

Landscape issues of Cedar Chase, Taplow

Report on a site visit on 12 July 2013 by Jan Woudstra

Present: Anthony Read, Andrew Findlay, Jane Curry.

The development of 24 Span houses was built in 1966 on the location of the Taplow Hill House, a sloping site down to the Thames Valley. One of the planning conditions at the time was that the size of the development should not exceed the area of the footprint of the house. Hence the development is located in a *cul de sac* development onto Taplow Highstreet, near the local school and green and local pub. The feeder road bends into the development, with direct access to small carparks and garages. The development used to be dominated by three huge cedars, but these have been lost through honey fungus, with two blue Atlantic cedars planted to replace them. Whereas these have grown well they do not make a domineering impact, and the nature of the space is determined largely by mature trees in a woodland belt on the edge of the site, which is divided in the housing part that is rather self contained, and a lower part that is left as an amenity ground. The very bottom of this is secluded from the rest of the site through a large yew hedge, a holm oak and group of fruit trees. Houses in the development have mostly south facing gardens, with some to west; they are of a good size, have generally been well planted, with most having reasonable sized trees in them.

Ambience: Cedar Chase continues to maintain the general Span ambience, gives a well maintained and cared for appearance that respects many of the original features.

The estate continues a healthy social life and just had its annual roast at the bottom of the site.

Surfaces: the road and path surfaces are in tarmac; pedestrian walks near houses are in large concrete slabs. There have been repairs to the tarmac and some areas have been completely re-laid, with various grades of tarmac, yet of a similar colour and the general impression is one of unity still. There will be a need for further repairs in the near future, and care should be taken to maintain an adequate standard of repair and renewal.

Concrete slabs are generally in good repair, but there have been local slumping near manholes causing dangerous level changes that should be addressed.

Gravel carpark surfaces have been well maintained, are free of weeds; annual scarifying and grading should be considered.

The gravel walk to the lower half of the site could do with re-aligning with the concrete slab path; in practice that could be done with turfing edges after gravel has been pulled back.

Grass areas: The grass areas in the housing area are cut very short; this has rather suffered in the dry weather of the last couple of weeks. At the bottom of the site it is slightly rougher and kept longer.

Mowing regimes should be reconsidered; greater height should be considered as such grass is less likely to scorch. In the area at the bottom mowing regimes could perhaps be less frequent with the first cut taking place the

week before the roast for example, thus allowing wild flowers to come in and flourish. Paths could be cut through longer grass.

Stumps of old cedars have now well rotted and ought to be considered for removal, with new tree planting to be considered at these positions: other cedars might be proposed; particularly a Lebanon cedar which is long lived, while there was also a deodar cedar.

Woodland belt: The woodland belt is of irregular width and consists of vegetation planted at the time of the conception of the Span development; most of the planting in the lower half of the site is clearly older, and mainly consists of evergreen planting, remnants of a Victorian planting scheme. There are some good holm oaks and yew trees. Cherry laurel is domineering the shrub layer and gives this belt quite a dark sombre impression. There is some dead wood and dieback showing evidence of out-shading but also of fungal disease, probably honey fungus. The trees are covered by TPOs and are within the Conservation area, so there are issues with tree management. It ought to be considered to clear certain areas and gradually rejuvenate the belt gradually over a number of years. Variety in the planting ought to be pursued with a mixture of shrubs planted, including: hazel, Guelder rose, hawthorn, sloe, *Prunus cerasifera*, each in groups of five or seven. A number of trees could be introduced: oak, robinia and black pine to create variety in habit and age structure.

Fruit trees: there are some six fruit trees that are in a reasonable condition, but are overgrown by large trees from various sides; thinning of trees and removal of overhanging branches should be given priority. Fruit trees should be given an annual prune that encourages health and fruiting.

