

PRESS RELEASE

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Reprieve for Magna Carta siege site

One of the 25 sites of national historic importance to Magna Carta has gained a reprieve from development thanks to the intervention of Berkhamsted Castle Trust.

Fields to the East of Berkhamsted Castle — an 11th century motte and bailey castle, in Hertfordshire (where William the Conqueror was offered the crown in 1066) — were used by the English Barons and Prince Louis of France to besiege the Castle in December 1216, during the uprising following King John's annulment of Magna Carta. In what is believed to have been the first use of a counterweight trebuchet in England, Prince Louis's forces hurled "innumerable damnable stones" at the castle walls for two weeks until the defending garrison was ordered by the young King Henry III to surrender.

The fields — identified as being part of one of the earliest royal deer parks — had been under threat of sale for housing development over recent years but matters came to a head when they were put up for public auction in March this year. However, with the assistance of a philanthropic loan from a former local resident, Berkhamsted Castle Trust is stepping in to buy the fields (around 30 acres / 12 hectares in size) to protect them for the public. The Trust, a registered charity set up by local residents to help look after the Castle and help with visitor welcome and interpretation, now needs to raise the money necessary to repay the loan.

Chairman of Berkhamsted Castle Trust, Adrian Barham, comments:

"The role and significance of the siege of Berkhamsted Castle in the story of the fight for Magna Carta meant that we could not run the risk of these fields being bought by property developers. We will work with the local community to protect the site, improve the environment and provide public access, and help people to understand the historical significance of the landscape around the Castle. But our first challenge is to raise the £500,000 needed to repay the loan we have taken out to buy the fields."

Berkhamsted Castle Trust is seeking donations to help it repay the philanthropic loan it has taken out to purchase the fields. It needs to raise £500,000 within two years to cover the purchase costs, as well as further sums towards land management and environmental improvement works. Anyone wishing to donate can do so via the Trust's website at www.berkhamstedcastle.org.uk/donate

The Trust's intervention builds on the crucial work of the Castle Fields Interest Group, a community pressure group which has been lobbying hard and continuously over the past year for returning public access to the fields, registering rights of way, ensuring trees are protected and keeping public attention focussed on the vulnerability of the fields. Simon Lewis, spokesperson for the group, says:

"This is great news for everyone in Berkhamsted! By securing the land, the fences and gates will be removed, public access will be restored and the risk of housing development in this environmentally sensitive and beautiful landscape is negated. It's been a victory for resolute, determined and committed community action.

But our job is not done - we now need to help Berkhamsted Castle Trust raise the funds to pay back this generous loan and ensure Castle Fields remains open and accessible for the enjoyment of future generations."

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For further information please contact:

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Editors Notes:

1. **Berkhamsted Castle Trust** is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation and registered charity (England & Wales no. 1176286). Last year it welcomed over 75,000 visitors to the ruins of Berkhamsted Castle, Hertfordshire, which is owned by the Duchy of Cornwall and which the Trust has managed on behalf of English Heritage under a Local Management Agreement since 2019. The site is free to enter, and open daily from 10am to 6pm (summer) / 10 am to 4pm (winter). The Trust's website is at <https://www.berkhamstedcastle.org.uk>

2. The acquisition of the fields builds on an earlier donation to the Trust, in 2018, of three acres (1.2 hectares) of the Castle's outer earthworks.
3. The role and significance of Berkhamsted Castle, as one of 25 sites in the story of the fight for Magna Carta, was highlighted by The Battlefields Trust and The Magna Carta Trust on the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta (in 2015) with the benefit of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (now National Lottery Heritage Fund). For more information see <https://magnacarta800th.com/events/battlefields/magna-carta-battlefields/>
4. With the benefit of a £26,600 grant from the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund at the end of 2023, the Trust was able to research and record the historical significance of the landscape surrounding the Castle — particularly the extensive former deer park area that still exists to the north of the site and includes the Castle Fields. For information on the deer park project see <https://www.berkhamstedcastle.org.uk/deer-park>
5. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills. For more information, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus>
6. **Castle Fields Interest Group** was formed over a year ago when fences were first erected around the fields and quickly grew to over 100 members. It has met every 2 weeks throughout the year fostering a campaign based around the recognition of the historic rights of way across the land and to see existing covenants that sought to control and restrict development enforced. The Group is still seeking to gain recognition of the historic Rights of Way / footpaths through Hertfordshire County Council.