

BINFIELD HEATH PARISH

Neighbourhood Plan 2011-2035

Pre-Submission Draft

Appendix E Special Character Areas

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Prepared by Binfield Heath Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

In conjunction with Bluestone Planning LLP

1. The Old Heath

1.1 Why Binfield?

Binfield Hundred encompassed the parishes of Shiplake and Eye & Dunsden along with Harpsden, Henley, Bix, Rotherfield Greys, Rotherfield Peppard, and Caversham. Medieval parishes were often triangular, sharing out the lower, fertile river areas and the higher pastureland. It was the rough area of heathland in Binfield Hundred, where people came to graze their animals, which became known as Binfield Heath.

So why Binfield, when there was no town or village of the same name? It may simply have been a description – an ‘area of bent grasses’ or heathland. The hundred took its name from the heath.

There are at least two possible origins for the name Binfield. The [Old English](#) *beonetfeld* meant ‘open land with bent-grass’, suggesting heath. Variants were noted as *Beonanfeld* in 963, *Benifeld* in 1176 and *Benefeld* in 1220. The ‘feld’ element in the name was common by the 8th century.

1.2 History and importance of the heath

The ancient heath that gave our village its name has been known since Saxon times. This ‘open land with bent grass’ lay across the northern parts of Eye & Dunsden and Shiplake parishes. The heath was the meeting place for people who lived in the Binfield Hundred, one of the old administrative divisions of Oxfordshire to which these two parishes belonged.

Set on a knoll in the foothills of the Chilterns’ southern edge, the heath defined the shape and character of today’s Binfield Heath. Large parts of the common remain untouched by development, the village settlements having grown up around it.

The land around the heath was largely forested until the Saxons cut back the woodland to farm. As the heath soil was too poor for crops, it was left as common land, where local inhabitants had rights to pasture their animals. Many villages named ‘Heath’, ‘Green’ or ‘Common’ today originally had open communal spaces and from this usage came the term ‘commoners’.

From Norman times through to the 18th century some of the land was used as royal hunting grounds.

Although some fields were arable, the heathland of Shiplake and Dunsden parishes was termed ‘waste’. Waste land once had a different meaning from today. Any uncultivated open space, usually on the manor boundaries and subject to tenants’ rights, could be termed ‘waste’, when not used for arable, meadow or woods.

Settlers wandered into these uplands and squatted there, often to the annoyance of local dwellers who referred to ‘waste and wastrels’. Travellers with mule packs crossed the commons and heathland along rough tracks and country routes to reach Henley, Reading or Oxford. There were tales of people crossing the heath in dangerous conditions: they might negotiate the steep inclines and hazardous descents only to be confronted by ‘robbers and lawless men’.

The heath was fenced, probably from medieval times and gates guarded the entrances to protect the animals. Nineteenth century maps show gates at Coppid Crossroads, outside the Bottle & Glass, the New Inn and Coach & Horses pubs. While better farmland on the lower slopes was enclosed over the centuries, the heath remained common land until the late 1800s.

The heath is marked on old maps and a medieval track is shown running across it - the main route from Reading to Henley until the 1760s. Another road connected Crowsley to the river at Shiplake via Shiplake Row. Many long-vanished pathways once linked old cottages and farms across the heath.

On modern maps, its outline can still be traced from the village centre along Dunsden Way, Gravel Road, Emmer Green Road, Harpsden Road and the track to the east of Common Lane.

Dunsden Way, which joined Shiplake Row to Dunsden, was originally called Heath Road. Following the 1860s enclosures, parts of the heath along this road were turned to agriculture. House and road names reflect locations close to the heath, including Heathfield Avenue, Heathfield House and Heath Cottage (lately renamed). The Old Clubhouse, parts of which date from the 1820s, is described as 'backing on to the heath' and the village stores, constructed in 1926, was said by historian Reginald Ford to be 'on the edge of the heath close to the New Inn'.

He noted: 'Since 1945 the last remnant of the Heath, the so-called common, has been supplemented if not replaced by a field behind King's shop, given in memory of the second Lord Phillimore... The common proper, because it is a common, remains merely an expanse of bramble and gorse. The Parish Council can let the grazing rights but must not turn it into arable.'

The story of our parish can be read in the pattern of housing that grew up around the heath, still separated by fields and woods. Residents now believe that the remaining parts of the heath should be protected so that future generations can see and understand the living history of their village. The best way to do that would be to enshrine it as a Special Character Area.

*The Old English beonetfeld meant 'open land with bent-grass', suggesting heathland. Variants were noted as Beonanfeld in 963, Benifeld in 1176 and Benefeld in 1220.

2. Crowsley Park and hamlet

2.1 Crowsley Park

Crowsley Park lies northeast of Binfield Heath and faces the hamlet of the same name, a picturesque horseshoe of cottages, farms and barns.

The parkland at Crowsley was noted in the 13th century and was one of Oxfordshire's 11 old deer parks. In 1595, still held by the Crown, the once-wild park was home to a royal herd, descendants of which still roam the woods and fields in Binfield Heath.

