

5. Faringdon Folly Circular Woodland: Policy 4.10D e)

The site, which comprises an area of ~1.8 ha, is located at grid reference SU 29745 95653; X = 429745 Y = 195653; Latitude = 51.658883, Longitude = -1.5713925. Its boundary, shown in Figure FW1, is defined by the peripheral footpath.

The town of Faringdon gets its name from the Saxon *faern-dune* meaning fern-covered hill with the 'Folly' in Folly Hill being a corruption of the Norman French *feuillu* meaning leafy and, therefore, predates by nearly 900 years the Faringdon Folly Tower built on it. The hill is mound of Lower Greensand on top of the Corallian Limestone Ridge on which Faringdon is built. The Scots Pines on the crown of Folly Hill were planted in the 1780's by Henry James Pye (1745-1813), Poet Laureate to George III, the owner of Faringdon House and Lord of the Manor and have been a significant landmark ever since. In 1919 a local wood merchant wanted to buy the woodland in order to fell the ancient Scots Pines, but Lord Berners, the then owner of Faringdon House, outbid him in order to preserve the woodland. It is reported that when Berners was inspecting his purchase with his friend and heir, Robert Heber Percy, he was overheard to say that it would be "nice to have a tower here". After a considerable struggle with Faringdon Rural District Council, in 1935 Berners achieved his ambition of constructing a folly on Folly Hill, one of the last to be built in England¹. Heber Percy, bequeathed the tower and woodland to the people of Faringdon in a Declaration of Trust on 7th May 1982; since then the Folly Tower and woodland has been owned by The Faringdon Folly Tower Trust (Charity No. 284795) – 'established for the benefit of the inhabitants of Faringdon and surrounding villages'. The current trustees are Dr Sofka Zinoviev, the owner of Faringdon House, Mr Edward Williams, the trust chairman, and the town mayor (ex officio); Document FW1.

The woodland is circular in shape with the tower at its centre and has a peripheral footpath that offers excellent views of the surrounding countryside. It is well used by dog walkers, ramblers and as place for quiet reflection. Since, 2011 the woodland has been the subject of considerable development in its own right to provide an attraction when the tower is not open². The trees have been maintained, the undergrowth has been cleared, flowers have been planted and various features added including wooden sculptures depicting aspects of Faringdon and novelty items in the spirit of Berners' surrealism; 24 blackbirds have been located around the site together with a wicker pie to commemorate the nursery rhyme apocryphally attributed to George Steevens's ridiculing of Poet Laureate Pye's somewhat florid first commission in 1790³. (Sing a Song of Sixpence had already been published in *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* in 1744⁴ and probably dated from much earlier, however, it's a good story.).

In terms of sports activities, since 2013, the woodland has been regularly used for slacklining (slack rope walking) with over 30 young people participating.

The justification is:

- Folly Hill has been Faringdon's signature feature from prehistory.
- The area surrounds and enhances the historic and important Faringdon Folly Tower built by Lord Berners in 1935.
- The area is long established as a recreational area and tourist attraction and well used by local people and visitors.
- The Scots Pines are well over 200 years old, and considered to be among the finest in the South of England.

¹ Lord Berners the Last Eccentric; Mark Amory, Pimlico (1999) pp 149-151, ISBN 0-7126-6578-1

² <http://www.faringdonfolly.org.uk/folly-woodland.html>

³ Reading Public Romanticism; Paul Magnuson, Princeton University Press (1998) pp133-4, ISBN 0-691-05794-X

⁴ Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book; Andrea Immel and Brian Alderson, Cotsen Occasional Press (2013) ISBN 0-615-67876-9

NPPF Criteria

The designation should only be used:

- *Where the green space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;*

The woodland is 750 m east of the Market Place, see Neighbourhood Plan Figure 12, and readily accessed on foot by four footpaths from adjacent roads. It is open to the public and readily accessible.

- *Where the green area is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquillity or richness of its wildlife;*

Significance for the local community

The hill crowned by the woodland gives its name to the town of Faringdon and the term ‘folly’ is used widely as descriptor for local products and organisations e.g. the local newspaper, the *Faringdon Folly*, the *Folly Dollies* (a young women’s organisation), the *Folly Singers*, the *Folly* public house, etc. Over 5,000 visitors climb the Tower each year, plus an estimate of over 20,000 visits to the woodland. It is regularly used by local primary and nursery schools as well as scouts, guides and associated organisations; local people picnic and play in the woodland. Results of a survey undertaken in late 2009 are shown in Documents FW 2 and 3. The tower itself is Grade II listed; List entry Number: 1048457⁵.

In paragraph 4.3 of the Vale of White Horse District Council Landscape survey undertaken in 2008, Document FW4, the top of Folly Hill is referred to as ‘*a very popular honey pot area for the local residents and visitors*’. Throughout, the survey refers to the views from and of Folly Hill in assessing the visual impact of the potential development sites. The woodland is a tranquil location, furnished with benches on the peripheral path to enable the visitor to reflect on the landscape.

Beauty and art

Henry James Pye wrote *Faringdon Hill. A Poem. In Two Books* in 1774⁶ describing the hill and the views there from. Penelope Betjeman also published a short ode in the North Wiltshire Herald in 1937 (see Document FW5 for extracts). Lord Berners painted a picture of Folly Hill, showing the woodland, in 1936 that was used as an advertising poster by Shell as part of its ‘Visit Britain’s Landmarks’ campaign, Document FW6. It has been referred to in several texts including biographies of Lord Berners⁷ and Robert Heber-Percy⁸.

