

Historic Environment Associates

Kearsney Parks: Conservation Plan



Dover District Council

Final Report

September 2015

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Executive Summary

Kearsney Parks, comprising Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens, lie on the outskirts of Dover. These parks are incredibly popular, particularly the Kearsney Abbey, and are intensively used by local communities as well as visitors from all over East Kent and beyond. On busy days the car parks are overflowing and coaches are dropping off visitors at the café – but despite this huge influx of visitors the majority of use is still local. Whilst little of this local use is formalised at present, apart from the model boat club, the attractions of the café and water creates a sense of an inland ‘beach’ and during the summer it has a seaside atmosphere. As in many parks a major user group is dog walkers and here the south of the lake in Kearsney Abbey is particularly valued as a place where dogs can be let off the lead.

The popularity of the parks lies in the beauty and distinctiveness of their landscapes. Kearsney Abbey has its café, a remnant of the former house, from which sweeping lawns lead to a lake with views to a wooded hillside beyond; Russell Gardens has its stunning canal, bridges and boathouse set amongst mature trees. Both sites centre around the River Dour, a chalk stream that has a history of powering agricultural and industrial mills throughout the last millennium.

People are drawn to these sites but many visitors are unaware of the historical importance of these landscapes, their cultural significance, and of what has been lost over time through fragmentation and management changes.

Both parks are strongly designed landscapes deliberately enhancing or adapting the riverine landscape of the Dour and its tributary to stylistic effect. Kearsney Abbey was designed in the **Picturesque style**, with an underlying philosophy of enhancing nature and accentuating the natural beauty of the location. The **Fector family** who owned the site in the early C19 created a Gothic mansion at the heart of the design with open lawns, controlled views of the lake and strong avenues radiating across parkland to the skyline on Coxhill Mount. Today the views to the south are obscured by trees on the lake islands and the full extent of the avenues is lost through self-seeded woodlands that have developed on the formerly grazed parkland, escarpment and hilltop.

Russell Gardens was designed in the **Arts and Crafts style** and represents but half of the gardens once designed by **Thomas Mawson**, the first ‘landscape architect’, for **Edward Barlow** at Kearsney Court. This representative Mawson design included a series of terraces cascading down the hillside, each offering a different



spatial, horticultural or functional experience, culminating in the magnificent ‘hidden’ canal in the valley bottom. The upper gardens are now in the ownership of residents of the still extant Kearsney Court but are completely cut off from the public park lower down by overgrown trees and woodland.

These parks were designed as **private spaces not public parks**. When both parks were created at the end of WWII little investment was made to ensure the parks functioned as public spaces, leaving a legacy of an unresolved path system and inappropriate entrances. The C20 explosion in leisure time and car ownership has also never adequately been addressed and increasingly traffic volumes and speeds along the Alkham Road that bisects these parks has isolated Russell Gardens from parking and visitor facilities in Kearsney Abbey. Also, over time, a deficit of structural maintenance has built up and the landscapes have lost some of their features and distinctiveness.

This plan describes the designs underlying these parks and argues for restoration and conservation of the designs into the future.

The main recommendations are summarised as follows:

- Make the original designs more legible by removing secondary tree growth or overgrown original planting to reveal views and vistas where possible
- Re-design the path networks in both parks to reflect circulation needs and consideration of easy access routes
- Re-design car parking facilities addressing how this relates to redeveloping the café area of Kearsney Abbey and visitor use of both sites
- Redevelop the Kearsney Abbey café to expand capacity, create a flexible use area as well as covered congregation space whilst providing better integrated WC facilities and maintenance accommodation
- Provide better visitor facilities at Russell Gardens to include WCs, shelter and refreshments to extend visitor times in the gardens and to encourage their use and appreciation
- Develop an activities plan that promotes understanding of the heritage of the parks and encourages broader use of the physical resources
- Develop a management plan that safeguards the unique cultural and historical values of the park for future generations to enjoy

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Introduction

1.1 Scope

This plan has been written by Historic Environment Associates (HEA) working closely with Dover District Council (DDC) and a group of supporting consultants, commissioned by the council, to provide specialist input into this Conservation Management Plan (CMP) and the development of Round 2 Application to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

- Kent Gardens Trust – historical research into both Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens
- Macemark Access Consultants – access survey of all the paths and entrances
- The Morton Partnership – survey of all the structures within the park with particular attention to those listed by Historic England
- Bramley Associates – Phase 1 habitat survey of both parks and recommendations for ecological enhancement of the sites
- Canterbury Archaeological Trust – undertaking a review of all aspects of archaeology of the parks including the mills and their history and importance to the area
- JBA Consulting – hydrological survey and condition of hydrological features
- Islington Tree Services - survey of all the parkland trees
- Land and Land Management – survey of the woodlands
- Dannatt Johnson Architects – designing the café extension, car parking and eye-catcher replacement
- DHA Transport – location and treatment of road crossing improvements between the parks and for general improvements to traffic calming and pedestrian crossing

The Plan will form part of the development work leading to a round 2 Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) application to implement the recommendations.

1.2 Brief

The brief circulated by DDC stated: *‘The Conservation Plan is an essential component of the development phase. It is the key document for helping us to understand the significance of the heritage of the Kearsney Parks, why it is valued, by whom and how we need to maintain it in the long term for the benefit of local people.’*

The brief also requested that: *‘The general approach, format and layout of the Conservation Plan should be informed principally by HLF’s Parks for People Conservation Plan Guidance, 2012.’*

DDC requires that *‘the final Conservation Plan is a useful tool that will help to shape our decision-making and future work, rather than a very lengthy and potentially inaccessible document. It is very important that the final Conservation Plan is accessible to the public so the language used must be clear, concise and where possible jargon-free.’*

It states that the plan *‘should also consider JS Kerr’s Conservation Plan: A Guide to the Preparation of Conservation Plans for Places of European Cultural Significance (2004, The National Trust of Australia (NSW)).’*

1.3 Format

The format of this plan follows the HLF guidance *Conservation Management Planning* 2012 and covers the entire area of both Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens.

