

Requiem for a Headland 1*

*Events on Cobourg's west headland.
September 2012 to August 2013*

By Clive Goodwin

Readers may have seen and heard about the problems on Cobourg's west headland. There were two excellent articles by Cecilia Nasmith in Northumberland Today, and a report on CHEX. However, these hardly covered the issue, so this article will first, look at why we placed such a high value on the area, and then, next month, outline the chronology of the events that have so concerned us.

First, a look at the headland, which is the broad strip of naturalized land bordering the harbour to the west. It's wholly man-made, with a breakwater of massive stone boulders along its western side, while a small inlet from the harbour separated it from the breakwater to the south. Its present form is largely the result of a series of land-filling episodes in the 1990's. Subsequently the area had been left undeveloped, apart from the yacht storage compound at its north end.

The last bulldozing occurred about 2001. The entire area then was left alone, apart from brief sorties by the Town for the annual firework displays, and an informal path down the middle. Gradually it developed into a rich and attractive natural area, valued by many for its ever-changing panoramas and its attractiveness to birds and other wildlife.

Botanically it had become what botanists call an 'old field'. Old fields are ubiquitous; they develop wherever a plot of open ground is left undisturbed for a period of a year or two. Their plants are typically mixtures of alien and native species, and probably no two sites are alike. For these reasons, they tend to be denigrated. For example, the Marina Manager, apparently writing on advice from the Conservation Authority, said in describing the headland: "the area has become quite naturalized". In fact, the headland was exceptionally rich in plant life, and its position jutting out from the shore of Lake Ontario made it exceptional. Over the 13 or so years it had been left undisturbed 235 plant

* Source: *The Curlew*

species had been recorded there during its long maturation, and in fall 2012 at least 123 species were present.

It's becoming more widely appreciated that old fields generally should be taken seriously. Protection and restoration of our native ecosystems is important, and we are appropriately spending thousands doing just that. But to suggest that we can depend on that fragile heritage to provide all the ecosystem functions we so badly need is wholly unrealistic. An old field, in this context, is valuable.

Much of Northumberland will continue to be agricultural, and today that seems to mean corn and soybeans. And it turns out that, in today's countryside, even old fields are disappearing, together with many of those creatures that assure a healthy ecosystem. Even in Cobourg, Tree Swallow boxes sit without tenants, once huge Bank Swallow colonies off Lucas Point and Monk's Cove are almost empty of birds, nighthawks no longer call overhead in the evening skies of June, and local beekeepers are seeing the collapse of their colonies. Clearly, we all have a problem.

So natural habitats in our urban areas are proportionately even more important. Cobourg has several, and fortunately the recent development of a Park Master Plan for the Town recognized their importance. It was also encouraging to see a real demand for the experiences such places provide. In a survey by the Plan consultants of activities persons participate in or would like to do so, the most popular activity was walking (63%), followed immediately by Nature Hiking (48%) and Nature Observation/Bird Watching (37%). As we all know, one doesn't need to be a botanist or ornithologist to value and delight in nature.

The headland, then, was particularly well positioned to perform an increasingly important role. Its rich variety of plant life attracted a corresponding richness in insects and invertebrates, further enhanced by its position along the Lake. The lakeshore is both a pathway and an obstacle to birds and insects. The headland acted as a magnet where migrants could rest and feed, and the abundance of life assured a diversity of food resources.

Being immediately adjacent to the harbour greatly enhanced its importance. A remarkable 270 species of birds have been seen in and around the harbour, and often the optimal viewing has been from the headland. In fact, the two areas complement one another; the headland providing cover for birds foraging in the Harbour itself.

It was also significant in aesthetic terms, with a rich and diverse mix of wild flowers, butterflies, dragonflies and bird life that was constantly changing, in a setting that is in itself picturesque.

It was significant in educational terms, giving the valuable opportunity in an urban area to show a functioning ecosystem at work.

But, like all natural ecosystems, it lacked the ability to recover quickly, once its integrity was damaged. It had taken five years for the 'old field' to develop in the first place, and probably most of the subsequent period to arrive at the rich mix that was present last fall. Damaged, it might eventually recover, but at any point the process could be arrested, and in the interim its values could be badly diminished or lost completely.

The inlet at the south end had its own story. A plan for the harbour area had suggested a small wetland be developed at the south end, as part of a proposal to keep the area a natural park. So the filling had terminated just short of the south part of the breakwater, leaving an inlet from the harbour. Sometimes, depending on lake levels, this area filled with the harbour water, while when levels were lower rocky pools were present.

