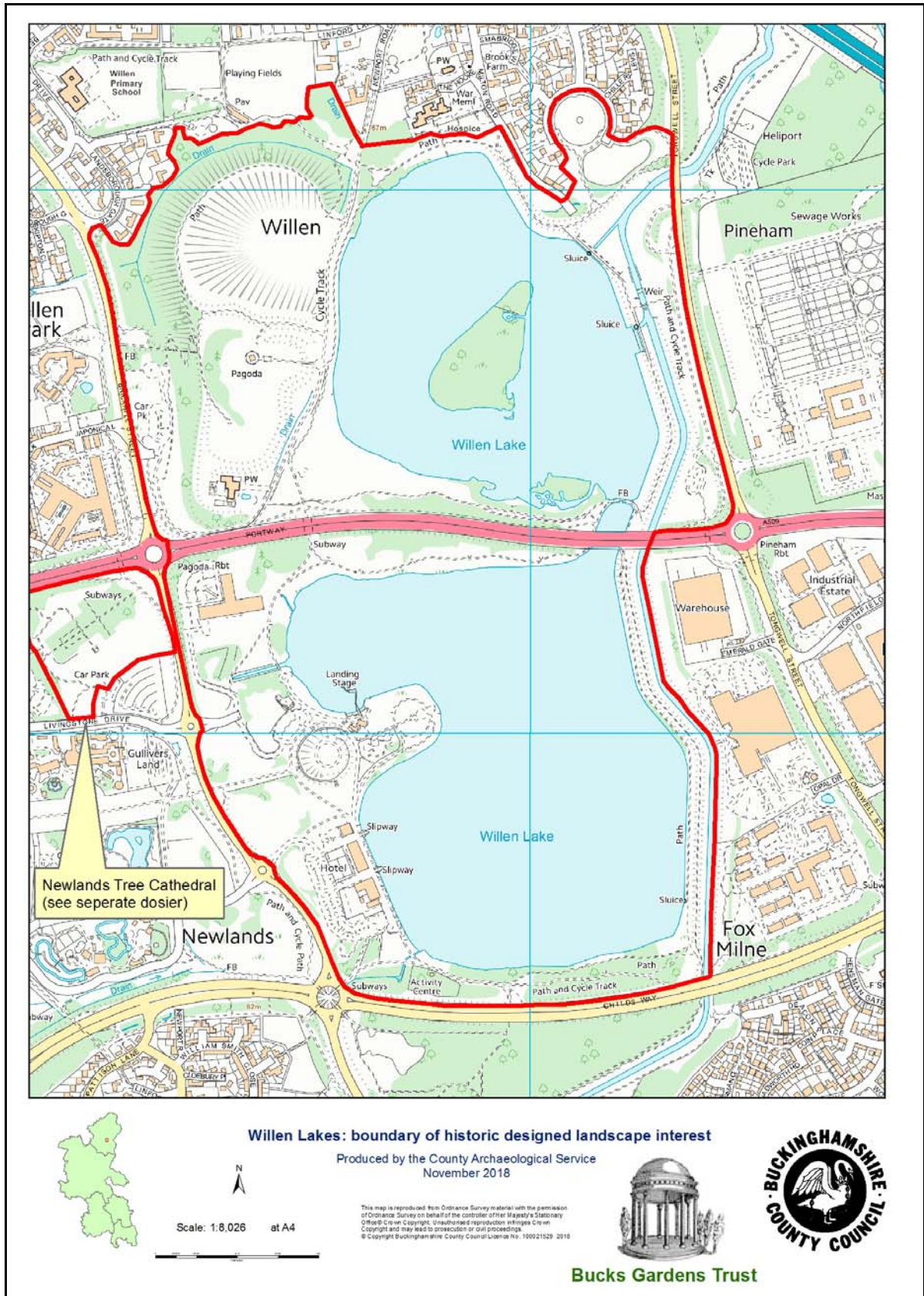


The Stanley Smith
(UK) Horticultural
Trust



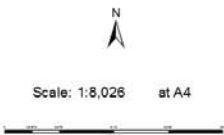
HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY

NB the south-west corner of Willen Lake adjoins Newlands Tree Cathedral (qv).





