

# Telling the story of the Abbey



Abbey and Cathedral  
Photo: Alan Baxter

The Abbey of St Edmund lies at the heart of Bury St Edmunds. It binds together St Edmund, the first Patron Saint of England, and Magna Carta. We will tell the story of their roles in national and international history.

## Overarching Plan

The Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership brings together numerous local and regional organisations to care for the Abbey and explain its heritage. The Abbey area is three times the size of the Abbey Gardens.

This draft Overarching Plan will direct our work over the next ten years. It will build on the Millennium Celebrations of the Abbey in 2020 and 2021. A wide range of ideas fits into a simple structure.

The plan is informed by the Heritage Assessment (2018), the Conservation Plan (2018) and the 'Past, Present and Future' Conference (2019). It is supported by further work with English Heritage, Historic England and the Heritage Fund.

## Consultation

The Heritage Partnership will consult its partners, the heritage agencies, local people and visitors to help develop the draft Overarching Plan. Our plans will be shaped by this consultation to ensure our future projects and activities are realistic and have wide support.

## Mission and Vision

The draft Overarching Plan is led by a Mission Statement and a Ten Year Vision that set the context for five key themes across a wide range of ideas. The aims and objectives for each of these key themes are summarised in this leaflet to inform discussion. They will follow through to our future work to develop more specific plans and projects.

**“The mission of the Heritage Partnership is to encourage people to experience the international significance of St Edmund and the historic Abbey.”**

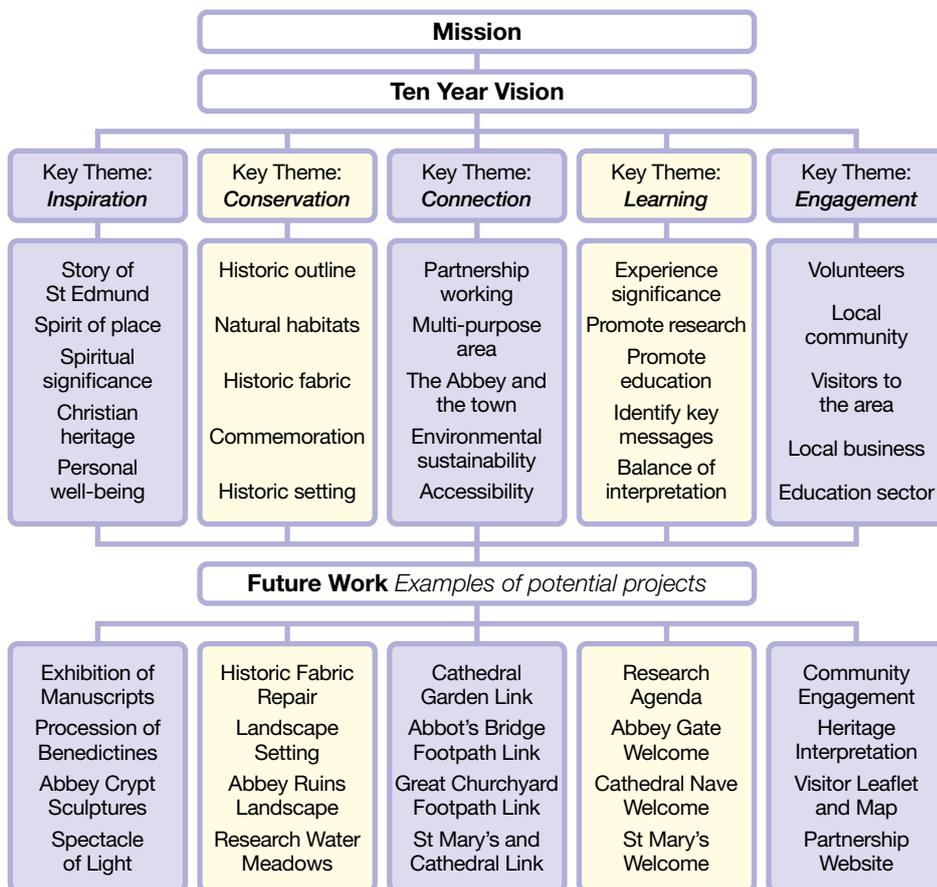
**“The ten year vision for the Abbey of St Edmund is that it will inspire all its visitors through excellent conservation, learning and community engagement.”**

