

Meades Water Gardens Management Plan



Contents

Site History	1
Management Vision	4
Environmental Policy Compliance	4
Maintenance Regime	5

Revised November 2016



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Site History

Meades Water Gardens was once the site of the millpond of Amy Mill (also known as Amies, Amen or Ameer Mill). It is not known when Amy Mill was built; the first record of the mill in the Chesham Bois parish registers was in 1616 (the site belonged to Chesham Bois parish until 1934). However, it is possible that it was one of the two mills included in the Domesday Book (1086).

Amy Mill was powered by the River Chess for flour production, which was Chesham's primary medieval industry. In the Buckinghamshire Posse Comitatus of 1798 (a survey of all men capable of acting in a military capacity, plus the numbers of horses, wagons and carts available) Amy Mill was recorded as being one of the smaller mills in the town, with a weekly production of 20 quarters. The mill had two carts, but no horses or wagons, compared to a production of 200 sacks, with 7 horses, 2 wagons and 3 carts at Cannons Mill.

In the 19th Century, Amy Mill was operated as a corn mill by the Rose Family. In the 1840s, the Roses installed an innovative steam-powered mill on the other side of Amersham Road. But this was not without incident, as in January 1845, shortly after the opening of the Bois Steam Mill, George Rose was tragically killed following an accident with the steam machinery. However, the steam technology superseded Amy Mill, which was demolished by the end of the 19th Century.

The miller's house, known as Amy Mill House, remained following the mill's demolition and was later extended. The house even acted as a sick bay during World War II. However, the house was damaged in 1970 when a lorry crashed into it and eventually the house was demolished to make way for the Friedrichsdorf Corner roundabout at the bottom of Amersham Hill. The only remainder of the site's milling heritage is the sluice gate.

After Amy Mill ceased operating, the mill pond was replaced by watercress beds, an important Chilterns industry that supplied the London market. However, at some point in the 20th Century, the farming of watercress ceased at the site and the beds were abandoned.

The land was donated to the town by the Garrett-Pegge family. In 1979, the town council converted the disused watercress beds into formal water gardens, named the Meades Water Gardens. This scheme received a Civic Trust Commendation for the conversion of a neglected space into a recreational area. The watercourse was altered to establish a broad-water with the flow splitting downstream to create an island feature.



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Daffodils were planted to spell out the initials of the late Cllr Robin Groves, chairman of the committee that planned the gardens. Other spring planting was carried out, including cowslips and bluebells, and wildflowers were sown in the area adjacent to 33-35 Red Lion Street. A flint gazebo was moved into the gardens from the town centre. The building commemorates Benjamin and Dinah Grove, woodturners of Waterside. Stones commemorating the opening of the gardens and the Civic Trust award were placed in gardens.

In the following years, long-term sustainability issues arose with maintaining the site as formal water gardens. The creation of the lake had reduced the speed of the water flow, which caused silt deposition. As the lake became heavily silted-up over time, its wildlife habitat value decreased and the area became aesthetically unappealing. The weirs that maintained the water level of the lake periodically collapsed. From 1992 onwards, various plans were mooted to de-silt the water body and make other improvements to the site. The site was de-silted in the mid-1990s. In 1996 a new information board was installed at the Red Lion Street entrance to the Gardens, to provide site information to visitors.

However, the water body soon silted up again and the process of de-silting was considered too expensive to be carried out regularly to maintain the gardens in their existing form. Periods of drought caused the river to dry up, exposing the silted bed. A lack of tree management reduced light levels, making the place unwelcoming to the public and attracting antisocial behaviour. The gazebo was boarded up following extensive vandalism.



The site before regeneration (February 2006) - ©Chilterns Conservation Board

In 2004, the Impress the Chess campaign was launched; a partnership between local authorities, conservation bodies, local groups and residents, to conserve and enhance the River Chess. Improvements to Meades Water Gardens were identified as a high priority and a plan was formulated to improve the site's recreational and wildlife value and to make the gardens sustainable in the long term. The plan was developed by Chesham Town Council, the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project and the River Restoration Centre.

On the 9th June 2006, Meades Water Gardens was designated an alcohol-restricted area in an attempt to help curb antisocial behaviour. Following over £60,000 of fundraising, work to renovate the gardens was begun with tree work in 2007 to increase light levels and improve tree health. In 2008, the artificial lake was restored to a chalk stream channel, characteristic of the River Chess, creating valuable habitats for riparian Chilterns' wildlife. The narrow, fast-flowing channel will not experience high levels of silt deposition. A wetland area was also created to benefit wildlife associated with slower moving water. The bridges were refurbished to improve the site's accessibility. The stones commemorating the previous opening of the gardens in the 1980s were removed and donated to Chesham Museum. A new interpretation board was installed at the Red Lion Street entrance, providing information on the history and biology of the site, plus a description of the regeneration project.