Newlands Tree Cathedral
(see separate dossier)



Willen Lakes: 2006 aerial photograph

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Produced by the County Archaeological Service
November 2018



Bucks Gardens Trust



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 and the Finnis Scott Foundation. 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	WILLEN LAKE, MILTON KEYNES
DISTRICT:	MILTON KEYNES	
PARISH:	MILTON KEYNES	MK HER: -
OS REF.:	SP 878 403	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

A very large public park, a key part of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation's planned cityscape, linking urban Central MK in a corridor to a swathe of naturalistic parkland down the Ouse Valley. It is linked with Campbell Park and Newlands Tree Cathedral in an unbroken chain and all were designed as part of the original planning for Milton Keynes New Town. The design is based around two naturalistic lakes, North and South, linked, which fulfil an essential water management function, dealing with potential flood water. The South Lake is a major recreational asset for Milton Keynes, for example in terms of water sports, and the North Lake is a notable habitat for wildlife and quiet recreation.

It is one of the largest and most imaginative parks to have been laid out in Britain in the later C20 and is probably of national significance. It is magnificently generous and on the right scale for the city and contrasts with the other parks in the chain leading out from CMK both in function and design style. As designer Neil Higson explains: *Willen Lake park is a key component of the overall Milton Keynes parks system (c.2000 ha.). The system is designed on the principle of "Strings, beads and settings". The strings are linear footpaths, cycle ways, greenways and riding trails. Beads are activity centres and "places" such as Willen park, MK Bowl and picnic areas, play areas, cafes etc. The setting is the visually or physically public landscape which makes up the body of the park. Land uses in this area include grazing, forestry, sports grounds, lakes, wildlife zones, events areas etc., most of which can generate some income which contributes to the management costs of the parks. Willen Lakes park is one of the most important beads on the system.*

The detail of the materials, types of horticultural features and planting all work together with the natural and artificial topography to produce an outstanding unified design. It survives intact and continues to be developed in similar character following the original vision for it as a people's park.

Archaeological interest

The archaeological evidence has been extensively studied during the development of the area. Evidence of Neolithic or Bronze age and Saxon settlement nearby; Roman occupation is significant in the locality. From the medieval period the land was agricultural, with the Grand Union Canal opened in 1805 with likely associated industry. Brick kilns were built nearby in the late C19.

Architectural interest

The park relies for its contemporary framework largely on natural and constructed landform, bold planting masses, tree lined roads and a complex of path systems with occasional buildings. The most prominent is the Buddhist Peace Pagoda and nearby Sangha on terraces to the west shore, designed in 1979-80 by Minoru Okha with Tom Hancock

and built by Buddhist monks. It is a notable structure within the park, the earliest of a series of peace pagodas in England, prompted by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The monks also built the Sangha below.

The North Lake is bounded to the north by a group of buildings on the highest ground that form the small village of Willen. These are dominated by the C17 church of St Mary Magdalene (listed Grade I) which is enclosed by the wall surrounding the church yard with gates at east and west ends and has a nearby War Memorial (listed Grade II). The tower is a significant feature in views around the North Lake. Other notable buildings in the group include the Hospice of Our Lady of St John (listed Grade II, formerly Manor Farm), and the Old School House (Grade II), now a private residence.

