

# The Significance of Hampstead Heath



Hampstead Heath has been shaped over the centuries by the way humans have lived on it, farmed, exploited and enjoyed it. Despite these pressures the Heath has retained its 'natural' character and rare sense of 'ruralness', a unique find just four miles from the centre of London; a piece of encapsulated countryside in the city. The Heath's distinctive landscape has become nationally renowned, immortalised in the paintings of Constable and instantly recognised as one of the principal open spaces in London.



'Wild flowers at Parliament Hill' Dr Meg Game

The Heath is significant in many ways - for its landscape, cultural and social heritage, for biodiversity and for its value as a major public open space. This statement sets out what makes the Heath significant and lays down the baseline upon which conservation and

management objectives can be developed to ensure that its historic landscape character and component buildings and features are conserved and enhanced for future generations. The key factors which contribute to its significance are described below.

# History

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The Heath landscape is the outcome of changes in ownership and management, both agriculture and landscape design and **survival against the pressures of development and industry** (sand extraction) particularly through the 19th and 20th centuries. The impacts of these phases of the Heath's history remain evident today illustrated by over 55 principal artefacts, monuments and archaeological sites<sup>1</sup> which together with surviving landscape features, including the remarkable population of veteran trees, ancient hedgerow boundaries and strings of ponds, form a vital part of the Heath's character and heritage. The Heath's location between the settlements of Hampstead and Highgate, its character and history has resulted in the Heath becoming nationally renowned whilst for many Londoners it is their local open space, their 'substitute countryside'.



The Stone of Free Speech, on the west slopes of Parliament Hill  
Layton Thompson



Spaniards Road stands proud of adjacent old sand pits, 1914 postcard Picture courtesy Michael Hammerson

<sup>1</sup> Note. There is one scheduled ancient monument on Hampstead Heath, the mound on Parliament Hill, known as Boadicea's Grave. The Heath is also designated an Archaeological Priority Area in the local authority UDPs.

The wider historical context is also of interest, on a local scale for example the relationship of the Heath with the adjacent Hampstead Garden Suburb and with the settlements of Hampstead and Highgate and more broadly the connections with the city of London, most obvious when taking in the **panoramic views** from Parliament Hill which encompass key historic landmarks of London including St Paul's Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster<sup>2</sup>. Whitestone Pond is situated at the **highest point in London** and from this ridge there are additional extensive views to the west and north of London particularly from the Hill Garden reaching to Harrow-on-the-Hill and more local views which emphasise the relationship of the Heath with its largely urban surround and associated local landmarks.

Hampstead Heath has always been within London's orbit of influence and has played **a significant role in London life** over the centuries. The

changing landscape has often reflected and responded to wider social change affecting the way people related to and used the Heath. For example, the popularity of the Heath grew rapidly as the settlement of Hampstead expanded during the 17th and 18th centuries. Increasing numbers of people came to the area to take the 'medicinal waters' from Hampstead's fashionable spa retreat and, in turn, the reputation of the Heath grew as a place to visit for recreation, health and plant collecting.

The popularity of the Heath continued to grow during the 19th century and the extension of train lines brought even higher numbers of visitors, many people travelling from the poorly housed areas of the East End of London in search of open space and fresh air. During the 1880s an estimated 100,000 people would descend upon the Heath on bank holidays, increasing to 300,000 by 1910, attracted by the open space and its unique features including its outdoor bathing ponds and, later, the Lido.



The famous Old Bull and Bush on a bank holiday Picture courtesy Michael Hammerson

<sup>2</sup> Note. These regionally important strategic views from Parliament Hill are protected through designation in the London Plan, also reflected in the local UDP.

Throughout its history Hampstead Heath has also been associated with a number of **political events** and leading **political figures**. These include:

**c. AD61** - Speculation that Queen Boadicea is buried on the Heath, there is a bowl-shaped tumulus on Parliament Hill known as 'Boadicea's Grave'.



The Tumulus - 'Boadicea's Grave' Layton Thompson

**1605** - The Gunpowder Plot conspirators are alleged to have waited and watched on Parliament Hill to see Parliament blown up.

