

Hadleigh Farm and Country Park

Green Infrastructure Case Study

The Olympic mountain biking venue for London 2012

NATURAL
ENGLAND

The creation of an elite mountain biking venue at Hadleigh Farm in Essex for the London 2012 Olympic Games provided an opportunity to expand investment in the long-term sporting and recreational facilities within the area. A partnership between landowners, councils and Natural England has capitalised on this opportunity to enhance green infrastructure and improve the quality and accessibility of the natural environment for the benefit of local communities and visitors.

Snapshot

- Selection as an Olympic venue provided the catalyst for short and long-term investment
- Elite and general mountain biking facilities integrated with nature conservation objectives
- Legacy facilities for sport and recreation are projected to increase the number and mix of visitors
- Improved accessibility to local green infrastructure has promoted healthy and active communities



The start / finish area at Hadleigh, London 2012 Olympic Games

Key facts:

- Size of the Olympic Mountain Biking Venue: 220 ha (550 acres)
- Combined size of Hadleigh Farm (Salvation Army) and Country Park (Essex County Council): 512 ha (1,287 acres)
- The Country Park is one of the largest in Essex and used by around 125,000 visitors per year
- The site includes areas designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area and Ramsar site (Wetlands of International Importance, especially as waterfowl habitat) and a Local Wildlife Site, and contains several Scheduled Monuments
- Construction work on the Olympic course began in July 2010 and was completed in March 2011, and construction of legacy mountain bike trails and facilities will be undertaken in 2013

Key environmental functions:

- Providing recreation and leisure facilities
- Supporting physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Protecting and enhancing designated sites
- Conserving and improving ecological diversity
- Increasing investment in the local economy
- Expanding visitor income opportunities