Shrubs, ornamental trees and groundcover: Planting in the housing area still contains many of the original plants; where plants have died they have been replaced with similar species, yet over time a variety has crept in that was probably not the original intention, with for example some species of bamboo introduced that are courser, taller, or less dense than the original selection. This may increase maintenance, or cause problems not previously foreseen. The introduction of *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' obviously provided new problems as the quickly outgrew the positions and were then clipped in order to retain them to desired dimensions.

The original intention would have been to have naturally shaped vegetation, with trees exhibiting their natural habit. This would have been maintained by careful pruning, by removal of older branches, but always considering the overall shape and balance. These were skills that were general currency of gardeners in the 1960s, but which have now been replaced unskilled labour with motorised hedge trimmers. This has turned the municipal landscape into planting formed in box and ball shapes. Consideration should be given to return to less formal ways of maintaining vegetation; occasional coppicing is an alternative and may be necessary in order to retain certain shrubs to restricted dimensions, allowing them to grow out naturally. Other shrubs like some *Cornus* (dogwood) species require coppicing in order to retain shoots with distinctively coloured bark. Mechanised hedge trimmers should be prohibited except for the use on hedges.

In order to retain the character of the original planting a list ought to be produced of historically suitable plants that should be edited over time with comments on performance and height. This ought to contain indication of suitable location.

To north near houses gaps in planting might be infilled with ferns: male fern would be suitable, but there are various other species that might be considered.

Plants listed on 1966 Span planting proposals by Preben Jakobsen:
(Unfortunately the key for the detail planting is not currently available)

Climbers planted at the edge of walks:

Cotoneaster rothschildianus

Hedera helix 'Digitata'

Hedera hibernica

Existing trees and other vegetation retained:

Fagus sylvatica

Fagus sylvatica 'Atropurpurea'

Acer platanoides

Ulmus

Cedrus deodara

Cedrus atlantica 'Glauca'

Taxus baccata hedges

Chamaecyparis pisifera

Quercus ilex

Groundcover ivy (*Hedera helix*)

Mahonia

Coryllus avellana

Berberis thunbergii 'Atropurpurea'

Favourite plants and combinations of Jakobsen's:

Aralia elata

Hebe rakaiensis

Phormium tenax

Cortaderia argentea

Yucca gloriosa

Phormium tenax

Fatsia japonica

Senecio greyi

Stephanandra incise 'Crispa'

Euonymus fortunea 'Emerald Gaiety'

Hypericum calycinum

Rosa virginiana 'Harvest Fire'

Rubus tricolor
Symphoricarpos x chenaultii

Further plants can be found in Preben Jakobsen 'Shrubs and groundcover' in Brian Clouston (ed.) *Landscape Design with Plants* (Oxford: Heinemann Newnes, 1990), pp. 40-75

Brick walls: There is some minor maintenance required on the Victorian brick retaining wall, where it is necessary to re-insert some bricks; care should be taken to use a lime mortar.

A section of the brick boundary wall to the south of the site has collapsed and the neighbours have put a wooden fence across the gap: restoration of this wall ought to be considered.

Furniture: The original mushroom lights have been replaced with bollard types that project the light sideward and up, rather than down.

When replacement is required a more suitable replacement ought to be considered.

The bottom half of the site contains an array of benches, of children's play equipment and former greenhouse structures. There are also play dens and tree houses; there are see saws. Some of the structures appear unused and could probably be rationalised. Benches could be phased out and one type might be selected to form a replacement and which might be encouraged as 'donations' i.e. memorial benches.

Dustbin stores: Dustbins and recycle bins are variously placed in front of houses and determine a first impression. In some houses the area where they are positioned has been planted with a row of shrubs that is intended to form a hedge. While this is sympathetic in a way it also provides a barrier that could be interpreted as a privacy boundary rather than screen planting, which is not really in keeping with the Span spirit. Perhaps a better solution would be to have centralised collection, as it happens on the European continent. An area beyond the garages on the west side might be considered, and designed for the purpose. Community composting areas might also be improved for example with one or two turbo composters; the area ought then to be re-designed with these new functions in mind.