

Reconnecting Berkhamsted Castle

Summary of Feasibility Study



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Berkhamsted Castle Deer Park

Berkhamsted Castle Deer Park is a heritage asset of considerable significance, derived primarily from its historical and evidential value. It also forms part of the setting of the medieval Berkhamsted Castle, and makes a moderate contribution to the significance of the Scheduled Monument. It was a critical part of the historic landscape for nearly 400 years until disemparked in the 17th century, and its distinctive layout is still preserved today in the line of field boundaries to the north of Berkhamsted.

At its peak in the 14th century, the deer park occupied c.401ha, equating to approximately 23% of Berkhamsted parish. This makes it one of the largest of 70 medieval deer parks recorded in Hertfordshire. Together with Berkhamsted Castle, the park was part of the Duchy of Cornwall estates; a private estate established in the early 14th century to provide financial independence to the heir to the throne. The castle is still held by the present heir, Prince William, although the former parkland was sold off in the late 19th century.

An assessment of the historical significance of Berkhamsted Castle Deer Park has been undertaken by LUC in May 2024 (available separately) to provide a greater understanding of the historical significance of the area and potential opportunities for future preservation and enhancement.

About the project

LUC was commissioned by Berkhamsted Castle Trust (BCT) to undertake a feasibility study on surrounding land that once formed a medieval deer park to Berkhamsted Castle. The study area boundary is based on the original extent of the former deer park.

The study is funded by the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund and by a grant from The Marchus Trust, and seeks to establish the potential for creating a local park with a shared vision to celebrate the rich historic and cultural heritage of the landscape linked to Berkhamsted Castle.

The feasibility study aims to:

- Identify interested parties and stakeholders in the concept of a local park;
- Assist in placing the Berkhamsted Castle at the heart of its landscape setting;
- Identify opportunities for joint working/delivery;
- Through the consultation exercise, gauge the appetite among residents for a 'People's Park' and, if positive, foster a new sense of local pride in and understanding of the potential for this key environmental area;
- Visualise how investment could transform the area and enhance local physical, cultural and social ties and amenities;
- Provide a well-conceived, practical framework to inform the Castle's Development Plan;

- and to provide a sound platform to attract potential donors and further funding.

Stakeholders include those involved in the ownership and management of the castle site, land owners in the wider landscape and local residents. A number of landowners are also local residents. Visitors to the site are predominantly local (as evidenced in the visitor survey results) with a smaller proportion travelling from local surrounding areas or further afield. Stakeholders include a range of national and local bodies and organisations, some with statutory functions.

The project follows on naturally from the work commissioned by the local history society on creating a Heritage Hub (2018) and the production by English Heritage and the Castle Trust of a Conservation Plan for the Castle (2019), as well as forming a key component in the emerging Mitigation Strategy for the Chiltern Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

There are two core reasons to commission the feasibility study. These are, to reduce the visitor pressures on the adjacent Chilterns Beechwoods SAC, this is evidenced by The Footprint Ecology Report commissioned by Dacorum Borough Council in 2022, and to provide natural and semi-natural green space for the local community, this is evidenced by the Dacorum Borough Council Space Assessment (2019) which demonstrates the limited number and extent of natural and semi-natural green spaces in Berkhamsted.

A park could take several different forms, from improved signage along existing Public Rights of Way to new areas of public access and interpretation of hidden historical features. This could have multiple benefits, including improving people's understanding of the historic landscape and its connection to the castle, helping to secure its future.

The key objectives for the project include:

- Protection - raising the profile of Berkhamsted Castle and securing its future;
- Public Access - providing additional and alternative publicly accessible green space in Berkhamsted whilst steering movement away from the Special Area of Conservation at the Ashridge Estate;
- Outdoor Provision - rationalising and improving access, signage and existing furniture;
- Education - promoting the site's history including its use as a former deer park;
- and Feasibility - working with landowners, key stakeholders and members of the public to understand the feasibility of the park.