While the proposed plan came to naught, the area took on a life of its own. The rubble and rocks did little to encourage plant growth, but the waters in the inlet, constantly refreshed by water percolating through the loose boulders of the breakwater, proved a magnet to ducks and other waterfowl.

Partly hidden from the busy harbour, it became a refuge for shyer waterfowl, and always seemed to have a small contingent of 'puddle' ducks. In recent times Black-crowned Night-Herons were often present during the summer of 2012, the Snowy Egret of 2010 was one of few ever seen in the County, and the last of periodic Purple Sandpipers, uncommon birds of rocky pools, was there for two weeks at the end of 2011 and into January 2012.

Such, then, was the situation on the headland in mid-September last year. We had no reason to expect adverse changes. The Park Master Plan appeared close to approval. There was strong support for the kinds of experience the headland provided. Natural areas generally appeared more secure and were receiving more recognition than at any time previously. We had a good Council where at least some seemed well aware of environmental issues.

Requiem for a Headland 2

*Events on Cobourg's west headland.
September 2012 to August 2013*

By Clive Goodwin

Last month I discussed the significance of the west Headland. In this article I'll outline the series of events of the past year.

In 2012 silt being deposited in the harbour from Midtown Creek had begun blocking boat access to the north wall of the harbour. In September the Town brought in equipment to clear the blockage. Apparently seeking an easy disposal location for the wet silt, it was decided to use the headland. On September 25, some of us encountered trucks loaded with wet sludge depositing the material at the north end of the area. Lori Wensley described the scene most eloquently: "a huge pile of slimy charcoal-colored sludge ... a tire sticks out, pop cans, broken glass ... scattered over it or partly sticking out. It could easily be mistaken for a dump."

Council assured protestors that the measure was temporary, until the material had dried out, when it would be moved. There was concern that no notice had been given, but seemingly no awareness that the north end of the headland had been damaged beyond easy recovery, and little that the headland was in any way special.

Instead, what we encountered, particularly from the staff to whom we were subsequently referred, seemed to be shaped by the traditional 'grass and trees' parks approach, where a new batch of sod can quickly make the place like new again. There was recognition that natural areas will regenerate, but this simply seemed to be viewed as an advantage, a reason to do nothing substantial. Thus ended phase one. Half the headland was covered with silt.

A month later, at the beginning of November, we discovered that a large truckload of building rubble had been dumped into the inlet at the south end of the area. The truck had damaged the vegetation remaining south of the silt, and had obliterated the pools.

The response to our futile protests on this score, and enlarged on later, was difficult to

understand. We were told that staff had discovered that the point where the headland and breakwall met had been breached by wave action, which had resulted in silt pouring into the harbour.

I had been there on September 29 and all seemed essentially unchanged. The inlet breakwater there consists of massive rocks, not easily breached. A very major storm would have been necessary, and none had occurred. There was evidence of minor sand penetration in the interstices between the boulders themselves, but it did not extend far, and it would have been the product of years of wave action. There was also a certain amount of rubble that had been loosened from the headland fill as a result of teenagers scrambling down to the water level, but this too was not new, and the pools were still intact.

To this day none of us has any idea where any breach or resulting silt were.

The timing of the filling was thought-provoking. The rest did not occur until 2013. But the natural value of the inlet had already been irrevocably destroyed. Here ended phase two.

Through this whole episode we had heard warnings from the Town's Works Department that the area required a certain amount of 'maintenance and remedial work', and there would be 'disruption of the vegetative growth' from time to time.

Given the recent events, this was at once both alarming and puzzling. One of the features of natural areas is that they normally do not require much in the way of maintenance and remedial work, and certainly not the kind of work apparently envisaged. The headland was typical: it had looked after itself for over a decade. So what exactly did these warnings mean?

Spring arrived. I had spent parts of the winter trying to persuade the Works Department to adopt more aggressive rehabilitation measures than their stated plan of simply sowing 'wildflower' seed of some kind, which I was sure would fail. I was the one who failed; in fact, I didn't even get a reply to most of my e-mails. Finally, in April, I did get a note telling me the composition of the seed mixture – two grass genera and 'wildflowers'. I inquired what kinds of wildflowers but again received no reply. I concluded no one knew.

Spring brought a tumult of activity – trucks trekking down the headland, just as the frost was coming out of the soil, to finish off the inlet. The sludge that was supposed to be moved last fall then being spread over the badly rutted areas, complete with its burden of glass and junk. Events associated with this episode were well chronicled in

the paper and on CHEX. There remained borders of varying widths on either side, with the lush remains of the original vegetation, reminders of what had been lost. And finally the promised seeding took place.

