

Lorton Valley Nature Park

Green Infrastructure Case Study

Enhancing the natural environment close to the London 2012 sailing venue



The designation of the sailing venue for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games at Weymouth and Portland in Dorset provided a catalyst for wider investment in green infrastructure. By integrating existing nature reserves, ancient woodland and land secured through environmental mitigation for the new relief road, a new Nature Park has been established in the Lorton Valley to the north of Weymouth town centre.

Snapshot

- **Designation of an Olympic venue added momentum for investment from a wider partnership of organisations**
- **Environmental mitigation for a relief road helped unlock the potential for the Nature Park**
- **Improved accessibility to local green infrastructure has promoted healthy and active communities**



View from Green Hill towards Coffin Plantation, the highest point of Lorton Valley Nature Park

Key facts:

- Size of the complete Lorton Valley Nature Park: 194 ha (479 acres)
- Size of Dorset Wildlife Trust's Lorton Meadows Nature Reserve: 34 ha (84 acres)
- Size of RSPB's Lodmoor Nature Reserve: 79 ha (195 acres)
- Size of the Woodland Trust's Two Mile Coppice Nature Reserve: 6 ha (14 acres)
- Size of ecological habitat lost through wider relief road construction: 29 ha (72 acres)
- Size of the environmental mitigation land for the relief road: 32 ha (79 acres)
- The Wild About Weymouth and Portland Legacy Trail links Lorton Valley Nature Park with Portland Quarries Nature Park

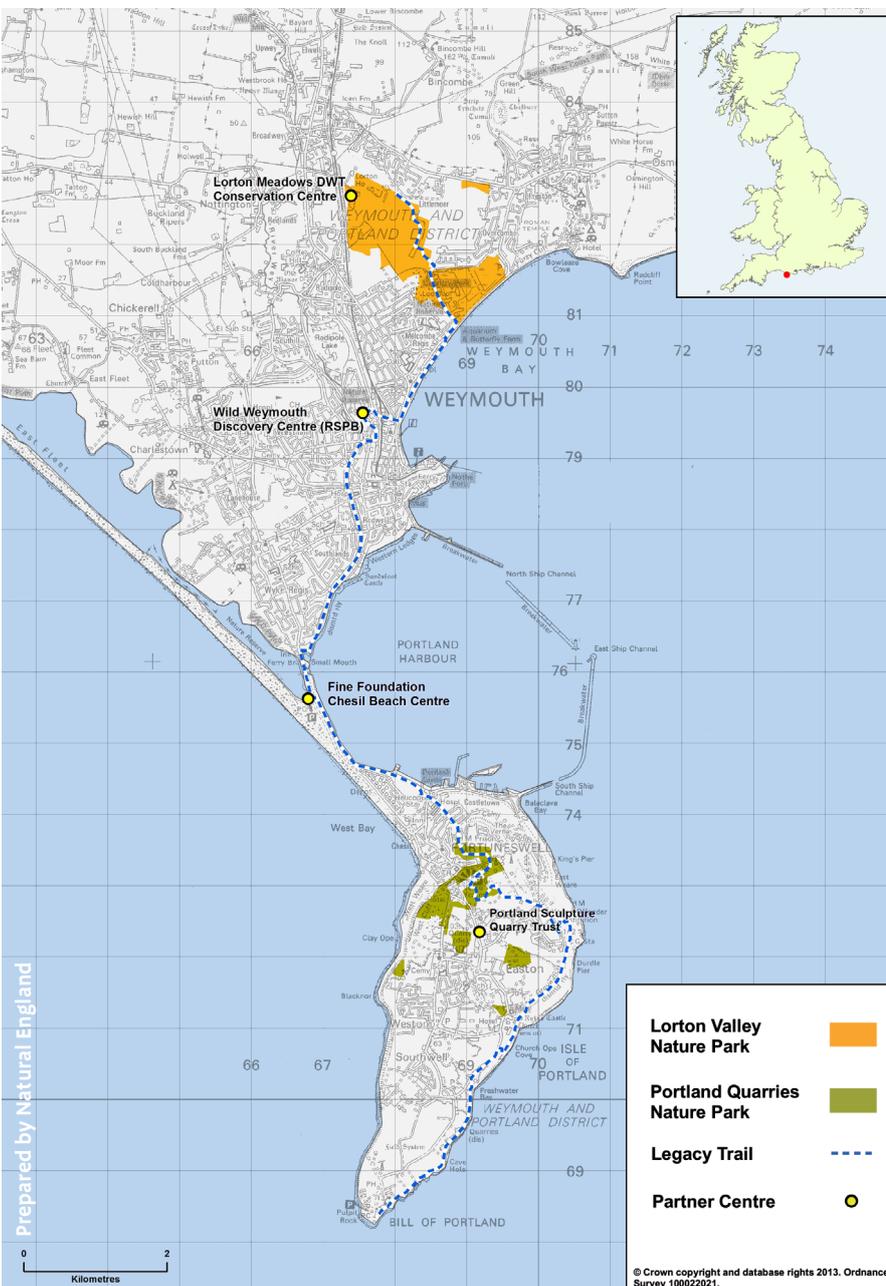
Key environmental functions:

