

Follifields Community Design Rationale.

OVERVIEW:

The Follifields site has been designed around several basic, but core, principals to enable it to function successfully on many distinct levels and in many differing ways. These are:

- **Accessibility to all**
- **Endless possibilities**
- **Naturally immersive**

From the start, it was apparent, that this site was going to be very much more than just somewhere for the children to play, although their use and perceptions of the site were some of my key motivating factors behind aspects of the design.

Follifields had to be a place where anyone from the village could feel relaxed and comfortable, and where the experience of visiting, and exploring, the site was unique to each person, and age demographic, while also seamlessly blending the several factors together.

What might inspire or captivate a child's imagination would not necessarily be perceived or received in the same way by their parents or grandparents.

One of my priorities was to create a design that would stand the test of time, which would evolve naturally without much maintenance, and which would become a living, breathing part of the fabric of the village and hub of village life.

Too often we find, or are told, that our children are not having the same experiences amid nature that we had, that our parents had, and that something is being lost to a generation now and for future generations to come. I wanted to create at Follifields a design that would inspire the children as they made their memories and that would evoke memories of childhood from the adults, creating a shared commonality, a linkage.

Now, with the plants being young and just beginning to establish, the site is but a shadow of what it will become in later years once trees have matured to create towering sentinels standing watch over future generations; with shrubs and ground plants, bulbs, yet to create the carpet of colour, in varying seasons, that they will produce. By planting carefully now, the site will sustain itself and grow into a wild beauty, where you allow it, and a more ordered and compact elegance elsewhere.

Pathways:

The initial Infinity loop which united all the areas of the site within it was designed to represent both the unending, infinite, possibilities of play that the site could open to the children as well as the endless, or ageless, appeal of the site to everyone, young and old. As it has turned out, some adjustments have been required and the sites pathways have evolved to better fit the requirements of the users and the constrictions of certain maintenance features within the site that require access. The pathway through the wildflower meadow still needs mowing into shape, but to allow it to function best it should be kept mown short round the path, and maintained short, to provide an easily accessed pathway. This creates the contrast between the wildness of the meadow and the conformity of the path but also allows easy, unrestricted, access to all ages to walk around the Infinity Loop.

Nexus Trees:

Two of the proposed three Nexus trees have been planted: The Oak and the Beech. These trees are placed to be centralized focal points around which both the site, and the paths, will naturally ebb and flow. As they mature over the coming years, up to 100 years until full maturity, the trees will create and become focal points themselves, while yet remaining a solid and very visible, yet natural, part of the design.

The Oak on its own will support in the region of 500 species of plant, insect, animal and bird life once fully mature and established. The Beech with its silver-grey trunk will also be a dramatic and solid presence in the site, its leaves a furious blaze of colour in the autumn and a vibrant mass of green in the spring. Winter will see the silhouettes of both Oak and Beech standing tall and wide, framed black against the sun as it sets at the western end of the site.

Hedging:

The new boundary hedging is of 2 types:

1. **Hawthorn** – Across the west end of Follifields, along the fence overlooking the fields, the Hawthorn will create a solid mass of thick hedging over time, capable of sustaining many species amid its spiked stems. Its flowers and berries are also another source of food to varying species.
2. **Hornbeam** – Following the boundary fence from bottom to top, the Hornbeam, in time, will create a vibrant hedge. It will become more than wide enough to deter climbing over it, or through it, and will mature overtime into a strong barrier from the roadside and inside Follifields. (in older times it was known as the Ironwood tree due to the strength of its wood). Even in winter it will create a living barrier screen between the houses and the site as it won't lose its leaves until the new green leaves come through in the spring. This year-round cover is important to some species of bird and small mammals when cover is scarce in the colder months.

