

Blaise Castle Estate A Place of Myths and Legends, Awe and Wonder



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Contents

Preface	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Identity of place	13
3. Significance	21
4. Our Spirit of Place	24

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Cover image, detail from Humphry Repton’s Red Book of the Blaise Estate,
BRSMG Mb2400 © Bristol Culture

Preface

Understanding the context of our place...

The City of Bristol is one of the most historic cities in England. Founded in about 1000AD the city has always been a place of change, economic growth and innovation.

Until the First World War the fabric of the city was essentially a medieval structure centred on the cross roads of High Street, Corn Street, Broad Street and Wine Street. Even the outer structure of the city, now the inner suburbs such as St Pauls and Kingsdown, was based on medieval routes or field patterns.

Despite centuries of urban growth and densification this structure remained unchanged while building forms adapted to new uses and new architectural styles.

During the twentieth century Bristol has seen its most dramatic changes with the depopulation of the central core, bombing during the Second World War and the dominance of private motor car use. Although this period has continued the process of urban renewal and the replacement of built form, it is the Post War highway infrastructure projects that have eroded the physical fabric of the city on a scale unlike any other period.

Within this broad context, Bristol's character is defined by a variety of individual neighbourhoods with a distinctive character informed by their topography, landscape, views, layout, land use, social development, architectural style and materials.

An Our Place document is intended to help explain how a specific area has arrived at its current state from its origins, and highlight the key features that define the area as it exists today.

This understanding provides the basis from which appropriate changes to the area can be achieved, which will enable it to grow and succeed whilst still respecting its historic legacy and unique sense of place. Ultimately it will help to deliver local plan policies particularly around issues concerning local character and distinctiveness.

The Our Place process encourages greater participation by communities in defining the character of their neighbourhood and planning for the future of their place.

Our Place character mapping is an important stage in defining the identity of a place that informs the Spirit of Place process that follows a co-creative place evaluation approach as defined by the National Trust (<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/our-conservation-principles>).

Understanding Our Spirit of Place...

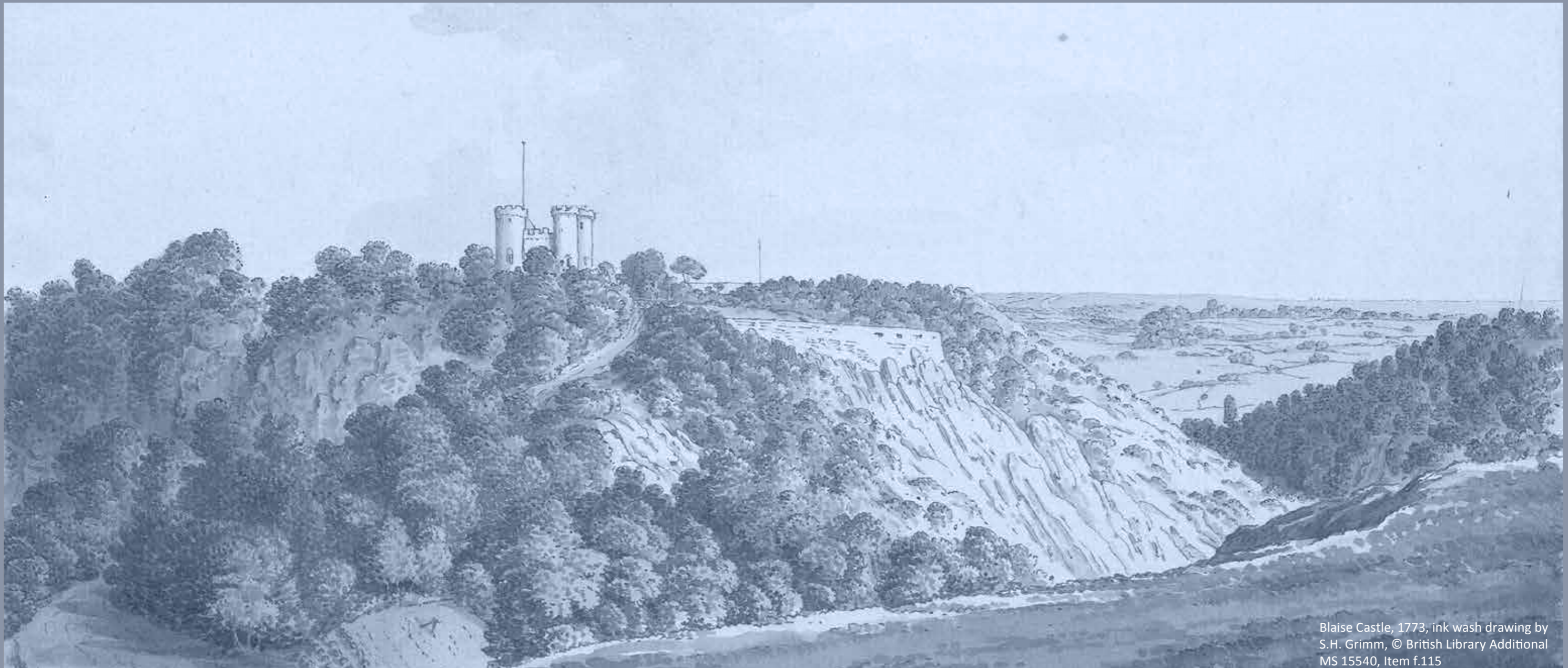
Spirit of Place brings together key stakeholders to unpick and identify what makes a place distinctive and unique. This understanding is built from the emotional reactions people have to the physical elements such as scenery and buildings, cultural aspects, heritage, and a sites aesthetic qualities.

Bristol City Council have adopted this approach as a way of understanding what their parks and green spaces mean to the people that use them. Through a series of workshops run at each site BCC will work with park users and managers to create a set of guiding principals that will act as a touchstone for future management of that place.

The finished Spirit of Place documents will be publicly accessible and will be published alongside the Bristol Future Parks Expression of Interest pilot. This aims to identify new sustainable income opportunities and community activities whilst also respecting the natural and cultural heritage within our parks and green spaces. The themes and principals identified in the Spirit of Place document will form part of the decision-making process.

Introduction

1



Blaise Castle, 1773; ink wash drawing by S.H. Grimm, © British Library Additional MS 15540, Item f.115

Purpose, scope and status

Policy Context

A local area is largely defined by its physical character and distinctiveness. Understanding and defining this local character significantly contributes to conserving an area’s identity. For this reason local character and distinctiveness is a material consideration of any planning proposal.