It failed. Despite a soothing report to Council from the Director of Public Works on August 12, saying that as the seed mixture grew the area would once again return to its more naturalized state, germination had been very poor. The next day, August 13, a mechanized rake was repeatedly moving up and down the area in a huge cloud of dust. The pathetic patches of new grass were eliminated, as were most of the more vigorous pioneering species that had developed. Almost a year after the original dumping, and for the first time in some 13 years, most of the headland was bare. So ended phase three.

But the Director of Public Works was correct, of course. Unwitting perhaps, he had changed the subject. Apparently the objective was no longer to try to replace what had been destroyed (perhaps it never had been, except in the naive minds of those who valued the area), but to make it green again. Undoubtedly it would become green again; the questions were only with what, and when.

One concern we had expressed repeatedly was the danger of invasive plants taking over and arresting the process of succession. Crown Vetch, the main concern, was now flowering vigorously along the edges of the side strips. Black Swallowwort, one of the Dog-strangling Vine group and another potentially serious problem, was also present. There was even an aggressive native guest unwelcome in most public parks – a patch of Poison Ivy.

I briefly considered the possibility that the threatened maintenance was action to curb these species, but quickly dismissed the idea. I was being naïve again.

In fact, while all this was going on, we finally found what might be the real reasons behind the Works Department's warnings – the dredging started.

Dredging was badly needed. On my first visits to the headland in 1991 there was little beach in the harbour, and water plants were growing along the eastern edge of the headland itself. To my layman's eye, the harbour has been steadily filling with sand ever since. Sandbars, initially seasonal, have become permanent, and steadily expanded. Starting opposite the harbour mouth, the bars developed in a large arc curving north, a trajectory that seems to make sense if sand is entering via the harbour mouth. Our major storms from the east dump formidable amounts of sand on the east pier, despite its height. There are no barriers to the same waves across the harbour mouth. Gales from the west are rarely so dramatic, but one a few years ago was. It

flattened the vegetation on the headland – and deposited a mass of pebbles across the path accessing the area. There was little sand, anywhere.

The points here are twofold: sand will continue to be swept into the harbour, despite the filling of the inlet, and if boating is to continue to be a primary use of the harbour it is important to get much of the existing sand out.

But a huge pile of sand appeared along the headland shoreline, and is still there as I write. The area acquired a semi-permanent excavator, and long lengths of piping were dominating its shoreline. It had become a quasi-works yard to support the dredging. A large ‘cell’ of sand was created, and the dredging slurry pumped into it. The Town even issued a press release saying ‘the sediment will be placed at the West Pier (Work Department jargon for the headland; it is not, of course, a real pier) to dry out for later use or pumped over the break wall to dissipate’.

This seemed perhaps the strangest in a sequence of strange statements. Surely the logical place for more sand would be Victoria Beach. It was placed there in former years, and given the amount of use the beach gets, additional area could well be welcomed. But why not pipe it there directly? This might be inconvenient for staff, but the difficulties would surely not be insurmountable. Similarly with ‘pumping over the breakwall’ – if it is not needed on Victoria Beach, why not pump it out at once, before it dries out? Why postpone the decision, and handle everything twice?

Even before the dredging ceased, material pouring into the north end of the cell was pouring back into the harbour from the south end. The longer the sand is piled in the harbour the more will erode, to negate this year’s dredging. As a naturalist it just seemed more of the same; as a Cobourg taxpayer it seemed inexcusable. Thus ended phase four.

Could someone have embarked on an unplanned beach development initiative for the harbour, despite the Parks Plan and the need for the perpetual large-scale annual dredging and added infrastructure it would imply? At this point, anything seemed possible.

There’s no happy ending to this sorry story.

Left alone, the headland may slowly evolve back to its former richness. It could grow back in less than five years, but – given the invasive species and the prevalent approaches to management– it may never recover.

The Town seems to delegate questions to staff to handle, including concerns about

policy issues. Staff seems to be able to make decisions that could impact on policy.

No one on staff seems to understand fully matters relating to managing the natural systems under its care, choosing to rely on the local Conservation Authority for periodic guidance. The Authority, in its turn, seems to lack experience in dealing with natural habitats in an urban setting.

The whole thing seems vaguely inequitable. Generally Cobourg is quite generous in providing support to various recreational activities, yet it seems unwilling to protect one of the natural jewels in its care.