Bulbs:

I selected a range of bulbs to plant on site to bring additional colour to Follifields right from the first chilly days of February. The planting of swaths of snowdrop will provide a display early in the year as well as much needed food source for wildlife during lean times. The English Bluebells, sadly in decline in many places, are planted to, hopefully one day, create a thriving bluebell patch and redress the balance somewhat. There are very few sights that remain in the memory as vividly as the carpet of violet/blue flowers, beneath the light dappled shade of the trees above.

Some of the bulbs are to be planted amongst the new trees. Others are to go in areas where footfall is likely to be minimal to be uncrushed or damaged as they grow each year: either close to, or under, the boundary hedging and the existing hedging where they can also spread happily as well.

Climbing Plants:

Within the wildflower zone, behind the seating and in specific, splendid, isolation, the climbing plants are set to create a range of heights in addition to the trees and wildflowers. Using the single poles, or a teepee of hazel or willow rods, the climbing plants will form points of interest that draw the eye and break up the flat vision planes of ground level planting and the heights of the trees. The climbing plants selected will also provide scents and colours at various times throughout the year, even winter. (**Winter Jasmin**) Once established, they will climb up, and conceal, whatever structure supports them and appear to be nothing more than a naturalistic, tangled clump of greenery and flowers. The nature of the climbers will allow them to clamber and twine themselves up whatever is used and keep them compact enough to require minimal maintenance. Various insects and wildlife will be attracted by the climbers as both a source of food and shelter.

Additional Planting:

The varieties of plants that I have selected for use with Follifields are chosen to remain both sensitive to the existing rural environment, to blend in with it, and to introduce additional varieties that will encourage varied species of insects and other wildlife, to broaden the biodiversity of the site.

The **Buddleja** is strong and tolerant to many conditions, easy to maintain, and quick growing as well as being liable to attract many butterflies to its blooms.

Several common hedgerow plants such as the **Borage** and **Yarrow** should grow well, attract insects, and create colour and movement throughout the site as they will self-seed if happy with conditions.

In several places I had specified a variety of other herbs that could be used by people coming to the site, provided pesticides are not used: **Rosemary** being an example. Planting close to, or

around some of the benches would create a pungent smell experienced while sitting and a convenient place to pick them.

Willow Tunnel:

By including a Willow tunnel within the site, I am creating a feature that then children will certainly latch on to and utilize. Anywhere that creates a screen, that veils the obvious, is attractive to most children as it stirs a sense of curiosity within them. The Willow Tunnel running as a cut through from one loop to the other, coming out by the teaching area, will naturally encourage the children to play further down the site, using areas other than the swings and football pitch. The sense of enclosure as you pass through replaced by the sudden expanse of the site one you emerge plays an important part in challenging the user's perspective and engaging awareness of their surroundings. Tunnels are also great fun and can be used in many games. As part of an ongoing teaching experience from planting onwards, maybe have the children label a willow sapling each and watch its progress and growth.

Play Equipment:

As the design has evolved throughout the process, as is to be expected, some changes have been made to the original Masterplan. Other issues come into play and can play a part in decisions that need to be taken. The Play Equipment is in the right place for what it is needed for, close to the entrance way, with the access Bredon path running between it.

The original planting that was to have accompanied the Play Equipment, and the pathway ringing it have now gone in favour of the more easily maintained current design. However, this apparent simplicity creates a great counterpoint for the more wild, untamed and rugged Wildlife area deeper into the Follifields site. The definite end of the path within the play equipment is a subtle psychological signal that once you step off the path you are moving away from the ordered and familiar into more imaginative, unknown territory.

Grassland:

Across the site there have been several distinct areas sown with different grass seed mixes. Where the football pitch is, a close growing, hard wearing, amenity mixture has been used. For all the grass areas outside of the Football pitch, a mixture containing grass seed and white flowering clover has been used. The reason for this was twofold. First it would create an amazing sight, the whole Follifields site covered in a carpet of white Clover flowers when in bloom. Secondly, the profusion of flowers would attract many pollinator insects to the site along with the accompanying predators.

