

Bolam Lake @ 200 Project Report 2017



Background To The Bolam @ 200 Project

This report will summarise the Bolam @ 200 Heritage Lottery Funded project that ran from April 2016 until March 2017. A bid was submitted to Heritage Lottery Fund Our Heritage in January 2016 to help fund improvements and research into the Bolam Lake Country Park Site owned and managed by Northumberland County Council. The primary aims were to undertake research into the historic connection with John Dobson, renowned architect, to improve the visitor experience to the site, to interpret and conserve the historic value and to gather information into future management of the site.

Development Officer

The Development Officer, Christopher Slaughter, was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund Our Heritage and appointed in May 2016 for a period of 6 months full time. The post was managed by Frances Povey from Northumberland County Council with the Development Officer role being the on-site member of staff overseeing the implementation of the Bolam Lake @ 200 project.

The main focus area of the Development Officer are:

- Educational visits by 10 schools with outdoor workshops and a local school competition.
- Varied events programme for all ages running from May to Sept.
- A series of walks and talks available to the public .
- Surveys and analysis of individual events/walks/talks.
- Visitor survey of 100 park visitors with analysis.
- Historical research for new interpretation including information booklets and park information panels.
- Groundworks including south shore path improvements by contractors, planting of 200 trees and rhododendron clearance.
- Arrange volunteer visits and the local community to assist with tree planting and rhododendron clearance.
- Organise a celebration day event to mark the 200th anniversary of Bolam Lake.
- A 200 memories project to collect stories and photos of Bolam from the public.

The initial contract for the Development Officer was for six months, ending in November 2016, although this was later extended until March 2017 as the project budget allowed for this.

Historical Research

Historical research was carried out with the help of Northumberland Archives at Woodhorn with contributions from the Friends of Bolam Group, NCC Area Tree Officer John Alderson, local historians, such as Fiona Green of Northumbria Gardens Trust and the 7th Lord Decies, the ancestor of the original landowner who commissioned John Dobson to design and landscape the lake. A site visit to local Cheeseburn Grange was also arranged to view their historical architectural and landscaping plans to see what, if any, influence had on the area and its wider estate and parkland.

Archival material included:

- A handwritten copy of an affidavit written by John Dobson in 1849 in which he denounces

the state of the woodland but does confirm some of the species that were planted at the time as well as the intended management strategy and recommendations for the future.

- Greenwoods map of 1828 depicting the lake, the routes around it and the large open area of parkland, unwooded at the time, to the north of the lake. The map also makes reference to Bolam Bog. Copies of old Ordnance Survey maps also confirm this.
- A Parish Record of births and deaths from the 1818.
- A Marriage Register from the 1800s showing Bolam landowner ancestors.
- A correct copy of the Decies coat of arms from a 1920's copy of Debrett's Peerage.
- Portrait of John Dobson.

This archival material was used in a new history pamphlet and a John Dobson Trail, 3 new information panels for each of the car parks, a new panel dedicated to John Dobson and a Circle Of Life Panel. No original plans or maps by Dobson were found despite thorough searches of available archives and media drives in local press and on local radio. These appear to be lost to history.

A meeting was arranged with NCC Area Tree Officer John Alderson to assist in giving a historical context to tree planting schemes, both past and future to ensure that future planting and forestry is sympathetic to the woodland both historically and environmentally. The Tree Officer also helped to clarify certain passages of text in Dobson's 1849 affidavit, such as 'brushwood' referring to the understory of the woodland and 'hanging nature' likely to be pendular varieties such as birch and willow.

