Public Consultation
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Abbey of St Edmund, Bury St Edmunds

Past, Present and Future
The jewel at the heart of Bury St Edmunds is the Abbey of St Edmund.

Its past, present and future are intimately linked to the character and spirit of the town. We all benefit from different parts of the abbey area being used for different activities and purposes, but in recent times the oversight of the area has been uncoordinated. Now there is good news! For the first time, organisations and people are working together as one group to promote the conservation and enhancement of the abbey. This is the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership and, through this booklet, we are delighted to share our work with all who care about the Abbey area. Page 3 tells you about who we are.

There is a lot of excitement about finding St Edmund! In reality, excavation doesn’t happen without careful research, statutory permissions and so on. This was how the Abbots’ graves were uncovered in 1903 (see page 5). The Heritage Partnership is taking the same responsible approach to the various exciting potential projects. Page 8 outlines some possibilities and asks for your feedback. Finding Edmund would be astonishing, but as you will see there are many other things to discover about the abbey as well. This booklet gives you an outline of two professional studies that we have undertaken this year, funded jointly by Historic England and St Edmundsbury Borough Council. You can read about the fascinating Heritage Assessment on pages 4 and 5, and the important Conservation Plan on pages 6 and 7.

So read on and let us know your views about the projects we have in mind to care for and ensure the long-term future of the extraordinary Abbey of St Edmund. Your input will be greatly appreciated and will help us work for the benefit of all who love our town.

Revd Canon Matthew Vernon
Chairman, Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership

This booklet, the Heritage Assessment and the Conservation Plan can be accessed digitally free of charge via:

https://www.stedscathedral.org/AbbeyofStEdmund
https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/AbbeyofStEdmund
About the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership

The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership was formed in 2016. For the first time, it brings together the major organisations that own land or have an interest in the precinct of the Abbey of St Edmund so they can work together in the care, conservation and enhancement of the abbey.

The mission of the Heritage Partnership is to deepen public understanding of the life and times of St Edmund and the medieval abbey and encourage people to experience the spiritual, historical and archaeological significance of the Abbey of St Edmund in the modern world. It is taking a responsible approach to heritage conservation and interpretation and will make changes only after thorough research, widespread consultation and obtaining the necessary statutory consents.

The partnership includes about 30 partners, including several individual specialists and about 30 associates.

It includes representatives and some observers from the following organisations:

- St Edmundsbury Cathedral
- St Edmundsbury Borough Council
- Suffolk County Council
- Bury St Edmunds Town Council
- The Bury St Edmunds Society
- Bury St Edmunds Town Trust
- Bury St Edmunds Town Guides
- St Mary’s Church
- St Edmund’s Roman Catholic Church
- Historic England
- English Heritage Trust
- University of East Anglia
- University of Suffolk
- Suffolk Record Office
- Bury Past and Present Society
- Abbey Gardens Friends
- Bury Water Meadows Group
- River Lark Catchment Partnership

Our Mission: Deepening public understanding of the life and times of St Edmund and the medieval abbey and encouraging people to experience the spiritual, historical and archaeological significance of the Abbey of St Edmund in the modern world.
Little is known about the early history of the abbey, but archaeological evidence shows that there was an Anglo-Saxon settlement on this site, and later documents say that it was called Beodricsworth.

In AD 869, Edmund, King of the East Angles, was killed by the Danes and within a few decades his body was laid in a timber church at Beodricsworth. Possession of Edmund’s body led to the later Benedictine Abbey becoming one of the wealthiest and most powerful monasteries in England and one of the major pilgrimage sites in western Europe. It led to the town being called Bury St Edmunds.

The royal veneration of Edmund was bound up with the origins and legitimacy of English kingship and so his shrine was strongly supported by medieval rulers. In around AD 1020, under the patronage of King Canute, the shrine at Bury St Edmunds was re-founded as a Benedictine monastery. Every English King between William I and Henry VII visited the abbey and several parliaments were held here.

Throughout the medieval period, the abbey was an important stage on which regional and national politics were played out. Perhaps the most celebrated occasion was in 1214, when it is thought that a meeting of earls and barons at the abbey led to the signing of Magna Carta.

