

From Mills to Mawson: uncovering the hidden heritage of Kearsney Parks

Kearsney Parks Activity Plan



Dover District Council
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1. Summary

1.1 Popular parks, distinctive landscapes, unique ecology

Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens are incredibly popular parks that attract visitors from the local community, Dover town, East Kent and beyond. While little of this use is formalised, the attractions of the café, wide open lawns and water create a sense of an inland beach and during the summer it has a vibrant atmosphere.

The parks' popularity lies in the beauty and distinctiveness of their heritage. Kearsney Abbey has its café, the remnants of the former country house, from which sweeping lawns and significant trees lead to the lake. Beyond the lake, Coxhill Mount hides the remains of rare chalk grassland, important for botanicals and reptiles. Russell Gardens has its stunning canal, boathouse and bridges set among mature trees. Both sites are linked by and centred on the internationally significant River Dour, a chalk stream that has a history of powering industrial mills throughout the last millennium and hosting unique ecology. The activities of the Dover Model Boat Association are an additional attraction.

Visitors are drawn to the parks but very few are aware of the historical importance of the landscapes, the people associated with them, their broader cultural and ecological significance and what has been lost over time. Our Mills to Mawson project provides a major opportunity to reconnect people with the varied heritage of the parks and their role in the history of the area.

Both parks are strongly designed landscapes deliberately enhancing or adapting the Dour to stylistic effect. Russell Gardens was designed in the Arts & Crafts style and represents part of the gardens 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 experience, culminating in the magnificent canal in the valley bottom. Kearsney Abbey was designed in the picturesque style, accentuating the natural beauty of the location. The Fector family created a Gothic mansion at the heart of the design with open lawns, controlled views of the lake and strong avenues of trees radiating across parkland and up to the summit of Coxhill Mount.

Today the design of both parks has been partially obscured, Russell Gardens has become increasingly isolated and the landscapes have lost some of their distinctiveness. The Mills to Mawson project is a major opportunity to address these issues and will harness the passion of local people to develop a sense of excitement about the parks' future. Our activity plan will galvanise the enthusiasm of existing park users to improve the parks' management, increase a sense of community ownership, uncover the parks' unique heritage and increase understanding of it among a wider range of people. We will offer more volunteering opportunities and help staff and volunteers to develop new skills to secure the long term future of the parks and the communities around them.

Our overarching vision is to work with the community to create high quality parks which meet the needs of existing and future park users by conserving and interpreting the significant heritage features, delivering high quality and accessible visitor facilities and activities, and managing them to high heritage, horticultural and environmental standards.



1.2 Developing our plans

The ideas included in our round one application have been tested during the development phase of our project through extensive consultation and engagement work. We carried out research with similar projects and parks; held discussions with community groups representing existing and potential audiences; consulted park users, local residents and key stakeholder groups; interviewed university staff, school teachers and pupils; and carried out visitor surveys.

With the support of volunteers we carried out observational studies to better understand our existing park users and to establish visitor numbers. We now estimate the parks receive approximately 277,000 visits a year and around 6,500 people attended events, consultation sessions and workshops during our development phase. Our existing audiences are predominantly families, local residents, members of the Dover Model Boat Association and very occasionally school groups.

The existing visitor profile is broadly representative of the local population within both a 3 mile and East Kent catchment area, with the notable exception of disabled people who appear to be under-represented among visitors. When combined with our market analysis of the catchment area and public and stakeholder consultation, we have established the following target audiences:

- Low income families with children
- Budget conscious adults looking for a heritage day out
- Young people looking for employment opportunities and skills
- Disabled people
- Schools

Although our research and data suggest that black and minority ethnic (BME) communities do not need to be a target audience, we recognise there are often significant barriers to accessing services, so we will continue efforts to work with community representatives to specifically target BME families.

A better understanding of existing and potential audiences and the recommendations of our conservation plan have helped us to establish overarching aims for our activity plan. The plan aims to:

1. improve existing and potential audiences' engagement and understanding of Kearsney Parks' unique heritage
2. recreate the parks' role as a cultural venue
3. maximise their potential as a venue for formal learning
4. enable young people to take part in vocational training and gain work-related skills and experiences
5. increase opportunities for meaningful community involvement and volunteering

Having established target audiences and overarching aims, we have developed a comprehensive action plan which sets out all of the activities we will deliver during the project.