The over-arching planning policy is the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which sets out the Government’s planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied at a local level. Of specific relevance is Section 12: Conserving and enhancing the historic environment.

The Core Strategy (June 2011) is the overall approach for planning in Bristol, guiding development and setting out key elements of the planning framework up to 2026 and beyond. Our Place documents form part of a suite of guidance documents referred to in Policy BCS21 of the Core Strategy and the Local Character and Distinctiveness policy in the Development Management Policy document.

Purpose and scope

This document provides an understanding of why Blaise Castle Estate is special and articulates which elements contribute to or detract from its identity.

To achieve this understanding, the document identifies the physical characteristics of the park defined by the local:

- Topography
- Views and vantage points (into, out of and within each area)
- Landmarks (positive landmarks and other notable features)
- Significant green infrastructure
- Routes
- Spaces and boundaries

Combining an Our Place process that considers physical character and significance to a Spirit of Place process that draws in wider communal aspects enables a rich understanding of the identity of an area.

This understanding is intended to form the basis of care for places like Blaise Castle Estate and ensure that all users of the park can contribute to its positive future.

Our Spirit of Place Blaise Castle Estate

In July 2021, the community met with officers to undertake an Our Spirit of Place exercise. Normally an Our Spirit of Place process would begin with an Our Place character mapping exercise. In the case of Blaise Castle Estate it was felt that the combined experience of the participants together with an officer site visit would be sufficient to help map the special identity and significance of the estate.

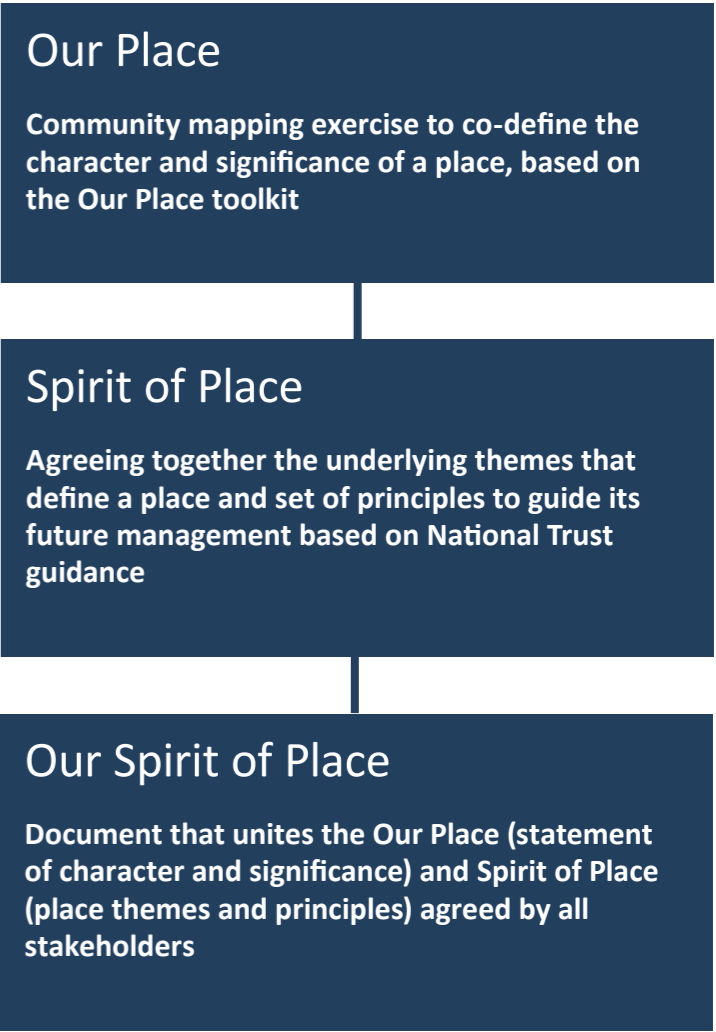
Participants were invited to complete an online survey to help define what was special and distinctive about the place and whether there were any negative aspects to the site.

Three online Spirit of Place community and officer collaborative workshops used a Flinga online white board tool to draw out themes about the place, based on the survey responses and discussions.

The place identity, statement of significance and identified place themes have been combined in this document to form a co-created vision for Blaise Castle Estate that should inform the future use and management of the site.

For further information about the Our Place project visit <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/239165/Our+Place+report-revised.pdf/bcbfffe3-58a4-2297-26be-98a8ba32d8a3>

The Our Spirit of Place Process



Language of the document

Character/context

The main visual characteristics of an area resulting from the influence of geology, topography, urban layout, plot form, land use, and predominant building ages, types, form and materials.

Topography

The physical form of an area defined by natural features of relief and geographic elements such as rivers.

Views

Within the scope of this document views are discussed in terms of locations from which a view to a specific landmark, or series of features (natural or built) is possible.

Landmarks

Are defined as features that make a positive contribution to a view (long distant or local). The description of each character area refers to positive landmarks as well as 'other features within the area'. This latter type are not necessarily visible in a specific view but are of historic interest or make a positive contribution to the local character.



Location

Location

Blaise Castle Estate lies in the northwest corner of Bristol between the suburbs of Henbury to the east, Lawrence Weston to the north/northwest, Henbury Golf Course to the southeast and Coombe Dingle to the south.

Kings Weston Road forms the estate boundary at its extreme western edge, beyond which lies another important historic landscape of Kings Weston House.

The bulk of the estate consists of woodland along Kings Weston Hill and the Hazel Brook valley, a tributary of the River Trym.

On the north side of the hill is a parkland landscape with visitors facilities along Kings Weston Road.

The estate was once owned by a series of wealthy families including the Harford family who lived at Blaise Castle House that lies at the northeast corner of the estate, close to the village of Henbury.

