

Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project

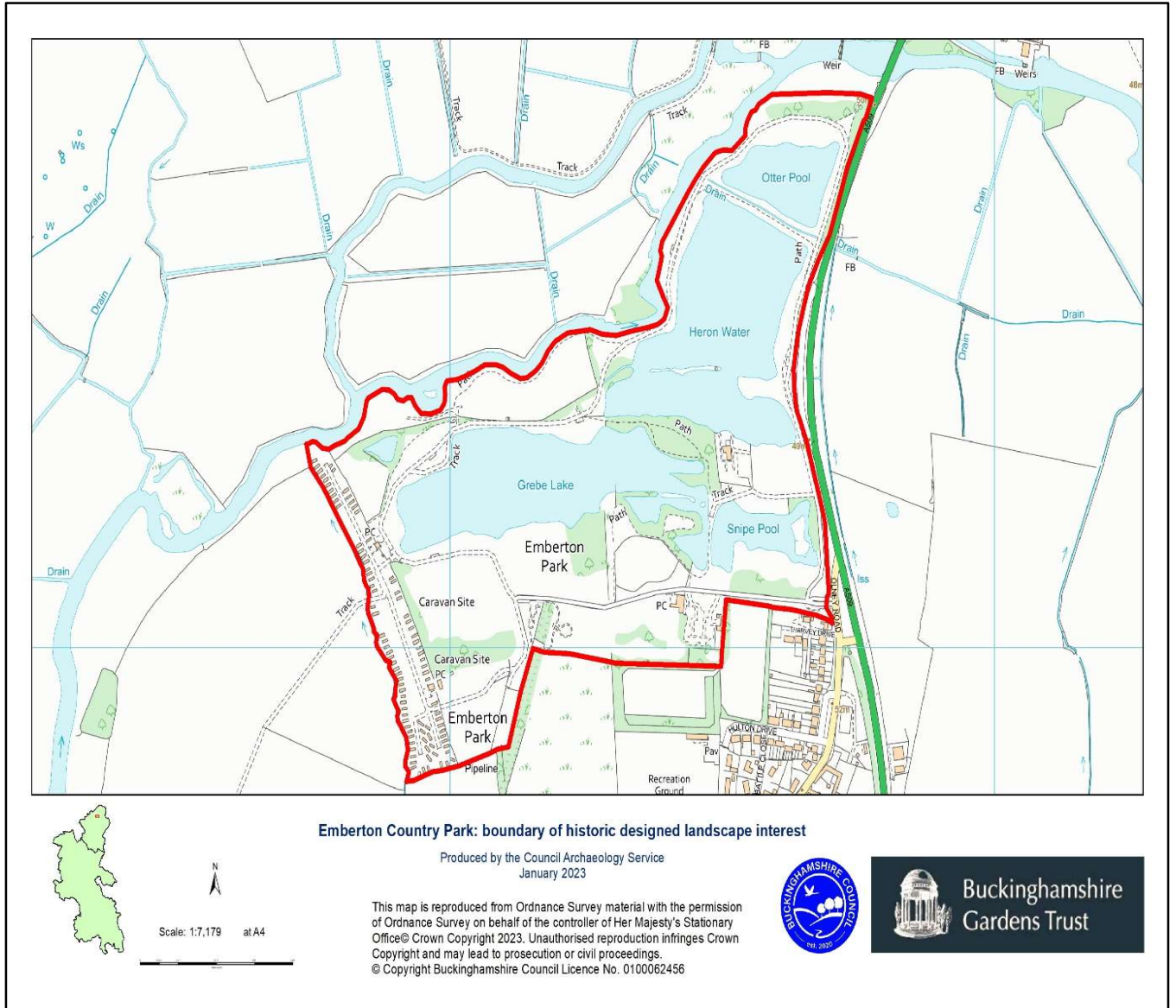


EMBERTON COUNTRY PARK

(Image: Heron Lake)

November 2023

HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY





Scale: 1:7,179 at A4



Emberton Country Park: 2022 aerial photograph

© Airbus Defence and Space Ltd

Produced by the Council Archaeology Service
January 2023



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, the Finnis Scott Foundation, Bucks County Council and other donors. Bucks County Council generously provided current and historic mapping; access to the Historic Environment Record was provided by Milton Keynes City 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