1.3 Engaging audiences

Our activities have been developed specifically to deliver our activity plan aims and with our target audiences in mind. The activities have been grouped around five themes that directly relate to our aims – engagement with heritage, recreating a cultural venue, formal learning, helping young people develop skills and take part in training, community involvement and volunteering. Our Action Plan in section 6 provides full details and a summary is provided below.

Engagement with heritage

We know that most park users know very little about the heritage of the parks, there are few opportunities for new users to find out about their history and significance, and many facilities are not accessible to all. Through our capital works and a varied programme of free activities and new interpretation, heritage will be uncovered, better interpreted and accessed by more and a wider range of people. Outreach work will help us to reach audiences that do not currently use the park. Activities will cover all heritage elements including landscapes and gardens, industry, ecology, social and cultural heritage. Activities include:

Uncovering heritage

- Volunteer research projects to uncover information about the parks role in paper making, WWII, Festival of Britain, food production
- Oral history and personal memories project
- Prehistoric Folk, Ancient Dour and Great Mansions of the Past archaeology projects
- My Place in the Park children's mapping project
- Bioblitz events
- Improving pre-visit access information

Sharing and interpreting heritage

- Annual exhibition sharing project and activity outputs
- Mills, gardens, ecology and trees trails, audio trails, geocache trail and tours
- The Kearsney Quilt project
- Paper making, Art in the Landscape and Shakespeare Rewired workshops
- The Big Tree Climb and veteran tree propagation
- Horrible Histories story telling
- Croquet on the Lawn
- Disability awareness for staff and volunteers
- Interpretation in a variety of formats and an improved Kearsney Parks website

Recreating a cultural venue

The parks have played host to community events throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, culminating in the open air theatre productions during the Festival of Britain. We want to recreate their role as a popular cultural and arts venue, which reconnects people with the historic use of the parks through affordable and accessible events and activities, while minimising the impact on the local community. Activities include:

- Outdoor theatre productions
- Open air cinema
- Community music events
- Afternoon tea on the lawn

We will work with the Kearsney Parks Forum and local community to develop a policy around the number, frequency and cost of events. We have already produced and consulted on our Travel Plan (see appendix 1) and implementing it will help us to promote use of sustainable transport and minimise the impact of events on the local community, as well as reducing the parks' environmental impacts. We will work with the Kearsney Parks Event Group, as well as community and commercial partners to deliver these events. Income from events will be reinvested into the management and maintenance of the parks.

Formal learning

There is huge potential for the parks to contribute to the education and development of children and young people. Our formal education programme will continue to build relationships with schools that are already enthusiastic and interested in the parks, as well as targeting schools that do not use the parks. Our capital work programme will provide the infrastructure that schools have said they need and our activities will provide the resources for successful school visits for both lessons and extra-curricular activities. Activities will include:

- Establishing a School Advisory Panel to ensure resources meet the needs of teachers and pupils
- Forest school sessions and ecology, biology and science lessons
- Shakespeare Rewired workshops specifically for schools
- Online resources including lesson plans, risk assessments, worksheets for children
- Rucksack packs for use in the park
- Teacher training (learning outside the classroom, forest school, Arts Award)

Helping young people develop skills and take part in training

The parks' catchment area includes areas of significant deprivation, while employment and skills are both issues for the area. We want to boost skills and create opportunities for people to overcome disadvantage. We will help young people from deprived areas to develop work related skills and take part in vocational training. We will also develop volunteering opportunities so that a wider range of people can develop skills and experiences that will help them access employment (more on that in the next section). Although open to all, we will specifically promote opportunities in areas of deprivation. Activities will include:

- Two 18 month level 2 horticultural apprenticeships
- Work experience placements for secondary school pupils
- School gardening club
- Construction phase site visits

Through our Management and Maintenance Plan (MMP) we will provide opportunities for 20 Kent Woodland Employment Scheme apprentices to develop and implement new skills. We will also continue to work with local partners including English Heritage, the Land Trust, Canterbury Cathedral and East Kent College to develop a heritage conservation apprenticeship programme; once established, apprentices on the programme could help to deliver parts of our MMP.