Artistic interest

Willen Lakes is an ambitious publicly-funded park on a scale rarely achieved in later C20/C21 England, building on the traditions set by the best of C19 public parks such as Birkenhead, Merseyside, and Central Park, New York. In its scale of ambition and unity of design it is comparable with Thames Barrier Park, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Lee Valley and the Olympic Park but in style and character these are all very different. The characteristic collection of various intensively ornamental areas is linked via the latter-day naturalistic English Landscape style park in which they lie, including the river Ouzel running through the park and treated in a number of ornamental and natural ways. This is set within the wider landscape of urban CMK on one side and the rolling naturalistic public open spaces, achieving the effect of a single tract of countryside. The views are carefully manipulated both within and beyond the park to take advantage of the rolling topography.

A number of works of artistic interest surround the Lakes. A maze by the north lake is ornamented by the Four Faces, wrought in bronze by Tim Minett, 1985, set at cardinal points (Pevsner).

The role of public art is integral in the design, with several significant works. This public art forms part of the collection of over 200 works city-wide. It complements the sculpture collection adjacent in Campbell Park and in CMK. Here it is effectively displayed as it can be viewed from different parts of the Park and is striking in its impact. Thus the designed and wider setting is of the utmost importance to the artworks.

Historic interest: Willen Lake is of high historic interest as one of few large-scale public parks developed in the later C20 in England, and for its high quality of design and survival intact. It is one of the largest, purpose-built balancing lake systems in Britain.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The village of Willen dates to the C11 (*VCH*) but it was so small that it was recorded in the Domesday Book with Newport Pagnell and Caldecotte. Willen and Caldecotte were classed as one parish until the C14. In 1672 the whole area was sold to Sir Richard Busby who had been the Headmaster at Westminster School in London. On his death the Busby Trust was set up which kept Willen as it was for centuries and until the 1960s there were never more than 100 people living there (Willen Heritage Trail Walk Leaflet 2010).

Willen was included in Milton Keynes when it was designated as a New Town in 1967. MKDC was established in the same year. The Master Plan for the New Town was published in 1971 and landscape was worked out in its broad outlines from the beginning (Pevsner). The MKDC Plan for Willen Village shows with a photo of the Church and surrounding buildings in the middle of fields.

Construction on the two Lakes started in 1972 and contrary to expectations no evidence was found of prehistoric settlement, but earthworks were destroyed on the south side of Hutton Road and Willen Mill (Croft and Mynard).

The engineering works for the South Lake were completed in 1974 and engineering works for the North Lake in 1977 (Kelcey).

This basic engineering works had begun when landscape architects and ecologists became involved. Derek Walker, Chief Architect of MKDC and Helmut Jacoby, a German artist, who worked for MKDC, produced images of elaborate lakeside developments including a water organ, but they were beyond available funding (Neil Higson – see Appendix). Inspiration for the design was sought from several inland lakes in Britain (Higson), but the final design was influenced by Finnish models, which featured a centre of activity, with access to the water plus restaurants and cafes, with a lakeside walk becoming more natural the further it was from this centre of activity. The landscape for both lakes was designed as a unit.

Neil Higson was appointed Chief Landscape Architect in 1977 and he strengthened the landscape architecture function and team. He drew up park development plans and in conjunction with the MKDC Recreation Unit introduced central purchasing of plant material to ensure consistent quality. The basic framework of the City Parks consisted of two north/south valleys based around Loughton River to the west and the Ouzel to the east; and two east/west valleys formed from the River Ouse and Simpson Brook (*Southard, T. Landscape Design CDC; undated*). Willen Lakes are to the north of the Ouzel Valley Park and were designed as a series of balancing lakes to prevent flooding, as well as to provide open space.

By 1975 (*Gazette*) there was a bleak, watery expanse, with a few canoes and no vegetation. Ecological problems had to be assessed whilst the contract was operational (Kelcey), for example algae. A considerable amount of landscape work and ecological engineering was carried out. Molluscs and fish were added, but in the drought of 1976 the public lifted the water lilies and the birds the molluscs (Kelcey). Much of the aquatic and lakeside planting set out in the Willen Lake Aquatic Planting Plan has since been lost (pers. comm. Rob Riekie, Parks Trust). However, the tree planting, such as the formal avenue of silver willows lining the promontory on the South Lake, the drifts of shrub willows running into reeds on the south side of the South Lake and the tree planting forming the framework for the North Lake have survived and thrived to make a dramatic contrast with the scene of 1975.

