

Hampstead Garden Suburb

Big Wood – Area B

Character Appraisal



BARNET
LONDON BOROUGH

HAMPSTEAD - GARDEN - SUBURB - TRUST

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Character appraisal

Section 1 Background site and historical information

1.1 Location and topography

Big Wood is located in the centre of the Suburb in the triangular area bounded by Oakwood Road, Northway and Erskine Hill. The A1, Falloden Way is only 50 metres to the north. The wood lies on the gentle north facing slope which runs down from Central Square towards the low land either side of Mutton Brook. Big Wood drains into Mutton Brook.

1.2 History

Big Wood is a remnant of a larger wood in lands owned by the Bishop of London since before the Norman Conquest. The woodland is shown on maps dating from 1746 and there is evidence of a Saxon boundary near the Temple Fortune Memorial Gate entrance. The site formed part of the 112 acres leased from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1912. The wood was ceded to the Finchley Urban District Council in 1933. Originally, it is likely that the wood was managed as mixed coppice with standards. The oaks of the present canopy appear to have been planted as a forest crop following clear-felling in the early 19th century. The oaks are closely planted and there is little evidence of subsequent thinning or restocking.

1.3 Status and management

Big Wood (together with the nearby Little Wood) is a designated Local Nature Reserve and is open to the public at all times. They are owned by the London Borough of Barnet and managed by the council in partnership with the Big and Little Wood Management Group which has representation from local residents and local groups. Big Wood is open to the public at all times. Since coming into public ownership, the wood has been managed for recreational use. Paths have been created and metalled; benches, signs, bins and dog bins and interpretation boards have been installed for public use and information.

Section 2 Overall character of the area

Big Wood is a very peaceful area of semi-natural broadleaved woodland. The canopy is dense and the surrounding houses are not visible from within the wood except right at the boundaries. The shift from residential roads into mature woodland is dramatic and unusual so close to the centre of London. Paths criss-cross the wood linking entrances in Denman Drive South, Oakwood Road, two in Northway and the main entrance in Temple Fortune Hill ([Photograph 1](#)). Access is easy (all entrances are accessible for wheelchairs and pushchairs) and the area is very well used by local residents, particularly by walkers, joggers, dog owners and families with children.



The wood is dominated by English oak with frequent wild service and occasional ash, wild cherry and hornbeam ([Photograph 2](#)). Hazel dominates the understory with some hawthorn, holly, field maple and



other species. Some species have self seeded from surrounding gardens; these invasive plants include rhododendron, snowberry, horse chestnut and sycamore. Many of the mature trees are in poor condition. Falling branches are common and there have been a significant number of trees felled in order to avoid accidents to members of the public ([Photograph 3 - see overleaf](#)). In a large proportion of the wood the understory and the ground flora are poorly developed and there is

almost no oak regeneration. Bluebells and wood anemone are very attractive features in some parts of the wood in the spring, but these species are not widespread.



Away from the paths, the wooded area appears 'wild' and 'natural' which belies the fact that the current character of the wood is a result of its long history as a managed wood (Photograph 4 - see below). Coppicing and thinning of trees effectively ended when Big Wood became a recreational area and this has resulted in a dense canopy with few glades within the woodland area. The shade of the canopy inhibits the growth of plants on the forest floor and the regeneration of the oak trees which need plenty of light to flourish.

Some glades have been unintentionally created where trees have been felled for public safety reasons and the ground flora is more vigorous and varied in these places.



There is a varied resident and visiting bird population which includes great spotted and green woodpeckers, nuthatch, wren, blackcap, tawny owl as well as the ubiquitous magpie and jay. Grey squirrels are common. The lack of active coppicing has led to a decline in invertebrates reliant on this particular habitat and thus restricts the range of birds and small mammals who feed on these insects.

In general, the character of the open space is undermined by the low level of active woodland management. For example, in addition to the neglect of the regeneration of the wood, other negative features include a failure to clear ditches, hence their colonisation by invasive species which affects their effectiveness. The dumping of garden rubbish in ditches on the northern boundary has resulted in flooding. Many of the benches along the paths are in a poor state of repair, either from neglect or vandalism. One section of the main north-south path has been re-metalled recently but many of the other paths have sections in poor repair and are prone to flooding because of blocked ditches.