We will also provide training for existing staff and volunteers to familiarise them with our conservation plan and give them the skills to manage historic parks, work with volunteers, and provide inclusive access to facilities, activities and events.

Community Involvement & Volunteering

Traditionally there has been a high level of interest in the parks among park users and the local community but very low levels of active community involvement and no volunteering. Enthusiastic community participation during development phase of our project highlights the enormous potential the parks have to develop community cohesion, as well as helping individuals and the parks to benefit from volunteering. To build on this, activities will include:

- Helping the Kearsney Parks Forum become more independent, representative and formalised
- Supporting the Kearsney Parks Event Group to organise and deliver cultural events
- Supporting the Kearsney Parks Quilting Group to engage with and represent the heritage of the parks
- Reinvigorating the local community orchard group
- Developing advisory panels with young people and BME communities
- Outreach work in areas and with communities facing disadvantage
- Working with existing organisations who represent disabled people
- Developing policies for managing volunteering, events and memorials
- One-off and long-term volunteer opportunities and associated training in four key areas:
 - management (e.g. Forum, fundraising, monitoring, observation study)
 - horticulture & maintenance (e.g. orchard maintenance, veteran tree propagation, scrub clearance)
 - access to heritage (e.g. archaeology projects, research, interpretation and learning activities)
 - events (e.g. organising and delivering community events)



1.4 Resources

We will create a dedicated Kearsney Parks Team to deliver the activity plan and wider project:

- Project Manager - full time for 4 years to manage the overall project
- Community Engagement Officer - full time for 4 years to deliver the activity programme
- Parks Development Manager - Full time for 3 years to deliver the MMP and deliver volunteering opportunities (post to continue after the project ends subject to funding)
- Volunteer Coordinator - part time for 3 years to promote and coordinate the volunteer programme
- Two horticultural apprentices - full time for 18 months to help improve horticultural standards
- Park Ranger (not funded by HLF) - full time during the project and beyond

We want the creation of additional posts to contribute to our project aims, so we have attempted to provide potential employment opportunities for a range of people in different circumstances. Collectively the new posts offer full time and part time roles that require varying skills and levels of experience. Job descriptions and personal specifications can be found in appendix 5.

Based on consultation results and the response to volunteering opportunities during the development phase, we anticipate 163 people will volunteer for the project, contributing over 900 hours each year. They will make a significant contribution to delivering the project aims by helping people engage with heritage, organising social and cultural events, and contributing to the management and maintenance of the parks. The volunteering programme will create a pool of advocates for the parks, with the skills, experiences and enthusiasm to ensure the project outcomes are delivered long into the future. A comprehensive volunteering plan is in appendix 3.

Staff and volunteers will be supported by a comprehensive training programme that will help to ensure the long term sustainability of the project outcomes. Key staff and Kearsney Parks Forum members will be offered training in the management and maintenance of historic landscapes, as well as familiarisation with our conservation plan. Disability awareness training for volunteers and staff will help to ensure the parks and activities are accessible and welcoming to all. We will also work with individual volunteers to ensure they have the skills and confidence needed to fully engage with volunteering opportunities, whether that is carrying out research, better understanding the parks history, developing horticultural skills, helping people engage with heritage, putting on events or formalising their group. A comprehensive training plan is in appendix 4.

A number of partnerships have emerged as we developed our project and they will play a significant role in delivering the project and HLF outcomes. Kent Gardens Trust played an important role in our round 1 bid and we will continue to work with their members to share knowledge about the gardens' design and significance. We have a strong relationship with Rippledawn Education Centre, who will deliver lessons for schools, train teachers and help us to develop our education resources. Kent Woodland Employment Scheme will help us to deliver a key part of our MMP and we can help their apprentices develop new skills. We will

also build on positive relationships we have developed with a variety of community organisations, including River and Temple Ewell Parish Councils, local schools, Canterbury Christchurch University, Dover Tales, and Canterbury Archaeological Trust to benefit both the project and their organisation.

A full breakdown of the budget for activities and staff is provided in section 6.