HISTORIC COUNTY	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	EMBERTON COUNTRY PARK
DISTRICT	MILTON KEYNES	MK46 5FJ
PARISH	EMBERTON	MK HER NO:
OS REF.	SP 880 503	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

Emberton Park, opened in 1965, is a fine and very early example of a mid-C20 naturalistic Country Park landscape laid out by a local authority for public recreation shortly before the 1968 Country Park Act. It was one of England's first country parks to be designed from scratch, comprising naturalistic planting with a network of paths around former extraction pits. Walking trails and paths take the visitor around four lakes, through wooded glades and open grassland. Newport Pagnell Rural District Council used the Physical Education Act 1937 to inform their ideas to create a recreation area open to all. Country Parks were pioneered by the Countryside Agency from the late 1960s and developed in partnership with local authorities for the remainder of the C20. There are around 250 recognised country parks in England and Wales, most being designated in the 1970s after Emberton, a very early, , example was created, perhaps the earliest designed from scratch.

Emberton is one of four diverse local-authority run Country Parks in historic Bucks, contrasting with the other three in the south of the county: Black Park (1970), Denham Park and Langley Park, which used existing historic designed landscapes. As a naturalistic public landscape with large expanses of shrubby planting as a key feature, it was developed in advance of the extensive and varied group of Milton Keynes New Town parks conceived in the 1970s and still being completed.

Archaeological Interest

The site has the potential for further archaeological evidence associated with the Late Iron Age and a Romano-British settlement along a section of Roman Road evidence of a pottery kiln also exists. It also has potential for finds associated with the Civil War Battle at Olney as a row of soldiers' graves has been located.

Architectural Interest

There is no significant historic architecture nor any associated with the 1960s design.

Artistic Interest

The initial design and layout of the park was managed by Newport Pagnell Rural District Council. It is an example of how sympathetic restoration of gravel workings combined with innovative design can provide excellent leisure facilities within a rural landscape at a time when the future of the countryside was under threat. It makes expert use of the rolling rural setting in its design with external views including of the iconic Olney church spire.

Historic Interest

The area had been crucial in the construction of the nearby M1 motorway (Britain's first) the gravel dug, being used in its construction. With the completion of the first section of motorway in 1959 the gravel pits became disused. Its historic importance is as a very early example of a purpose-built Country Park. The development of the Country Park is a significant historical phenomenon in landscape design in the past 60 years and the designs thus have high heritage significance as post-war designed landscapes.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT UP UNTIL THE OPENING OF THE PARK

Emberton Country Park is one of the first of England's country parks to be developed. While Studley Royal (West Riding Yorks, now owned by the National Trust) was created around the same period, (Lambert 2006) it was not designed on a new site specifically for the contemporary needs of public recreation.

The idea of Country Parks was first raised as early as 1929, but it was to be some decades later before legislation enabled local authorities to develop suitable land. The 1960s saw increasing momentum in acquiring land for leisure activities. The reasoning behind this drive was threefold: to ease the pressure on the more remote places of natural beauty, to protect the countryside and, thirdly, to provide accessible leisure activities for the public without having to travel far (Lambert, 2006).

In 1952, the area which is now the Country Park was used as gravel pits to provide material for the development of the first section of the M1 Motorway nearby to the east which opened in 1959. Newport Pagnell Rural District Council and Buckinghamshire County Council then acquired these disused gravel pits on the edge of Emberton village in April 1965 for the sum of £24,000. The initial design and layout of the park was achieved by Newport Pagnell Rural District Council. It "became a model of how sympathetic restoration of gravel workings can provide first class facilities" (*Emberton Park Nature Trail Brochure*). Three main principles guided the initial thinking and the original concept:

The desire to retain as much as possible of the flora and fauna.

No noisy activities such as power boats or fairgrounds.

To have natural places in the countryside with a family focus.

Almost all the work was carried out by Newport Pagnell Rural District Council's engineers and administration was done by existing staff prepared to work overtime. Thus, a significant amount of money was saved. The idea of a restaurant was rejected as not "being in keeping" with the basic plan which concentrated on small play areas for children with other areas left completely natural for wildlife. The park was thus deliberately designed without buildings.