The earliest reference to a farm there was in 1577 when the Gemotte (Jemmatt) family was granted a lease by Elizabeth I.¹ In 1665 Walter Jemmatt was recorded as being of Crowsley Farm and Holmwood – and paying the second highest 'hearth tax' in the area after Edward Plowden at Shiplake Court.²

By 1627 there was a house in the park with 278 acres, and more in Harpsden. The estate changed hands frequently, the Stonors acquiring it in 1685, selling on to the Jemmatts, who later passed it to the Aldworths.

¹ Climenson

² Life in our villages

Accounts differ as to who replaced the earlier house with Crowsley Park House and exactly when. According to some it was the Jemmatts or Aldworths in the reign of James II at the end of the 17th century, others say Francis Heywood constructed it. He bought Crowsley Park in 1732, linking it to nearby Rotherfield Greys manor and adding Shiplake and Lashbrook manors and Crowsley farm.³ In the grounds there remains a building with an apse known as the grotto, which, like the house, is listed. Other surviving outbuildings are a brick-built coach house and stable block erected by Francis's successor, his brother William, in 1758.

In 1793 the estate passed to John Atkyns-Wright, a high sheriff and MP for Oxford. He improved and enlarged the house around 1800, adding a Gothic-style battlemented porch and corner turrets. He died at Crowsley Park in 1822.

On the death of his widow in 1842, the property was bought by Henry Baskerville, a Wiltshire landowner. He added heraldic family symbols inside and out and planted thousands of trees in avenues in the park, also establishing a fine arboretum. Henry's son John inherited the estate plus a great deal of land that stretched to the river in Shiplake. Much of this was subsequently sold off.

The early 20th century saw the house fall into neglect and in 1942 the house and park were requisitioned by the government and used by the BBC. A signals-receiving station was built in the park, although members of the Baskerville family remained in residence until the 1950s. By 1970 the house was in poor condition but has since been restored by its current lessee who took it on in 1996.

2.2 Crowsley hamlet

The hamlet of Crowsley, with its two farmhouses, barns and cottages lies across the Sonning Common Road from the magnificent Crowsley Park, their histories closely intertwined. The tranquil, unspoiled rural setting of Crowsley must have preserved the character of its few farms and cottages over the centuries as a high proportion of them are ancient and listed.

For centuries the houses and farms in the hamlet belonged to the Crowsley Park Estate, although most pre-date the main house by at least a century. It is likely that many people living in the hamlet across the road were employed by the estate. Crowsley Park Farm was originally the home farm for Crowsley Park, a role taken over later by Frieze Farm.

Timber Cottage has traces of 14th and 15th century construction; Crowsley Park Farmhouse is said to be 17th century or older but a recent heritage assessment of the latter suggests it may be much older in parts than its statutory listing. The same may be true of other Crowsley properties, many of which are listed as 18th century, if more detailed expert research were done.

Most of the hamlet's 17 properties are arranged around a narrow, unnamed loop road, both ends of which join the Sonning Common Road. The only property on or even close to the main road is South Lodge at the main entrance to Crowsley Park.

Remarkably, it appears that no houses have been built in Crowsley since 1877 and possibly earlier, except for Orchard Cottage, an agricultural worker's bungalow put up in the 1950s. The number of residences in Crowsley has therefore grown by about 50 per cent simply through the conversion of existing old buildings, mostly in the last 30 years.

³ VCH Shiplake

Around 30 people live here. A dozen of their homes are listed, six being former farm buildings converted for residential use. There are three separately listed non-residential buildings – the stables and grotto at Crowsley Park House and a thatched barn at Well House.

Other properties are also of interest. Crowsley Park Farm Cottage, which appears as a pair of cottages on the 1877 map has been substantially extended. The flint Crowsley Grange appears on old maps but was also enlarged, in grey/blue brick, and 'Victorianised' in the mid-1800s.

Harvest House is a simple but very large barn, which appears on the same map, sympathetically converted to a residence with ancillary buildings in the mid-1990s. Its size indicates the earlier importance of Crowsley Park Farm to the Crowsley Park estate.

All changed on October 20th, 1927 when the trustees put up most of the hamlet and a great deal of surrounding land for auction. The huge sale offered 670 acres plus fields and buildings in Binfield Heath, Shiplake, Eye and Dunsden, Harpsden and Rotherfield Peppard.

Sold off were Crowsley Grange and its 14½ acres, Crowsley Park Farm plus 147 acres, Crowsley Park Farmhouse, its annexe, Harvest House, Crowsley Park Farm Cottages and Well House. Crowsley Park Farm was purchased by the Phillimore Estate, the farmland assimilated and the house rented out.

Twenty years later another 138 acres were auctioned by the estate, leaving Crowsley Park House standing in its 200 acres with stables, listed grotto and lodge houses. Among properties sold in 1947 were Jasmine Cottage and Timber Cottage, Frieze Farm and its 128 acres, plus Frieze Farm Cottages, originally a pair, now one cottage. Frieze Farm is now an active equestrian livery establishment.

Crowsley remains today a much valued and picturesque corner of our parish, full of historical and architectural delights in a truly rural setting.