1.5 Achieving Parks for People outcomes

As a result of HLF investment, the varied heritage of Kearsney Parks will be uncovered, restored and celebrated.

We will improve the way the parks and their heritage are managed by:

- securing staff resources including a Park Development Manager and two apprentices to support our existing park keeper
- increasing awareness among staff and Kearsney Parks Forum members through training in the management of historic landscapes and the significance of the parks and their heritage
- increasing community involvement, helping the Forum and other user groups become more confident, skilled and representative
- establishing a volunteering programme and developing skilled, experienced and enthusiastic volunteers
- creating a stronger financial position by reinvesting increased income from land hire, commercial events and café rent into the parks
- implementing and regularly reviewing our MMP and retaining a Green Flag and Green Heritage Awards

We will improve the physical state of the parks and their heritage by:

- delivering capital work to restore Mawson's original design for Russell Gardens and key landscape features in Kearsney Abbey
- carrying out repairs to listed and other heritage structures
- removing culverted sections of the River Dour
- improving maintenance arrangements for the calcareous grassland on Coxhill Mount

The heritage of the parks will be better interpreted and explained as a result of:

- new onsite and online interpretation, maps, signage and access information
- a wide range of activities to uncover, share and celebrate heritage including research projects, self-guided trails and audio tours, creative workshops, heritage events
- a schools programme, onsite and online education resources and teacher training

The heritage of the parks will be uncovered and made accessible following:

- volunteer research projects, archaeological digs and an oral history project to fill gaps in information about periods in the parks' history and people's experience of them
- the development of our website to signpost people to countrywide primary sources of information about the parks

- outputs from activities and events will be available online, in the café, at the Dover Museum and at our annual exhibition

Individuals will have gained skills as a result of:

- training for staff and Forum members in the management of historic landscapes, volunteer coordination, and disability awareness
- volunteering and training in park management, horticulture and maintenance, access to heritage and events
- training for teachers to increase their confidence in using the parks to deliver lessons outside the classroom and specific lessons in the parks
- horticultural apprenticeships
- general project and construction-specific work experience placements

People will have developed their knowledge and understanding of heritage as a result of:

- our activity programme, helping visitors engage with landscape, ecological, industrial and social heritage in ways that meets their needs and interests
- improved access to Russell Gardens, helping more people appreciate its spectacular design
- value for money cultural events, bringing new audiences to the park
- improved onsite interpretation
- increased school visits as a result of our new educational resources, teacher training and schools advisory panel
- increased volunteering

People will have volunteered time and benefitted from the experience as a result of:

- new volunteering opportunities in park management, horticulture and maintenance, access to heritage and events
- coordination by our new Volunteer Coordinator
- opportunities to take part in training and social events for volunteers
- the ongoing development of the Kearsney Parks Forum and Kearsney Parks Events Group
- establishing a Dover-specific partnership between organisations offering heritage volunteering opportunities

The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit as a result of:

- the restoration of the parks' role as a venue for sociable cultural events
- capital works to create more accessible and attractive visitor facilities, park infrastructure and local pedestrian network
- our travel plan and the associated reduction in visitors driving to the parks
- more opportunities to use healthy travel options and take part in physical activities, leading to a better and healthier quality of life
- more opportunities to get involved in the parks through the Forum, volunteering, activities and events and to meet a more diverse cross section of the community, with associated benefits for community cohesion

Negative environmental impacts will be reduced as a result of:

- lower carbon emissions from fewer visitors traveling by car and a more energy and water efficient building
- the reuse and recycling of materials from our construction phase site waste management plan
- using environmentally sensitive materials including building finishes, FSC-certified timber and peat-free compost

More people and a wider range of people will engage with the parks and their heritage as a result of:

- free and value for money activities and events focused on our target audiences
- outreach work targeted at areas and communities affected by deprivation
- more accessible parks, better pre-information about access, disability awareness training for staff and ongoing collaboration with Dover District Disability Association
- young people taking part in heritage and horticulture related training and work experience and establishing a Young People's Panel to ensure we meet their needs
- establishing of a BME Panel and overcoming barriers faced by communities in accessing the parks and project activities

