

White Horse Wood and the AONB



Over 80 years ago the writer Charles Igglesden, standing on top of the North Downs and surveying the parish of Thurnham laid out before him, described it as:

“One of the most charming spots in Kent if you love wild undulating country, rich with woodland and lanes that twist about and rise to the heights of the chalk hills from which you obtain a wondrous view of typical Kentish scenery”

Today that scenery has been tamed by agriculture; there is much more urban intrusion; the area has become less wooded, and undoubtedly noisier. But the local roads are still narrow and twist, and on a clear day the views from the top of the Downs remain – for the moment at least – amongst the finest in Kent. They make you feel, as the pamphlet ‘Explore Kent’

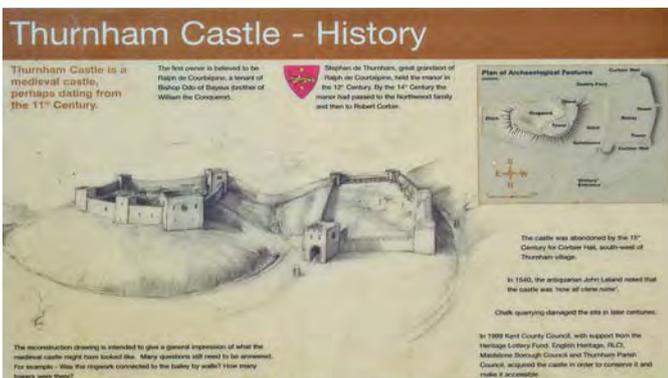
published by Kent County Council put it, “as though you are standing on the roof of Kent”. The area is popular with ramblers, those who follow the new sport of Nordic walking, hang gliders, people flying model planes and those who just wish to stop and take in the area’s natural beauty.



Just to the south east of White Horse Wood lies Thurnham Castle, a scheduled ancient monument. Importantly, it lies within the *Walking the Walls* grouping within Kent, East Sussex, North France and Belgium. The sites within this network represent a globally important set of monuments and the partners are dedicated to preserving them for future generations and helping people to enjoy them.

Consistent with this approach Kent County Council issued a consultants’ report in 2007 containing suggestions to make Thurnham Castle an education site and enhance the area as a visitor attraction. The Parish Council is in sympathy with this idea which keys in with its own ideas for a visitors’ centre at White Horse Wood. This approach is also consistent with replies received to the questionnaire.

Accordingly, we would welcome facilities that help



visitors gain an understanding of the area's landscape, environment and history. A key element of that history is the story of the aerodrome during World War II and, in particular, the events of 13 August 1940 when more people died in Thurnham than in any other engagement during that conflict.

As well as tracing the history of Thurnham's part in the war we believe the visitors' centre would provide an opportunity to pay tribute to one of the great heroes of the Battle of Britain: Air Vice-Marshal, Sir Keith Park, the Commander of 11 Group which covered South East England and which was in the front line of the battle.

Park is one of three men who, it is widely acknowledged, played key roles in winning the Battle of Britain: the other two: R J Mitchell, the inventor of the Spitfire, and Air Chief Marshal, Lord Dowding, have extensive memorials to their name. Despite discussion about erecting a monument in Trafalgar Square, Park has none.

As Lord Tedder, another commander of the RAF, said of Park:

"If any one man won the battle of Britain, he did. I do not believe it is realized how much that one man, with his leadership, his calm judgment and skill, did to save not only this country but the world".

We recommend that consideration should be given:

- **To erecting a memorial to Sir Keith Park as part of any visitor centre. This is a project the Parish Council could undertake jointly with Detling and Stockbury parishes, with the KCC and others; and**
- **To celebrating Battle of Britain Day within the parish. There are many in the parish who still remember that period of our history and would welcome an opportunity to give thanks to all the brave young men and women who died in the conflict. Here again, Thurnham might provide a focus for worship in which members of other parishes might wish to join.**

Any visitor centre needs to be in harmony with the surrounding landscape and measures need to be taken to ensure that it is secure out of hours. The remoteness of the location which is part of its attraction obviously increases the threat of vandalism. The other issue that needs careful consideration is that of access.



Considerable investment has been put into making the site easily accessible to those on foot and wheel chair users. Motorists travelling west on the Maidstone Sittingbourne road are catered for by a car park off the A249 opposite the entrance to the County Showground. This works well for them but the absence of a roundabout adjacent to the entrance poses real problems for those approaching from the direction of Maidstone.

While the need for a roundabout has been acknowledged to help manage traffic entering the showground, its location is a matter of dispute between the White Horse Wood site and one nearer Binbury Lane and the entrance to the industrial estate. It is suggested that the owners and operators of the industrial estate and County Showground favour the latter option because it facilitates their commercial aspirations. However, it is clear from the answers given in the questionnaire that Thurnham residents believe that pressure for further commercial development on these sites should be resisted both to protect the AONB and the strategic gap between Maidstone and Medway.

It is also clear that local opinion strongly backs the new roundabout being located opposite the entrance



have argued that Castle Hill road should be joined to the car park adjacent to the A249 to allow for easier access to this area from the south. Others oppose such a solution on the grounds that the increased use by cars of a steep and narrow lane would inevitably conflict with its intensive use by walkers and ramblers who should be accorded priority. The provision of a roundabout on the A249 opposite the county show ground would make access to the car park much easier and perhaps provides the best way of helping to resolve this problem.

to the county showground where it can serve both that facility and make a major contribution to helping the people of Thurnham and those to the west of the parish enjoy the facilities offered by White Horse Wood and Thurnham Castle, as well as the proposed visitors' centre.

Access to White Horse Wood and Thurnham Castle from the south involves negotiating the narrow, steep and winding Castle Hill at the top of which are a few places by the side of the road that are suitable for car parking. Areas like this pose a real dilemma with regard to allowing greater vehicular access. Some

We recommend that:

- **The Parish Council should actively promote White Horse Wood, including a visitor centre.**
- **When it is built the Kent County Council should locate the proposed roundabout on the A249 opposite White Horse Wood and the entrance to the County Showground where it can be of most benefit to local people, those using White Horse Wood as well as the showground.**