Without any of Dobson's original plans or maps being available, a meeting was arranged with Fiona Green of Northumbria Gardens Trust to help give a greater historical picture of what Dobson's plan would be and what the estate would have looked like from a garden and landscape perspective. A similar 'wild and woody' landscape can be found at Castle Eden Dene, whilst similarities can be found at the other north eastern locations of Gibside and Jesmond Dene. The site visit to Cheeseburn Grange which is within 10 miles of Bolam proved useful in that the owners of this Dobson landscape had the original plans and this allowed us an insight into his techniques and vision albeit a different estate

Education

Woodhorn Education Services were employed to conduct research into educational services and staff training needs at Bolam Lake Country Park from which an Educational Advice and Planning booklet was produced. Guidance was provided within this for future services and staffing within the park.

A Teachers Information Pack was created with information about Bolam Lake Country Park that is relevant to any visiting school, including places to conduct activities, hazard identification (but not risk assessment), information on what to bring, timings and where to park.

Woodhorn staff worked alongside the Development Officer and other Northumberland County Council staff to deliver workshops (Minibeam Safari, Lake Dipping, The Perfect View and Den Building) to eight different schools, comprising of 370 pupils, from the Northumberland and Newcastle area, over a 5 week period. An additional workshop, a Tree Walk was added in when time allowed. These visits were free to the schools, with the money coming from the project budget, funded by the HLF.

At the end of each visit, Woodhorn staff conducted surveys of visiting teachers to produce a Heritage Education Services Evaluation. All events were given positive reviews, ratings and comments by visiting teachers with all but one suggesting they would be prepared to pay for such a visit in the future.

Worksheets were also produced by the Development Officer which can be used by schools visiting the park in the future, either on paying visits being run by NCC staff or on visits not requiring NCC staff. These cover the Minibeast Safari, Lake/Pond Dipping and Tree Walk workshops.

The local primary school at Belsay were engaged to create a new Coat Of Arms for Bolam Lake in line with that of Lord Decies and they came up with some wonderful ideas after a briefing by the Development Officer. The entries were judged by Lady Decies on the Celebration day with every child receiving a certificate and the winners prizes

Events

A programme of twenty events comprising of walks, talks and activities was ran from the end of July until the end of October, all of which were free to the public, with any costs being covered in the HLF funded budget. The events were chosen to meet different age, education and mobility needs with some being ran by NCC staff, whilst others were ran by other individuals or external organisations. It was estimated that some 230 people took part in the events programme. Events ranged from bat nights, autumn strolls, building insect homes to talks on John Dobson and Bolam at War.

The events programme was advertised using traditional methods such as leaflets and posters placed at Bolam Lake and other Country Parks, libraries, visitor centres, schools and local churches. Social media was also utilised with events etc being advertised on NCC Facebook and Twitter pages. Events were well attended and feedback was obtained from the majority of events and analysis was conducted for a final report. Overall feedback from the events was very positive and most respondents suggested that they would pay to partake in events in the future. This analysis would help in future planning of events

Interpretation

New site interpretation is being introduced in the form of history leaflets, a John Dobson History Panel, a Wildlife 'Circle of Life' Panel with input and ideas from the Friends of Bolam group, as well as three new Orientation Panels to go in the three carparks on site. Information for the history leaflet and panel came from the previously mentioned Historical Research. Design and production of the history leaflet and panels has been conducted by Infinite Design in Newcastle upon Tyne.

A site visit to Wallington Hall was arranged where the Development Officer and the Project Manager met with Gillian Mason, Wallington Hall's Visitor Experience Manager to discuss their interpretation and signage. This allowed for themes and ideas that could be transferred to the new Bolam Interpretation and History panels to be identified and formulated, such as standardised layouts and fonts.

Conservation

The conservation element of the project, the removal of Rhododendron, has both environmental and historical connections. In Dobson's affidavit there is no mention of the use of rhododendron as a shrub layer. Rhododendron is a non-native and invasive plant species which can completely replace the natural understory, which once established, is extremely difficult to eradicate. Rhododendron was not one of the original species planted by John Dobson, who stuck with native varieties.

