

The innovative “Eton/Dorney Green Belt” and its ongoing “protection” of Dorney, Eton Wick and Eton

We are all aware of the Green Belt that protects the green spaces around our cities. It was first introduced for London in 1938 and rolled out to the rest of England in 1955.

However, the first “green belt” that protected Dorney was implemented by some far-seeing people around 1930.

After the First World War three events near to Dorney appear to have raised concerns amongst the Provost and Fellows of Eton College that Eton may be in some danger of being absorbed into the rapidly growing town of Slough. Col. Charles Palmer shared their concern related to Dorney and Eton Wick. They developed a plan – I have called it the “Eton/Dorney Green Belt”.

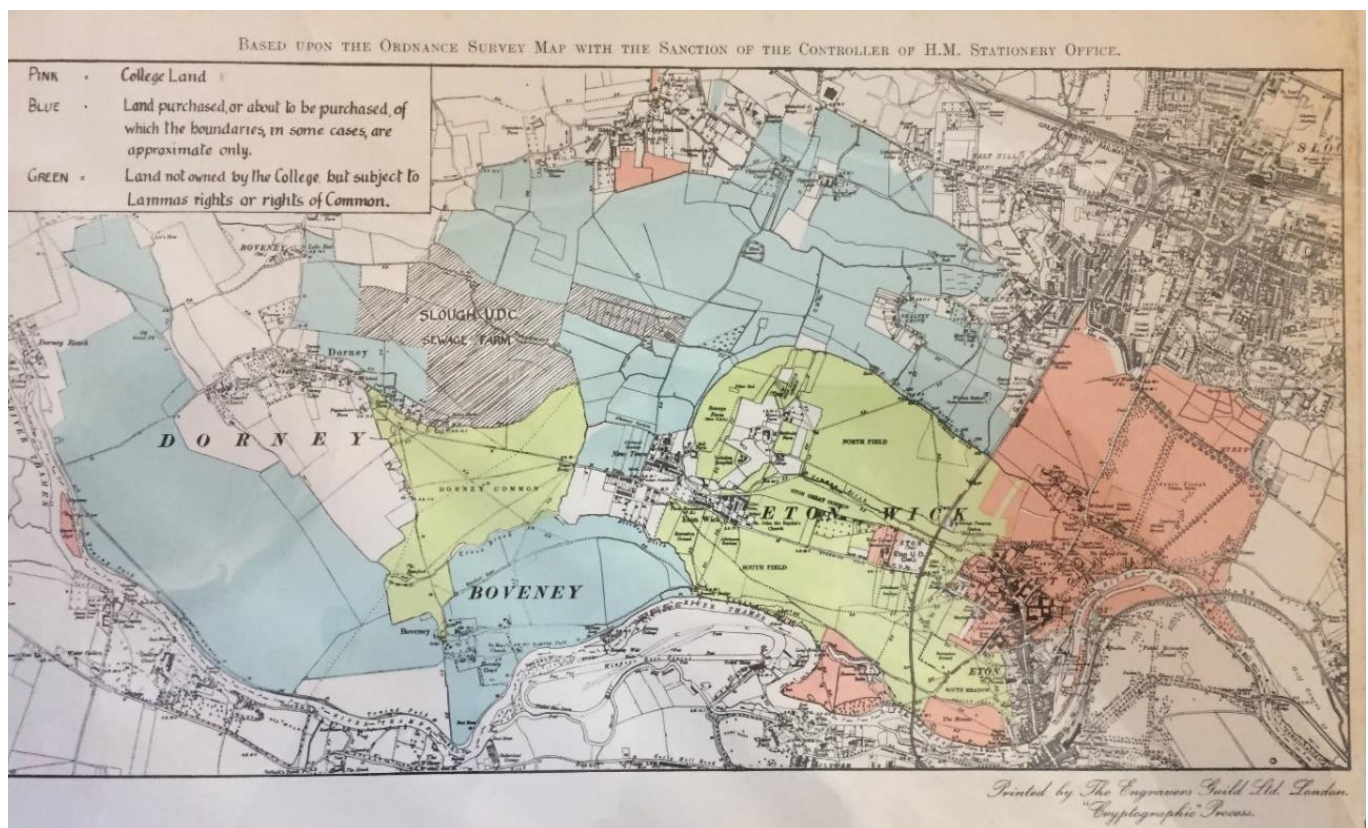
The three events that triggered the “Eton/Dorney Green Belt” were, firstly, the decision by the Government – after considerable debate – in 1918 to compulsory purchase Cippenham Court Farm and five neighbouring farms (over 600 acres) to create a motor repair depot for government vehicles returning from overseas. The site rapidly became known locally as “The Dump” owing to the thousands of vehicles stored in the mud in various stages of decay and disrepair. By April 1920, there were nearly 18,000 vehicles at the site of which at least 75% were derelict. The workforce at “The Dump” was around 8,000.