The project methodology has followed a number of key steps from December 2023 to June 2024 as outlined below.

Step 1: Finalise the scope of feasibility study with BCT exploring the purposes, functions and options for use of the Park.

Step 2: Open discussions with key landowners / stakeholders and determine the scope for joint working, SANGS, Gateway Site or purchased land and final extent of the Park.

Step 3: Land Use Survey, including the identification of site assets (environmental, heritage, transport and access) and current visitor use.

Step 4: Identify the methodology for assembling any land and investigating its status as a potential SANG or Gateway site (by considering its alignment with the emerging Chilterns Beechwoods SAC Mitigation Strategy gateway and SANG principles).

Step 5: Define the scope for the Park to provide:

- Clear and sufficient parking (incl. coaches);
- Improved signage and transport links;
- Easy access and defined routes;
- Orientation/interpretation points;
- Event space/play areas;
- Visitor facilities (to serve visitors to the Castle as well);
- Environmental/habitat improvements.

Step 6: Provide draft Masterplan and outline Management and Maintenance Plan, including recommendations for governance.

Step 7: Public consultation to determine local appetite for the Park.

Engagement

A visitor survey was undertaken in May 2024, incorporating a stakeholder engagement event at Berkhamsted High Street and Berkhamsted Castle on 11th May. The survey sought to better understand how people currently use the castle's surrounding landscape, to explain more about the history of the deer park and to gauge the appetite for a local park.

Stakeholder and visitor engagement has helped to refine the scope of potential improvements to the visitor experience, including access and arrival and visitor facilities. Importantly, the visitor surveys have underlined why people value the castle and its surroundings and what should not change.

Options testing

Option testing was conducted on three main elements affecting the study area and in particular the castle site. These included parking options, traffic calming options and visitor centre location and access options. Each option was appraised with a final preferred option presented.

There are currently no dedicated parking spaces for castle visitors and some dedicated spaces would be beneficial for visitors travelling from outside of the area, particularly on days

when events are held.

It would be beneficial to the area to mark out parking bays at the main entrance, to provide the most efficient use of space and provide a more welcoming space for pedestrians. There is also potential to provide an improved parking arrangement on New Road e.g. via dedicated spaces and narrowing of the carriageway as well as offer overflow parking on events days on adjacent land, subject to further investigation.

The visitor survey highlighted that the majority of people (around 80%) walk to the castle and surrounding landscape. The survey highlighted issues related to the dominance of traffic and compromised pedestrian experience, including lack of clarity of crossing points and signage.

Traffic calming would aim to improve the overall arrival experience for pedestrians in particular, better connect the castle to its immediate surroundings and to the wider landscape, and to improve the setting of the castle.

There is potential for traffic calming measures to immediate periphery, including the following options:

- Speed restrictions;
- Changes of surfacing as a visual indicator e.g. resin bonded gravel and block paving shared surfacing at White Hill;
- Narrowed pedestrian crossing points/priority chicanes along New Road;
- And a one-way traffic system for at least part of the periphery.

It was concluded that any visitor facility should be located in close proximity to the castle site, with any potential options further afield such as at Berkhamsted Cricket Club being too remote and not linking authentically with the castle site. A total of six options have been assessed in relation to a range of factors including heritage impact and likely cost.

Preferred option

The preferred option, which performs best overall is a combination of options to ensure that the visitor centre and access remains relevant and non invasive on the Scheduled Monument and surrounding landscape.

The preferred option (Custodian's Cottage Option V1) makes use of a well-located built asset rather than requiring a new building. Challenges include the viability of installing in-ground services and respecting the listed status of the Cottage. In the short term, priorities include rationalising the existing parking area as a shared space and improving the visitor arrival experience from the train station and town centre through traffic calming measures.

There is potential to make better use of Berkhamsted Castle Trust land (adjacent to the castle) with walking routes linked to

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the wider countryside and space for events and/or informal play. This could be achieved in the shorter term and would ideally incorporate a small footbridge across the outer moat, to better link the field to the castle.