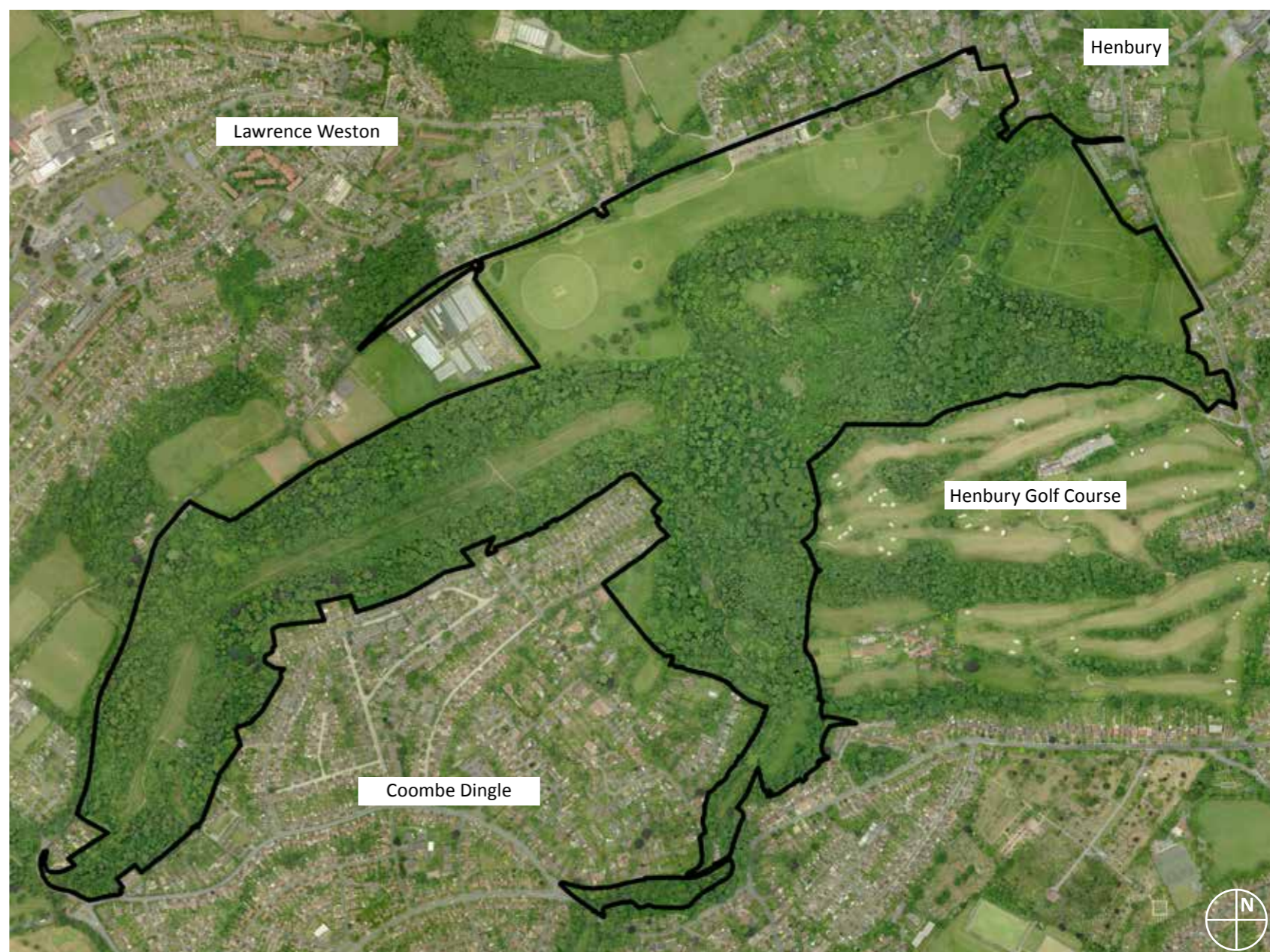
Within the boundary of the estate are many historic assets and important landscape features that relate to the history of these wealthy families. In addition to this there are nationally significant prehistoric sites along Kings Weston Hill and on Blaise Hill.



Fig 1
Our Spirit of Place Blaise Castle Estate
study area



Park area boundary



Blaise Castle Estate prehistory



The Blaise Castle Estate contains evidence of communities living in the area since at least the Bronze Age. These communities are likely to have been farming the land along the edge of the Severn and have left archaeological remains across the wider landscape.

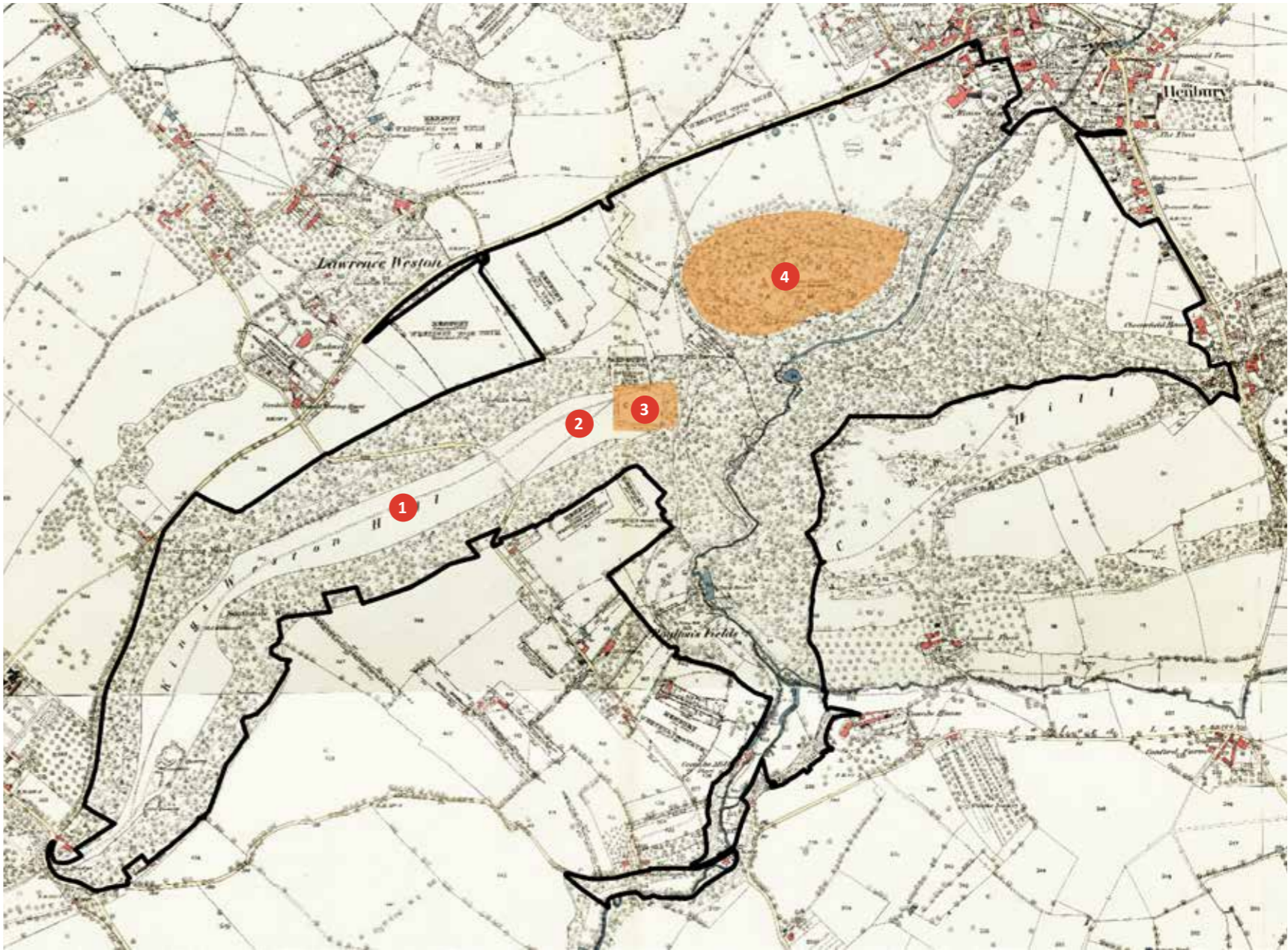
Along Kings Weston Hill and on Blaise Hill these archaeological remains consist of earthwork features including several tumuli, or burial mounds dating to the Bronze Age (1) and at least three enclosures of Iron Age date; a circular feature (2), Kings Weston Camp (3) and Blaise Castle Hillfort (4). These latter two features are protected as Scheduled Ancient Monuments and their extent is shown in orange on the map.