**1780** - Protestors of the Gordon Riots reached as far as the Spaniards Inn on the Heath where the effects of drink famously overcame the rioters leading to their eventual dispersal.

**1900s** - Use of the Heath during the First and Second World Wars for training and as allotments to supplement food supplies.

**1970s** - Michael Foot, Leader of the Opposition in the 1970's, was well known for walking on the Heath.

The **cultural associations** of the Heath are also many and varied through artists and writers who lived near and used the Heath or through its appearance in

novels, artworks and films. The most prominent among these include John Keats, poet, and John Constable, artist, who both lived very close to the Heath which provided inspiration for their work. The poet Coleridge also lived close to the Heath in Highgate Village as did Daphne du Maurier and George Orwell in Hampstead. In addition, many famous figures such as Karl Marx, Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson are known to have been regular visitors to the Heath.

As a result there are many paintings and prints of the Heath. As well as Constable's studies of the Heath, the Victorian artist John Atkinson Grimshaw painted a well known night-time scene of Hampstead Hill in oils. The Heath was also used as the setting for the opening scenes of Wilkie Collins' 'The Woman in White' and has references in Dickens' 'Pickwick Papers'. More recently, the Heath has featured in numerous films and television dramas including Notting Hill, Mansfield Park and Twenty Thousand Streets under the Sky and in 2005, the Heath was the location for the extraordinary sculpture, 'The Writer', a 9-metre tall table and chair by Giancarlo Neri.



# Natural Landscape

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The Heath makes a significant contribution to London's biodiversity. It is one of the largest open spaces (275ha) in London noted particularly for its chiefly naturalistic character with a **diverse mosaic of habitats** that encompass ancient woodland and UK BAP habitats as well as a small area of the Site of Special Scientific Interest at neighbouring Kenwood. Of particular importance are the estimated 800 veteran trees, the extensive water bodies and the small areas of acid grassland, heathland and sphagnum bog. In turn, these habitats support European and UK protected species as well as **national, regional and local rarities** including certain spiders in the grassland and beetles on the veteran trees. Over 180 species of birds, at least seven bat species, 300 fungi species and a good range of invertebrates have been

recorded on the Heath. The biodiversity value of the site is recognised through its designation in the London Plan as a Site of Metropolitan Importance for nature conservation.

The biodiversity of the Heath has long been observed and recorded by people. Important studies were carried out by Thomas Johnson in the 17th century and subsequently Tansley and others, contributing significantly to records of ecology through the ages. The 'natural' character of the Heath is what people enjoy and value most, **a remarkable natural resource** on the doorstep of thousands of Londoners, which continues to thrive with wildlife untroubled by the hundreds of visitors observing the wildlife and freely exploring the Heath's every corner.



A Heath grassland Adrian Brooker

# Hydrology

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The strings of ponds are a significant hydrological resource and collectively form an essential part of the character of the Heath. The ponds serve a wide range of functions including acting as reservoirs, contributing to the Heath's diversity of wildlife habitats, whilst also providing a highly popular and **nationally renowned** recreational

resource. The **natural bathing ponds** have been enjoyed for centuries and are the only life-guarded open-water swimming facilities in the UK open to the public every day of the year. The ponds are also importantly valued for their visual amenity for example as the setting for the Grade II Listed Viaduct Bridge.



Natural swimming Jeff Moore

# Designed Landscape

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The natural qualities of the Heath are considered its richest asset, representing a rare survival of Middlesex farmland and heathland. Areas of the Heath are however also recognised for their **designed landscapes** which represent different periods of the Heath's history. The most significant of these are the Mawson designed Hill Garden (20th century) with its remarkable Pergola, and neighbouring the Heath, Kenwood (essentially an 18th century Adam mansion house and landscaped estate, managed by English Heritage), their national significance evidenced through their inclusion as Grade II\* on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of special historic interest. In addition, remnant features in the form of an archway, wall and lime avenue