From an environmental perspective, clearing rhododendron is important to allow native understory species, such as Holly, to regenerate. Areas cleared of rhododendron were also planted with native trees as part of the 200 trees scheme. From an historical viewpoint, clearing rhododendron has been important as it was not originally planted by John Dobson and has also allowed for lost vistas of the lake to be opened up, which would have been originally visible and part of Dobson's landscaping. Groups involved in this work were the local cadet force, local school, a scout group and NCC staff totalling some 38 days

Visitor Survey

One hundred visitors surveys were completed, the majority of which were carried out by the Project Development Officer with some completed by a member of the Friends of Bolam group.

The visitors survey had three main objectives. These were to:

- Obtain an up-to-date visitor profile.
- Establish how and when the Country Parks are used for future management purposes
- Stimulate comment from visitors about the service they receive at the Country Parks.

All data was collected by a questionnaire survey which was an updated version of previous visitors surveys carried out by Northumberland County Council . The questionnaire consisted of 31 questions and took approximately 5 to 10 minutes to administer.

In order to take account of seasonal, weekly and daily variations in park use, survey days were allocated to ensure samples were taken on the following days during daylight hours:

- Weekdays
- Weekend days
- Days within and outside school holiday periods.

Four new questions were introduced targeted only at cyclists. Bolam Lake Country Park has become a popular stop off point and destination for cyclists and as such it is important to get feedback from this user group. The main conclusions drawn here are in the separate document 'Visitor Survey Analysis'

Publicity and Marketing

The events programme was advertised using traditional methods such as leaflets and posters placed at Bolam Lake and other Country Parks, libraries, visitor centres, schools and local churches. Social media was also utilised with events etc being advertised on NCC Facebook and Twitter pages as well as the County Councils own website. Similar methods were also used to advertise the 200 Memories

Project with forms and posters being deposited in libraries, visitor centres and churches as well as in care homes and sheltered accommodation.

Both the project as a whole and the 200 Memories scheme was twice covered twice on BBC Radio Newcastle, once in a short 5 minute evening slot, and once in an extended, multiple slot, mid morning broadcast. This second one was successful in bringing in a number of historical memories relating to Bolam Lake and the surrounding area and its people.

Local Newspaper the Morpeth Herald ran a story on the celebration day featuring a large photograph of the attendees, whilst the Beresford Family History Society Magazine also ran a story. The Campaign to Protect Rural England also ran a story on their website covering the day.

The Friends Of Bolam Lake produced a special edition of their annual newsletter announcing the project and also another after the celebration day.

One slide presentation/talk was given to the Morpeth Civic Society on the project

Training For Volunteers

After discussion at the Friends Of Bolam Lake Group a Research Training day was requested at the Woodhorn Archives for the group to look into local history. This was undertaken in June led by Archivist and proved an incentive for the group to undertake further research into the History pamphlet

Later in the project some money was also identified that with HLF agreement could be spent on another training day. After discussion with the Friends Group they identified a Bird Identification training day ran by Eco North in December 2016.

Community Involvement

Bolam has a very small local community but it was important to involve them both at the pre-application stage and the running of the actual project. The Friends Of Bolam Lake Group set up some time before the project in 2000 does consist of locals, regular park users and people who volunteer in the park. The project officer holds regular meetings with the group in advance of the bid to ascertain what they think is the missing pieces in the visitor experience are and how we could improve this.

The Friends Group produced extra newsletters, helped in Visitor Surveys, helped with events and talks to the ideas and work on the new panel on the 'Circle Of Life' which they did their own research and worked with the designers to create.

The project also involved local schools in the education workshops and the Coat Of Arms Competition. Scout groups and cadet forces were involved in the conservation work onsite.

The project also targeted the older generation specifically looking at memories. The Development Officer went into the local care homes and asked if staff could engage with their clients to elicit some memories of the site.

Summary

From all participants the feedback from the Bolam@200 project has been very positive. It had left a lasting legacy on the site and in the local community. At the last Green Flag Assessment it was commented on by the judge how much improved the site was after the input from the Heritage Lottery Fund