The function of these features is uncertain. Historically they have been called hillforts, but it is likely that they had a more agricultural role and that the people who created the enclosures actually lived in settlements on lower ground in the river valleys to the north and west.

Despite our lack of understanding about these features, it is true to say that Kings Weston Hill and Blaise Hill survive as an important prehistoric landscape.

Fig 2
Prehistoric monuments highlighted on
1880s Ordnance Survey map

-  Scheduled Ancient Monument
-  Park area boundary



Blaise Castle Estate historic landscape

The Blaise Castle Estate landscape as we see it today is largely the result of investments by Thomas Farr and John Scandrett Harford during the 1700s and early 1800s. Harford's Blaise Castle House (1) (listed grade II*) designed by William Paty is surrounded by several other listed assets built at this time including the Orangery (listed grade II) and Model Dairy (listed grade II*) designed by John Nash.

The landscape around the house is the result of the designs of Humphry Repton who worked for Harford in the 1790s. Repton's designs resulted in the surviving route through the woodland from the Gate Lodge on Henbury Road (2), past the Rustic Lodge (3) and Inner Lodge (4), across Hazel Brook before approaching the house from the south.

Repton usually produced a 'Red Book' to promote his designs to his clients and the Blaise Red Book held at Blaise Museum provides excellent evidence for the landscaping that was undertaken at the time.

As well as the landscape proposals for tree works within the parkland area to improve the setting for the house, the book also includes plans for the inner lodge and picturesque woodland walks that passed the caves or grottos and the earlier Blaise Castle (5), built in 1766.

These pre-existing features that probably included a Root House and dramatic wooded valleys were ideally suited for Repton's ideas for romantic, awe inspiring landscapes.

