



**ALDENHAM COUNTRY PARK**

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**A Free Range Experience**

## Park History

### Overview



## **The History of Aldenham Country Park**

Aldenham Country Park lies in what was the medieval Aldenham Common which was the largest of several commons within the Manor of Aldenham. The name derives from Eladeham, meaning either 'old home' or Ealda's home'.

The Common was part of a parcel of land given to the church by King Offa in roughly 785 AD. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century it was annexed by the Danes and was later reclaimed by King Alfred. During the Norman Conquests the Abbey of St Alban leased it to the Abbey of Westminster for 20 years on condition of clearing woodland and keeping the roads clear. Westminster, in favour at court, refused to relinquish the land when the lease expired and 200 years of disputed ownership followed.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 meant that all the Church land was confiscated by the Crown. A series of owners followed; in 1620 Henry Cogshill was in ownership and built a house called Wigbournes (probably where Haberdashers Aske's Boys School now stands), then it was the home of Sir Henry Carey (the first Lord Falkland) and later Lord Hollis. The mansion was remodelled and extended during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The land that now forms the Park was the last part of Aldenham Common to be enclosed under the 1801 Enclosure Act, with most of the Common returning to the Church. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it was sold to Henry Hicks Gibbs, head of a local banking family who became Baron, Lord Aldenham in 1896.

The estate remained intact in the family until the end of the Second World War when much of it was sold. The mansion and its immediate grounds became the Haberdashers Aske's Boys School. Vicary Gibbs, son of the first Lord Aldenham, was a world specialist on trees and shrubs. Much of his collection was lost with the division of the estate but within the Park we still have The Avenues (a double row of Turkey Oaks flanked by hawthorn and lime) which was planted in 1880 to extend an avenue of elms, now gone, that stretched down from the mansion.

In 1793, 68 acres of the Aldenham Estate was sold to the Grand Junction (later Grand Union) Canal Company for £2,051.

The reservoir was dug by French prisoners of war from the revolutionary wars in order to maintain the water levels in local rivers after the Grand Junction Canal was built. Work finished in 1797 but the dam was badly constructed; problems of subsidence and cracking still occur today. In 1802 James Barnes of Banbury, an engineer for the Company bought a further four hectares of the estate and arranged a £400 contract to strengthen and raise the dam wall

In the 1930's the Grand Union Canal Company made the reservoir available for boating, bathing and fishing with car parking and informal refreshment facilities. This recreational use was halted in 1937 until 1973 when the reservoir was no longer required for drinking water. You will find the concrete base of the old pumping station in the scrub behind the dam wall.



In 1938 Hertfordshire County Council, London County Council, Barnet Rural District Council, Bushey Urban District Council and Watford Rural District Council purchase 38 hectares of the land adjoining the reservoir for preservation as a public open space. They also entered into an agreement with the Grand Union Canal Company to preserve the reservoir as a part of the London Green Belt.

12 hectares (now One Oak, Five Oak and Events Field) were originally leased to Bushey Urban District Council as public playing fields and a recreation ground but in 1940 with wartime pressure for British self sufficiency, this was let for agricultural use and farming here continued until 1973.

In 1967 Hertfordshire County Council started discussion with British Waterways with a view to incorporating the land and reservoir as a public open space for recreation. The passing of the Countryside Act in 1968 (stating that areas of countryside should be made available for the public to relieve pressures of trespassing and crop damage on farmers and rural dwellers), meant that these proposals were then included in the County Countryside Plan.

This site was chosen as the county's country park out of five possible sites, mainly because it was possible to build a car park overlooking the reservoir. Aldenham Country Park was opened to the public in 1972 after construction of the car park, toilet block and bungalows for wardens was completed. In the following years footpaths, bridges and a playground were built.

The Planning and Estates Department took over the running of the Park from the Land Agents and continued working to maintain and enhance the Park for the public. Unfortunately, due to a cut in government funding and resources it was likely the Park would close and be sold on as the Council could no longer afford to operate it. A public appeal was launched and tenders invited for an organisation to take over and make it financially sustainable.

In 2012 Aldenham Renaissance Ltd took over the management of the Park, with its formal re-launch in April 2012, thereby securing its future as a fine Country Park, open for the public to enjoy once more.