Other features were added, including the Peace Pagoda (1979-80) and the maze. A miniature railway was built on the west side of the South Lake in 1989 and, to its south, a High Ropes course in 2005. In 2000 the Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel was built on the west side of the North Lake Park to celebrate the Millennium. The Cornucopia proved too small for current needs and has recently been redesigned to allow for greater car parking and a larger events and play area.

MKDC was wound up in March 1992 and a charitable trust, Milton Keynes Parks Trust (MKPT), was established to be responsible for parks and green spaces in Milton Keynes, as they had more in common with nature reserves and country parks than traditional town parks. MKDC wanted to keep relevant skills together. MKPT was given a 999 year lease with a property endowment to provide a revenue stream. It became fully operational in July 1992 (*Leisure Management*, March 1996). MKPT is responsible for the park area around the Willen Lakes and Anglian Water is responsible for managing the level of the water.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Willen Lakes form the eastern end of the corridor of green space from Central Milton Keynes through Campbell Park and Newlands, including the Tree Cathedral. The Lakes lie to the immediate west of the River Ouzel, which forms part of the flood management system. The Ouzel runs north/south and enters the Ouzel Valley Park to the south of Willen South Lake, beyond Childs Way. The Willen Lakes therefore form a cornerstone of the public park system on

the east side of Milton Keynes. In terms of distances the hotel on the South Lake is about 2km equidistant from the end of the Shopping Building in Central Milton Keynes to the west and the M1 motorway to the east.

The lakes cover an area of approximately 40 hectares and form one of the largest, purpose-built balancing lake systems in Britain. (<https://mknhs.org.uk/willen-lake/>).

The Willen Lakes and surrounding parkland are bounded to the south by Childs Way (H6), to the east by the River Ouzel and beyond that Tongwell Street, to the west by Brickhill Street and to the north by Willen Village.

The area consists of Oxford clay and is flat and low lying, but Willen Village stands on an area of slightly higher ground with an elevation of 20m giving a view over the Ouzel Valley before the Lakes were flooded. The Ouzel, or Lovat, rises in the Dunstable Downs and joins the Ouze at Newport Pagnell. The original river course was through the Willen Lakes and was diverted, giving it the appearance of a canal. A series of weir gates, controlled by computer, was installed to control flood water (MK Urban Studies Centre, Lake Trail).

The setting of the North Lake is dominated on the north side by the Church of St Mary Magdalene by the renowned Restoration architect Robert Hooke (1678-82), paid for by Richard Busby. It is a simple church, well placed on an eminence and reached from the west by a straight line of lime trees. The church is the most prominent of an attractive group of red brick buildings, which can all be glimpsed from the North Lake skirting the churchyard. These include Manor Farm, now Willen Hospice, to which Richard Busby retired in 1671 and the old school, Tudor brick with lattice windows.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance for vehicles is from Brickhill Street to the west of Willen Lake South, to the main car park. Pedestrian access to the South Lake is from the south through an underpass under Childs Way and from the west through underpasses under Brickhill Street. Access to the North Lake is from Willen Village at the north end and from a large car park beside Brickhill Street. The Lakes are linked by access routes along the west and east sides.

PERAMBULATION

The Lakes are divided by a raised embankment, running west to east for c.0.5km apart from a narrow channel running north/south on the far eastern side. The division between the Lakes was further emphasised with the completion of Portway in 1990 (MKDC *Insight*), despite a public campaign to stop it. This is part of the Milton Keynes grid road system and runs along the embankment between the two Lakes, bridging the channel linking them.

SOUTH LAKE

The South Lake was designed for leisure activities, with cafes, water sports and a hotel. Entering from the car park on Brickhill Street on the west side of the Lake, there is a new children's play area to the south and an events area previously known as the Cornucopia is directly ahead to the east.