St Edmund gave the town its name and the town grew up in the shadow of the abbey. The abbots laid out the streets and controlled the town and the surrounding area. Relations between town and abbey were often tense, occasionally erupting into riots as in 1327 when the abbey gate was burnt down and in 1381 when the Prior was killed.
After the dissolution of the abbey in 1539, the buildings were demolished. Medieval dressed stone from the abbey can still be seen in many walls and houses around the town. The body of St Edmund was taken from its shrine and there is some speculation that it may possibly be buried in the abbey grounds.

Although the early history of the abbey is somewhat hazy and the sources are scant, the later history of the monastery is well documented. The archives of the Abbey of St Edmund are extensive and include documents about the abbey’s administration and other material collected in its large library. Historians have tended to focus on this rich archive of documentary sources, while the abbey precinct itself has received less attention because the ruins are so fragmentary.

The Heritage Assessment demonstrates that the nature and extent of the buried archaeology and the discoveries during the last few centuries far exceed those of many other monastic sites, even if the surviving ruins are less extensive. It identifies over 100 individual episodes of archaeological or antiquarian investigation which is far higher than was first expected. Many of the archaeological investigations have been piecemeal and the abbey precinct has not been systematically investigated.

Perhaps the most famous of these excavations occurred after M.R. James, scholar, antiquarian and writer of ghost stories, found manuscript evidence that six of the abbots were buried in the chapterhouse of the monastery. On New Year’s Day 1903, the tombs were found exactly where he predicted they would be. The graves can be seen in the ruins and finds from the tombs are still exhibited in Moyse’s Hall Museum.

The Heritage Assessment identifies the architectural and historical analysis of the ground-plan of the abbey by Arthur Whittingham in 1952 as the single most significant analysis of the abbey ruins. His account has never been bettered and subsequent investigations have largely confirmed its accuracy.

Many of the excavations have been primarily concerned with uncovering the ruins of the monastery from under tons of demolition rubble. Very little of this clearance work has penetrated the medieval floor-layers. As a result, the buried archaeological resource is well preserved and lies largely intact across much of the precinct.

Archaeological investigation has produced evidence of prehistoric occupation of the area, although, interestingly, none of Roman occupation. There is strong evidence to suggest an Anglo-Saxon settlement underlies the medieval abbey buildings and deep layers of demolition rubble. The report concludes by recommending ways in which the ruins can be investigated further.

The Heritage Assessment is especially valuable in demonstrating that, despite all the historical and archaeological investigations of the abbey that have taken place, an enormous amount remains to be discovered.

The Heritage Assessment was prepared by Dr. Richard Hoggett, a freelance heritage consultant.

It can be downloaded free of charge via:

https://www.stedscathedral.org/AbbeyofStEdmund
https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/AbbeyofStEdmund
The Conservation Plan builds upon the Heritage Assessment to assess the significance of the abbey precinct and outline a conservation framework for its future care and enhancement.

The project area is 60 acres. Half of this is the Abbey Gardens but it also includes St Edmundsbury Cathedral, the Great Churchyard, St Mary’s Church, the former Eastgate Nursery, the Vinefields, the Crankles and No Man’s Meadow. It includes two Scheduled Monuments, a Registered Park and Garden and part of the Bury St Edmunds Town Centre Conservation Area. It includes an exceptionally rich collection of heritage assets with 21 Grade I listed buildings, three Grade II* listed buildings and over 115 Grade II listed buildings and structures (many are memorials in the Great Churchyard).

Apart from the two churches (St James’ – now the Cathedral – and St Mary’s) which were built by the Abbots within the precinct for the use of the townspeople, the best survivals are the two fine gates, the Norman Tower and the Abbey Gate. The Abbot’s Bridge and precinct walls are also noteworthy, and the way in which houses have been built into the flint core ruins of the west front of the abbey church is thought to be unique.

The Conservation Plan says that the abbey precinct has high significance because it is:

- the historic site of the Abbey of St Edmund, which was for nearly five centuries one of the wealthiest and most influential ecclesiastical institutions in England
- the location of the shrine of St Edmund and a focal point for pilgrims
- associated with Magna Carta
- a rare assemblage of monastic remains in an urban location
- a place of continuous Christian worship for over a millennium
- a place of commemoration with both medieval and modern memorials
- a place of leisure, a place for community events and a place for quiet and reflection.

As the site of St Edmund’s tomb and of the genesis of Magna Carta, the abbey gives Bury St Edmunds its identity as the ‘Shrine of a King, Cradle of the Law’.

