

THREAT TO STOKE LODGE PARKLAND

We believe that there is a serious and imminent threat to Stoke Lodge Parkland on Shirehampton Road in BS9.

Far more than just a playing field, Stoke Lodge Parkland was laid out in the 1830s as an arboretum / parkland. The type of trees and the natural, gently sloping landscape were greatly influenced by the English Landscape Movement brought in by great landscape gardeners of the 1700s and early 1800s such as Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton. The fine trees were carefully spaced throughout Stoke Lodge to allow them to reach their mature shapes and be properly admired. Its border trees (one boundary oak has a girth of 14 feet) and an old walled orchard are also of interest.

Mr Tony Titchen, the dendrologist who identified the trees at Tyntesfield for the National Trust, has pointed out that Stoke Lodge boasts some of the finest examples of specimen trees in Bristol.

For generations, Stoke Lodge has been a wonderful resource for the local community for all kinds of informal recreation. Whether you're strolling on your own in quiet surroundings or kicking a football with friends or family, you cannot wish to find a better place to de-stress! The Green Spaces detailed strategy highlighted the locality's lack of public open space by citing Local Need Area 10, with 4 square metres of green space per person, as having by far the lowest amount of green space of any of the LNAs in Bristol, well below the target of 18 square metres per person.

An appallingly one-sided Report for Bristol City Council Informal Cabinet April 2010 has just come to light. It was written by a BCC officer dealing with Projects and recommends that Stoke Lodge be fenced off and developed for the use of Cotham School several miles away.

The report's main points:

- 1.) **Cotham use Stoke Lodge as their playing fields (rarely!!), therefore they are officially part of Cotham "school premises" and must be protected from the public**
- 2.) A diktat from the previous government based on **Health & Safety gone mad** states that **all school playing fields should be fenced off**. (Many Bristol Parks Forum members will be aware that school playing fields in and around Bristol and until now used by local residents are steadily being fenced off.)
- 3.) In reaching a decision about fencing off school playing fields, NO ACCOUNT must be taken of "unauthorised users" (local residents using the field, local children kicking a ball around after school, picnicking etc. These people are trespassers & help wear out the pitches.)
- 4.) BCC money (£1,000,000) from the sale of playing fields from a school near Purdown being closed, plus a grant from Sport England (£600,000) will help finance the "major refurbishment" of the land including expensive fencing, etc. (We've been told other "improvements" include extensive earth moving to level the beautiful parkland, but these aren't listed in this report.)
- 5.) If Stoke Lodge is not fenced off, the officer claims that an "intense inspection regime" (daily up to several times a day) will need to be set up to clear litter (£25,000 per year). This is Health & Safety gone completely bonkers.
- 6.) **Charges made for "community access"** to Stoke Lodge parkland & its "improved facilities" can provide **"an important funding stream for the school"** (and whoever manages the site – currently it's managed by Coombe Dingle Sports Complex).

Please don't be fooled by terms like "community access" or "shared access". This really means "authorised users" only – groups or individuals who formally book & pay in advance for facilities open only at certain times. Even "open access" need not include informal recreational use by residents. Friends of Stoke Lodge want **free public access**, enjoyed by generations of residents, to continue.

There are many **arguments against the one-sided Officer's report**, including:

- 1.) Cotham's use of Stoke Lodge is extremely low! Close monitoring shows that in many weeks of term Cotham don't use it at all. The highest usage so far this year has been just 4 hours in a week – and even that involved only very small groups of students. To refer to Stoke Lodge as primarily Cotham's Playing Fields is completely misleading!
- 2.) Informal community use by a huge variety of users is much more obvious. And local teams such as Shirehampton Colts are already struggling financially. They need inexpensive pitches to play on and cannot afford to pay the higher costs that would result from "improved" pitches. These teams have a huge social benefit and must not be lost.
- 3.) The very first "Spring Watch" series ("Wild in Your Garden") was based at Stoke Lodge. It said the parkland and surrounding properties are **one of the best areas for wildlife in the country**. A world expert on mammals has stated that **fencing off Stoke Lodge would be disastrous for wildlife**. It is the last playing field available to badgers for foraging (they suck up earthworms from the surface of short grass on damp nights) as a consequence of all the other development and fencing off in the area.
- 4.) **Coombe Dingle Sports Complex is very near, & we don't want duplication**. It is securely fenced, highly developed and dedicated to serious sports usage by teams and individuals who can afford the hefty charges. We don't need two such establishments here.
- 5.) **Stoke Lodge's beautiful and important historic landscape** is the curtilage of a Grade II Listed building. Fencing would detract from the views, and levelling the lovely parkland would ruin it.
- 6.) Litter is not much of a problem; and some of our local residents pick up sweet wrappers, orange peel, plastic water bottles, etc. when they walk around the parkland. Local teams say dogs are never a major problem for them at Stoke Lodge.
- 7.) If Cotham were to opt out of the LEA, what would then become of Stoke Lodge (referred to in the report as "Cotham School premises")?
- 8.) **This project will soak up money**. A civil engineer familiar with the site has contacted us to say that bedrock is just under the soil. He states that if BCC think they can move soil around and do excavations for the £1,000,000 mentioned, they are crazy. ("Many millions", he says.) And the current low maintenance costs to mow the pitches will skyrocket if the fields are "improved".