Beyond the former Cornucopia further to the east is the promontory. Changes may be planned here but at the time of publication (2018) the area was bisected by a path leading east to the Bandstand, a small brick-built platform surmounted by iron railings and a tiled roof. The building faces away from the lake onto a grass area surrounded by low hedging and a series of benches. There is a further circular path bounding the hedging.

On the south side of the promontory is a further children's play area and to the north is a café with seating area and other facilities. North of the café a walkway leads out over the lake to facilitate various watersports.

A pathway leads north around the Lake. This keeps close to the Lakeside, with mixed shrubbery on the land side. It

passes a low-level office building at the north-west corner of the lake. The path then turns east, running parallel to Portway, and crosses a narrow causeway over the channel separating the two Lakes.

On reaching the east bank the path turns south on a raised embankment, with the River Ouzel in a channel immediately to the east. Beyond the Ouzel light industrial units eastwards to Tongwell Street mark the park boundary. Along the path there are benches and pieces of exercise equipment, but no substantial planting.

Towards the south end of the Lake planting re-appears, with willows and reeds and beyond a poplar plantation. In the south-east corner is the high ropes course and to the north beyond is the miniature railway. The path then leads north along the west bank to a restaurant, the hotel and RYA yachting centre. This is the main centre for recreational water sports. Nearby is the sculpture *Leda and the Swan* by Michael Morse McDonald (1992). Beyond the hotel and restaurant a path bears north east along the lakeside towards the Bandstand and the promontory. This is lined with silver willows.

NORTH LAKE

The North Lake was designed as a quiet area to foster bird life especially and has a large island as a central feature. It is linked to the South Lake on the west side by a path which takes pedestrians under Portway. Following the path north, on the western side of the lake it passes a series of features.

To the east of the path 75m from the bridge under Portway is 'The Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel' inspired by Roy Little Sun the adopted son of a Native American elder Titus Quomayumptewa. It was built to celebrate the millennium and as a universal symbol of peace. It is on the Midsummer line which extends up through the Cathedral of Trees into Campbell Park and on to Midsummer Boulevard and was built on the 'sacred' green patch. The Wheel is made up from 108 limestones from the village of Weston Underwood. (Willen Heritage Trail Leaflet 2010 and The Trustees, Milton Keynes Medicine Wheel, City Discovery Centre).

50m south-west of the 'Medicine Wheel' is the Buddhist Temple and its Japanese and Zen gardens. In its grounds is a sculpture by Ronald Rae, *Hiroshima Departed* (1985), donated in 2007. It is carved from granite in memory of those who died. 100m north of the temple is the One World Tree decorated with prayers and messages of hope. This tree is at the southern end of a band of cherry trees which commemorate the victims of war. Below them the Peace Pagoda, built in 1980, is a Buddhist stupa and has sacred relics of Lord Buddha enshrined in it. It was the first Peace Pagoda to be built in the western hemisphere (Willen Heritage Trail Leaflet 2010).

150m north of the Peace Pagoda is the Labyrinth or Willen Lake Maze. This was formed in a bowl facing the Lake, made from spoil arising mainly from the lake excavations, and it was originally planned for large events, but the need for this reduced with the building of the Milton Keynes Bowl. Higson's landscape team therefore created a maze based on an enlarged version of the Saffron Walden Rosicrucian Maze (see appendix) in order to furnish the bland bowl floor and create a land art feature without precluding use for occasional large gatherings. At the centre of the Maze is an oak tree and in each of the four lobes – at the cardinal points of the compass – is a bronze face designed by sculptor Tim Minett in 1985. The four faces represent four of the main races of mankind and are derived from the faces on the artist's bollards in the Shopping Centre (Willen Heritage Trail Leaflet 2010). The maze is framed by a belt of mature trees. Between the Labyrinth and path around the lake is a white marble sculpture, *Souls in Love* (Frederic Chevarin, 2012).

