

MAIDSTONE GREEN SPACES STRATEGY

improving our parks
and open spaces

PARKS AND RECREATION GROUNDS

MANAGEMENT PLANS

ARCHBISHOPS' PALACE GARDENS

WARD: HIGH STREET

MP 0602

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Management Plan for the Archbishops' Palace Gardens describes the site and outlines the adopted maintenance regime. It also lists the further improvements to the site that will be carried out during 2007 and 2008, as part of the process of implementing the Green Spaces Strategy.

The Archbishops' Palace Gardens are situated within the historic All Saints Conservation Area, close to the Maidstone town centre, where the River Len joins the River Medway. They slope gently northwards, towards the Len.

The Gardens are an intrinsic part of Maidstone's heritage. The Palace itself was once part of the Manor of Maidstone. The Manor was given to the Archbishops by Rector William de Cornhill in 1207, and was used as a rest house for archbishops travelling between London and Canterbury. It has historic links with places like Charing, Otford and Croydon.

The Palace was built by Archbishop Courtenay in the late 14th century. It now houses the Kent Register Office for civil marriages and public records.

A much smaller stone building in the corner of the Gardens by Mill Street houses The Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce. In the past it was a mill on the River Len as well as a gate house.

The stables are now the Coach Museum, across Mill Street.

To the south, the Gardens lie adjacent to historic All Saints Church and its graveyard, which amongst others contains the grave of William Shirley, the founder of the Royal Society of Arts.

Many buildings and stone walls in the All Saints Conservation Area are listed at Grades I, II and II* by English Heritage.

The Gardens were the second ornamental public park, after the Brenchley Gardens, created at the end of the C.19 by public subscription. The Palace was used as Maidstone Borough Council offices till the early 1990s.

In 2000 the Council commissioned the "All Saints Conservation Area Appraisal and Study", a report on the history and present condition, with a proposed enhancement scheme.

The Palace Gardens consist mainly of paths, drives and mature trees in short grass, although there is some ornamental planting. Of particular interest is the Infirmary's Garden, a small walled garden between the Palace and the Church.

Rose beds within the Gardens are part of a Rose Trail created along the town centre stretch of the River Medway.

A terrace in the Gardens overlooks the River Medway.

The Gardens lie within the River Medway Green Corridor and are adjacent to the Millennium River Park.

2. RELATIONSHIP TO COUNCIL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

There are a number of Council strategy and policy documents that are relevant to the Archbishops' Palace Gardens:

- Green Spaces Strategy (2005)
- "Play for Today" Towards a Strategy for Outdoor Equipped Play Areas 2004-08 (2005)
- Sports and Play Facilities Strategy (2003)
- Maidstone Matters: Community Strategy for Maidstone Borough (2003)
- Best Value Review: A Clean and Tidy Borough (2002)
- The Local Cultural Strategy for Maidstone
- The Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Guidance (2005)

These documents recognise that public green open spaces are an important part of the environment in which we live. The quality and quantity of those open spaces have an effect on our quality of life. They are valuable and free resources for recreation and education. There is need in Maidstone to further improve the access, infrastructure, facilities and the biodiversity of public green spaces. The Green Spaces Strategy (2005) has set the way forward with a plan of improvements for years 2005-10.

3. VISION AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE SITE

3.1 The overall vision for the Archbishops' Palace Gardens is:

"To create and maintain a public green space which provides opportunities for outdoor contemplation, recreation and education, in keeping with its town centre location and its heritage value."

3.2 The key objectives for the Gardens are to:

- Provide an interesting landscape feature for this part of Maidstone.
- Interpret the history and the heritage value of the site through careful design, good signage, literature and publicity.
- Ensure that the site is clean and well-maintained.
- Ensure that it is safe to use at all times.
- Develop and maintain links with the local stakeholders in order to consult on the management and maintenance of the site.

4. THE SITE AND ITS FACILITIES

4.1 Entrances and boundaries

The Gardens are bounded by old traditional ragstone walls with coping along the top. Several breaks in the wall allow pedestrian access. Vehicular access is off Mill Street.

An ornamental and grand access through a stone Archway in the northern end of the Gardens leads out towards the River Medway and a mooring place for pleasure boats.

Within the Gardens, a low metal palisade fence restricts access to the banks of the River Len.

The Infirmary's Garden is hidden behind a much higher stone wall than the one along the boundary. It has a lockable wrought iron gate.