1.4 Methodology

Preparation of this report has followed a structured process of discussions, research and analysis. The project started March 5th 2015 with a meeting on site at Kearsney Abbey with the project officer and community officer to discuss programme and background information for the study. Following this we:

- Met with a range of DDC officers to discuss their views and

thoughts around the heritage, ecology and management of the parks;

- Met with representatives of the Round 2 delivery team;
- Met with Kent Gardens Trust (KGT)
- Spent a day at Kearsney Parks assisting DDC officers, to engage with users of the park and explore opinions on the parks as they are today, what people do when visiting the parks and what changes they would like to see in the future;
- Undertook archival research to identify references, maps and photographs that may not have been sourced by KGT in their reports on the parks;
- Met with members of the design team developing the Round 2 application;
- Attended a meeting with the HLF and design team to present background of the historical development of the parks and explain the restoration approach that underlies the project.

1.5 Acknowledgements

The team would like to acknowledge the support of DDC officers in the production of this report, in particular Jon Winder, Kearsney Parks Project Manager for his excellent co-ordination of, and support for, the diverse consultant team.

Much of the survey information has been taken from a range of technical studies commissioned for the Round 2 HLF application and they are acknowledged where this data has been used.

1.6 Copyright of illustrations

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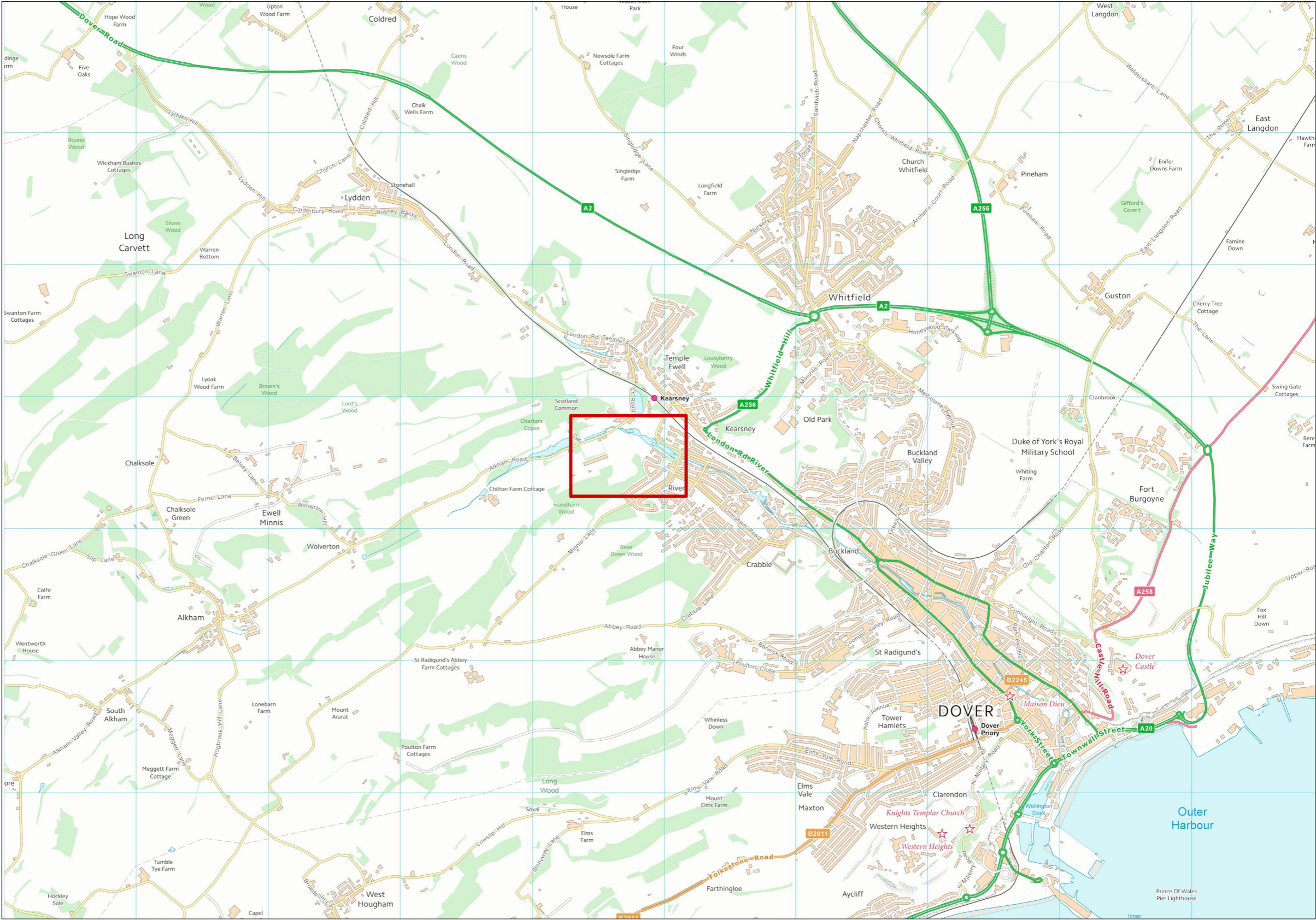


Figure 1.1
Location Plan