

# 2

## Context

### 2.1 General Description

Kearsney Parks are situated in the Dour valley near to River and Temple Ewell, some five miles north west of Dover, Kent. The site comprises two parks either side of the Alkham Road, which is the main inland road between Dover and Folkestone. To the north of the Alkham Road is the terraced Russell Gardens, which is noted for its formal canal; to the south is Kearsney Abbey with its café overlooking a large lake.

A general plan of the site and the names used throughout the report are shown in **Figure 2.1**.

### 2.2 Ownership

Dover District Council owns all the land shown in **Figure 2.2**. This covers the entirety of Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens. The original landscape of Kearsney Court House is partly owned by residents of the House.

### 2.3 Physical setting

The geology of the area is dominated by chalk, a very porous alkaline rock that produces a distinctive landscape. The area is essentially a huge plateau of chalk that has been incised by small streams and rivers and, as the rock is relatively soft, the watercourses carve out characteristically steep, narrow, valleys. Another characteristic of the watercourses is that they are often seasonal in their flow and sometimes they can dry up altogether. This fact, along with the distinctive fauna and flora that thrive in such conditions make ‘chalk streams’ very unusual habitats.

Kearsney Parks have developed with such a chalk stream at their heart: the River Dour, and one of its tributaries. The water draining south from Temple Ewell is named the Dour; the river running along the bottom of the Alkham valley is sometimes also referred to as the Dour, but is also known as the Drellingore, or Drellingore arm of the Dour. Therefore, for descriptive purposes in this report it has been referred to as the Drellingore. Kearsney Abbey lies at the confluence of the two watercourses.

The Alkham valley is steep sided, rising to over 130m to the north at The Minnis, and a similar height to the south where the land rises to a plateau on which St Radigund’s Abbey was sited.

The soils in the park are generally shallow and lime-rich throughout; adjacent to the river they are overlain with a thin alluvium. These thin alkaline soils restrict the range of species that can thrive in the parks; the native species that survive such alkalinity make up the habitat we know as chalk grassland.

### 2.4 Designations and Planning Policy context

#### Historical Designations

##### Registered Park

Russell Gardens is listed on the Historic England *Register of Historic Parks and Gardens*. The designation does not carry any statutory controls but it is a ‘material consideration’ in the planning process. As such, local authorities must take into account the historic interest of the site when determining planning applications. Russell Gardens is currently registered as Grade II which means Kent Gardens Trust must also be consulted on any applications affecting the site.

A copy of the designation is included in **Appendix 1**.

Kearsney Abbey is not included in this listing.

##### Dover District Heritage Strategy 2013

Dover’s recent Heritage Strategy specifically identifies the parks and whilst there is no formal policy of heritage protection the strategy states:

*‘The historic gardens at Kearsney are maintained as a public garden and provide valuable green space close to the urban centre of Dover. The gardens provide an attractive open area and are valued by the local community. Opportunity should be sought to continue to promote, interpret and develop the historic gardens as an important local amenity space.’*

##### Listed Buildings

Within the parks there are a number of garden features that are listed on the Historic England *Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural*

*or Historic Interest*. Unlike the historic parks and gardens register, listed buildings have statutory protection and therefore a listed building may not be demolished, extended, or altered without special permission from the local planning authority.

In Russell Gardens there are three listings:

2 Bridge Pavilions	Grade II
Boathouse Pavilion	Grade II

In Kearsney Abbey, the following are listed:

Bridge in the grounds of Kearsney Abbey	Grade II
Ruin in the grounds of Kearsney Abbey	Grade II
Kearsney Abbey House	Grade II
Arch across river	Grade II
Part of wall and gatepiers to Kearsney Abbey	Grade II
Wall at the end of the lake in the grounds of Kearsney Abbey	Grade II

#### Ecological Designations

There are no ecological designations that currently cover the parks. There are important ecological areas within the Alkham valley and immediately to the south west of Coxhill Mount lies Alkham, Lydden and Swingfield Woods SSSI, which includes the ancient woodland at Frandham Wood.

#### Landscape/Planning Designations

The boundary of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is drawn exactly around the northern and western boundary of Russell Gardens and exactly to the western boundary of the site on Coxhill Mount. The designation identifies areas of natural landscape beauty and encourages planning authorities to safeguard this value.

There are four trees in front of Kearsney Court (four green circles on **Figure 2.3**) that are covered by a tree preservation order as well as a block of trees to the west. All were designated in February 1965.

In addition, a block of trees described as Palmtree Hill Plantation, comprising ‘mixed hardwoods consisting mainly of beech, sycamore, ash and hazel’, is also designated.