4.2 Roads, paths, cycleways and car parks

Authorised vehicles can access the Gardens off Mill Street. A small number of parking spaces is allocated to the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, Registry Office and the owners of the pleasure boats.

Apart from the hard standing by the Archway, which is made of mostly broken paving slabs, uneven in place, the other hard surfaces are tarmac dressed with gravel, with concrete edgings. This includes a courtyard in front of the Palace building. These surfaces show signs of wear and tear and are in need of resurfacing in the worst affected areas.

North of the Palace there is terrace overlooking the Medway; the surface is broken stone slabs ('crazy paving'). The slabs were re-laid in 2005. At the northern end of the terrace a flight of stone steps leads down towards the Archway.

There are four other flights of steps in the Gardens, leading down towards the rivers.

4.3 Lighting

There are several lighting columns that make the Gardens accessible after dark.

4.4 Grass areas

There are several areas of well established lawn.

4.5 Trees and other vegetation

The Gardens contain many mature park trees: London plane, lime, robinia, hornbeam and others together with more exotic ones such as Metasequoia glyptostoboides and Cedrus deodara.

Together with the trees growing in the adjoining All Saints graveyard, they form an important oasis of green in the centre of town, close to the main shopping area. Important both visually and for its air cooling properties.

A hornbeam and yew hedge forms a broken line across the middle of the Gardens and a yew hedge with some Aucuba grows close to the graveyard wall.

The ornamental planting in the courtyard consists of a box parterre with roses and more rose beds close to the Palace.

Looking north towards the Archway, on the left there is an attractive shrub bed edged with box and on the right the banks of the River Len are covered with a mixture of low growing garden plants, including low shrub roses in a distinct bed, part of the Rose Trail.

The Infirmary's Garden contains a large selection of medicinal and cooking herbs.

4.6 Biodiversity assessment

The mature trees are of considerable biodiversity value. The hedgerows and the banks of the River Len provide some hiding places for wildlife and the ragstone walls provide specific habitats. There are two patches of 'wilderness' next to the Infirmary's Garden. Their biodiversity value remains to be assessed.

The banks of the Len could be improved for biodiversity. Elsewhere in the Gardens there is little potential in this respect, with the exception perhaps of one of the patches of 'wilderness'.

4.7 Provision of seating and bins

There are several park seats along the paths and on the terrace. They are of traditional pseudo-Victorian design. The five new seats on the terrace were installed in 2005.

There are litter and dog litter bins in the Gardens.

4.8 Signage

There is an information board about the Conservation Area near the Chamber of Commerce building. There is need for more interpretative and directional signage.

4.9 Provision of recreational and other facilities

The Gardens are an oasis of green calm and a setting for the historic buildings. As such they contain facilities for socialising and quiet relaxation: seats, clean lawns, tree shade, attractive views, sight of running water.

By the Kent Chamber of Commerce a wide flight of steps leads to a shady terrace with a railing by the River Len. From the terrace it is possible to see some of the workings of the former water mill, now mostly hidden under Bishops' Way.

The Len disappears under the main pathway through the Gardens, into a culvert, before it flows into the Medway.

A small waterfall was created on a bank of the Len some decades ago. It is currently out of use, but would become an attractive feature if it could be restored.

The Gardens, including the enclosed Infirmerer's Garden, provide an attractive setting for wedding photographs following the ceremonies in the Registry Office (in the Palace).

The Infirmerer's Garden is designed and maintained by Kent Gardens Trust. It is open to the public on Wednesdays 11am to 4pm, from beginning of May to the end of September. There is a small charge for visiting it.

Just outside the boundary of the Gardens, the All Saints Church and the graveyard offer a pleasant walk in historic surroundings. Across Mill Street the Carriage Museum is free of charge, open daily 10:30-16:00 from beginning of March till mid September.

By the Archway there is a kiosk selling refreshments and tickets for trips on one of the two pleasure boats, 'Kentish Lady' and 'Allington Belle'. They travel between the Archbishops' Palace Gardens and Allington Lock from Easter till mid October.

5. MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Since 1904 Maidstone Borough Council has owned and managed the Gardens.

The day-to-day maintenance is carried out by the grounds maintenance contractor Glendale, with the exception of the Infirmerer's Garden which is maintained by the Kent Gardens Trust.

5.1 Cleanliness

Litter is collected, and litter bins are emptied, every day.

Dog litter bins are emptied twice a week by a specialist contractor.

5.2 Safety and security

The site is fairly secluded but it does not feel unsafe. A degree of surveillance is provided from all directions by passers by.