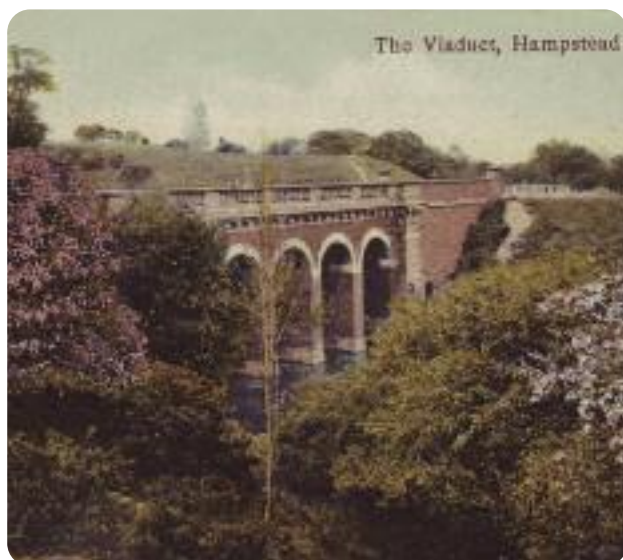
indicate the location of the 18th century Pitt House Garden. The magnificent Golders Hill Park is a product of the 19th century. After 1869, the original gardens were remodelled by Marnock, who favoured naturalistic designs, as opposed to elaborate bedding in geometric patterns.



The Pergola Richard Lea-Hair

# Built Environment

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The Viaduct, 1910 postcard Picture courtesy Michael Hammerson

The **buildings and built features** such as the Pergola (Grade II\* Listed) and Viaduct Bridge (Grade II Listed) contribute to the character of the Heath and the more contemporary Lido is also notable nationally for its architecture recognised by its Grade II Listed status. In total 14<sup>3</sup> features are Listed including the Keeper's hut and the public conveniences at the Vale of Health, the Walter Field drinking fountain on the Heath Extension and a sewer vent pipe at the Gordon House Road entrance to Parliament Hill Fields (all Grade II Listed).

<sup>3</sup> Note. There are 19 separate Listings but this includes six entries for the various sections of the pergola.

# Public Open Space, Recreational and Learning Resource

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The **local and regional importance** of the Heath as a public open space is recognised through its designation as Metropolitan Open Land, providing much needed breathing space away from the urban environment. As the largest open space in northwest London, the Heath has been a much loved destination by the public for a number of centuries and now receives at least 7.2 million visitors each year. The open space is **free entry**, is easily accessible by public transport and has a large audience in close proximity. The Heath is a valuable recreational resource and with the range of informal and formal leisure experiences on offer means the Heath has the potential to reach out to a wide audience.

The greatest number of visitors come to the Heath for **informal recreation**

arriving on foot to walk/walk the dog to enjoy the peace and quiet, the sense of space, explore the 'natural' and 'designed' landscape and take in the panoramic views across London. In addition, the Heath offers important opportunities for play and for more active recreation, with a **wide range of sporting facilities** including athletics track, grass pitches, lawn tennis courts, the more unusual croquet and petanque together with the Lido and bathing ponds. The Heath hosts regional duathlon and English National Cross Country events and the 2012 Olympic cycle races will take place on the roads surrounding the Heath, passing Whitestone Pond, the iconic highest point of the Heath and London.

The history and biodiversity of the Heath provide a **significant learning resource**



A guided walk on Hampstead Heath

for all ages and **opportunity for community engagement** through interpretation, more formal educational activities, outreach work, as well as engagement in management. The local community has a long history of involvement in the Heath, initially as a campaigning and protective force but this has developed over time and the established groups of The Heath & Hampstead Society and 'Heath Hands' volunteer organisation now play a vital role as 'ambassadors' to the Heath, disseminating information to the public and implementing vital management work on the ground. In 2008 over 250 Heath Hands members dedicated over 3000 volunteer hours to work on the Heath.

The combination of all of these factors make Hampstead Heath a unique landscape and significant community and recreational resource which has been protected since 1871 through the Hampstead Heath Act, the City of London obliged *'forever to keep the Heath open, unenclosed and unbuilt upon .... to preserve it as an open space; .... to preserve as far as maybe the natural aspect of the Heath' as well as 'to provide active and passive recreational facilities and information for the public'*.

**The Heath has a continuing role to play as a significant and hugely popular heritage, biodiversity and recreational resource, a rare piece of countryside in the city.**



Views up to Highgate village Layton Thompson