**Archaeological designations**

There are no archaeological designations covering the site.

**2.5 Access and Public Rights of Way**

There is only one designated footpath that crosses the site and this connects Frandham Wood via Coxhill Mount to Abbey Road and the Alkham Road. The parks do not link to wider footpath networks on other boundaries.

Technically, the whole of Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens are open to the public. However, not all of the land owned by the council is currently made accessible, as unusual ownership boundaries have arisen around Kearsney Court, which if made generally accessible would impinge on privacy of residents. It is hoped that one outcome of this plan might be restoration of this situation to allow greater appreciation by the visiting public of the landscape of Russell Gardens.

**2.6 Community and Recreational Use**

The parks are very popular local and regional open spaces. In 2013 a visitor survey was undertaken to understand the audience in more detail.

The majority of visitors arrive by car, 62%, although for the local users from the Dover catchment, this drops to 50%. Whilst most visitors (57%) are local visitors, 37% come from the wider East Kent and 6% from further afield. Many visitors come regularly: 40% of people visit weekly or more and 72% visit at least once a month.

The survey also showed that nearly half were visiting with family (only 12% came alone) and that 92% visited Kearsney Abbey site with a third of those also visiting Russell Gardens, but only 4 people made a specific visit to the latter site.

Significant comment was made about the need for more car parking, better WC facilities and the need to improve footpaths. There were a range of comments about the café but particularly requests for longer opening hours and better outdoor and covered seating.

More specific consultation was undertaken in May 2015 when local stakeholders were asked for their views on some of the main issues facing the park. The following summarises responses:

**How can we manage peak time travel and parking?**

A Increase parking capacity

Improve and extend existing car parks / buy more land for overflow parking / formalise ‘overflow’ parking near playground / use land near Scout hut / could other local organisations provide parking (bowls club, nursing home, etc) / limit café car park to disabled people, families and access for boat club / need coach drop off/parking space especially for short visits to gardens / don’t detract from key views too much

B Management

Don’t charge / don’t add double yellow lines on Alkham Road / don’t introduce a controlled parking zone / the parking issue generally manages itself even on busy days / events can be managed separately / see how it goes over time / donation rather than charge for parking / need a parking strategy

C Public transport, cycling and walking

Improve access from station / promotion / peak time park and ride / hop-on-hop-off shuttle around town / subsidized bus tickets and/or rewards for using public transport to travel to the parks / cycle access and parking / pedestrian route to town

**How can we make the parks more financially sustainable?**

Mixed views – some felt the café, parks and events should be mainly for community benefit, others suggested events like weddings and private use could happen but should be ‘out of the way’, off peak and income would need to be reinvested in the parks

Cultural events like Dover Music Festival, open air theatre and cinema / would need park and ride / try it and see if it works / café open in evening / not appropriate for weddings / Russell Gardens as venue for weddings using temporary marquees / River Parish Council may be interested in helping to manage some events

**Comments about the café and extension**

A Catering offer

Existing operator provides a good service, pricing, value, menu choice / could open in the evening and provide more outside space / could be licenced / could provide soup and roll at end of guided tours

B Building

Support for continued use of billiard room as café space / needs to

welcome dog walkers / could be similar to National Trust café on the White Cliffs / needs to be flexible for schools, scouts, workshops, volunteers / design needs to be in keeping with the landscape, robust, not too grand / open-sided structure could work but may attract vandalism / need for CCTV?

**Where should the balance lie between authentic historical restoration and the requirements of today’s park users?**

A Historical restoration

Focus on Russell Gardens (be brave and purist, with more sensitive play provision) / be more pragmatic about Kearsney Abbey / some apprehension about tree removals although removals at Dover Castle were successful / maintain privacy and security of Kearsney Court residents / gazebo and play provision in Russell Gardens not in keeping but does attract users

B Ecological restoration

Chalk grassland is valued but needs to be accessible, understandable and managed

C Russell Gardens

Needs toilets and kiosk to attract visitors and cater to likely increased use

Tennis courts – mixed views, some saying they should stay and be better maintained, other questioned whether cost of maintenance was worth benefits to a limited number of users

Need more information about heritage, access, ecology / trails and QR codes

**Is there appetite for community involvement in the management of the parks?**

DDC should continue to lead, although there is an appetite for community involvement in the project, events and volunteering

It needs a clear plan so people understand roles and responsibilities

Routine maintenance and quality horticulture needs paid professionals

Volunteers likely to help with light gardening and ‘added extras’ like events, guided tours – there is interest in a regular Kearsney Parks forum or similar





Figure 2.1  
Study Area



Figure 2.2  
Ownership Boundary





**Figure 2.3**  
Designation