Wildflower Area:

For the Wildflower Meadow end, I recommended a seeding that would provide the widest variety of species and, therefore, the widest variety of creatures that would be attracted by them. The species used should provide a robust meadow and a long duration of flowers from spring throughout the summer. As previously mentioned, the path to be kept mown very short, mostly suppressing the wildflowers around the loop to allow safe access to all ages. The seating within the area takes users lower down, placing them, and their view, amongst the taller wildflowers and looking out through a sea of plants. For children, looking up through and between such flowers and grasses would be like being the size of one of the insects that fascinate them at an early age, transporting their imaginations again.

Orchard Trees:

Surrounding the perimeter of the inner Wildflower meadow are the fruit trees: Apple, Pear and Plum. Three each of these trees have been planted to provide both an attractive lure to more insects and birds, as well as a reliable source of early blossom and latterly a harvest that can be used by the village locals as well as the wildlife. The varieties of fruit tree are chosen for ones that will either produce fruit that stores well or in great quantities. Who among us could forget, as a child, picking and eating ripe fruit directly off the trees!

Cherry Trees:

The four Cherry trees will provide a bright display of pink blossom early in the year as well as a visual pathway to lead users along the path to the right and further into the site. As they mature they will also provide copious quantities of fruit for the birds and animals of the Follifields site and the surrounding environment.

Silver Birch Trees:

As part of the design, I wanted to use the Silver Birch for several reasons. Firstly, it is distinctive and one very good way to engage children in their environment is to ensure that it is memorable and stands out. Few trees are so easily recognizable and thus easily retained within a child's mind. Secondly, the trees, even once mature, still maintain a certain permeability, not forming a dense canopy or screen and thus allowing the site to have semi permeable screens which don't fully screen one end from the other. This fact was important as a part of the brief was to retain the visibility of the children from one end to the other by the parents. The Silver Birch are also planted among the Hornbeam in the hedge to break up the sight lines and provide more separation from the houses and provides them with more privacy in addition. The Birch also brings a sense of movement in all seasons, being stirred by even the smallest breeze into wakefulness. The noise of the wind rustling through its delicate branches and leaves adds further to the sensory experience of the sight.

The Silver Birch copse was/is to be planted to re-create, on a small scale, English woodland, an island of trees, its understory a profusion of plants protected by the trees, contained and therefore easily maintained. An odd number of Silver Birches planted close, creating a copse, with Bluebell bulbs planted beneath for an early spring display, the blues/lilacs contrasting against the stark black and white of the trunks. Twining on the ground amid the trees in the summer would be the Lesser Periwinkle, its purple flowers attracting more insects to this specific, mini habitat within the site.

Final Word:

The Follifields site is a splendid example of what a community can do when given the chance, combined with hard work and determination. For my part, I have been delighted to be able to help translate the varying ideas and needs of the community and bring them to life as an initial design and an enduring, evolving, site plan. I have been lucky enough to assist in the ongoing evolution of the site, through my design, and been able to help overcome a few of the challenges that arose along the way.

In designing the site there is a lot of thought that has gone into it that, to the casual user, is not immediately evident. And to most people it doesn't matter as long as the site works for them. In the scheme of things, it may not matter at all. If the site becomes somewhere that all generations of the village can use and enjoy, the devil can stay in the details as it will have fulfilled its purpose. The site that has been created is just starting on its journey, hopefully a long and fruitful one that will see Follifields become an established, treasured, part of the landscape and fabric of the village.

Although we are planting today and want to see quick results for our children, it is further ahead that we are looking with every design like this. For every Follifields that is planted, and protected, and enjoyed, and looked after we create not just a space to inhabit but to grow in, to connect to and to remember.

Our children will grow up alongside the plants that have been established here. But only in several generations time, when our children have grandchildren, only then will the site reach its full potential.

Follifields has been planted as a vision, as potential, and as a legacy from the villagers of Follifoot today to those who are yet to come.

Mr Jay Rayner

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