History

Folly Hill is the identifying feature of Faringdon and the crown of the hill has been an important strategic site throughout history. It was probably the site of an iron-age fort as were many of the surrounding high points. In 1144 a castle, probably a wooden construction with earth ramparts, was built by Robert Earl of Gloucester, a supporter of the Empress Matilda, but destroyed by Stephen in the following year. In the Civil War it was an important vantage point and strategic asset. Following the Battle of Faringdon in 1646, it has been referred to as Cromwell’s Battery, particularly on OS maps, e.g. as shown in Figure 11. The woodland has been a prominent feature of Faringdon for about 230 years and has featured in post cards before the tower was built. The Scots Pines have been described by Dr Tim King, Fellow of the Society of Biology, and a research member of Wolfson College, Oxford, as some of the finest in southern England.

- *Where the green area concerned is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land.*

The area of the woodland is about 1.8 ha, so it is not an extensive tract of land. It is a significant landmark for the town and district.

⁵ <http://list.english-heritage.org.uk/resultsingle.aspx?uid=1048457>

⁶ *Faringdon Hill. A poem. In two books*; Henry James Pye, Gale ECCO, Print Editions (2010), ISBN-10 1170482236

⁷ *Lord Berners: Composer, Writer, Painter*; Peter Dickinson, Boydell Press (2010) ISBN-10: 1843835517

⁸ *The Mad Boy, Lord Berners, My Grandmother and Me*; Sofka Zinovieff, Jonathon Cape (2014) pp 132-6, ISBN 9780224096591

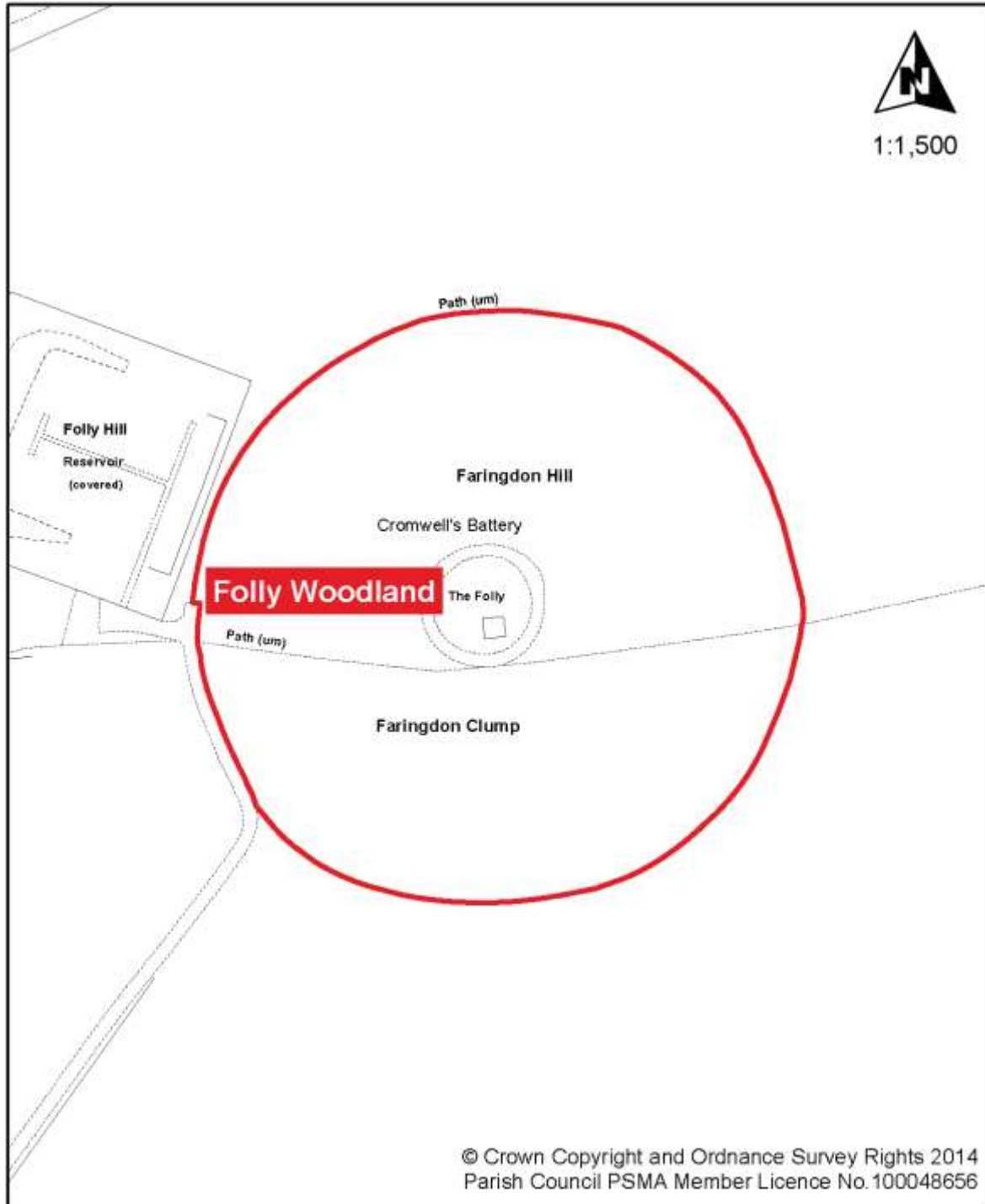


Figure FW1: Showing the boundary of Faringdon Folly Woodland.