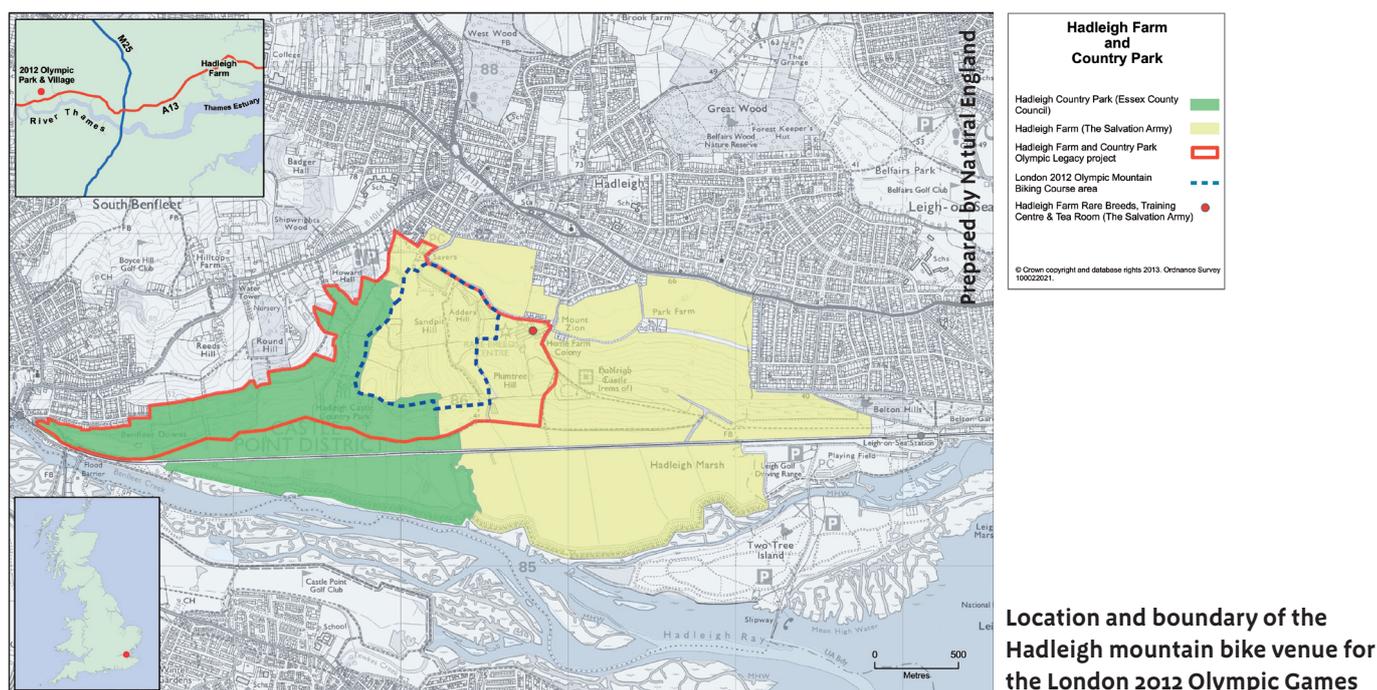
Introduction

Located in southern Essex and to the west of Southend-on-Sea, Hadleigh Farm and Country Park is set on a downland steep scarp slope. The Farm is owned by the Salvation Army and the Country Park was established on Essex County Council and Castle Point Borough Council land. The entire site offers dramatic views south towards the river Thames and wider Thames Estuary. It contains Roman archaeological and World War Two features along with the ruins of Hadleigh Castle, built over 700 years ago and managed by English Heritage, which provides the most prominent historic landmark to the east of the site.

It is an ecologically mixed landscape of broadleaved woodland, neutral grassland and scattered scrub that leads down to grazing marsh, saltmarsh and the intertidal mudflats of Benfleet Creek. This mosaic of habitats has local, national and international significance for wildlife. Most of the Country Park is noted as a nationally important Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) for its plants, invertebrates, wading birds and overwintering waterfowl. The grazing marsh and adjacent intertidal creek habitats are designated as an internationally significant Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site. In addition, the Olympic venue includes a Local Wildlife Site that contributes notable geological and wildlife interest to the area.

The London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) selected Hadleigh Farm as the mountain biking venue for the London 2012 Olympic Games. The venue included land in Essex County Council's Country Park and land privately owned by The Salvation Army that was established as a farm over a century ago. To this day, The Salvation Army continues to operate the farm as a commercial enterprise with social purpose and includes a rare breed farm, café, training facility, craft centre and garden shop.

Over two days in August 2012, the area's dramatic sloping terrain hosted the world's leading riders watched by around 40,000 spectators and millions on television around the world. The 5km open course, designed with demanding climbs and descents, included some of the Country Park's paths on its western boundary. The course was a new concept for the Olympics that have traditionally favoured more closed and forested landscapes. Following the Games, the Olympic track has been adapted for use by a greater range of elite and advanced riders and additional biking trails are being created for the general public.



Integrating elite sport within an ecologically diverse landscape

Strategically, the site of the Olympic course is located within the former Thames Gateway South Essex Growth Area. Hadleigh is within both the Thames Gateway South Essex Green Grid green infrastructure strategy area and the Greater Thames Marshes Nature Improvement Area, which covers nearly 50,000 ha of estuarine marshland and Thames terrace grasslands. It also lies within the Thames Estuary Local Nature Partnership, which is leading the on-going development of the Thames Gateway Parklands vision jointly with the Green Grid Partnership.

The main challenge for the project has been to integrate the various mountain biking courses and associated visitor facilities within a designated and ecologically rich landscape. Focused investment triggered by the Olympics has offered significant opportunities for Essex County Council, The Salvation Army and Natural England to improve and develop the resources of the site – improving the green infrastructure and increasing the socio-economic, public health and recreational potential of the wider area. In time, broader environmental functions and knock-on benefits will be gained through more sustainable grassland management including better soil nutrient retention, enhanced carbon sequestration, improved water quality and a broader pollination season and nectar supply for insects. Furthermore, the use of livestock for grazing expands opportunities for localised food production.