Challenges to the heritage significance of the abbey precinct include:

- some lack of clarity over ownership and maintenance responsibilities
- backlog of maintenance of the ruins
- obtaining funding for future work.

The Conservation Plan puts forward a conservation framework for future management of the abbey precinct. It uses Historic England’s definition of conservation as:

‘The process of managing change to a significant place in its setting in ways that will best sustain its heritage values, while recognising opportunities to reveal or reinforce those values for present and future generations’. 
The Conservation Plan also puts forward a series of conservation policies to inform and guide future projects, including:

- adopt a coherent and integrated approach to any new work to preserve and enhance the heritage significance of the whole site.
- use the Conservation Plan to guide change.
- ensure the long-term good condition and appearance of the heritage assets.
- retain as much of the significant historic fabric and landscape features as possible.
- consider the impact on the whole area of proposals for any part of it.
- ensure a high standard of design in new works.

The plan suggests and outlines many individual projects to conserve and enhance the abbey. The Heritage Partnership has included many of these in its list of potential projects.

The Conservation Plan was prepared by Purcell, an architectural and heritage consultancy.

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**Six Objectives for the Project Area**

1. Re-present the project area to explore its history and inspire visitors through a range of interpretive techniques.
2. Unify the different parts of the area and improve access across the whole area.
3. Showcase the heritage assets to a standard that reflects their significance.
4. Increase understanding of the area through research and investigation.
5. Maximise use of under-used heritage assets.
6. Ensure the overall sustainability of the area to benefit the wider local economy.

**Four Key Tasks to Achieve Objectives**

1. Form a constituted organisation to conserve and enhance the abbey.
2. Identify funding sources.
3. Develop an overarching plan of projects.
4. Obtain the necessary heritage consents.

Above Photo: Abbey ruins taken from the Cathedral Tower, from the Conservation Plan
What Next?

The vision of the Heritage Partnership is that the Abbey of St Edmund will be treasured and enjoyed by an increasing range of local people and visitors as the focus of our past history, our present culture and our future inheritance in the heart of Bury St Edmunds. The Heritage Partnership aims to realise this vision through a series of potential projects that it will discuss with the local community and with the Heritage Lottery Fund and other potential funders during 2019.

Your comments on this draft action programme will help to secure funding and promote the implementation of some of the most important projects. Consultation with partners and partner organisations has helped to shape this draft programme of action. Early priorities could include protecting and conserving the historic fabric and promoting historical and archaeological research.

1 Work with partners and local people
   • ‘Past, Present and Future’ conference
   • Contribute to the Millennium Celebrations in 2020 of the founding of the abbey
   • Undertake visitor and user surveys
   • Establish a volunteer programme
   • Develop a master plan and action plan
   • Develop an interpretation strategy
   • Establish the partnership as a charity

2 Improve maintenance and conservation
   • Implement the new conservation policies
   • Improve protection of the historic fabric
   • Review responsibilities for the fabric
   • Start clearing backlog of fabric repairs
   • Start full maintenance programme

3 Increase understanding of the abbey
   • Develop a framework for further research
   • Commission archaeological research and non-invasive surveys
   • Explore the possibility of excavation
   • Develop further historical research

4 Unify the abbey precinct
   • Improve access and circulation within and around the abbey precinct
   • Incorporate outlying areas including The Crankles and No Mans Meadow
   • Reconcile the different roles of the area as a public park and a heritage attraction

5 Improve presentation and interpretation
   • Develop an educational programme
   • Produce a new guidebook
   • Produce a range of information for visitors
   • Improve signs in and around the area
   • Investigate producing digital reconstruction

6 Improve visitor facilities
   • Work with local organisations to feature the abbey within the town’s tourism offer
   • Open new tennis courts at Eastgate Nursery
   • Clear the old tennis courts to reveal the east end of the abbey church
   • Replace Abbey Gardens information point
   • Consider an Abbey information centre

Your Views

The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership will be gradually taking forward many of these projects to deliver its mission and vision. We are keen to hear and consider your views as we further shape our approach to the heritage conservation and interpretation of the Abbey of St Edmund.

• Which projects are the most important to you and why?
• Are there other projects you think we should consider?
• What should feature in any new heritage interpretation?
• Any other comments?

Please reply to lorna.heritage@protonmail.com Your reply can be anonymous but it would help us if you could include your name, age group, occupation and place of residence. This data will not be made public. If you would like to know more about our activities, please ask for a contact form.