Fig 3

1880s Ordnance Survey Plan

Repton's designed route

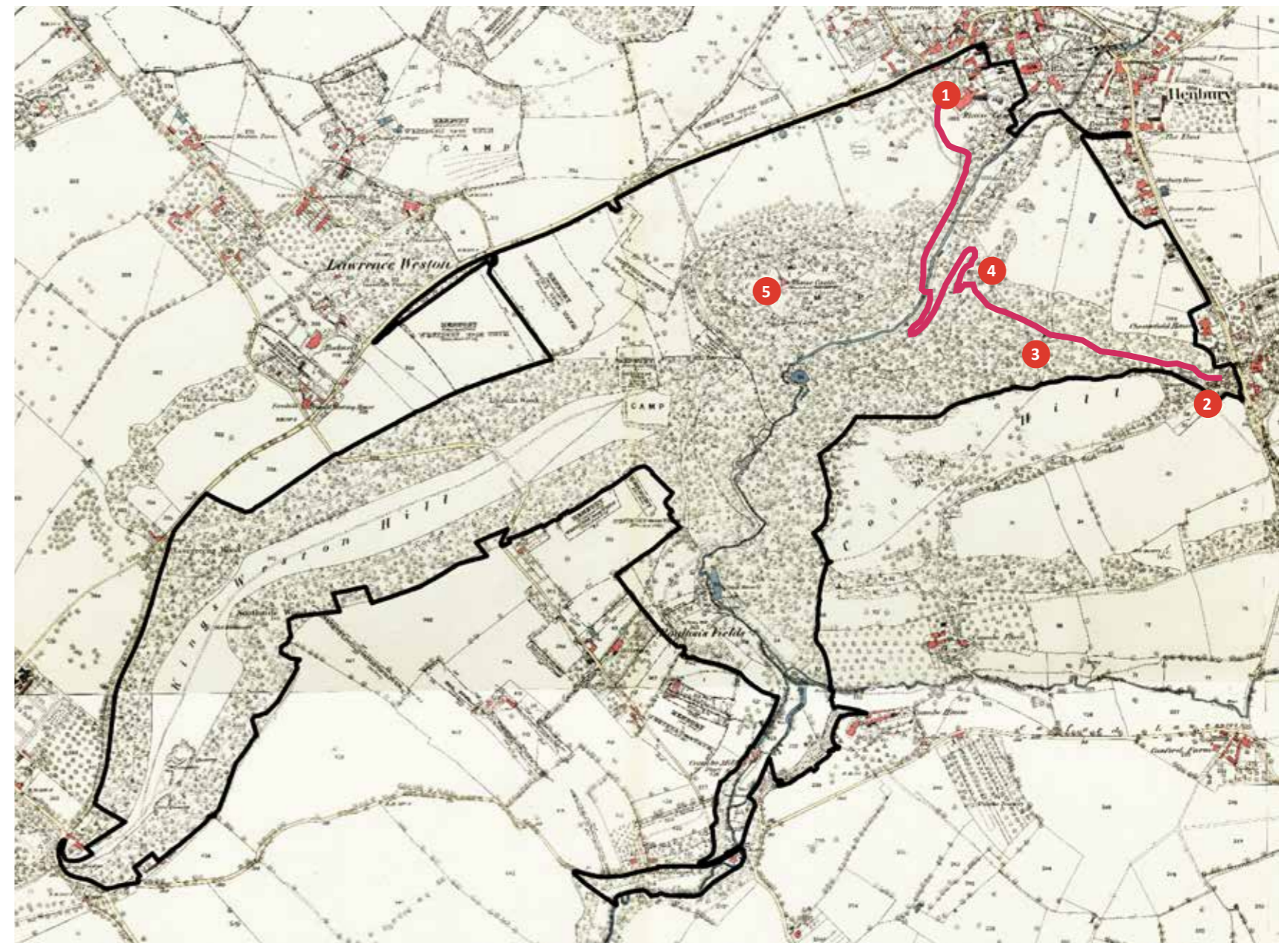
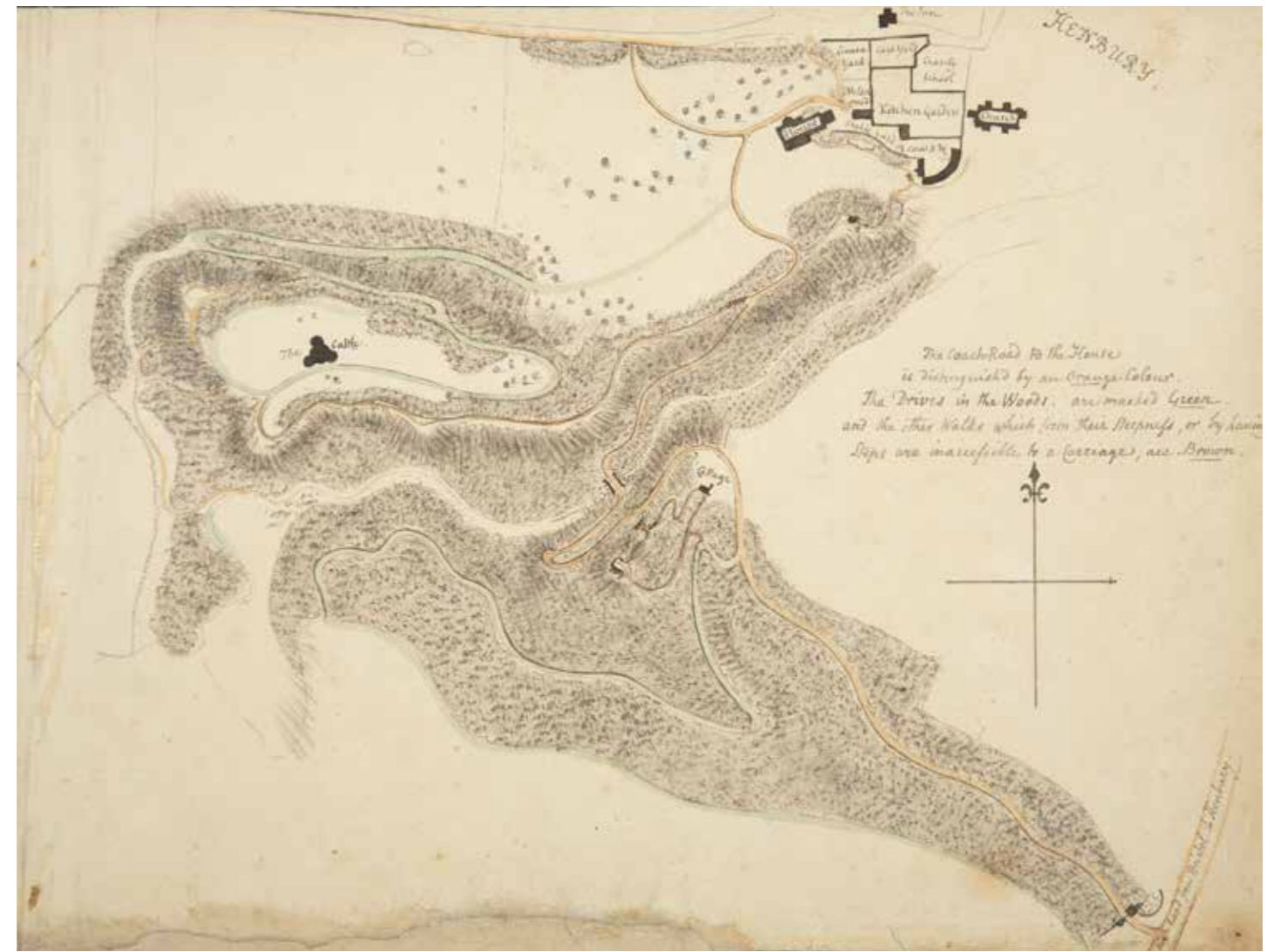


Fig 4 Extracts from Repton's Red Book for the Blaise Castle Estate demonstrating how careful tree management could improve dramatic views (below) and the parkland setting in front of the house (bottom). Images, details from Humphry Repton's Red Book of the Blaise Estate, BRSMG Mb2400 © Bristol Culture.



Blaise Castle Estate later history

Blaise Castle Estate was purchased by Bristol Corporation (now Bristol City Council) in 1926. Since this date the estate has become one of Bristol's principal destination parks with a play area and event spaces within the parkland landscape.

Previously this area has also included sports pitches and a paddling pool.

The house itself opened as a branch of the City Museum in 1949.

In the early 2000s the City Council secured funding to restore the historic landscape and introduced the current cafe facility close to the Kings Weston Road car park.



Fig.5

1950s photographs of the Blaise Castle Estate paddling pool (above) and children with a Goram Giant at the Goram Fair (right), images from the Public Relations Collection at Bristol Archives, 40826/EST/21/70 and 40826/LEI/13/2

Blaise Castle Estate natural landscape

The important archaeological and historic landscapes within the Blaise Castle Estate are set within an important natural environment.

The whole estate is designated as a Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Site (RIGS). This designation is based upon the rich landscape of gorges that have formed since the last Ice Age and the research potential that these rock exposures present.



An important ecological landscape overlies this geology. Where this ecology is particularly significant or vulnerable to change, the area has been designated as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI). Within the estate this SNCI covers the woodland areas and extends into the parkland environment of the Royals and Kingsweston Down.

