

# 7

## Issues and Opportunities

Russell Gardens and Kearsney Abbey are historic parks of national and regional significance respectively but are probably of greater merit than their listing suggests, due to the lack of information at the time the listing was undertaken. Russell Gardens is a part of one of only a handful of gardens designed by Mawson in the south of England and, as the original design is relatively intact, if restored in co-ordination with the owners of the upper terraces, it would be a good example of his work.

Kearsney Abbey is an example of a picturesque design of some quality, although not undertaken by a named designer. The artful positioning of avenues, islands, fountains, tree blocks, shrubberies and the use of the natural surrounding created an interesting and extensive composition.

The main issue facing both parks is that they were **originally designed as private gardens** and hence the infrastructure, intended only to support private use, is not adequate for the needs and numbers of visitors to the present day public parks.

The main issues in this respect revolve around **access and circulation**. At Russell Gardens, only half of the original garden is in public use and when the lower terraces were opened in 1945 as a public park, the area that became Russell Gardens was simply partitioned off and opened for use by the public. This left a severed footpath network; obvious 'desire lines' to features such as the boathouse were un-surfaced; the strong axial north-south path was truncated by the split in ownership; and as a consequence, lateral paths along the middle terraces developed through use. Furthermore, today, there is much more awareness of access needs for all, but when the park was created, disabled access was not carefully addressed – one flight of steps to the north of the eastern bridge has been replaced with a clumsy ramp arrangement. The legacy is a poor path system that fails to meet public need.

At Kearsney Abbey, the same lack of consideration about how the park would be used and what circulation system was needed arose when the private grounds were opened to the public. Most obvious, was the omission of a circular route around the lake. Today, there is still no surfaced circuit. The path that leads from the cafe to the bridge does

not even connect to the one area of lake bank with a path edge. The 'eyecatcher' bridge over the weir at the eastern end of the lake has been lost, so it is now impossible to cross the lake at the eastern end. The route from the River Paper Mill entrance to the main body of the park is un-surfaced and parts are impassable in wet weather. The path system is undeveloped and an improved path network would enable more people to use wider areas of the park.

**Opportunity: to analyse circulation and access needs, and to provide path networks appropriate for today's visitors, whilst also respecting the antecedence of each of the parks.**

**Entrances** to both parks also relate to their previous, private, use and none of them were designed for significant vehicular or pedestrian use. The main car park entrance to Kearsney Abbey is on the brow of a hill; there are also pedestrian entrances on blind corners, and generally entrances are not clearly signposted. At Russell Gardens, it is unclear which entrance should be used by those who need to avoid steps.

None of the park entrances have any orientation information, which would help users understand the park, its facilities, and the scale and variety of experiences on offer.

**Opportunity: to re-design the entrances to the parks so that they are safe and inviting with good orientation information.**

Another major issue facing the parks is the **levels of use**. When created, the parks would have primarily served Dover residents, and there could have been little anticipation of their future popularity and the rise in numbers of visitors to the park that has come with increased car ownership and a consequential expansion of 'catchment'.

In 1945, car ownership was restricted mainly to the wealthy and provision of **car parking** space was not an issue. Today, visitors come not only from Dover, but also from all over Kent and beyond. On summer days, the car parks are overflowing; parties arriving in groups of cars, in minibuses and in coaches (which drop off on the Alkham Road) are a common sight. During events and at times of peak use, parking along the residential roads around the parks is problematic;

local visitors who are 'in the know' congest the narrow residential streets in River and to the south of Coxhill Mount.

However, the layout and topography of Russell Gardens precludes any possibility of accommodating car parking, which means that, at present, Kearsney Abbey has to meet the entire site's parking needs. A substantial increase in car parking provision would be likely to result in an unacceptable impact upon the historical fabric, design and character of Kearsney Abbey; however, improvements to mitigate the impact of current parking arrangements on the Kearsney Abbey site are certainly desirable.