The site was officially opened on the 11th July 2008 and the Meades Water Gardens Regeneration Project was awarded the 2008 South East England Market Towns Environment and Culture Award. The project was also a runner-up in the 2008 Chilterns Conservation Awards and was short-listed for the 2009 Wild Trout Trust Conservation Award.



In 2009 a further phase of works was carried out in consultation with residents to increase accessibility to the gardens for all. The footpaths were upgraded, and thanks to a grant of £3,000 from the Chilterns AONB Sustainable Development fund, a boardwalk was installed along the narrowest and muddiest stretch of path to aid access, whilst protecting the natural river bank; a potentially important habitat for wildlife, including water voles.

The newly regenerated water gardens in July 2008
© Chesham Town Council



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Management Vision

This Management Plan has been devised by Chesham Town Council and the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project.

The gardens have been regenerated to provide an urban space of benefit to both wildlife and the public. The management regime has been devised to ensure that both the recreational and conservation value of the area are maintained. It is recognised that in the urban environment, one of the major benefits to the public is the ability to observe and enjoy wildlife, and Meades Water Gardens will be managed to maximise such opportunities for residents and visitors to Chesham.

The paths have been renovated and are to be maintained at a standard that permits access by a broad range of people with differing levels of mobility, whilst retaining the informal, woodland feel of the site. Part of the route of the Chess Valley Walk runs through the gardens and access to this route will be maintained.

Management of the site, whilst ensuring its accessibility to the public, will also safeguard wildlife. The town council reserves the right to temporarily close-off sections of the site, for example, to protect nesting birds.

Environmental Policy Compliance

The town council adopted its Environmental Policy in 2006. In the policy, the council acknowledges that the River Chess, as a chalk stream, is a globally rare habitat that is important for the characteristic wildlife of the Chilterns. The Council has made a commitment to the conservation of this habitat.

The water gardens will be managed in line with the Environmental Policy, to enhance and protect the river habitat and promote local biodiversity.



Maintenance Regime

Regular maintenance tasks are carried out by Chesham Town Council's Parks & Premises Department. Some works are kindly carried out by volunteers, particularly Chesham Environmental Group.

Horticultural Tasks

(i) Grass care

Red Lion Street Gardens are immediately adjacent to the water gardens and have a formal setting. This area receives 'fine turf' cutting treatment.

The water gardens are treated as a 'utility area' which is more in-keeping with a riverside & woodland setting and a more informal mowing regime is adopted with fewer cutting frequencies per annum. The frequency of cuts is determined by the growing conditions each year. The **maximum height** that the grass will be allowed to reach before cutting will be no more than **76mm** (3 inches).

Many areas are left uncut to provide natural, undisturbed areas as habitat for wildlife. A buffer zone of uncut vegetation will be maintained along the river banks. This uncut zone can be 'scalped' to provide varied buffer zone depth. The buffer zone will be cut once or twice through the summer to provide a relatively tall sward, but staggering the time of cutting to allow continuity of the habitat (i.e. cut one bank, but leave the other and vice versa). Some tall herb vegetation will be allowed to overwinter uncut to provide continuous habitat for invertebrates and mammals. To prevent riparian areas becoming dominated by 'rank' vegetation, all arisings resulting from buffer zone cuts, will be removed from site. Nettles will be cut back hard every two years to stop encroachment. Flag iris and reed mace will be cut down as necessary to allow new growth, with cuttings removed from the site.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – grass cutting approximately every 3-4 weeks (mid March – end October). Hard cut back of nettles every 2 years. Flag iris and reed mace cut back each spring
- Grass collection – N/A as a utility area, except for removal of arisings from buffer zone cuts
- Action – town council and volunteers (not grass cutting)

(ii) Hedge & Shrub Maintenance

There is one formal hedge on the site, i.e. the mature laurel hedge dividing the water gardens from Red Lion Street Gardens. The laurel hedge will now be maintained at approximately **122cm** (4 feet) tall.