In the longer term there is potential to establish a raised walkway at a former historic gate to further enhance the visitor experience, linking to the historical context of the original castle entrance. Also to pedestrianise roads that access and surround the castle which would help to re-link the castle to the historic town centre.

Proposals

The concept masterplan for the wider landscape includes five main elements: gateways and views, potential routes, SANGs - subject to approval, habitat creation and open space.

Historic gateways and points of interest in the landscape based on evidence set out in the Statement of Significance report (LUC, May 2024) provide 'markers' in the landscape. The proposals seek to link these gateways together via a series of heritage trails, revealing existing evidence of the former deer park and bring to life the many stories of the surroundings to Berkhamsted Castle. Specific viewpoints and interpretation material would help to tell these stories visually through different creative ways that are appropriate and sensitive to the local setting.

The masterplan provides an overall framework for improved legibility and wayfinding within the landscape. The quality and layout of existing signage would be reviewed with the intention of providing higher quality, more consistent signage in the right places, providing a clearer identity and sense of place. This would be sensitive to concerns about sanitising the landscape with too much signage and would embrace the 'wild' nature of certain areas which provide a sense of escape and freedom.

The concept maximises opportunities for sustainable transport. It recognises that most journeys to/from the area are by foot and encourages this by improving the quality of access routes and surfacing. The masterplan seeks to introduce an accessible route running from the castle and the proposed Castle Hill SANG in the south to the proposed Hill Farm SANG in the north (both subject to approval). The route would follow the lower ground of the valley, providing a multi-use trail accessible by walkers and cyclists and linking to the existing Chilterns Cycleway that runs through Berkhamsted, close to the train station. Berkhamsted Train Station provides a hub for the arrival and departure of visitors from outside of the local area. Given the scale of the landscape and resulting walking distances, there is potential to establish a shuttle bus to bring visitors alongside area stakeholders back to the station from Hill Farm.

The concept presents a series of themed walking routes of varying distance and nature, with the castle as the main start/finish point. These include 'Park Keeper's Loop' a 6km (approx.) circular route following the 'inner park' area and incorporating

Berkhamsted Place and the panoramic view at Hunts Hill; the 'Prince's Walk', a 2km (approx.) linear walk through the heart of the former deer park up to Dearne Gate, referencing the Black Prince, the foundations of the park and links between Berkhamsted Castle and Ashridge House; the long-distance 'Commoners Loop' a 9km (approx.) loop that broadly follows the boundary of the former deer park, revealing evidence of this along the way.

The concept also proposes a series of local connections to/from the castle, largely following existing desire lines, to enable visitors to enjoy the immediate surroundings and move from castle to wider landscape, re-establishing this connection.