The key themes are interlinked:

1. **Inspiration** ... including spirit of place, spirituality and well-being
2. **Conservation** ... including repair and maintenance of the historic fabric
3. **Connection** ... including accessibility and connections with surrounding areas
4. **Learning** ... including heritage experience, research, education and information
5. **Engagement** ... including volunteering and local community involvement.

*The structure diagram shows how these elements fit together and includes some examples of potential future projects.*

## Structure Diagram



# Abbey of St Edmund Overarching Plan November 2020

## 1: Inspiration

The Inspiration key theme includes **spirit of place, spirituality and well-being**. It is important in achieving our mission and in understanding the origins and development of Bury St Edmunds and its people.

The main aim is to tell the story of St Edmund, King and Martyr. He was a prominent East Anglian Christian King. He was the first patron saint of England and a focus for international pilgrimage for five centuries. We will promote his role in English history and tell the fascinating legends that he inspired.

The Abbey has a special spirit of place and has been sacred since the dawn of history. It is focussed on the location of the Shrine of St Edmund over the ruins of the Abbey Crypt. We will encourage reverence for this spiritual inheritance and highlight the church services and other events that continue today.

The Abbey area has deep spiritual significance and we will welcome visitors of all faiths and none. We will explore the beliefs of pre-Christian settlers and the growth of Christian settlement in the River Lark valley. We will recognise all religious traditions and encourage the growing trend in contemporary pilgrimage.



Visitors to the Abbey *Photo: Alan Baxter*

The Abbey has a long Christian heritage. We will explain the Rule of St Benedict that governed the Abbey and the ancient traditions of national and international pilgrimage. We will describe the Dissolution of the Abbey by Henry VIII in 1539 and chart the growth of the local Christian Church in Bury St Edmunds in the centuries that followed.

The primary purpose of this key theme will be to help promote the personal well-being of visitors to the Abbey. This will include inspiring rest, learning and enjoyment and encouraging mutual respect between visitors. We will enhance the tranquillity of the special gardens, promote various heritage activities and encourage informal leisure and children's play.

We will aim to conserve natural habitats, enhance the landscape setting of the Abbey ruins and continue the high quality maintenance of the formal gardens and other special gardens. We want to develop a distinctive landscape around the ruins, research the medieval management of the water meadows and support continuing river management.

We will encourage excellent conservation of the historic fabric and identify priorities to catch up with the current backlog of repairs. Maintenance should not damage the historic fabric and best practice techniques must be used. It will be important to ensure that visitors respect the historic fabric of the Abbey ruins.

## 2: Conservation

The Conservation key theme includes **the repair and maintenance of the historic fabric**. The physical remains of the Abbey are continually crumbling as a result of weather erosion and visitor erosion. Excellent heritage conservation must be a priority if we are to hand on the ruins in good condition to future generations.

Our first aim will be to highlight the historic layout of the Abbey to local people and visitors. This includes the river valley site, the Abbey's defences, the secular and the sacred areas and the wider setting. We know that much of the medieval Abbey and the remains of the Anglo-Saxon town beneath it lie under metres of demolition rubble.

Commemoration is part of the Abbey visitor experience. We will explain the history of St Edmund and the Abbey across the whole area. We will continue to maintain the various tombs and military memorials including the Great Churchyard. We will also commemorate significant anniversaries and events and consider suitable new public memorials.

And finally, we will aim to coordinate conservation through the Local Plan and through our work with the heritage agencies. We will highlight key views into and out of the area and identify key historic buildings and routes. In particular, we will focus attention on key parts of the Abbey area that need protection.