Amazingly, the Park was ready for its open day on Whit Sunday, June 1965. It was held up as an example of how derelict land can be reclaimed for leisure facilities with representatives

from the government and other interested parties visiting the park (R.G.Bellchambers & A. Eley, 1974).

Over time, with monies obtained from national and local grants, planned improvements were made and the site further developed. The park was the first country park to gain recognition from the Countryside Commission.

Whilst ownership and management of the park has since been transferred to Milton Keynes City Council, the same principles apply today.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Location

Emberton Country Park is set in over 80ha in North Buckinghamshire, between the village of Emberton and the old market town of Olney. It lies on the edge of the Great Ouse floodplain just South of Olney, the river forming its boundary to the West and the North. To the East, mature hedging and trees separate the park from the A509 with the path which runs alongside it, these form the boundary on this side. To the South, mature trees and dense hedging form a live boundary with residential housing and open farmland lying beyond these.

The park comprises mature informal parkland. A network of walking trails and paths take the visitor around the four lakes, through wooded glades and open grassland. Many areas offer opportunities for structured and creative play. A Conservation Area and Bird Hides provide scope to study and learn more about the wildlife and its preferred habitats. Information boards provide details ranging from the history of the site to the geology of the area, to the wildlife which visit and inhabit.

The park lies in a shallow valley on level ground, with hills to the North-West (Olney to Weston Underwood Road), the South-East (Clifton Reynes) and the South (Newport Pagnell).

Area, boundaries, landform setting

The largely level park is made up of wooded glades and meadows, four lakes, a smaller pond and 5km of footpaths. The Great Ouse forms its boundary to the West and the North; to the East, mature hedging and trees separate the park from the A509 and a path which runs alongside it, these form the boundary on this side; to the South, mature trees and dense hedging form a natural boundary with residential housing and open farmland lying beyond these. The tree and hedgerow south-western boundary lay behind the static caravan park.

Entrances and Approaches

The main and only vehicular entrance to the park is situated on the Olney Road, just off the A509 on the outskirts of the village of Emberton on the south-east boundary. A small, single storey gatehouse reception building flanked by barrier gates marks the entrance to the corner of the park. This leads directly to the single-track circular road which runs around the

entire park. There are two specific car parks but visitors can also park on the grass in most areas.

Two further pedestrian entrances to the park link to the exterior public footpath which runs from Emberton and Olney alongside the A509. One lies 400m North of the main entrance joining directly with the paved road which runs round the perimeter inside the park, continuing onto a path which winds between three of the park's lakes, past the yacht club and the Conservation Area before re-joining the perimeter road on the opposite side of the park. The second pedestrian entrance is at the most northerly tip, leading off the public footpath just before it crosses the bridge into the market town of Olney.

SURROUNDING BULDINGS AND FEATURES

While there are no significant buildings in the park, the surrounding settled areas are of local historical interest. South of the park a residential area has detached post-war properties which lead into the village of Emberton.

According to the Reverend Hulton, who was Rector of Emberton from 1922 to 1932, the name of the village derives from an Anglo – Wan Berht or Eanbeorht, Emberton meaning Eangerht's farm. During that period many travelled over from North Germany in search of a place to settle and journeyed inland via the rivers establishing themselves eventually in Buckinghamshire (*Hogg 1989*).

Emberton provided a convenient place to stop for Robin of Redesdale who, with 20,000 men, was planning to attack King Edward IV who had taken refuge in nearby Olney. Fortunately, the battle was averted when the King was captured in July 1469 (*Osborne 1976*).

To the north in nearby Olney, the fine windowed lantern spire of the church of St Peter and St Paul (built some 600 years ago in the gothic style), is visible from the park. The old English name for Olney was "Olla's Island" as at that time it was surrounded by rivers, streams and marshes (*Emberton Park Nature Trail Brochure*).

Sports and play amenities

Emberton Sailing Club has a clubhouse in the park and operates on Heron Water. A static caravan park, comprising 114 pitches, large and small rally fields with campsites give people the chance to stay on site. Fishing (permit only) is allowed on all lakes and the river with catches including perch, roach, bream and pike.

Facilities include public conveniences (two sites); a café with seating areas both inside and out; an outdoor gym and table tennis table. Picnic tables and benches are dotted around the site, each placed to afford pleasant views - many of them across the lakes.