The issue of parking extends beyond the immediate parks that are the subject of this study: a review of parking provision should also include an understanding of the use of Bushy Rough Park, which is situated next to, and can be accessed through, Russell Gardens. There may be other recreational facilities in the area, and indeed, possibilities for off-site parking, for example at times of peak park use, that may offer opportunities for a more holistic approach to parking provision.

**Opportunity: to re-design Kearsney Abbey's vehicle entrances / exits and to improve access and parking arrangements for the whole park complex.**

The majority of visitors arrive by car, including a high proportion of local people. A very small percentage (4%) of visitors arrive by bus and even fewer cycle or arrive by train, although the local railway station is very close to the park. A more holistic approach to travel could include a review of the existing public transport services including bus stop locations, which are inconvenient in relation to park entrances and facilities, and improved provision for bicycles.

**Opportunity: to review and promote alternatives to car transport, seeking improvements wherever necessary to make public transport a preferred choice of travel to and from the parks.**

Providing adequate parking is not the only car-related issue. The Alkham Road separates Russell Gardens from Kearsney Abbey Gardens, and traffic on this road consistently exceeds the 30mph limits

at the crossing point between the two parks. Added to this, the island created to assist crossing at this point is too narrow and is therefore dangerous to use with a buggy or wheelchair. In short **the Alkham Road is a significant barrier to the use of Russell Gardens.**

Opportunity: to seek traffic calming measures on the Alkham Road, providing a safe crossing and speed restrictions, so as to enable visitors to move safely between the two parks and facilitate increased use of Russell Gardens.

Expanding on the theme of levels of use, there is a marked **differential use of the parks' open spaces.** On peak days, Kearsney Abbey lawns between the lake and the cafe are crammed with visitors, while just across the lake to the south, there are only a few groups of people and dog walkers. The location of existing facilities – café, WCs, car park, play area – within a small area of Kearsney Abbey creates a 'honeypot' effect, with the result that facilities are unable to accommodate demand at even moderately busy times.

Russell Gardens, by contrast, lacks basic visitor provision such as WCs and accessible shelter; it is relatively quiet and under-used, probably due to the combined effect of lack of amenities, lack of information, unclear entrance arrangements, poor paths and circulation, and the barrier presented by the Alkham Road.

Coxhill Mount is also an under-used and very quiet area; although the steepness of the slopes presents a challenge and will always be a restriction for some visitors, there is potential to attract more people to make the climb and appreciate the views.

Opportunity: to review the overall use of the different character areas in relation to visitor facilities, and formulate a use and amenity strategy that encourages more widespread use of the parks as a whole and reduces the intensive pressure on the most popular areas.

Today, parks are required to meet diverse visitor expectations: they act as focal points for communities, bringing greenspace back into the heart of local resident's cultural and social life. As such, there is need for great flexibility of use: to accommodate a wide range of potential events, including festivals, performances and exhibitions; school visits and other study groups; to provide meeting places and social spaces that meet a variety of cultural expectations.

DDA legislation sets a minimum standard of provision for disabled visitors, but few parks in the UK go beyond this by considering specific needs of different ages and disabilities, and how to accommodate them; good examples include provision of 'changing places' facilities, carefully designed and selected play equipment etc., and demonstrate

greater inclusivity within their visitor profiles.

Opportunity: to provide new and upgraded visitor amenities, with flexible provision and with spaces and facilities that can meet the needs of the widest range of users and accommodate a broad variety of activities.

**Play provision** in a heritage setting needs special consideration, in terms of siting, layout and detail design, to ensure that not only is there good play provision in terms of age-appropriate challenge, but that this is integrated well into the historic landscape setting, and that adverse impacts, including visual impacts and over-intensive use that might damage historic character and fabric, are avoided.

Opportunity: to review play provision and develop a strategy, and ultimately, designs, for play provision within each of the gardens that is appropriate to the historic landscape setting as well as meeting the needs of visitors.

As in many parks, there are issues with **dogs and dog fouling.** At present, the area to the south of the lake is used as a 'dog off the leash' area. However, discussions with local users have revealed that many visitors would like to see the area immediately south of the lake mown shorter and kept free of dogs, so that people could sit on the grass and allow their children to play, with greater confidence (avoiding dog fouling). This would reduce pressure on the northern lawns.