The north side of the North Lake is dominated by the Church and principal buildings of Willen Village. The path turns south on an embankment along the eastern side of the lake. The River Ouzel flows in a channel to the east of the path, as with the South Lake and it crosses a number of water inlets and weirs, which are part of the flood prevention scheme. There are benches and exercise equipment, but no substantial planting. Tongwell Street is to the

east of the Ouzel with a sewage works on the eastern side of the road. The path continues south under a subway beneath Portway to join the path on the east side of the South Lake. Alternatively, another path crosses the channel between the two lakes, going westwards either to join the path on the north side of the South Lake, or to go north to a bird hide on the south side of the South Lake. The area round the bird hide is rich in wild flowers.

(<https://mknhs.org.uk/willen-lake/>) The muddy margin of the triangular island in the North Lake is the only known Buckinghamshire site for the nationally rare Grass-poly (*Lythrum hyssopifolium*).

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MAPS

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Jill Stansfield and Gill Grocott November 2018 Edited SR November 2018 & January 2019

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Bucks Gardens Trust is indebted to Neil Higson for his enthusiastic and vital contribution of information about the genesis and vision of this site and its context within the wider contemporary landscape of Milton Keynes.

APPENDIX ONE

Background of park planning and design by the Central Landscape Unit, MKDC

Neil Higson, former Chief Landscape Architect, July 2018

Before the advent of the new city the river valleys of Milton Keynes were subject to frequent flooding. The development of the city would inevitably create large quantities of rapid surface water run off which would overwhelm the existing water courses. MK and Anglian Water engineers proposed variable water level catchment lakes which would not only act as a flood control system, they could become venues for water based recreation and outstanding attractions in the new city park system.

The first of these to be developed was Willen Lake. Basic engineering works had already begun when landscape architects and ecologists became involved. Derek Walker and Helmut Jackoby had produced images of elaborate lakeside development including a water organ which were beyond the funding possibilities of the time.

The water-body was divided into two by City road H5. The southern part, which Pirkko Higson's and my practice was commissioned to design by MKDC in 1975 was to accommodate water sports, lakeside parkland and a hotel site.

WILLEN LAKE SOUTH

For inspiration we looked at several inland lakes in Britain studying particularly their lakeside park areas.

Our frequent holidays in Finland however offered the opportunity to look at a range of models which worked well and created a strong relationship between lake and adjacent parkland. Consistently they included a lakeside walk or promenade which became more natural the further it was from the centre of activity. Generally the centre would allow access to the water and contain a restaurant and plenty of outdoor seating with kiosks serving ice cream and snack food radiating from it.

The plan that evolved limited vehicular access to the area behind the buildings which allowed mainly for boat parking and servicing. A generous path system, starting with an avenue of silver Willows led from the 'promenade' to the promontory with band stand and large enclosed play area.

On the landward side of the promontory where the electronically controlled water organ had originally been suggested, surplus spoil was shaped to a spiral form offering a continuous viewing terrace around a small arena with an inviting angled entrance. The feature has been extensively used for many different functions and small events. We called it "The Cornucopia". It has proved too small for the developing needs of the city.

South of the centre the lake edge is treated informally with drifts of shrub willows running into reeds at the water's edge. A miniature railway now operates and weaves through the trees adjacent to the city road H6. Further along the shore shallow scrapes have been made to encourage bird activity and a bird watchers hide is provided.

A generous opening in the bridge under the H6 leads through a grid plantation of poplars to further walks along the river.

The ground levels in this area are particularly low since it acts as the first lake overflow during winter floods.

The bulk of the park area north of the centre between the V10 city road and the lake is open grassland with scattered trees and car parking areas. It is much used for family picnicking and informal play.

The popularity of the whole area has necessitated extensive use of planned green sections of the parkland for car parking and as in other parts of the park payment has been introduced.