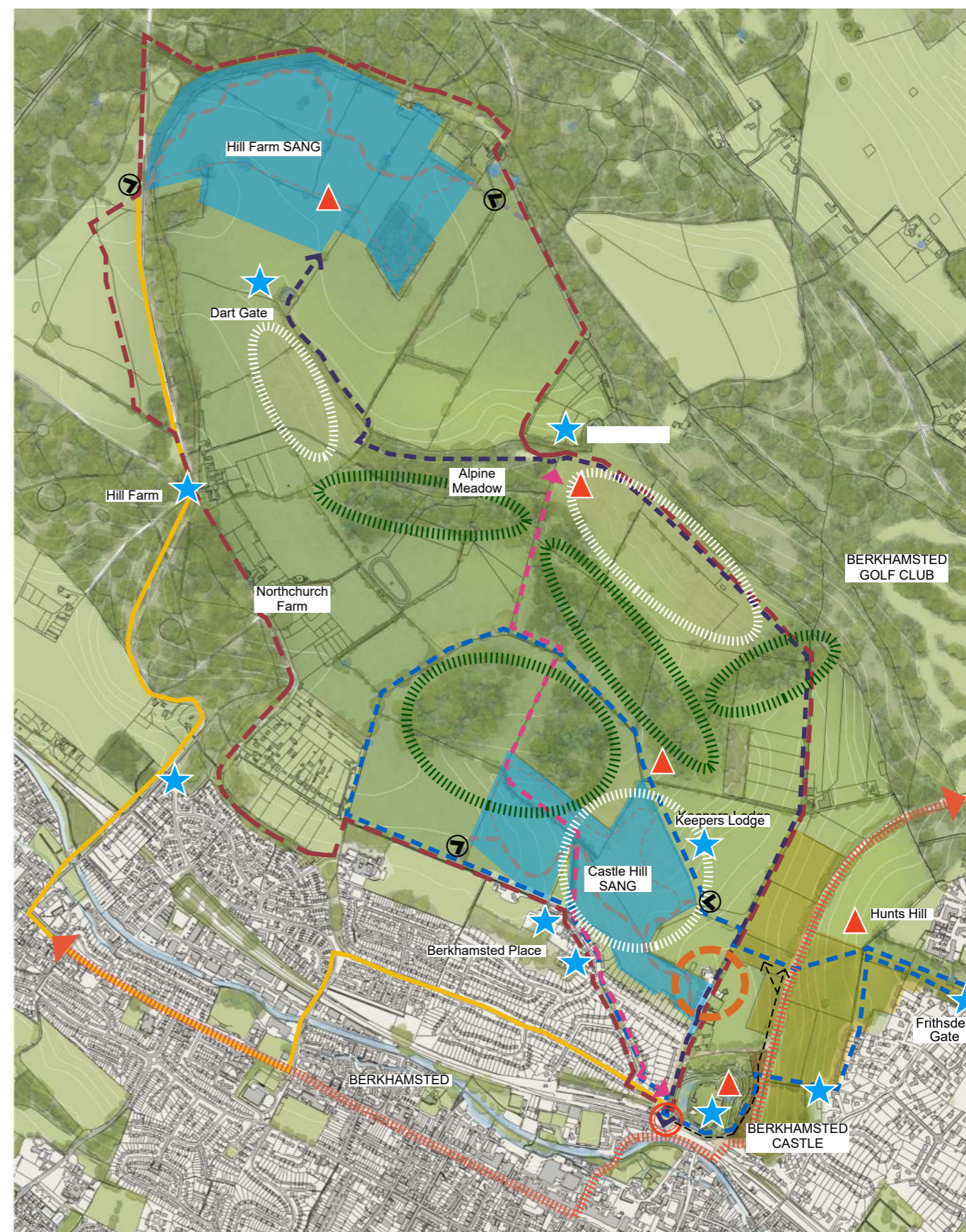
The concept provides an overall cohesive strategy to reduce visitor pressures on the Chilterns Beechwoods SAC. Potential links into proposed circular routes at Hill Farm and Castle Hill have been identified, with the aim of complementing and enhancing existing SANG proposals by placing them in the wider context of the historic landscape. There is also potential to provide additional SANG within the landscape itself, within close proximity to the castle.

Proposals for habitat creation and enhancement are based on recommendations from the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (LUC, March 2024). There is potential for woodland creation where this is historically known to be present and as an extension to existing woodland e.g. Alpine Meadow, as well as the creation of new native hedgerows to re-establish field boundaries and improve habitat connectivity. There are large areas where lowland calcareous and species rich grassland could be created, as well as a series of other local-scale interventions such as pond enhancements and establishment of deadwood features.

The existing recreation hub that comprises Berkhamsted School sports fields at Kitchener's Field, Berkhamsted Cricket and Bowls Clubs would be maintained and enhanced. Potential interventions include the improvements to the quality of existing access routes and measures to reduce trespassing and direct visitors to publicly accessible areas. There is potential for the creation of publicly accessible open space in close proximity to the castle, either by agreement or purchase of land. These areas provide potential for additional SANGs within the landscape.