The mountain bike facilities have been developed in two phases, first for the Games and then for the long-term legacy. Essex County Council submitted the planning application for the Games-time course in May 2010 with permission granted by Castle Point Borough Council in July 2010. The legacy application was approved two years later in July 2012. The post-Games transformation application set out a shared ambition between Essex County Council, The Salvation Army, Castle Point Borough Council, Natural England, local communities and other local partners to create both a lasting legacy for the natural environment and increased access and facilities for people to enjoy the benefits of the site and its wider environment.

The legacy planning application included additional mountain bike trails to improve and enhance the network of existing paths and trails across Hadleigh Country Park and Hadleigh Farm, providing better access for walkers, cyclists, mountain biking, runners and horse riders. A key objective has been to increase, diversify and balance the offer to a wider variety of visitors. This includes opportunities for both active sports and recreation for individuals, families, and schools along with further and assisted education for a variety of organisations and groups.



The Olympic Mountain Biking Course at Hadleigh Farm being used for a test event in May 2011

Extensive pre-application negotiations included the preparation of an Operational Environmental Management Strategy (incorporating an Ecological Management Plan). This was a key document within the planning application that set out the long-term framework for the integrated management of recreational activities and environmental improvements.

The Management Strategy ensured that appropriate control and monitoring measures have been identified, planned and implemented to protect and enhance environmentally sensitive features and areas. It also sets out an agreed approach for the management, monitoring, presentation, accessibility and interpretation of the historic environment. The partners' vision is to promote Hadleigh Farm and Country Park as an integrated landscape destination, establishing a multi-functional green infrastructure asset linked into the wider landscape through the management proposals.

As part of the planning approval Natural England advocated a Section 106 planning agreement with Essex County Council. This would ensure that the adverse short-term impacts on the botanical and invertebrate interest of the SSSI are addressed through long-term management and deliver added environmental conservation benefits.

Improving landscape stewardship by grazing with rare breed cattle

Alongside the statutory development control process, Natural England has worked with landowners to improve the condition of the SSSI downs habitat and environmental stewardship agreements have been established to deliver more effective management. For The Salvation Army land at Hadleigh Farm, an Entry Level Stewardship (ELS), which provides a practical approach to supporting the good stewardship of the countryside, has been established. Within the Country Park, a Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement has been set up with Essex County Council to deliver more focused and targeted management.



Native Red Poll cattle grazing mixed grassland habitats to improve the sustainable management of the Hadleigh Farm and Country Park

This HLS agreement will help to bring the SSSI into favourable condition through a programme of scrub and grassland management and a targeted extension of the cattle grazing regime. The Olympic legacy extension to the agreement will include grazing by Red Poll, a rare breed of cattle native to East Anglia and introduced through the Essex Grazing and Grasslands Project. This management with native cattle provides an attractive connection with The Salvation Army's rare breed's facility that has been part of the farm since the late 1800s.

Natural England has also been negotiating with The Salvation Army to encourage them to expand their ELS to deliver an HLS agreement that includes reverting existing arable land back into a more ecologically diverse and traditional landscape. Essex County Council has supported this proposal to improve the character and increase the quality of the natural environment across the wider landscape.