- Connecting and enhancing biodiversity habitats
- Improving local landscape character
- Expanding local recreation and volunteering opportunities
- Supporting learning and play, especially for children
- Enhancing physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Contributing to the local tourist economy

Introduction

The waters of Weymouth Bay and Portland Harbour provided the venue for the sailing events for the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Investment for the Games contributed to the regeneration of Osprey Quay, the former Naval Air Station at Portland, which now includes new residential, commercial and marina facilities. This development complements the Weymouth and Portland National Sailing Academy and maintains Weymouth's position as one of the UK's and Europe's premier sailing destinations.

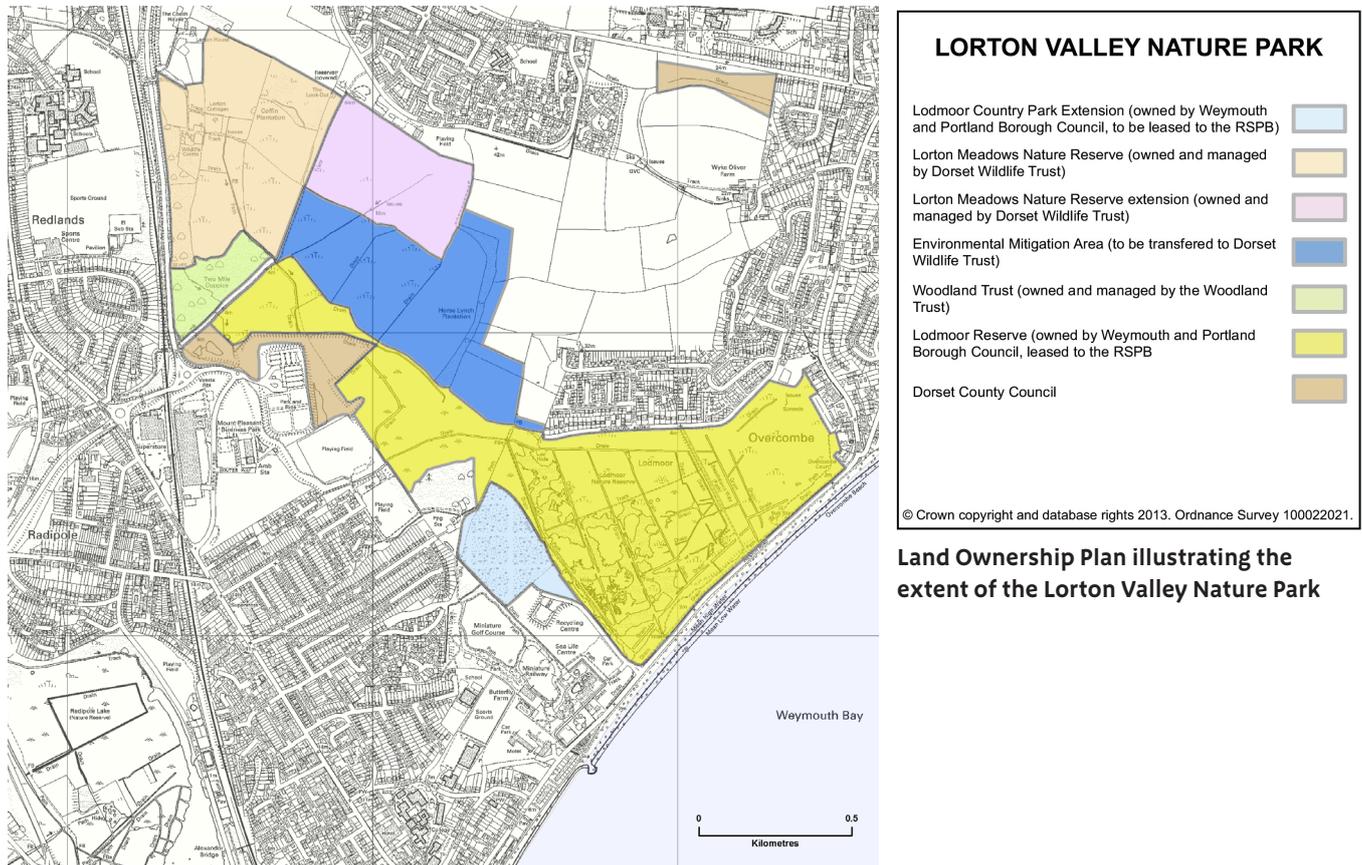
In addition to this waterfront development, the Games added momentum to a number of existing environmental projects in Weymouth and Portland aimed at increasing access to the natural environment. This case study focuses on Lorton Valley Nature Park and a complementary case study looks at the Portland Quarries Nature Park. Both sites are linked by a Legacy Trail that runs for approximately 20km from Littlemoor in Weymouth to Portland Bill and each has benefitted from additional green infrastructure investment.



