



## **KEARSNEY ABBEY, RUSSELL GARDENS AND BUSHY RUFF A STATEMENT OF THEIR JOINT SIGNIFICANCE**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Kearsney Abbey, Russell Gardens (formerly the gardens of Kearsney Court) and Bushy Ruff are located on the western edge of Dover along the valley of the River Dour. They form a series of interconnected parks now managed as a single entity by Dover District Council, which together are of considerable importance both in terms of their heritage value and as providing space for public recreation.

The 2012 Dover Heritage Strategy has identified (10.63 – 73) the valley through which the river Dour flows as having several sites along its length which are of significance for the industrial and social history of the area. Particular reference is made to the corn mills which were built along the river from mediaeval times onward. One mill was situated within the present grounds of Kearsney Abbey. The fast running clear water of the river also made it very suitable for paper making and one of the six paper mills which have been identified on the river Dour was at Bushy Ruff dating from c 1791.

The Dover Heritage Strategy highlights the importance of Country Houses and their estates in terms of their contribution to the character and distinctiveness of the District. Kearsney Abbey and Russell Gardens (Kearsney Court) are specifically identified as key heritage assets.

The formal gardens of Kearsney Court, designed by Thomas Mawson are an important example of his early work and retain most of their original layout. The gardens are arguably of outstanding heritage value and are certainly unique in Kent. The site is registered as grade II on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. The grounds of Kearsney Abbey also retain many features of the C19 picturesque design including lakes, bridges, weirs, a fountain and a later open air theatre. They are of considerable local importance.

The three sites owned and managed by Dover District Council which are now under consideration are currently used as a single public open space. However they each have a separate character and history and are enjoyed by the public in different ways. The gardens of Kearsney Abbey contain tea rooms, a boating lake and open space which is well used

predominantly for family and informal social use. Kearsney Court which includes Russell Gardens still retains much of the formal gardens designed by Thomas Mawson. As such the publicly owned parts are enjoyed more for walking and appreciation of the remnants of the designed garden. Bushy Ruff is less well used but is enjoyed by walkers and dog owners as a place of relaxation and for its peace and solitude.

The significance of the three parks has been evaluated individually using the guidance and values set out in English Heritage's *Conservation Principles*. This report gives an overview of their joint significance.

## 2. EVIDENTIAL VALUE

Kearsney Court is the only one of the three sites where there does not seem to be any likelihood of archaeological remains being found. Bushy Ruff and Kearsney Abbey both have greater potential for further research which may reveal more about their history and use. In particular the Abbey site contains appreciable remnants both above and below ground of the house, garden features, industrial buildings and associated remains. The Bushy Ruff site includes an existing building originally associated with the paper mill, the mill pond and weir. If alterations or development of the sites are proposed further archaeological research will be needed.

## 3. HISTORICAL VALUE

The history of all three sites can be traced back to the Norman Conquest. Later developments reflect the industrial and social history of Dover and its environs. The purchase of the manor of Kearsney in the early C19 by a prominent Dover businessman was the first step in a process of change in which the Abbey mansion was built and much later part of the estate was sold and Kearsney Court was built. At about the same time a house was built at Bushy Ruff by another Dover businessman. All three sites contain buildings listed as being of architectural or historic merit and the landscape at Kearsney Court is a registered park and garden designed by Thomas Mawson, the leading landscape architect of the period. Russell Gardens are named after Hilton Arthur Russell, mayor of Dover in 1928/9 who was responsible for the Council acquiring part of the gardens of Kearsney Court for use as a public park.

## 4. AESTHETIC VALUE

All three sites make good use of the topographical features of the river valley including the steep banks and the more gentle levels around the river Dour. In the case of Bushy Ruff it is apparent from the OS maps that the C19 garden was created along the banks of the mill pond which still exists with its C19 sluices and weir. Kearsney Court was designed by Thomas Mawson. The remains of the designed garden are remarkably complete in that they still reflect his original design aesthetic. The C19 appearance of the picturesque garden with its lake, islands and bridge at Kearsney Abbey is still identifiable despite the loss of the mansion and other garden features. Although each site has its own different qualities the three sites taken as a whole appreciably enhance the aesthetic value

of the whole.

## 5. COMMUNAL VALUE

The three sites taken together form a well used and increasingly popular public park which is already a focus of local identity which should be enhanced. A recent survey by DDC confirmed the value of the open space for local residents and those from further afield. Better facilities such as improved car parks and pedestrian access would increase opportunities for a wider use of the parks.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

6.1 The design of Kearsney Court dates from 1901 when The Mawson Practice was beginning to expand into civic design commissions such as the Palace of Peace Gardens in the Hague in 1908. This design is part of his predominantly garden design phase and although he continued to produce garden designs, as his practice grew, his family became more involved and the scale of work changed. Hence this design can be considered an important example of his personal approach to garden design.

6.2 It is clear from a preliminary survey that a substantial proportion of trees survive from the original design. The gardens also exhibit the identifiable remains of the original garden layout with paths, garden buildings, water features, and levels defined by retaining walls. Finally, there are extensive photographs ranging in date from the early 1900's to the 1960's. The majority show the various stages of planting ranging from the early flower beds (preferred by the first owner) to the grassing over of the terraces after the 1950's. It has not been possible to obtain any information on the detailed planting proposals or constructional drawings for the garden features. Thomas Mawson's writings provide a flavour of his approach but the availability of his office records could provide a valuable resource worth investigating.

6.3 The site of Kearsney Court House and Garden is a self-contained design which follows the philosophy of Thomas Mawson and no doubt his client. The site over 100 years later still retains its original character in spite of the changes of ownership and use that has inevitably occurred.

6.4 That the original design is still recognisable is due to the luck that it survived development pressures and to the credit of Dover District Council for their policy of care and repair. Credit must also be given to the quality of the original building work and to the robustness of Thomas Mawson's design which has been flexible enough to cater for change whilst maintaining the original design aesthetic. We are at a key point in its securing its future. The majority of the hard landscaping, particularly the retaining walls around the house are in urgent need of restoration and repair.

6.5 The retaining walls in private ownership are showing their age and the lack of sensitive garden management has changed the visual appearance of the garden. Due to the divided ownership some compromises are probably inevitable. Consideration should be given to the listing of further garden structures with the option of defining some as "Buildings at Risk". The production of a Conservation Management plan could also be considered.

6.6 Pressure on public gardens and open spaces are increasing. They are more intensively used by the public and for a variety of uses from sitting, walking, jogging to organised informal sport and other so far unconsidered uses. Schools are introducing children to the wonders of plants, nature conservation and sustainability issues are coming to the fore and Kearsney Court garden linked with other sites on the River Dour provide the ideal opportunity to cater for these leisure activities.

6.7 Finally, Kearsney Court Gardens provide an ideal foundation for appreciating the principles of designed landscapes and the need to sensitively modify to cater for changing leisure needs whilst restoring relevant features such as the lost boggy area just down-stream of the lower cascade.

6.8 As a rare garden designed by an internationally recognised landscape designer, in a recognisable condition after 100 years, the heritage asset is of exceptional interest. It is therefore, nationally as well as locally of considerable significance.

6.9 Structures within the garden have been assessed and since they contribute appreciably to the character of the garden the following should be listed or safeguarded as of local significance:

- the main house
- entrance lodges and gate posts
- all brick retaining walls and steps
- the brick boundary wall and house within the original kitchen
- garden
- extant garden structures such as pool edging.