HORTICULTURE

Perambulation

On entry, from the main entrance either by car or on foot, follow the road (which circles the perimeter of the park) in a clockwise direction. To the North (n the right of the road) a grass

area leads onto shrub land and trees which conceal “Snipe Pool”, one of the park’s smaller lakes. To the South an avenue of mature trees, including Black Poplar, Blue Cedar, Common Lime, Copper Beech and Common Beech give a pleasing entrance with a view of open parkland beyond. Emerging from the avenue of trees, the café, toilet facilities and a car park (including electric car charge points) appear. These look out across the perimeter road to a large grass area which includes the Quarry Experience; this is a children’s play structure which using various cranes, pulleys, diggers and containers is a nod to the Park’s past as gravel pits (1956 – 62). Latterly these provided the hardcore for the construction of the M1 around Newport Pagnell. Within the rocks from the gravel pits were many from Norway and Sweden, many of them igneous. It is likely that these were carried over in ice floes which then melted leaving stones, sand and silt as well as the gravel (*Osborne 1976*).

To mark the Millennium, a low local limestone wall was built. Its shape replicates the direction of the River Great Ouse as it wends its way through two nearby villages. Built into the wall items mark the location’s passage through time since the “beginning of time”. For example, an ammonite, a “Roman bracelet” and a small flint axe are among the many exhibits clearly visible; a series of small circular plaques on the ground link with these by providing a timescale. Some of the “exhibits” are no longer there, however, the wall is still interesting to view and serves an educational purpose. A series of stone slabs surrounds the wall; each with a picture of a church engraved upon it which are representative of the churches in the local area (Appendix 1).

A low fence separates the activity area from the track which runs behind it. Continue, on foot, in a westerly direction along this track for a short while, through an area with dense brambles on either side until reaching a wooden board walk leading to a bird hide on the edge of Grebe Lake. Swans, Canada geese, ducks, moorhens, coots and heron are among the bird life to be seen. The track loops back through the edge of the grassed area joining the perimeter road.

Follow the road until it reaches the main children’s play area towards the southwest of Grebe Lake where there is a good range of play furniture, with each item named and identified on an information board. The play area entitled “Spirit of Adventure” has mini attractions such as “Dragons Gorge” and “Old Man of the Sea”. On the edge of the play area a wooden walkway climbs through trees to a wooded ridge from which various slides and shutles descend. A path leads around the base of the mound to a “sensory area” comprising a covered table and benches surrounded by raised beds. A full-size concave mirror and a couple of circular spin machines are placed to deceive the eye. This path continues around the base of the mound to arrive at an arch leading into the rear of the play area. This is typical of the way in which paths and trails are used on a “journey of discovery” around parts of the park which are not immediately visible from the perimeter road.

Continue south westerly on the perimeter road where at the T junction the road turns left into the static caravan park. This area is sheltered from view by trees and hedgerows. Back at the T junction follow the perimeter road north/ northwest passing on the left the touring

field and campsites together with a car park and toilet facilities. There is also a children's area nearby and a small pond called Frogs Hole.

Open grassland lies to the right of this road, running down to Grebe Lake. Two benches on the lakeside afford beautiful views across the lake. Large weeping willows and a silver birch frame the edge of this viewpoint.

The road borders the lake as it continues around the westerly side of the park, past the entrance to the rally fields and campsites. Again, trees and dense hedgerows block these sites from view.

Opposite the entrance to the Overspill Rally Field, a path wends its way easterly between Grebe Lake on the right and Heron Water on the left (the two largest lakes), into the Conservation Area. In contrast to the open grassland of much of the park, this area has a more intimate feel. The undergrowth and hedgerows come right to the edge of the path and a subsequent wooden walkway. Overhanging branches create a different environment and information boards and pictures ingrained on the walkway encourage the visitor to pause and explore the habitat. A bird hide on the edge of Heron Water gives scope to observe the birdlife, but also in the distance the masts of sailing boats on the water can often be seen. The path continues south through the Conservation Area, past Snipe Pool and Grebe Lake. Snipe Pool is a much smaller expanse of water, edged with bullrushes and bordered by trees: in season water lilies cover the surface - an ideal spot to see dragon flies, water boatmen and the occasional fish jumping. Coming out of the Conservation Area the path leads back to perimeter road, the main car park and café. Alternatively, the westerly path can also be taken leading to the Quarry Experience.