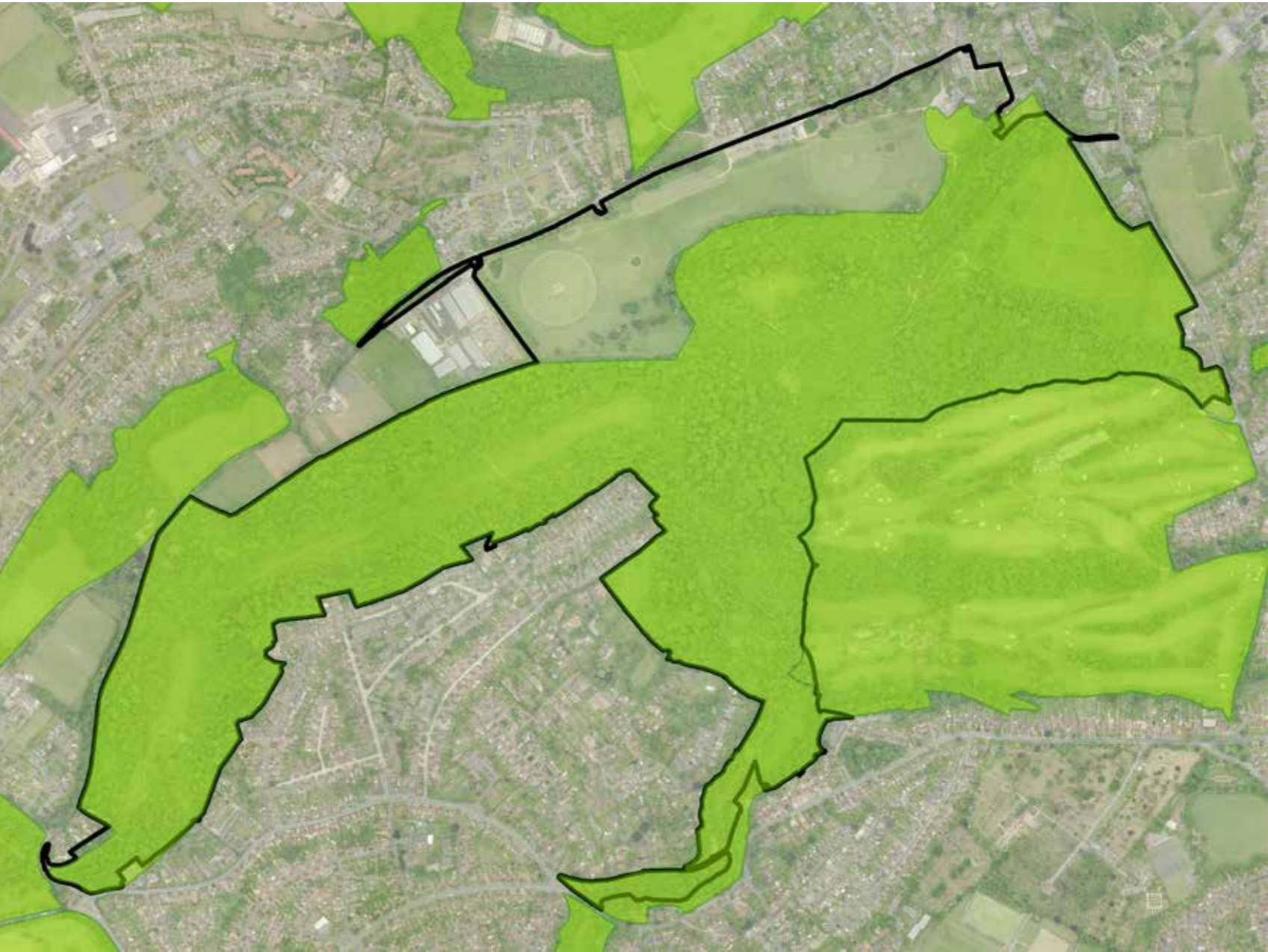
The ecological importance of this SNCI is defined as ancient & semi-natural broadleaved woodland, unimproved calcareous grassland and semi-improved neutral grassland, streams & ponds.

Data about these designations and the biodiversity in the area is held by the Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC) based at Blaise Museum.

In addition to the habitats, the parkland supports species that are also threatened. Digitised records held by BRERC show a total of 1626 different species that have been recorded in the Park.

Fig 6
Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) highlighted on 2012 aerial image