The Lorton Valley Nature Park is set within Lorton Valley on the north-east boundary of Weymouth. Framed to the north by the high ground of the Coffin Plantation, the Nature Park leads south over 2km to Lodmoor on the edge of Weymouth Bay. It is a mixed landscape that includes unimproved grassland, flower-rich meadows, deciduous woodland, open agricultural land and, on the lower land close to the sea, reed beds, wet grassland, saltmarsh and areas of open water.

The Nature Park provides a strategic element of Weymouth and Portland's green infrastructure network and incorporates three nature reserves: Lorton Meadows, which is owned and managed by the Dorset Wildlife Trust; the Lodmoor Nature Reserve, which is owned by Weymouth and Portland Borough Council and leased to and managed by the RSPB; and the Two Mile Coppice Nature Reserve, which is owned and managed by the Woodland Trust.

Location of Lorton Valley Nature Park. The area shown as Portland Quarries Nature Park is taken from the submission draft of the West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan. Following Local Plan consultation the final boundary may change



Land Ownership Plan illustrating the extent of the Lorton Valley Nature Park

All three sites incorporate land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The open grassland areas attract a variety of butterfly species including the marbled white, common and holly blues, and small and large skippers, along with a variety of migrant and resident bird species including barn owls – a signature species for the valley – and kestrels. Closer to the sea, the Lodmoor reserve is home to one of the largest common tern colonies in the south-west. The wider Lorton Valley is also considered as a significant stop off point for migratory birds that use the flyway through the Isle of Portland.



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The Barn Owl, a signature bird species for the Nature Park

Establishing the Nature Park by connecting green infrastructure resources

Over many years, the extent of wildlife habitats and open space within the Lorton Valley has been reduced through development of a landfill waste site, drainage of the wetland and, more recently, the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road on the western boundary. The designation of the key ecological sites of Lodmoor SSSI and the Lorton SSSI within the valley prevented further loss of nationally important habitats. An area in the north of the valley was reserved for development but received minimal management and, over the years, this resulted in neglected and undermanaged land that attracted anti-social activities including fly-tipping and dumping of abandoned vehicles.

The potential for establishing the Nature Park emerged through a number of complementary opportunities: the impetus generated by the Olympic and Paralympic Games; the size of existing nature reserves and designated landscapes; a near contiguous network of complementary land ownership interests; and, the creation of an ecological mitigation area on the eastern boundary of the valley.

In 2008, a previous extant planning permission for the construction of the Weymouth Relief Road and Park-and-Ride facility was resubmitted for approval. Following negotiations, initially with English Nature and subsequently with Natural England, the route of the proposed road was amended to protect the wider Lorton Valley. Although the revised alignment reduced the damage to the centre of the valley, it had significant impact on the western boundaries of the Lorton Meadows Nature Reserve and Two Mile Coppice Nature Reserve. Through compulsory purchase for the road, an area of SSSI woodland owned by the Woodland Trust – 0.25 ha of which was designated Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland and 0.35 ha as secondary woodland – was lost. Long-term monitoring of the impacts of the road scheme is needed to assess the effects on the remaining woodland and wider Nature Park.