Returning to the Overspill Rally Field at the north-west of the park, the perimeter road progresses in a northerly direction, bordered by the River Great Ouse to the West and Heron Water to the East. On the horizon houses on the outskirts of Olney can be seen on the road toward Weston Underwood. Trees and hedgerows stand between the road and the lake, however there are gaps in these at regular intervals through which are clear views of across Heron Water. At the northern tip of Heron Water, a trail leads across to the east side of the park, this separates Heron Water from Otter Pool, a much smaller lake with another bird hide situated just off the path.

The perimeter road continues round the north side of Otter Pool, passing other grass areas which then disappear into marshland which runs down to the River Ouse at the north-east corner. At the park's most northerly point the road is edged with an avenue of poplar trees at the end of which is a pedestrian exit from the park, leading up a small mound and then joining the outer path as it crosses the bridge into Olney. Beyond the trees, water meadows and sluice gates form part of the area's flood control measures. To the north-east, the spire of St Peter and St Paul's Church in Olney can be seen.

The perimeter road then runs back in a southerly direction to the main entrance of the park. It is edged with trees and hedgerows, including hazel, blackthorn and field maple, plus a fence to the east which separates it from the A509 which runs parallel at this point. To the

west of this path grassland leads onto bramble hedging and spindly trees which edge the lakes.

ARCHAEOLOGY - Emberton Gravel Pit (Emberton Park)

The key identified points of archaeological interest were from the late Iron Age and then the Romano-British settlement; evidence of both was found in 1957, when the land was being stripped in preparation for the gravel quarry. Sites of enclosures were revealed over a large area where late Iron Age and Roman pottery were discovered. Four stone lined walls were excavated where the following were found: several nearly complete pottery vessels, a bucket handle, a bronze ligula (strap), fragments of quern stones (tools for grinding) and a limestone slab 0.4m high with a figure of the Roman god Mercury carved in relief. A section of Roman road was also found (Osborn 1976).

A large amount of Roman pottery, including a pottery waster (discarded or failed) was identified which may indicate a pottery kiln close by. Signs of an earlier riverbed were revealed next to timber piles. An area of paved stones was also found which had a significant amount of 12th & 13th century pottery on and among the stones suggesting that this may have been a riverside wharf or quay (Osborn 1976).

Also discovered was a row of graves of the soldiers who had perished in the Civil War Battle of nearby Olney in 1643 (Osborn 1976).

There is evidence of the uncompleted proposed railway line linking the Newport end of Wolverton to the Newport branch line to Olney. Cuttings and embankments were constructed in 1865-6, however the project was expensive and was abandoned (HER Number MMK7956).

Another significant find, while excavating the gravel pits, were two horns of Aurochs (Appendix 1). The cattle often grew to a shoulder height of 1.8 meters (6 feet) and the horns could reach up to 80cms. Extinct since around 1500BC, these were cattle brought to Britain by the Romans and their descendants may be Welsh cattle (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

REFERENCES

Publications

Bellchambers, R.G. and Eley, A. (1974) *"A History of Newport Pagnell Rural District Council"*. Bletchley: Keynes Print Ltd.

Buckinghamshire Federation of Women's Institutes (1993) *"Buckinghamshire within Living Memory"*. Newbury: Countryside Books

Hogg, H (1989) *"The Hulton Diaries 1832-1928 A Gradely Lancashire Chronicle"*. Chichester: Solo Mio Books.

Osborn, G. (1976) Cowper Country, *"Journal of Roman Studies"* 48 (1958) 13-15; 141, pl. XX1,1.

Documents

Emberton Park Nature Trail, brochure.

Lambert, D. (January 2006) *"Landscape Research"*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 43 – 62,

Milton Keynes Council Monument Full Report (2022) *HER Number MMK7956*.

