

Wheelchair Trail Around Hythe Park, Chertsey

29th July 2020

As a result of the Government's new loneliness strategy, a multi-agency working group set up by Runnymede Borough Council identified wheelchair users as needing places to go and socialise. One suggestion was to have a local wheelchair trail.

In June 2020, one had been created for Gogmore Park Farm, Chertsey in the south of the borough. Now one was to be produced for Hythe Park, Egham in the north of the borough.

Suzanne Stronge from Runnymede Borough Council had previously worked with some Duke of Edinburgh students from Magna Carta School on a tree trail leaflet for the 10th anniversary of some of the trees being planted in Hythe Park.

It was hoped that an up to date wheelchair tree trail could be devised for Hythe Park, Chertsey and Suzanne asked if RALG could assist her with testing possible routes with a wheelchair user.

Pauline Carter (a wheelchair user) and her husband Simon as well as Jonathan Fisher (a totally reliant white cane user) met Suzanne and Dave Pope, a local resident who had been nurturing the trees in the park for many years, on a warm weekday which was sunny with a gentle breeze. Armed with the tree trail leaflet produced by the Duke of Edinburgh students we began our pleasant adventure.

The hour and a half spent together was very productive for all. Covid 19 rules were still in force at the time but it was easy to maintain social distancing throughout the walk. Within the park, it was easy to see that a wheelchair friendly route could be devised around the unusual and extensive range of trees that had been planted through the years, the fruit orchard and its surrounding hedgerow, and the plants in the wildlife friendly garden area – all of which were pointed out by Dave and Suzanne.

There were some minor accessibility issues encountered and ideas were offered on how to enhance the user's experience.

Accessibility

- There is good road signage on Pooley Green Road to Rowan Avenue then to Field View for vehicles. There is also good pedestrian and cycle access from the Roundway at the bottom of Hythe Park Road, Wendover Road and Rowan Avenue/rear of Pooley Green Road
- The car parking area is to the rear of Rowan Avenue off Field View where there is 1 disabled parking bay right beside the entrance to the park which is free. However, the parking bays are alongside a service road to the park and involve parallel parking. There is no turning area. The disabled bay could be too small for many Motability vehicles: due to a low wooden boundary rail preventing a car door from opening widely enough for the passenger to exit/enter easily, the bay length not allowing enough space for a rear car boot from opening and an electric wheelchair be unloaded
- The high kerb then small piece of uneven ground before the low wooden boundary rail would present a trip, overbalance hazard to a visually impaired or restricted mobility person
- The route to the entrance of the park is tarmacked and the actual entrance itself is an opening at the side of a locked service gate. The opening is wide enough for a wheelchair/electric wheelchair/scooter
- There are no toilets (including disabled or 'Changing Places'), refreshment facilities or shelters for rain or wind protection in the park
- There were no signs, including tactile, about any of the trees, shrubs or plants.
- The paths in the park are level and of crushed sandstone. There is just enough width for a walker with carer/guide but not for an electric wheelchair/scooter and companion. The paths are bounded by cut grass so there is enough white cane roller ball detection between the two surfaces. There was an occasional shrub/plant which encroached a path but generally the gardens are very well maintained and accessibility around the gardens is good
- All the paths are well lit and there is CCTV surveillance
- The grass areas are a combination of mown areas, which are cut short enough for easy movement and generally flat. Other parts of the gardens are left longer for wildlife habitats but they do not block access around the trails. The grassy areas could be slippery when wet but there is no need to venture off the graded paths to get around the trails
- To reach any of the trees, shrubs or plants, the visitor needs to leave the path and cross mown grass for at least a couple of metres.
- The fruit orchard is accessible by a wide gate. In it, the ground is rough with uneven grass and there is a small mound which might be challenging for a wheelchair user or person of unstable mobility

- In the fruit orchard, there is a picnic table with bench seats which has its ends free for wheelchair users. It is close enough to the gate to walk to for wheelchair users or people with limited walking mobility
- There were plenty of seats/benches/resting areas along most of the paths every 200m. Apart from the picnic table with benches in the orchard, no other picnic tables were seen
- A visually impaired person would need a guide to assist them undertake the trail as the paths wind and merge
- Within the park there is: an adventure playground, an outdoor gym, a dedicated fenced toddlers' play area and a multi-usage games area. These all can be accessed according to one's disability
- An added bonus is that fruits in the fruit orchard, the hedgerow surrounding it, on some trees in the park can be consumed by the public along with nuts, berries and herbs!

User Experience

Suggestions were offered to enhance the user's experience. It is suggested that:

- An actual trail could be devised with instructions to assist the user encounter all the points of interest
- A trail map with information could be produced as a leaflet and downloadable Word document for phone/laptop
- The trail map with information could be made accessible for the visually impaired by being Arial font size 16 in black on a yellow background
- The trail could be improved for users, especially the visually impaired, by having descriptions of tree bark patterns, leaves, flowers, fruits and seeds that can be found in the park so users could perhaps try to identify them. This can be achieved by the user having descriptions and images of the trees of interest in a leaflet or by downloading the Woodland Trust tree app at <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/british-trees/tree-id-app/>
- Information boards and tree plaques/signs that are tactile could be produced about the trees, shrubs or plants of interest
- A few covered seating areas around the trail would be welcome for shelter in inclement weather
- Cycle racks would encourage users to cycle there instead of coming by car
- Re-positioning and enlarging the disabled parking bay would make it easier for the disabled to access the park
- Putting a turning area in for cars parked in the car park would make exiting the car park far easier