Outline management and funding

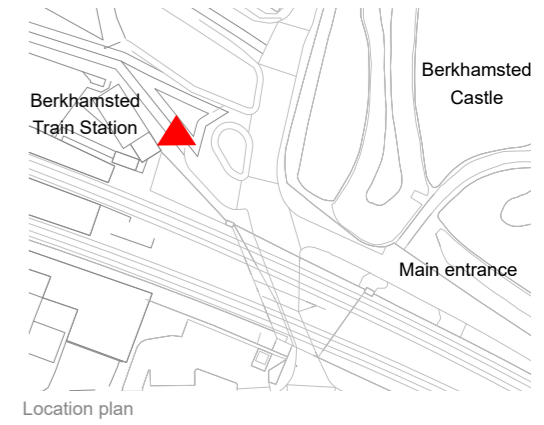
Potential benefits to landowners of working towards an overall vision to re-connect the landscape include various funding opportunities, biodiversity net gain opportunities, and prevention and protection opportunities. There are also many complimentary schemes which help to achieve opportunities for funding and biodiversity net gain, these include the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Countryside Stewardship and Countryside Stewardship Plus schemes, Capital Grants, Higher Tier Capital Grants, England Woodland Creation Offer, and Environmental Improvement Grants.



Concept Masterplan showing walking, vehicular, and cycle routes, historic gates, viewpoints, SANGs (subject to approval) and habitat creation opportunities

Proposals

Sketch View - Arrival at Train Station



Permanent interpretation boards along route

Dedicated route to Hill Farm SANG

Trees enhance setting and lead pedestrians to main entrance

Dedicated pedestrian route to entrance

Adapted community garden with seating and planting

Shared surface

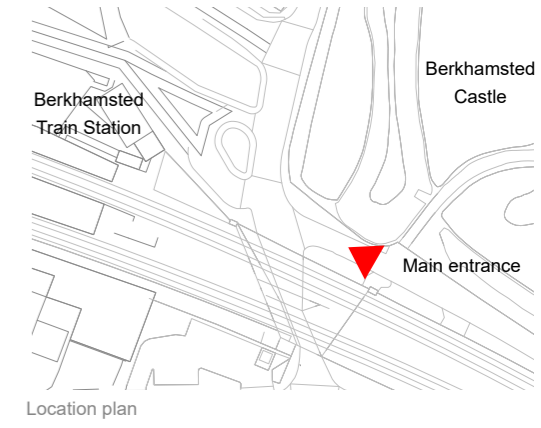


Cycle parking

NOTE: Exact layout of planting to be designed in consultation with the Friends of Berkhamsted Station group.

Proposals

Sketch View - Main Entrance to Train Station



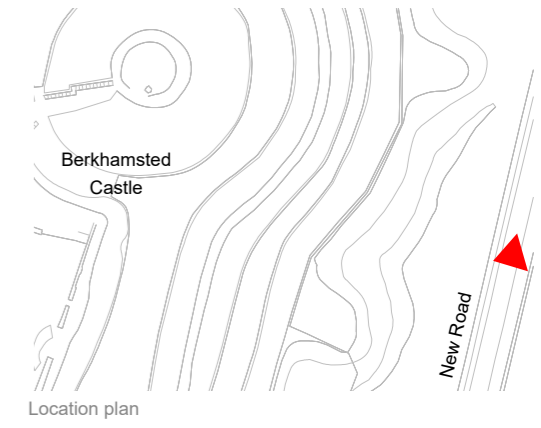
- Dedicated parking bays
- Shared surface
- Community garden
- Pedestrian route to entrance
- Seating and planting
- Trees enhance setting
- Permanent interpretation boards



NOTE: Exact layout of planting to be designed in consultation with the Friends of Berkhamsted Station group.

Proposals

Sketch View - Traffic Calming along New Road



Direct link to BCT Field and wider countryside

Planting improves pedestrian environment

Dedicated parking bays

Narrowed highway with change in road surface

Raised table with paved surface to slow traffic

Interpretation board





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