

‘Connecting Abbey Ponds’ Project – a summary so far:

A report for Full Council by Lisa Ulf-Hansen

Introduction

In 2020 Abbey Ponds was leased by BTC from King’s School, Bruton, for a period of 99 years. An all weather, safe walking route was installed connecting Bruton town centre and the train station with the art gallery, Durslade Community Gardens, and the Dovecote.

The footpath now requires an upgrade;

- The surface becomes very claggy when it rains.
- In places the path is uneven due to storm damage.
- The steps at the bottom entrance are not accessible to those with restricted mobility.
- It has been suggested that extending the footpath up through the Community Gardens (the Durslade Allotment field) would be beneficial.

Footpath

The key function of the footpath is that it is a safe walking route up to the Community Gardens and to the gallery, and it is disappointing that the footpath installed has not stood the test of time. However, the grant funding application provides an opportunity to obtain funds not only to support replacing the existing surface, but also to upgrade the gateway, and extend the footpath through the Community gardens. The aim is to encourage visitors to come to Bruton by public transport and enjoy the open spaces like Abbey Ponds and the Dovecote area.

An application to the GWR Customer & Community Improvement Fund was made in January 2025.

Grant funding application

The grant funding application to GWR was submitted in December 2024. The application amount was for £21,000, to support several different elements to the proposal:

- Accessible gate and ramp at the bottom entrance to Abbey Ponds.
- Improving the surface of the existing hoggin path.

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- Extending the hoggin path through the Durslade Community Garden.
- Accessible gates for the top of Abbey Ponds.
- Information boards for Abbey Ponds, design and installation.
- Pedestrian way-finding signage to and from the train station, via Abbey Ponds and Durslade Community Garden.

The grant application was successful, and the amount awarded is £18,740.00.

There are conditions attached to the grant funding:

- A monthly report is required to be submitted online and this has to include budget/funds spent, what has been achieved in the current month, is the project on target, are there any elements which may delay the project.
- In addition, photographs have to be submitted on an ongoing basis to show progress, and on completion. 'Before' photos have already been taken, in preparation for submission with the conclusion of grant report
- The project's completion deadline (including invoicing) is **31st March 2026**.
- A completion report must be submitted by **7th April 2026**. This is being compiled on an ongoing basis so as to ensure that it is accurate, comprehensive and submitted before the deadline.

The grant documents are available on Sharepoint, including copies of the monthly submissions to date.

Budget and funding

The GWR grant funding has been complemented by funding from other sources. The Town Council has £4,754.59 in earmarked reserves for the Abbey Ponds footpath upgrade, and £2,000 in the current year's budget. Hauser and Wirth have made a donation of £7,000. This gives a project budget of £32,494.59.

Officers have been monitoring the budget closely, and there is an up-to-date summary in the meeting papers.

Historic England- Scheduled Monument Consent.

Two thirds of the Abbey Ponds area is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) was required from Historic England before commencing any works on the upgrade of the gateway, the refurbishing of the footpath, or the installation of upgraded information signage could go ahead.

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All this required close and continuous liaison between Council officers and Historic England, including the submission of documents and diagrams to obtain pre-application advice. The support of members of the Abbey Ponds Working Group (APWG) was crucial at this stage, as designs for the ramp and gate to replace the steps were required.

Ultimately, two practical designs of ramp and gateway were produced, and submitted to Historic England along with many other documents. These documents are available on Sharepoint to view.

Historic England stated early on that due to the historic nature of the site a Watching Brief would be required. The archaeologist who had assisted with the Brubowl excavations provided invaluable assistance, including a Written Scheme of Investigation for the pre-application advice. The Written Scheme of Investigation was subsequently submitted with the application for SMC.

Historic England responded quite quickly, with the preference to the gateway design Option 2, enabling the Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) application to be completed, and counter signed by Kings School. The application took about 8 weeks to be determined, and it is fair to say that had the SMC not been granted the majority of the project would not have been possible.

Kings School

Kings School had full sight of the accompanying documents to support the SMC application. These were supplied (in hard copy as well as electronic) with the SMC application form.

Kings were contacted when the SMC application was successful, they have been thanked for their support, and they have been notified of the provisional start date. Kings have been asked to allow the footpath contractor to access the site via the top entrance of Abbey Ponds, to their compound, and to store some material there. Note this will not interfere with the Sauna.

Officers will ensure that copies of the monthly submission to GWR are also forwarded to Kings, for their information.

Working Group Input

'Connecting Abbey Ponds' has been an agenda item for the working group for the meetings held on 20th February, 14th April, 14th July and 13th October, 2025.

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As mentioned, Working Group members have been instrumental in elements of the SMC application for Historic England, and Officers have assumed that they receive regular updates from the Working Group Chair.

The working group were invited to a 'walk around' to discuss way-finding signage on 20/21st July; this was particularly to consider aspects of the existing signage that would benefit from being upgraded/making more prominent/visible.

Historic England

Historic England have been very engaged with the application for Scheduled Monument Consent.

Signage

Signage has been separated into two areas; way-finding and information.

Way-finding signage.

Wayfinding signage locations



The way-finding signage is the external directional signage, that assists footpath users find their way between the train station, the gallery, Durslade Community Gardens and the centre of Bruton.