But this is our main worry:

A mere 400 metres from Stoke Lodge is the **Coombe Dingle Sports Complex**. This is a very different type of facility, run by Bristol University Sports Department, providing indoor and outdoor tennis courts, floodlit all-weather pitches and other services to serious sports enthusiasts, clubs and **members of the public who can afford the significant charges**. (Hiring an artificial football pitch for a 90 minute games costs £130!) It is only open to those who have booked and paid. The Council have a shareholding interest in this Complex and it is used by Bristol schools. Many grass pitches were lost forever under concrete when Coombe Dingle playing fields were developed.

The ostensible reason for fencing is the protection of children; this is an issue that some would feel nobody can argue against even though local residents over more than 30 years are not aware of any actual incidents! But we believe that there is a **hidden agenda** and that is **to turn the Stoke Lodge Parkland into an elite, dedicated money-making sports facility like Coombe Dingle**. Under the Playing Field strategy a few years ago, Coombe Dingle/Stoke Lodge was listed as a possible 'Sports Hub.' This would be acceptable if the Stoke Lodge Parkland was preserved and the general free public access maintained. **It is not acceptable for the last two large open green spaces in this part of the City to be dedicated exclusively to less than 10% of the population who are active -- and affluent -- sports users.**

The interests of serious sportsmen should of course be considered, but so must the interests of the much larger group – all the rest of the population!

We thank the Executive Member of the BCC Cabinet dealing with education, Clare Champion-Smith, local Lib) for indicating that **the scheme should be frozen** until a decision on the future of access to school playing fields is made. And we feel she is genuinely amenable to the idea of not reaching a decision until all alternatives are explored, including these from Friends of Stoke Lodge:

- 1.) **Cotham to share another school's facilities.** To maintain their charitable status, private schools must share facilities with other non-private schools, so there are many opportunities for Cotham there. Perhaps more interesting is the fact that Brightstowe (formerly Portway School) is near Stoke Lodge and has excellent new sporting facilities, which are underused. Sharing with Brightstowe or another nearby school such as Henbury is an innovative idea with **huge benefits socially and financially**, and Bristol could lead the way for other cities to follow.
- 2.) Cotham to use Coombe Dingle Sports Complex, which is very little used during the day on weekdays.
- 3.) Manage Stoke Lodge Parkland like a city park – with clear, enforced rules for dog owners. This has never been tried before at Stoke Lodge.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- 1.) Email a short note a.s.a.p. to BCC saying if you agree with the Officer's report or not. Send it to the PA of the Service Manager: julie.cole@bristol.gov.uk or to the Officer who wrote the report: michael.branaghan@bristol.gov.uk
Michael Branaghan, Service Manager Capital Assets & Access, CYPS, Bristol City Council, PO Box 57, The Council House, College Green, Bristol BS99 7EB
Send a copy to Clare Champion-Smith: clare.campion-smith@bristol.gov.uk
- 2.) As a separate issue, Barbara Janke, Leader of the Council, has requested that the public suggest ways to cut £35 million from BCC's budget over the next three years. So far, most of this year's cuts have been to education.
Email **in July & August** to: consultation@bristol.gov.uk For "subject" put "The Big Debate". Or write to **The Big Debate**, The Council House, College Green, Bristol BS1 5TR (yes, there are 2 postcodes)
Or go to www.bristol.gov.uk/conversation home page "Ask Bristol" & click "Bristol's Big Budget Conversation" on the right to write an open or private comment.
You very likely have your own ideas for saving taxpayers' money, but please consider adding these as well:
We feel further fencing off of school playing fields is a waste of money. And the £1,000,000 of BCC Education money earmarked for fencing & other "improvements" to Stoke Lodge parkland could be better spent on other capital projects in the education department (CYPS). Schools such as Cotham & Brightstowe could share underused facilities such as playing fields. Private schools need to share facilities with non-private schools to maintain their charity status. You'll probably think of many more!

For generations, users of Stoke Lodge (including teams, informal groups, people on their own, wildlife, and occasionally schools) have shared the land with no problems. We feel the one-sided report (which also recommends fencing off Purdown!) should be withdrawn.