Lighting is installed around the courtyard and along the main pathway.

The Gardens are within range of three CCTV cameras placed at the main street junctions nearby.

Visitors can report problems:

- general – to MBC parks hotline on 01622 602747
- anti-social behaviour – to Community Safety Officer on 01622 602598
- any crime should be reported to the police.

5.2 Maintenance of infrastructure and facilities

KCC and the Kent Chamber of Commerce lease their buildings from the MBC, and are responsible for their maintenance. The KCC's lease includes the rectangular courtyard between the Palace and Bishop's Way.

The paths and drives, the vegetation and the lighting columns are maintained by the Parks Section of the MBC.

5.4 Horticultural management regimes

The lawns are maintained to an 'ornamental' specification, i.e. the grass clippings are collected, lawn fertiliser is applied every year.

The hedgerows are trimmed every summer.

In the autumn leaves are collected and taken away, except for a small amount used as mulch in the shrubbery.

The trees require special attention with regards to health and safety of visitors. Tree work is done as and when required. MBC has a rolling programme of tree work on the council managed sites. Trees are inspected and work is scheduled according to its priority. Top priority for work are trees which may be dangerous to the public.

The ornamental plantings are weeded regularly. Mulch of chipped bark is used in the rose beds in order to reduce the number of weeds and to reduce moisture loss from the soil.

In the Infirmerer's Garden the work of planting, weeding etc is done by a member of the Kent Gardens Trust.

6. FORTHCOMING IMPROVEMENTS

Following site audits and a public consultation in summer 2005, a list of improvements has been drawn up. Most of this work will be carried out by a specialist landscape contractor between autumn 2006 and spring 2008. This is part of the Green Spaces Strategy work aimed at enhancing the quality of public green spaces.

The following projects are planned:

- Repair and restart the waterfall.
- Resurface hardstanding under the plane tree by the Archway.
- Resurface path/drive to the Archway and path/bridge across the Len.
- Install more seats.

- Plant water-edge plants at the bottom of the steps by the Len.
- Install directional signage.

7. Funding

There are a number of sources of funding, both internal and external, for further improvements to the facilities and the maintenance regimes, which can be considered for this site.

Green Spaces Strategy – improvements to the value of £500,000 are being implemented in Maidstone's main green open spaces during 2005-2008.

Planning obligations – Section 106 agreements on new residential developments can generate funds to improve existing public green spaces directly related to those developments.

Big Lottery Breathing Spaces Programme – starting in summer 2006, aimed at community groups involved in creating and maintaining wildlife-friendly green spaces in their local area. Grants of £300-10,000 available to voluntary groups and to parish/town councils.

Awards for All – give grants towards projects aimed at improving quality of life of local communities. Grants of £500-5,000 are available to community groups, parish/town councils, schools and health bodies.

Esme Fairbairn Foundation (Environment Programme) – promotes environmental improvements which balance the needs of people and wildlife, especially those aiming to conserve 'hard-to-fund', or lower profile, UK native species and habitats under demonstrable threat of loss or decline in urban, rural or marine areas.

Safer and Stronger Communities government funding stream – is aimed at tackling crime and anti-social behaviour through improving the condition of streets and other public spaces.

Landfill Tax Credit Scheme – for projects within 10 miles of a landfill or extraction site, aimed at provision and maintenance of public amenities. Grants £250- 25,000.

Local Heritage Initiatives – assist local communities in the preservation of their environment, landmarks and traditions, including archaeological, natural, built and industrial heritage. Projects like an exhibition on the history of the site, or a repair of a feature; funding up to 100% for project costs of £3,000 to £25,000.

English Heritage offers grants for historic parks and gardens.

9. RESULTS OF QUALITY AUDITS

Quality audits are carried out in parks and open spaces at regular intervals. Various attributes of each site are given points between 1 and 5, where 5 is the maximum score.

ARCHBISHOPS' PALACE GARDENS					
ATTRIBUTE	AUDIT DATE AND SCORE				
	2004	2008	2010		
Main entrance	3				
Boundaries including hedges, gates etc	5				
Roads, paths, cycleways and access points	2				
Parking	-				
Availability of public transport	-				
Lighting	5				
Cleanliness	3				
Planted areas (trees, shrubs, floral displays)	3				
Grass areas	4				
Litter and dog litter bins	5				
Seats	5				
Toilets	-				
Health and safety	4				
Nature conservation value	2				
Access for disabled	3				
Information	3				
Sustainability	-				