Abbey Ruins from Cathedral Tower  
*Photo: Rachel Clover, Cathedral Head Verger*



### 3: Connection

The Connection key theme includes accessibility and connections with surrounding areas. The various parts of the Abbey area have been managed differently by the various landowners and organisations involved ever since the Dissolution. The aim now is to join it all up.

We will continue to promote partnership working across the whole Abbey of St Edmund area. The Heritage Partnership is playing a leading role in this and intends to become established as an independent charity. We must maintain the trust of our local and external partner organisations and in particular we must build our links with the local community.

We will aim to present the whole Abbey of St Edmund area as a multi-purpose visitor attraction for heritage and leisure. This will include the setting of the Abbey Ruins and the Abbey Gardens in the wider landscape and the town beyond. We will develop the footpath network as a framework for heritage interpretation. We will link the Abbey with other heritage attractions in and around the town and with other St Edmund locations. We will unite the whole area (see map).

The relationships between the Abbey and the town have been crucial and sometimes turbulent. We want to improve physical links with better signposting and visitor information. And we will do more to involve local tourist groups and to help drive local business growth.

But none of this would be right unless we can promote environmental sustainability. We will sustain a diverse natural environment and protect the historic built environment. We will reduce unnecessary use of resources and encourage the use of public transport.

It will also be important to develop equal accessibility for all and improve physical access in and around the Abbey area. We will work to integrate the multiple access points and routes across the area. And we will improve signage to public transport and car parks.

### 4: Learning

The Learning key theme includes heritage experience, research, education and information. It joins up the various elements that can enable visitors to understand the significance of the Abbey and all that it represents. We want to help people experience the past in the context of modern life.

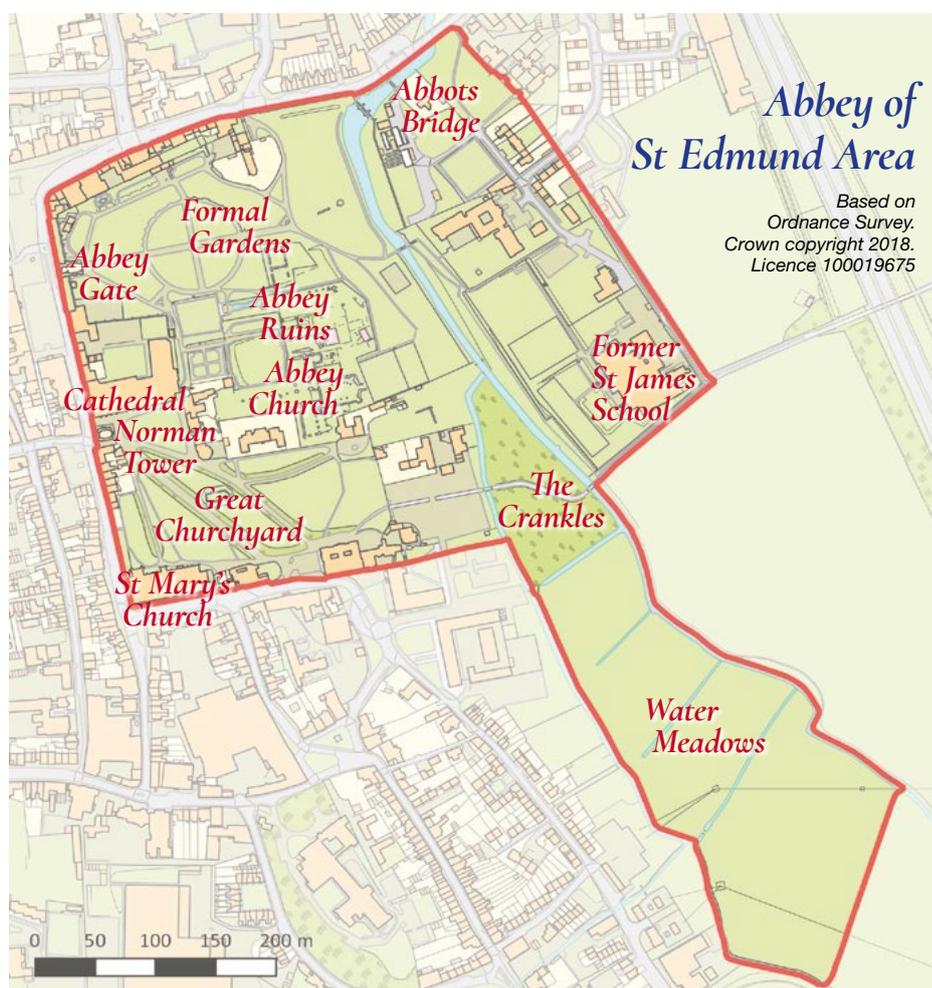
Our first aim is to extend people's experience of the Abbey story and to explain its role in Magna Carta and modern democracy. We are preparing a visitor leaflet and we intend to provide attractive information panels, an outdoor education area and guided pilgrimage visits.