-  SNCI area
-  Park area boundary



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Identity of place

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Blaise Castle Estate

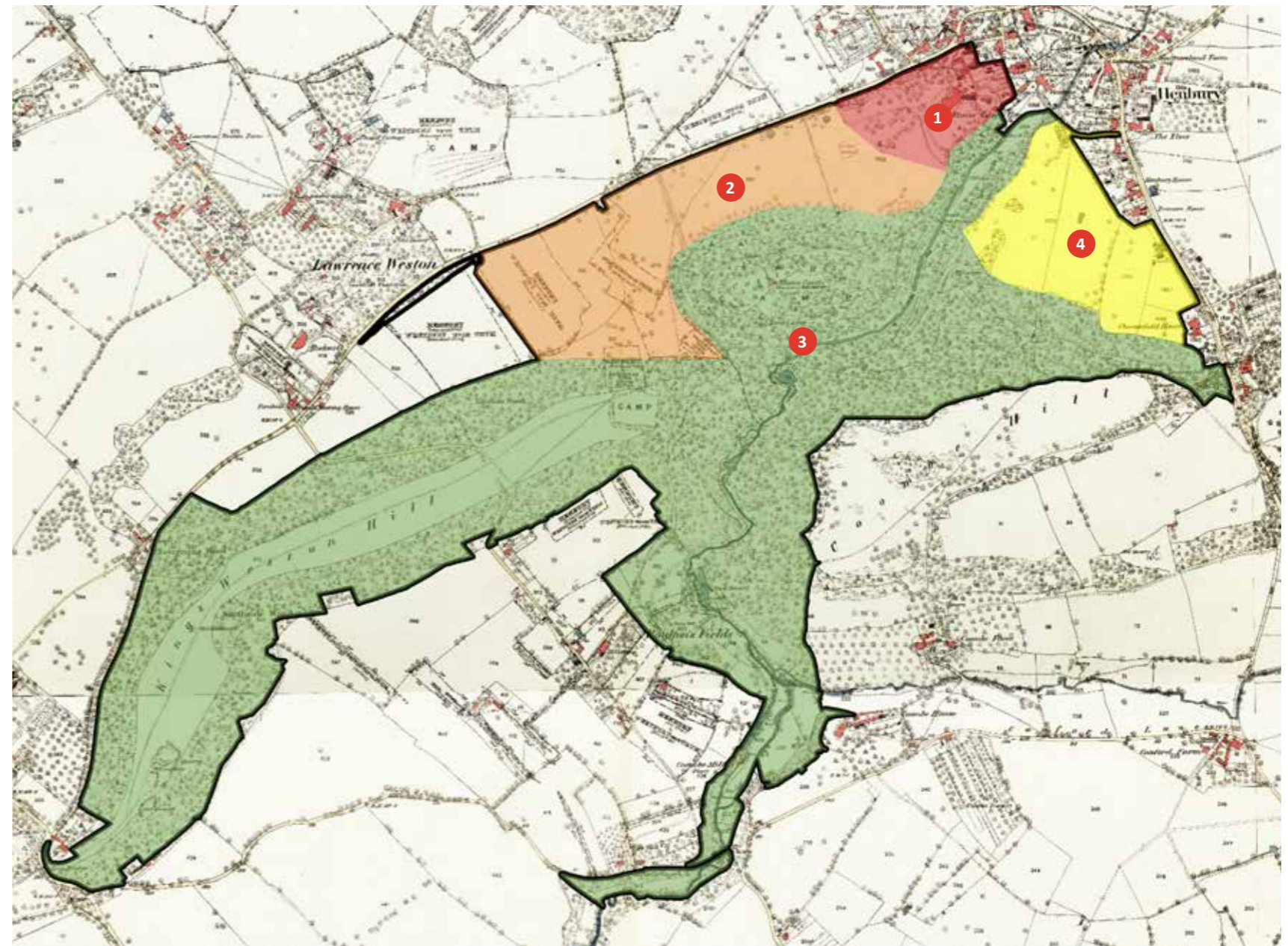
Summary description

Blaise Castle Estate covers a variety of landscapes spread over some of Bristol's most dramatic topography.

To assist the understanding of such a varied environment, the estate can be divided into four distinct character areas. The extent of each of these areas is largely determined by the topography and landscape conditions.

- 1 Blaise Museum
- 2 Parkland community space
- 3 Kings Weston Hill, Blaise Hill and woodland valleys
- 4 The Royals

Each of these areas have important aspects that contribute to the overall identity and significance of the estate.



Area 1 Blaise Museum

Positive Context

High quality historic buildings and their setting relating to the domestic life of previous wealthy families.

The group of parkland trees to the south of the play area largely create a visual separation from the parkland character area to the west. These trees also provide a sense of enclosure to the area immediately in front of the house.

These parkland trees do not form a continuous boundary and the space between the main group, and the woodland trees beyond, enables good views from the space in front of the house towards the wooded Blaise Hill. These views include an important glimpse of Blaise Castle. This viewing corridor is particularly important, being a survivor of Repton's original design intent, as evidenced by his Red Book.

The Model Dairy enclosure is a particularly important feature within this character area. Because of the kitchen garden walls and boundary planting, the space has a unique, intimate quality.



View towards Blaise Hill (above)

Model Dairy (right)



Area 2 Parkland community space

Positive Context

Open green space with good community facilities, large event space at the western end and sensitively screened car park area.

The parkland edges retain the form created through Repton's designs offering a good visual and physical transition between open space and woodland hillside.

Glimpsed views of Blaise Castle House between grouped parkland trees.

Popular play park within woodland setting at the edge of the parkland context.

The green space is particularly well used by picnickers during the summer months.

View west through parkland area with screening of car park on the right and woodland edge to the left



Area 3 Kings Weston Hill, Blaise Hill and woodland valleys

Positive Context

Dramatic views from viewpoints on both sides of the valley.

Historic woodland walks past multiple natural and heritage points of interest such as Lovers' Leap, Goram's Chair and Butcher's Cave. All these individual components create a coherent landscape that remains consistent with the romantic principles of Repton's picturesque designs.

Blaise Castle, an 18th century landmark, set within open space on the brow of Blaise Hill.

Kingsweston Down itself is a dramatic finger of open grassland along the ridge framed by woodland to the east of the castle. Along this downland ridge are several prehistoric earthworks.



View from Lovers' Leap (above)

Butcher's Cave, one of the caves/grottos within wooded hillside (right)



Area 4 The Royals

Positive Context

Views towards historic properties along Henbury Road and landscape beyond.

Peaceful meadow environment with parkland trees. The meadow has been restored over recent years with green hay imported from Ashton Court.

Accessible from various points and good informal routes through the space.

View looking northwest across the area of The Royals



Strengths and challenges

As part of the Our Spirit of Place process an online survey was circulated to stakeholders that asked ‘what is special, unique and distinctive about the place?’

In addition to these positive elements, participants were also asked to identify any specific negative issues.

These responses have been used to inform this strengths and challenges table as well as the themes and principles in the following section.

Strength	Description	Challenges and opportunities
A variety of landscapes from open parkland to wooded valleys	The dramatic topography of Kings Weston Hill, Blaise Hill and gorge combined with the flat grassland beside Kings Weston Road, provides a mix of environments for multiple park users.	Comments received from stakeholders referred to damage on some routes caused by cyclists and horse riders. The rich quality of the landscape and its heritage offers many opportunities for positive use and exploration.
Well preserved historic landscape and associated historic buildings	The natural landscapes of steep valley gorge, rocky outcrops, caves and woodland were ideal for Repton’s picturesque concepts. The romantic landscape approach was to emphasise the awe and wonder of a landscape.	It is important that management of the estate is informed by this historic landscape approach that contributes to the overall significance of the estate. There are many opportunities to celebrate this incredible natural and historic resource through woodland trails and digital experiences.
Dramatic views	These views are a key feature of the landscape and many were part of Repton’s design approach. The view from Lovers’ Leap will be the best known, but there are many other views from above the gorge.	Lovers’ Leap remains an amazing dramatic view. Tree and scrub growth has reduced the visual quality of other significant views within the gorge, some of which are inaccessible. Prioritising tree and scrub works to restore these views provides an opportunity to enhance the enjoyment of the walks on the estate. Care must be taken to ensure the safety of people enjoying these views, some of which are close to cliff edges.
Woodland trails	There are a variety of trails and designed walks through the estate, that take visitors through the different parts of the estate.	There are several designed walks of varying lengths through the estate. Improved signage would assist the visitor. Any signage should be sensitively designed to avoid visual and physical clutter. Improved signage, particularly estate map signs at the car park and cafe area, would be beneficial. Digital wayfinding options are not always possible because of poor phone signal coverage at present.
Popular play area	One of the most popular aspects of the estate is the play area that attracts families from across the city. It is well screened from the parkland landscape, but also well connected to areas for picnics and exploration.	Maintaining the park, increasing its use without impacting the significant landscape, requires sensitive design. An active use in the old sports club house would present an improved aspect to the play area and parkland.

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Significance

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Understanding Significance

Heritage Values and Significance

The conservation principle of ‘Significance’, the sum of the cultural and natural heritage values of a historic place, underpins modern conservation policy and practice. It provides a framework for understanding and comparing different values that have established in a given place through time.