Emberton Park Brochure - by kind permission of Milton Keynes City Council

Websites

Britannica Online: www.encyclopaediabritannica.com

Acknowledgements

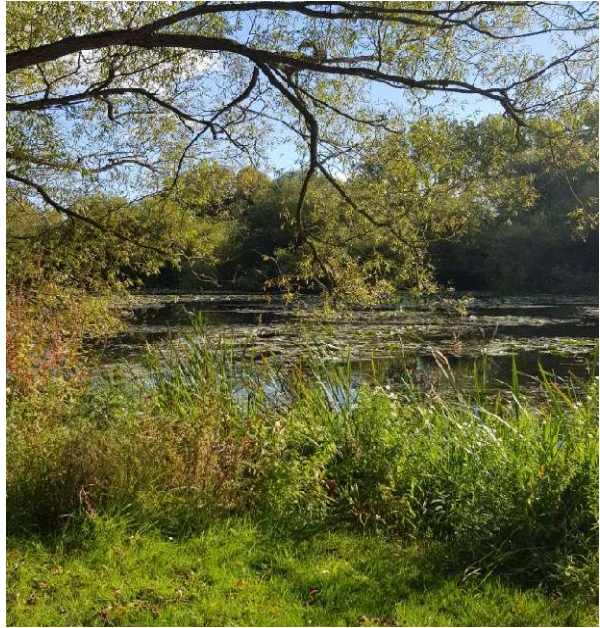
Cowper Newton Museum, Olney

N. Crank – Senior Archaeological Officer, Milton Keynes City Council

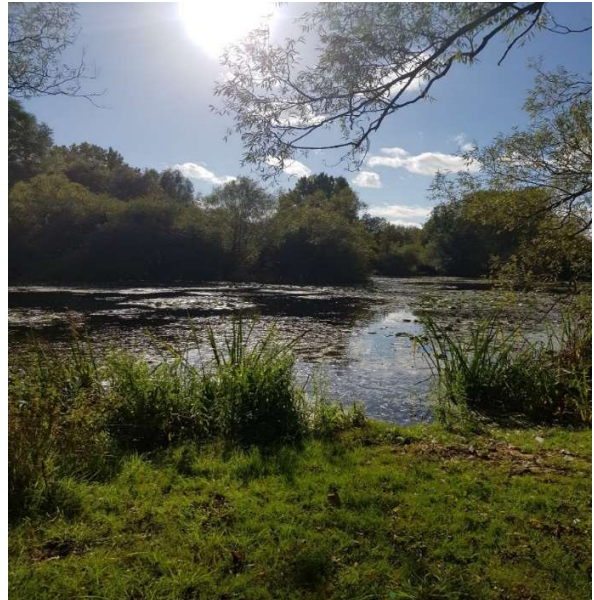
A. Mcgrandle – Local Historian

K. Jackson Sept 2023, Edit. C. de Carle & SR Oct 2023

CURRENT IMAGES



Grebe Lake (©K Jackson)





Timeline Plaque (©K Jackson)



Section of Timeline Wall (© K Jackson)



River Great Ouse (©K Jackson)



Courtesy of Cowper Museum, Olney.

BROCHURE & PLAN OF EMBERTON PARK – INFORMATION, VIEWPOINTS AND FEATURES

(By kind permission of Milton Keynes City Council)

Welcome to Emberton Country Park

This attractive parkland is situated in the village of Emberton, close to the historic town of Olney and just a few miles northeast of Milton Keynes. Set in over 200 acres, the park is peaceful and relaxing.

Days out for all the family

Originally a gravel works, it was transformed by Milton Keynes Council into England's first Country Park in 1965. There are wooded glades and meadows and children's play areas. From birdwatching to triathlons, camping, picnicking or a walk in the countryside, Emberton Country Park has something for everyone to enjoy all year round.

Explore the park

Walk, jog, run, cycle or ride around over 5km of paths and trails winding their way around 5 lakes, wooded glades and meadows. The park is a 'natural' environment, please take care as there are some uneven walking surfaces.

Swimming, wading, and paddling are not permitted in any of the Park's waters.



Children's play areas

There are three dedicated children's play areas with fun and accessible equipment. There is the pirate play ship area, the sand pit and squirrel drey wooden play area.

Bird Watching

There are numerous birds to see such as woodpeckers and kingfishers to migratory birds such as swifts, swallows, wintering ducks and cuckoos. Watch from our 3 bird viewing platforms and bird hide.