WILLEN LAKE NORTH

Design of the northern part of the lake became the responsibility of the MKDC Central Landscape unit in 1977. Excavated spoil from making the lake was being formed into a bowl facing the lake. A large quite steep sided island was formed in the middle of the lake. Some tree planting had taken place on the mounding strengthening the effect of the bowl form. The H5 city road embankment separated the two parts of the lake with only a tenuous shallow water connection being retained. The engineering works were relatively simple and the lake area was shallower than ideal.

Early intentions had been to focus on this part of the lake as a wildlife attraction with the possibility of the bowl being used periodically for large events and music. The Milton Keynes Bowl was nearing completion however and it was unlikely that the city would need a similar venue.

At the end of the 1970s Milton Keynes was becoming more successful economically and more attractive to business. Japanese interest was strong and a proposal to build a peace pagoda and Buddhist temple in Milton Keynes was welcomed. [it was built in 1980] Willen North was an excellent site, and the park needed iconic features. There was a possibility that large scale gatherings could occur near the pagoda in future.

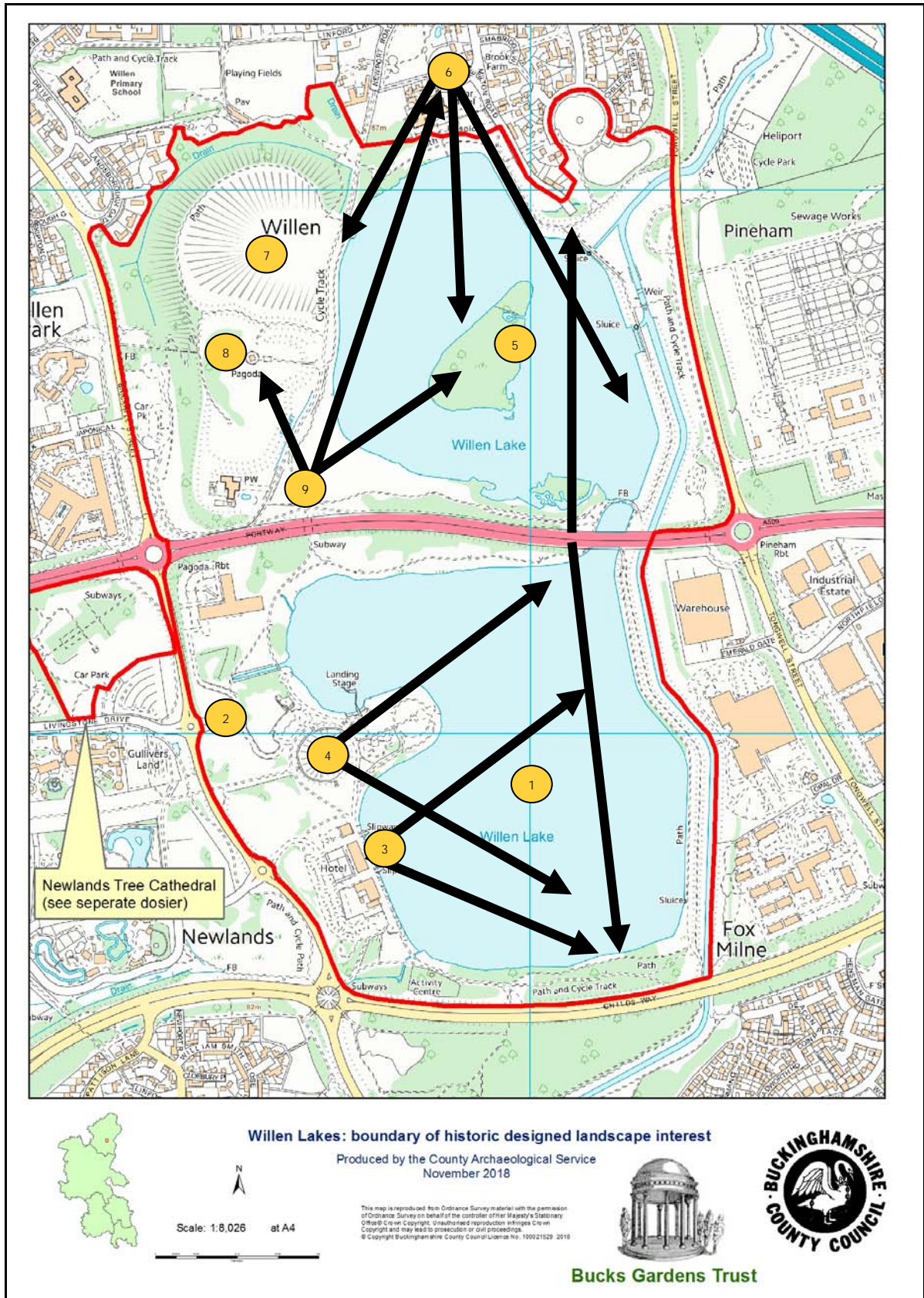
In 1976 the area was quite bland and empty. Looking through a book on mazes and labyrinths I came across illustrations and a small plan of the beautiful Saffron Walden turf maze. Increased in scale it seemed to offer the ideal feature to furnish the floor of the Willen bowl. We made it a simple narrow gravel path level with the surrounding grass surface so that events and gatherings could still take place using the whole floor of the bowl.