The Assistant Clerk, Town Clerk, and Cllr Jones met with Andy Barron (Somerset Highways) on 7th October. A summary of this meeting was shared with Town Committee on 7th October, along with a map detailing the locations where those who took part in the July 'walk around' consider it is needed.

The challenge with the way-finding signage is the number of organisations whose consent is required for the installation or upgrading of signage, notably Kings School, Network Rail, and Somerset Highways.

Kings School are the most direct to deal with, and their consent is required for the signs at position 2 and 3. Position 3 (wall near to the railway bridge) is fairly straightforward, but the installation at position 2 (wall opposite the junction to the railway station) would require some traffic management. In the opinion of the Highways engineer, the junction opposite position 2 would be a more straightforward option.

Position 1 (lamppost, opposite the entrance to the railway station) requires permission from Network Rail. A request has already been submitted for a sign in this position, and a response is awaited. Position 2 would also require Network Rail permission, but the existing signage may be adequate if the foliage is cut back.

Position 5 (church wall opposite the entrance to Station Road Car Park) would require the agreement of the church, and probably a Faculty application. The installation would also require traffic management, and given the deadline for the completion of the project this is not considered practical at present.

The other points require permission from Highways.

In Position 4 (the gateway that is being upgraded), a combination of Way-finding signage and Information signage is considered desirable (see *Information signage*, below). If this were mounted on a large block of stone it could also function as a barrier, discouraging pedestrians from walking up the road, and encouraging them to use the path through Abbey Ponds. In short, the existing information board inside the gateway would be removed, possibly being replaced with an information board fixed to large block of

stone, which itself would sit on the pyramid paving next to the bollard nearer to the roadside.

Position 3 (Kings school, railway bridge) will also have a post and directional arrow, showing the direction to the train station and into Bruton.

Position 6 (Church bridge) will be a finger post, to direct into Bruton, and also towards the train station.

At the date of writing this report (24th October 2025) Highways are not accepting any more work instructions up to the end of March 2026. We have also been informed (not via official channels, but by the customer liaison for Kier, the Somerset Highways contractor) that the Enhanced Highways Maintenance Scheme is no longer available (it has been terminated by Somerset Council). Way-finding signage within the gift of the Town Council is being considered, but it is likely that some elements of the way-finding may run past the end of the project deadline. This will be communicated in a monthly submission to GWR, when the options have been considered.

Information signage



The aim is to install functional information signage that is sustainable and in keeping with the Abbey Ponds site. Currently, a design process is underway, to consider four locations that are deemed ideal for the installation of

information signage. Various options have been considered, some of which was presented to full council in September 2025.

The designs have been presented to the Abbey Ponds Working Group, and feedback has been collated both from councillors and working group members. The briefing presented to working group members on 13th October can be found on Sharepoint.

At the November full council meeting there will be a brief presentation for councillors to consider, with two options for information signage, including pricing.

The proposal involves replacing the traditional 'post and board' design with a more rustic and robust design, probably in a local stone, but the amount of information provided would be limited. Detailed information often requires updating, so a QR code could be provided, directing users to a website with up-to-date information.

The Town Clerk has contacted Historic England, to explain the probable change in fixing method for the information signage, and to establish the process to follow should an amendment be required to the SMC.

To ensure that the footpath and gateway upgrade is progressed and completed, the signage is now being viewed as a separate strand of the whole project.

Working with other organisations

Regular meetings are taking place with key stakeholders. The latest meeting (22nd October) was with Hauser and Wirth (senior director, estate manager, designers and social media), footpath and gateway contractor, the town clerk and Cllr Jones.

Hauser and Wirth have led on the contractor for the footpath and gateway upgrade. The trusted contractor has vast experience in undertaking works on a scheduled site, working in close proximity to the public, and producing an end result of a high standard. Their design contractor is leading with the designs for the information signage.

The town clerk met with the Good Company chair earlier this month, to provide an overview of the project, and the approximate timescales.

Other organisations such as Highways and Network Rail have been consulted as and when required.

Current position.

- The lower gateway and footpath will be closed from 3rd -14th November inclusive. The area will be barriered off. Allotment holders, users of the Wild Sauna, and those wishing to go to Hauser and Wirth will be encouraged to use the footpath from the Dovecote. The option to drive and park in the Hauser and Wirth car park is also available.
- It is possible that the footpath will be open on the middle weekend (8 & 9 November). Obviously if the works finish early, the footpath will be opened early.
- The works are starting from the steps, with the gateway upgrade, and working up towards the top of Abbey Ponds.
- Additional warning signs will be in place on Dropping Lane (the junction with Park Wall, and also down at the railway bridge end) to warn drivers of the possibility of pedestrians walking at the side of the road (this will be organised by the town council, via the grounds maintenance contractor). A brief phone call conversation took place with Highways (24th October) and the proposed signage was discussed and approved.
- A notification on the town council website, social media, Hauser and Wirth websites and social media, will be published early next week, and there will be a notice in the community office window. This is similar to what was done for the works at Library Junction.
- Allotment holders and other key stake holders (Wild Sauna, Chamber of Commerce, Good Company, and channels like local Whatsapp groups) will also be notified directly.
- During the closure officers will publish updates, to the best of their ability.

END OF REPORT