Legacy benefits secured through Olympic investment

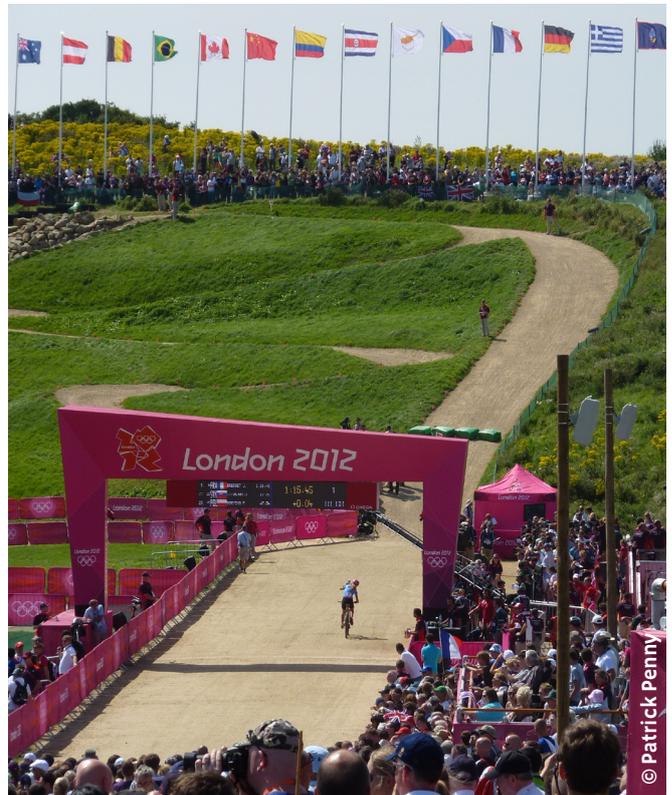
The success of the London 2012 Games and the popularity of the mountain biking events have significantly raised the profile of the Hadleigh Farm and Country Park to build a greater awareness of the sporting and recreational resources available for visitors. By integrating improvements to access, landscape management and stewardship, additional benefits have been secured through Olympic and legacy investment. The area will have much better biking and leisure facilities for both competitive sports and general recreation. In addition, the quality of the habitats and wider landscape will be improved including the restoration of grassland habitats, better footpaths and a new visitor facilities 'hub' with cycle hire provision and heritage interpretation panels.

The legacy investment will deliver a range of socio-economic and environmental benefits including recreation, health and wellbeing, environmental and heritage education, employment, biodiversity and countryside management. Through this process a strong and shared commitment to an enhanced Country Park and countryside destination has been established that will expand The Salvation Army's existing commercial facilities in partnership with the County Council. The long-term goal will be to maximise the sustainable development and green infrastructure legacy for the local community and provide a significant mountain biking facility that is financially self-sustaining.

Natural England's third annual Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey shows that on average 66 per cent of visits to the natural environment are taken by people within two miles of home. For the local neighbourhoods of Hadleigh, South Benfleet and Southend that contain wards with some health and social inequalities, improvements to facilities and better access to the Farm and Country Park provide direct local benefits to residents' and visitors' health and wellbeing. There are good public transport links and better access to the rights of way path network providing greater opportunities for cycling, walking, riding and informal recreation within the two sites and across the wider Thames Gateway South Essex Green Grid network of green spaces.



Women's mountain biking event, Hadleigh, London 2012 Olympic Games



The finish, Hadleigh, London 2012 Olympic Games

Lessons from taking a partnership approach to delivery

Establishing a partnership across the Olympic and Legacy programmes between LOCOG, Essex County Council, The Salvation Army, local communities, Natural England, Castle Point Borough Council and other organisations has ensured the delivery of a joint vision. The complexities of working between two landowners has been helped by a number of shared business objectives that have increased Essex County Council and The Salvation Army's confidence in the viability and value of a natural environment legacy for their landholding.

Setting up a number of internal working groups provided a key mechanism to coordinate management and consultation arrangements. Essex County Council developed an integrated approach within their Olympic Legacy Team to coordinate input from environmental specialists drawn from their Place Services practice. In a similar manner, Natural England set up an internal Hadleigh Project Board that brought together individuals from different teams to work towards a joint delivery plan.

Collaboration allowed the expertise of a range of professionals to be pooled effectively and ensured a consistent approach. Early and extensive pre-planning application negotiations for the legacy facilities together with extensive local consultation has been key to establishing confidence, openness and trust between all parties. This has enabled shared solutions to be found to meet the challenge of creating the additional recreational trails and facilities within the sensitive SSSI landscape.

One of the most challenging aspects of the project has been to avoid confusion between the environmental benefits outlined in the legacy planning application and those already secured through the existing stewardship agreements. The Natural England project team worked hard to maintain a separation between the improvement needed as mitigation for the legacy proposals and the negotiated commitments for enhancing the management of the landscape through the HLS agreement.

For further information

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Essex Grazing and Grasslands Project

- <http://bit.ly/XTatt7>

Hadleigh Farm & Country Park Olympic Legacy Project Operational Environmental Management Strategy (incorporating an Ecological Management Plan)

- <http://bit.ly/ZnAwPA>

The case study was prepared for
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