Recent publications by Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund set out the current thinking on what is significant and how it is to be described. These documents promote four key categories of heritage value:

- The site as a source of evidence or knowledge (*evidential*)
- The site as a link to the past, the people who shaped it and a means of learning about it (*historic*)
- The site as a source of sensory or intellectual stimulation, designed or incidental (*aesthetic*)
- The site as an embodiment of social or spiritual values (*communal*)

To these heritage values a fifth has been added to cover the contribution that the site makes to the natural environment.

Within the five value categories the different levels of importance inevitably require judgements about their relative significance.

This study takes a broad approach to ranking the assets significance based on the heritage values, any formal designation status and survey information available at the time of assessment. The following significance ratings are used:

A+	Exceptional	(international)
A	Exceptional	(national - UK)
B	Considerable	(regional - West of England)
C	Some	(local - Bristol)
D	Little or no importance	
INT	Intrusive or damaging	

This approach supports future decision-making about the prioritisation and approach to management of historic assets. However, it is recognised that direct comparison across different heritage values can be problematic. For example part of the site may only be of limited historic interest but exceptional communal value to the local community.

Historic Values

English Heritage’s ‘Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance’ (2008) states that:

- *historic* value derives from the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present
- *historic* value tends to be *illustrative* or *associative*

Blaise Castle Estate is one of Bristol’s most important historic landscapes. It contains highly designated heritage assets including prehistoric scheduled monuments and multiple listed structures.

The estate covers parts of two conservation areas; Henbury and Kingsweston and Trym Valley.

Value rating A

Historic Associative Values

The association with the designer Humphry Repton contributes to the historic significance of the estate as a whole.

Historic associations with John Nash, designer of the Model Dairy, William Paty, designer of the house and the local Farr and Harford families are exceptionally significant.

Value rating A

Aesthetic Values

English Heritage's 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance' (2008) states that:

- *design* value relates to the aesthetic qualities generated by the conscious design of a building, structure or landscape as a whole
- *aesthetic* value derives from the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place
- some aesthetic values are not substantially the product of formal design, but develop more or less *fortuitously* over time, as the result of a succession of responses within a cultural framework

As previously stated, the estate retains a huge amount of the aesthetic qualities emphasised by Repton's designs.

Consequently the landscape has exceptional aesthetic and design value.

Value rating A

Evidential Values

English Heritage's 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance' (2008) states that:

- evidential value derives from the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity
- physical remains of past human activity are the primary source of evidence and evolution of places, and of the people and cultures that made them
- age can be a strong indicator of relative evidential value
- evidential value derives from the physical remains or genetic lines that have been inherited from the past
- the ability to understand and interpret the evidence tends to be diminished in proportion to the extent of its removal and replacement

The prehistoric landscape along Kings Weston Hill and on Blaise Hill has the potential to provide exceptional evidence about these early communities. There is considerable research potential for this rare landscape within Bristol.

The surviving Red Book produced by Repton and held at Blaise Museum has exceptional evidential value that contributes to the understanding and future management of the estate.

Value rating A

Communal and Natural Values

English Heritage's 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance' (2008) states that:

- *communal* value derives from the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory
- *commemorative* and *symbolic* values reflect the meanings of a place for those who draw part of their identity from it, or have emotional links to it
- *social* value is associated with places that people perceive as a source of identity, distinctiveness, social interaction and coherence

Communal Value

Blaise Castle Estate is one of Bristol's most important destination parks that attracts visitors from across the city and beyond.

Since 1926 the estate has been city owned and has been the focus of many significant public events and day to day community enjoyment.

In addition, the Blaise Museum is an important cultural asset for the city that offers considerable potential for increased communal value.

The Friends of Blaise are a long standing, important local volunteer group whose active membership make a valuable contribution to the estate.

Natural Value

The SNCI and RIGS designations for the estate define how valuable this landscape is at a national level.

These natural values were, in part, recognised by Repton and accentuated to create the dramatic environment we see today.

However, what Repton will not have fully appreciated is the exceptional ecological value the area has.

Our Spirit of Place

The Our Spirit of Place workshops with officers and members of the community identified three key themes that define the spirit of the Blaise Castle Estate.

A place of Myths and Legends

Blaise has had a long connection with mythical stories that create some of the magic for visitors to the estate.

The rocky outcrops and geological features that have been associated with the giant Goram have led to the previous Goram Fayre events on the estate.

The prehistoric landscape, dramatic scenery and hidden caves all contribute to this fantastic place where imaginations can run wild.



The ‘Giants Footprints’,
Bristol Archives,
40826/
EST/48/700

A place of Awe and Wonder

The art of the picturesque landscape was aimed to inspire awe and wonder and accentuate the emotional response to the scenery.

As a well preserved example of a romantic landscape, Blaise still causes the intended awe and wonder when people explore the site.



‘Goram’s Chair’,
Bristol Archives,
43207/9/44/58

A Busy and Quiet place

The variety of landscapes provide rich opportunities for different types of enjoyment on the site.

The Blaise Museum and Model Dairy area provides opportunities for quiet contemplative reflection, learning and community involvement.

The playarea and parkland provides a busier, more active environment for families.

The woodland and the Royals are areas for more quiet, peaceful walks.

Our Spirit of Place

A set of place principles has been established within each of the Our Spirit of Place themes.

These principles set out a broad approach to the future management of the estate by all stakeholders; council officers, community groups and users of the space.

A Place of Myths and Legends

Place principles:

- Myths and Legends will define the identity of Blaise, but not to the detriment of the natural beauty of the place
- Access to all the historic places such as caves, grottos and follies will be maintained
- Walks to encourage the exploration of these places will be promoted, but any signage will be sensitively designed to be non-intrusive
- Positive uses for key historic assets such as the old mill, lodges and castle will be developed in partnership with stakeholders and in accordance with the themes of the estate

A Place of Awe and Wonder

Place principles

- The vulnerability of this exceptionally valuable geology and ecology is an aspect that will guide future management of the estate
- Partnership working will explore opportunities to prioritise the maintenance of dramatic views to ensure safe enjoyment of these places
- Support the nature recovery proposals that offer enhancement opportunities for the ecology of the estate

A Busy and Quiet Place

Place principles

- The character of the individual areas will be respected by all users
- In particular the Model Dairy area will be retained as part of the Blaise Museum attraction helping to maintain its special identity
- Any additional car parking areas will be sensitively designed to retain the parkland character
- Active travel (walking, cycling and public transport) to and within the estate will form a key part of any promotional materials
- New signage at the main entrance areas will promote the different opportunities that the estate currently offers