Dorset Wildlife Trust volunteers planting trees with Lodmoor Nature Reserve and Weymouth Bay in the distance

A number of measures were adopted to mitigate this impact. Surplus land to the east of the Park-and-Ride site, which was initially allocated for the road, was made available for the Nature Park to enhance the integrity of the Lodmoor SSSI. In addition, 32 ha of former farmland to the east of the Lorton Meadows Nature Reserve was created as an ecological mitigation area and leased to the Wildlife Trust. While it is accepted that the mitigation measures cannot replace Ancient Woodland, the allocation of this land unlocked the potential for the Nature Park and, in addition, improved the potential of both the Lodmoor and Lorton SSSIs. Further mitigation measures were undertaken within the wider area including the creation of over 7 ha of unimproved chalk grassland, three green bridges, more than 6km of new hedgerows and improvements to the remediation of the Lodmoor North landfill.

Throughout this process, Natural England has fulfilled a dual role in meeting its development control and statutory functions and chairing the Lorton Valley Nature Park Steering Group to support the delivery of the Nature Park. The partnership has worked jointly to identify funding including Environmental Stewardship support for land management. Through the planning process £70,000 was secured from the Relief Road along with £12,000 voluntary developer contributions towards the purchase of an additional 15 ha field. A further £8,000 gained through a planning agreement has established a small community orchard to be managed by the Dorset Wildlife Trust. The majority of funding for the Wild About Weymouth and Portland project was obtained from Natural England's Access to Nature programme funded by the BIG Lottery. In total, the partnership members have pooled over £2.5m for environmental projects within the Weymouth and Portland area, including Lorton Valley since 2011.

Improving public access for the benefit of local communities

A key objective for the Nature Park has been to improve access and interpretation throughout the area, with the summer of 2012 providing a milestone for implementation to complement the wider sustainability objectives of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. While individual reserves have had good access for many years, public paths across the wider valley have developed in a more ad-hoc manner with no signs or interpretation linking the separate sites together. Establishing the Nature Park has brought improvements to the statutory and permissive footpaths throughout the valley with better signing and information, giving local residents better direct access to the natural environment.

Data for the Index of Multiple Deprivation highlights that local neighbourhoods adjacent to the valley are some of the most disadvantaged in the whole county, with a number being in the most deprived 20 per cent. Research has shown that access to the natural environment brings a variety of physical and mental health benefits. Better access across the valley can help to improve active and healthy lifestyles by providing opportunities for walking and, in some areas, cycling, such as the cycleway along Preston Beach Road. Provision for outdoor learning, recreation and play has been a particular priority for the Wild about Weymouth and Portland project with an emphasis on improving opportunities for local children and young people.



The funding secured by the wider partnership has been able to connect green corridors and green spaces from the north of the Borough to Radipole Lake Nature Reserve in the centre of Weymouth, around Weymouth Bay and through to Portland Quarries Nature Park and the south of Portland. In addition, the first section of England's Coastal Path was established as an outcome of the Olympic Legacy, providing eastern and western connections to the Jurassic Coast.

Volunteers undertaking conservation survey work at Lorton Meadows Nature Reserve

Lessons learnt by integrating and coordinating delivery

By taking a strategic approach to green infrastructure delivery, the work of various partners has been combined to establish a far greater environmental legacy from the Olympic and Paralympic Games than would have been achieved by organisations working separately. Existing sites have been improved and are now connected to provide a wider network of publicly accessible nature areas across Weymouth and Portland.

The consolidation of the landholding across the valley became feasible through the revised alignment of the Weymouth Relief Road that helped to unlock the delivery of the Nature Park. Detailed negotiations between Natural England and Dorset County Council resulted in a net increase in biodiversity over the long term. Greater support for wider environmental projects has now been established through policies set within the emerging Weymouth and Portland Local Plan.

Pooling expertise between all partners has helped to secure a mix of funding that may not have been accessible to individual organisations. The Nature Park has benefitted from coordinated investment, using existing resources of the various partners, the funding of mitigation measures from the County Council, Environmental Stewardship for enhanced landscape management from Natural England, and a successful joint bid for funding from the National Lottery. With added impetus gained from the Olympic and Paralympic Games, a quantum of investment has been combined to accelerate the establishment of the Nature Park for the benefit of local communities and visitors.

For further information

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