Sculptor Tim Minette had designed tops to stainless steel bollards in the original Garden Court in the shopping building. Each of these showed features of the main races of homo sapiens. The Saffron Walden maze design has four loops which, in our Willen labyrinth version, we placed large versions of four of these and as a central focus planted a semi mature oak tree.

The Buddhist Temple progressed and the Central Landscape unit worked closely with Japanese experts to produce an authentic Japanese garden setting around it. Ground form adjustments were made to accommodate the Peace Pagoda, dramatise its approach, its relationship to the lake and terrace adjoining land to facilitate public use. Donations of Japanese cherries and extensive plantings of native species woodland (including evergreens) enrich the area and underline its atmosphere as "the Peace Park" of Milton Keynes.

The linked North and South Willen lakes efficiently perform their function containing rapid surface water run-off from city development and reducing danger of downstream flooding. At the same time they greatly enhance wildlife within the parks and provide water based and waterside recreation activities both for Milton Keynes citizens and large numbers of visitors.

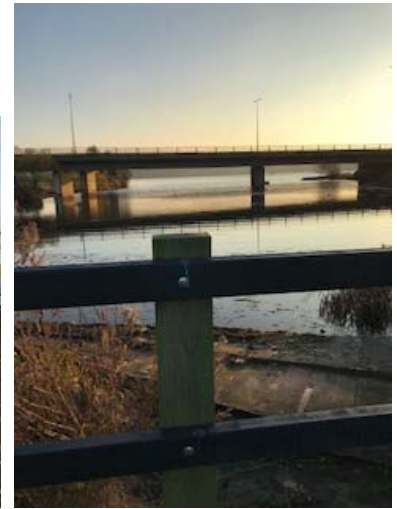
KEY HISTORIC FEATURES & VIEWS



Key to Numbered Features

1. South Lake	2. Main entrance
3. Hotel and leisure area	4. Former Cornucopia, now partially redesigned as car park/play area
5. North Lake	6. Willen parish church, St Mary Magdalene
7. Maze	8. Pagoda
9. Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel	

CURRENT IMAGES (2018)



South lake, silver willows (left); view north across south lake (centre); channel between lakes with Portway (right).



North lake: Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel (left); maze (centre); one of Four Faces Minett, the maze (right).



North lake: Peace Pagoda (left); view north to Willen village & church (centre);
South lake new car park towards remains of Cornucopia (right).



Ouzel confined to canal on east side (left); south lake hotel and leisure area (right)



South lake hotel Leda & Swan