Secondly, sixteen years earlier in 1902, Col. Charles Palmer agreed to lease the 244 acres of Manor Farm, Dorney, which then stretched from Dorney Common to Cippenham, to Slough Urban District Council on a 21 year lease. It was agreed that a small proportion (40 acres) of this land, near to Slough, could be used as a sewage farm. The population of Slough in 1902 was approx. 14,000 – a small town with no major plans to expand.

In 1920, when the Slough population was around 20,000 plus the 8,000 workforce at “The Dump”, Slough Council decided that they wanted to purchase Manor Farm in its entirety, together with some land owned by others, in order to increase the size of the sewage farm in line with the increase in population plus the workforce that “commuted” to “The Dump”. This location was Slough’s only sewage farm. After an Inquiry, this land was eventually compulsory purchased.

The third event, linked to the first, occurred in April 1920. The Government sold “The Dump” to a new company called Slough Trading Co Ltd. This was the start of the Slough Trading Estate. All the vehicles were disposed of and Slough Trading Co Ltd started to lease the land to businesses. The twenty original tenants by 1925 included Gillette Razor Company, Johnson & Johnson, Life Saver Sweets and St Helen’s Cable and Rubber. By the end of 1927 there were 65 companies on site and over 150 by 1933.

In 1926 Eton College, together with Col. Charles Palmer of Dorney Court, developed a plan to protect the west side of Eton, Eton Wick and Dorney from any further land-purchasing incursions. They did this by ensuring that virtually all the land surrounding Eton, Eton Wick and Dorney was, essentially, owned either by Eton College or the Dorney Court Estate. By 1931 this plan was complete and around 25 Dorney landowners became two.



Map showing the “Eton Green Belt” plan around 1926

The map above shows the plan in detail in 1926 (approx). The pink land is that owned at that time by Eton College, the blue shows land purchased or about to be purchased (from the Dorney Court estate and other landowners) and the green land is land not owned by the College but subject to Lammas rights or rights of Common. Lake End Common should have been included coloured green. The black, hatched land in the centre is the Manor Farm land including the sewage works. The white land in Dorney was primarily owned by the Dorney Court estate.

The white triangle along the Thames at the bottom of the map south of Boveney Court Farm is where the Eton College Boathouse is at Dorney Lake. At that time, it was owned by the owner of The Willows, across the river. In 1950 Eton College bought these 41 acres from the owner of The Willows.

Between 1961 and 1965 the M4 Motorway between London and Maidenhead was opened and effectively became the revised northern boundary to the “Eton Green Belt” with the Thames making an excellent west, south and east boundary combined with the land owned by Eton College and Dorney Court estate.

The opening of the Jubilee River in 2002 added further protection for Dorney and Eton Wick from any future encroachment of the Slough Sewage Works.

That is where the very careful planning of both Eton College and Col. Charles Palmer after the First World War has left Dorney today. Protected by two landowners – Eton College and the Dorney Court estate - who are committed to the ongoing protection of Dorney against further incursions and with no apparent plans to further develop the green fields they own in and around Dorney.

Those of us who enjoy Dorney for what it is today should be thankful that bold and imaginative steps were taken nearly 100 years ago when the “Eton/Dorney Green Belt” was created.

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