Operational Details:

- Frequency & time of cutting – once annually, in Spring after flowering
Action – town council

There is a mix of shrubs on the western boundary of the site bordering Meades Lane. Those on the outside of the perimeter fence were planted by the Meades Meadow Management Co Ltd (Residents Association) and will be maintained by that association. Those shrubs on the inside of the perimeter fence will be maintained by the town council.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – as necessary to suit the different growth habits
- Action: - town council and Meades Lane Management Company

(iii) Tree Care

Although the trees will be monitored by the various interested parties, all trees on the site will be formally inspected by the town council each winter and tree surveys will be carried out by contractors as appropriate. Basic tree works, e.g. dead-wooding, removal of ivy, crown lifting, coppicing willows, removal of elder, cutting back saplings and epicormic tree growth, etc. will be programmed into the town council's winter work schedule, with assistance from Chesham Environmental Group. A professional arboriculturist will be contacted to inspect any tree that is considered to be diseased or dangerous, and the appropriate action taken.

A number of trees have been pollarded for safety reasons, to promote healthy growth, and to open up the previous dense tree canopy. This practice will be continued as necessary, usually 4-5 years after the previous cut.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – winter and as required
- Action – town council and Chesham Environmental Group.

Other Works

(i) Litter-Picking and Bin Emptying:

Carried out weekly by the town council, usually on Mondays. During the summer, a further litter-pick will be scheduled but, realistically, will be dependent on time constraints.

In-stream litter constituting a flood risk will be removed as a priority, with particular attention being paid to accumulations of litter at the footbridges. Large items that pose a flood risk, such as fallen trees, will be reported to the Environment Agency for the Agency to remove.



Chesham Environmental Group will carry out work parties to clear litter, paying particular attention to in-stream litter.

(ii) Dead Wood

A woodland environment will naturally accumulate an amount of fallen dead wood. In a wild wood, this would lie in the undergrowth and rot, effectively returning to nature. The Meades Water Gardens is a relatively small woodland area, within an urban setting, and naturally attracts a lot of interest from local children. Part of their games is often to attempt to dam the river, float logs, etc. and for this reason, this wood needs to be removed from site. Large items of deadwood that cannot be easily removed will be left.

(iii) Signs and Interpretation Board

These require a periodic clean by rinsing with clean water. This is carried out as necessary. Graffiti will be removed as soon as possible after discovery. Offensive graffiti, particularly racist graffiti, will be removed within 24 hours of discovery where possible. If damage to the board is severe, a replacement board will be installed.

Operational Details for all ancillary works

- Frequency – as specified above
- Action - town council with the Environmental Group assisting. Environment Agency to be informed if obstructions to channel constitute a flood risk.

(iv) Public Footpaths

The footpaths were renovated in 2009 to provide a solid footing that will enable visitors to walk the site from Friedrichsdorf Corner to Duck Alley and Red Lion Street (the route of the Chess Valley Walk), regardless of wet conditions.

Any unevenness will be raked level and reconsolidated and the paths will be topped up as required. The paths will be edged back to maintain wheelchair and buggy access. Accumulations of leaves in autumn/winter will be removed.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – as necessary
- Action – town council

(iv) Perimeter Fencing

The original chestnut fencing between the water gardens and residential properties in Meades Lane has been replaced with a 120 cm tall weld-wire fence, and double-gate entrance for works vehicles. The new fence is green in colour, to be in-keeping with its environment.



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Maintenance will only entail repairs if vandalism occurred and removal of any tree branches that may encroach on or into the fence.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – as necessary
- Action – town council

(v) Foot Bridges and Boardwalk

There are two wooden bridges connecting the East and West banks. In June 2008, Chesham Rotary Club kindly refurbished these. Non-slip footboards for both footbridges were purchased as part of the renovation project, and were installed by the town council in Winter 2008/09. The upstream bridge was completely replaced in 2015. A new boardwalk was installed over the path approaching Friedrichsdorf Corner in 2009. Future maintenance will consist of an annual clean, with an application of teak oil every two to three years. The bridges will be monitored for the build-up of trapped litter that could cause a flood risk.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – cleaning annually, in spring. Apply teak oil every two – three years in spring
- Action – town council and possibly a volunteer group

(vi) River Banks

The make-up of the river banks vary. Large sections are natural grass covered earthen banks, whilst sections have been reinforced with concrete. One or two small sections have wooden shoring.

Maintenance consists of the monitoring of the natural banks for areas of collapse and deterioration of the existing reinforcements. Collapses in the earthen banks require shoring, and back-filling with consolidated aggregate. Existing reinforced shoring requires repairs/replacement as soon as discovered.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – as necessary, and immediately if this constitutes a safety hazard
- Action - town council

(vi) Riverfly Monitoring

Monitoring riverfly populations will detect significant pollution events in the river and enable reporting to the Environment Agency, as well as providing a more general understanding of the river's health.

Operational Details:

- Frequency – monthly (when there is flow in the river)
- Action – River Chess Association