Fishing

Enjoy a relaxing day fishing in beautiful surroundings here at Emberton Country Park. There are 4 lakes stocked with a variety of fish including perch, roach, pike, bream and tench. Day, week, and season permits are available from Customer Services on 01908 252860. Accessible fishing facilities are available with several adapted fishing pegs. Find out more www.milton-keynes.gov.ecp-fishing

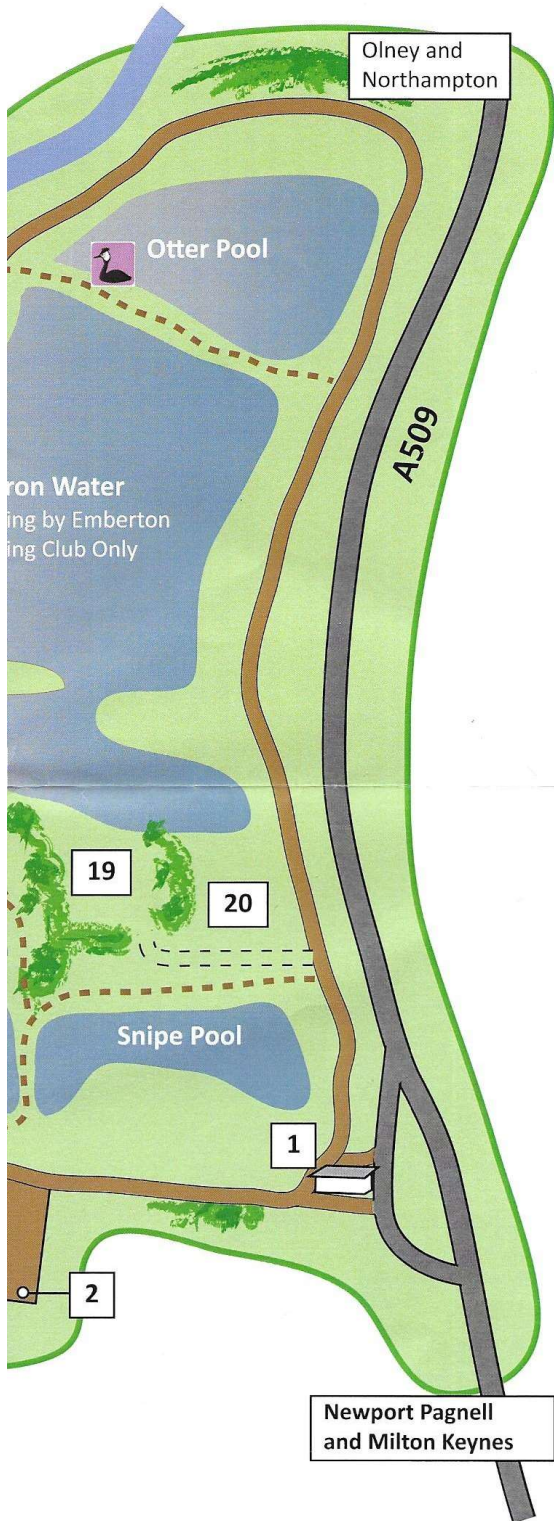
Picnics and Café

The park provides a beautiful setting for eating outside, with two dedicated picnic areas. BBQ's and campfires are not permitted in the main park.

Situated by the main car park, the cafe is a great place to stop for hot drinks and a bite to eat <https://groundscafe.uk/emberton/>

We have recycling facilities available on site next to the café car park. Where

Emberton Country Park



Your guide to the park

- 1 **Gatehouse reception**
 - Card and pay entry machine
 - Emergency phone
- 2 **Main Car Park**
- 3 **Public toilets**
including disabled facilities
- 4 **Refreshments**
- 5 **Visitor Information Notice Board**
● **Defibrillator**
- 6 **Picnic Area**
- 7 **Play Area**
- 8 **Touring Field & Campsite**
- 9 **Touring Field toilets,**
showers and utility wash areas
● **Defibrillator**
- 10 **The Meadow**
(picnic and ball games area)
- 11 **Public toilets**
- 12 **Car park**
- 13 **Children's play area**
- 14 **Frogs Hole**
- 15 **Small Rally Field & Campsite**
- 16 **Large Rally Field & Campsite**
- 17 **Overspill Rally Field & Campsite**
- 18 **Conservation Area**
- 19 **Emberton Sailing Club**
- 20 **Picnic Area**

Park trails



Bird hide or platform



Continued