However, dog walkers, who are a large and regular user-group that are present throughout all the times of day and seasons of the year, greatly value the southern parkland as a place where their dogs can be let off their leads and allowed to exercise freely.

Opportunity: to separate an area near the lake from the wider parkland further south, by re-instating parkland fencing to provide an extension to the dog-free zone while also meeting the needs of dog owners; this would have the added benefit of enabling the unsightly and awkward-to-use dog-proof fence and gate to be removed from the bridge.

Over the seventy years that the parks have been in public ownership there has been a **gradual decline in active management** of the gardens, which has had marked impacts on the appearance of their landscapes.

In Kearsney Abbey, the open parklands to the south of the lake linked, visually and physically, with chalk grassland on the scarp slope and on top of Coxhill Mount. This dramatic view from the house, southwards across the valley, was emphasised by the double avenues arrangement, which framed the hilltop horizon. Today, as a direct result

of change in management practice that removed grazing, presumably after the site became a public park, the grassland on the whole scarp face has been taken over by secondary woodland. The top of the hill is now also being taken over by scrub too, threatening the remaining chalk grassland habitat.

In Russell Gardens, self-seeded trees have been allowed to colonise the terrace between the public park and the private gardens, forming a densely wooded and unmanaged boundary. This tree belt completely screens Kearsney Court from the lower terraces (and also obstructs the elevated views from the bastion and upper terraces); furthermore, it obscures the principle north-south axis on which the design of the garden hinges, and prevents visitors from making the important visual connection with the house that that was the catalyst for the garden's creation.

Opportunity: to restore the spatial integrity of the designed landscapes, by removing trees that obscure historical views and vistas; and within Kearsney Abbey grounds, to re-instate and manage the chalk grassland habitat for its ecological diversity.

Both gardens have benefited from donations of **commemorative and memorial trees** throughout their years as public parks, which has maintained and broadened the arboricultural interest provided by a wide range of tree species. However, lack of knowledge about the spatial arrangement and designed arrangement of the historical layouts, has resulted in loss of important spaces and balance of tree distribution.

Opportunity: to develop a strategy for future commemorative and memorial donations, and for how these can be acknowledged within the parks; and a tree and shrub planting strategy that seeks to both restore the spatial integrity of the historical layout and secures good age range and maintains an appropriate horticultural diversity.

The **fabric of both gardens** is also, in many instances, worn or deteriorating; infrastructure has generally been untouched since the gardens became public parks, and where interventions and repairs have been made, these have not always been in accordance with best conservation practice. Walls, mill ruins, gates and gateways, the ice house, bridges, boathouse, and watercourses including weirs, headwalls, channels, culverts and leats all require attention to greater or lesser degrees. The canal in Russell Gardens needs de-silting; both this, and the lake in Kearsney Abbey need repair and restoration of their edges and levelling of the ground around them.

Opportunity: to restore and repair the main park structures and features, bringing them back into good, stable, condition.

Both parks are in need of an uplift in **maintenance and management standards**, to reflect the care needs of their particular historic features.

To ensure that such a level of repairs does not mount up again it is important that a detailed management plan identifies the resources necessary to maintain the park into the future.

Opportunity: to prepare and resource a ten-to-fifty year management and maintenance plan, to identify medium to long-term resource needs and ensure the parks are well managed into the future.

Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens are both of considerable heritage merit; restoration will stabilise and reverse the current trend of gradual deterioration and management planning will help to secure a positive future. Resolving a range of issues associated with visitor pressures, and providing improvements to visitor facilities, will no doubt increase visitor numbers and should diversify visitor profiles, but restoration will also, it is to be hoped, bring about new opportunities for local people and increase community engagement. The dedication and hard work of all those involved in achieving this should be celebrated through attaining a national award for heritage landscapes.

Opportunity: to show commitment to quality open space in a heritage environment, by attaining and retaining a Green Heritage Award for Kearsney Parks.