

Appendix 2

1 Background to the History and Importance of Beechen Cliff and the Involvement of the National Trust in the Adjoining Land

- 1.1 Beechen Cliff is a product of the last ice age, about 10,000 years ago, when glacial melt cut through the oolitic limestone hills, adjacent to the river Avon, thereby leaving a dramatic backdrop to the city. As stated above, the area is the site and result of a major historic landslide and, whilst no large scale mass movements of the landslide appear to have occurred in recent centuries, there is evidence of small slips and instability over the past 200 years, with falls of trees on the steep upper slopes within the last 30 years. The cliff has a slope angle of 45 degrees+, but appears to be currently stable with no recorded movements in the last 100 years. Small land slips and instability are commonly associated with human activity and heavy rainfall.
- 1.2 Jane Austen noted in Northanger Abbey the “noble hill, whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking an object from almost every opening in Bath”.
- 1.3 Bath has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site (WHS) because of “its outstanding universal values”. In other words Bath is a world class exemplar of these universal values, and its landscape setting is specified as one of those values in the formal designation. It is characterised by a rural landscape which provides a green hills setting for the City, particularly where it stretches in to the city centre, and nowhere more so than at Beechen Cliff and the adjoining fields.
- 1.4 No other City in England offers such a magnificent panoramic view of itself, nor has rural woodland, within 200 metres of its main shopping centre.
- 1.5 In its recent report on the Bath World Heritage Site, UNESCO highlighted the need to enhance the protection of the landscape surrounding the City, and the WHS Steering Group agreed at its meeting earlier this year, that this should be one of the Group’s four immediate priorities.

2 Recent History

- 2.1 The Cliff itself, forming part of the land under consideration, was purchased by public subscription in 1869. The deed describes the cliff as a “picturesque object from most parts of the City, purchased with a view of preserving it as an ornamental appendage to the City” The land was given to the Council “to be held in trust in perpetuity” Legal advice will need to be sought about whether this would stop the Council from transferring the land to the National Trust. It is likely that the mature beech trees at the top of the cliff were planted soon after, to help stabilise the cliff. Earlier prints show a patchy covering of vegetation. It is understood that the various springs on the cliff face which had fed property in the Southgate area, were also culverted about this time, presumably for the same purpose. Alexandra Park was established

on the flat area at the top, in 1902, and subsequently Beechen Cliff School, which opened in 1932.

- 2.2 In 1993 the former Bath City Council commissioned Cobham Resource Consultants, Landscape Consultants to prepare a Management Plan for Beechen Cliff. Their report stated that:-
- “The most significant trees are 24 mature beech trees on the upper slopes which are reaching the end of their safe life. New planting is urgently required if the impact of these trees is to be in any way maintained”. Over the majority of the site “there is no evidence of current (1993) management”. The report proposed a maintenance action plan over a period of 16 years from 1993 and indicated that its implementation was essential :-
- “to maintain the landscape contribution of the trees to the city, and
 - to secure the long-term stability of the cliff, and
 - to retain the existing nature conservation interest”.

The objective of this Plan was described as “to sustain uneven aged, predominantly broad-leaved cover on the site in order to eliminate exposure and consequent rapid erosion of sections of the steeper slopes”.

3 Current Situation

- 3.1 Little implementation of this management plan has occurred since 1993, mainly as a result of a lack of funds, but the viewpoints have been kept clear. The Parks section only has sufficient funds currently, to carry out emergency works to Beechen Cliff, particularly concerning public safety. The cost of these works is currently averaging about £5,000.
- 3.2 Mature trees have fallen in several places, and several trees lean at an angle in excess of 20 degrees. Trees are being throttled by ivy, and others have shed major branches. Public access is limited to a footpath up the face of the cliff, and footpaths in the adjoining fields, and park. A rough tractor route through the woods at the bottom of the cliff has been created, presumably to deal with collapsing trees which have slid down the cliff face, and the trunks of at least 20 substantial former trees are on the side of that track. A footpath along the bottom of the cliff, was recommended in the 1993 report to encourage public enjoyment of the woods, but has not been implemented. New beech tree planting has been concentrated in Alexandra Park, where they still impact on the skyline but are more accessible for management. Some tree planting on the cliff and closer to properties has been undertaken utilising smaller tree species.
- 3.3 It is clear that the lack of adequate funding has impeded the implementation of the recommendations within the 1993 report. In the present financial climate, it is unlikely that the Council will be able to find sufficient additional revenue funds for the management of the woodland in the foreseeable future.

4 The National Trust

- 4.1. The National Trust already owns over 200 hectares of Bath's skyline, particularly in Bathwick and Widcombe, (equivalent to about 200 football pitches) and manages it to a high standard. It first acquired parts of this land in the 1950's and made further substantial acquisitions in the 1980's when it launched its Bath Skyline Appeal, to which the former Bath City Council contributed £100,000, and it has subsequently made further additions to this landholding. The National Trust also acquired the Prior Park Landscape Garden in the 1980's and has carried out major restoration works there. During this time the National Trust has raised and spent several million pounds, on the acquisition and conservation of this land and currently incurs a running cost of around £200,000 per annum on its Bath landholdings.
- 4.2. There are 15,000 subscribing members of the NT in Bath which together with Guildford has more members as a proportion of their populations than anywhere else in the UK. (1 in 6 households has a member) This suggests that there would be considerable local support for a transfer to the NT.
- 4.3. The National Trust has been granted by Parliament a unique power to declare its land inalienable. This means that once an acquisition is so declared, the National Trust cannot subsequently sell, mortgage or otherwise dispose of that land. Neither can it be compulsorily purchased except by resolution of both Houses of Parliament. This has proved to be very attractive to donors who know that the National Trust's inalienable land will be looked after by it for ever. However it also means that the National Trust must make sure, before declaring any land inalienable, that it will be able to afford to look after it for ever. This usually means that an endowment is needed, to cover the annual overheads and running costs.