We will promote research into the Abbey to develop the narrative we can tell. We will draw up an overall research agenda, complete reporting of major excavations and undertake a geophysical survey. We will develop a deeper understanding of the archaeology and history of the Abbey.

We will promote education for all across the whole Abbey area. We aim to develop a flexible education programme and coordinate provision with other local providers. We will seek to coordinate the work of the Town Guides and the Cathedral Guides.

We will identify the key messages that will be needed to help interpret the heritage of the Abbey and the town. We will work with English Heritage to develop a Heritage Interpretation Plan. We will work with visitors to identify and refresh our key messages.

We will strike the right balance between presenting heritage information amongst the ruins and elsewhere in the Abbey area. We will balance presenting this information on conventional panels and on smart technology. We want to provide explanatory labels and a guide book and we will provide personalised interpretation by our guides.





Abbey Gate  
Photo: Richard Summers

## 5: Engagement

**The Engagement key theme includes volunteering and local community involvement.** It will be fundamental in ensuring that the work of the Heritage Partnership can continue into the future. We want to foster the growth of a resilient voluntary charity that will sustain the heritage of the Abbey in the heart of Bury St Edmunds for everyone.

Our first aim is to encourage a wide range of volunteers to support the Abbey of St Edmund. We will need to engage volunteers of all ages and interests and to train them for roles to suit their ability and availability. We will appoint a lead volunteer coordinator and encourage other voluntary services to assist us. We will also need volunteer fundraisers.

We want to engage the whole local community in the work of the Heritage Partnership including all local neighbourhoods and hard to reach groups. We will reach out to local councillors and local community groups and we will engage with local schools, West Suffolk College and various specialist interest groups. They will become part of the Abbey community.

We will also engage with visitors to the Abbey by offering a warm welcome, providing excellent heritage information and promoting events to encourage

repeat visits. We will continue our systematic survey of visitors to inform our heritage work. And we will collaborate with the 'Bury St Edmunds & Beyond' tourism organisation and other visitor attractions in and around the town.

It will be particularly important to engage with local businesses through 'Our Bury St Edmunds' and local and regional Chambers of Commerce. We aim to secure continuing support from sponsors of the Millennium Celebrations. We will promote environmental initiatives with local businesses and we will collaborate with local visitor attractions and tourist facilities. It will also be important to work with the education sector by welcoming school visits and encouraging apprenticeships, work experience and suitable student placements. We will value partnerships with Universities and Colleges to promote joint research and teaching initiatives and to encourage experimental technology projects. They too will become part of the Abbey community.

### Further information

Find out more about the Abbey of St Edmund and the Abbey of St Edmund Heritage Partnership at:

[www.abbeyofstedmund.org.uk](http://www.abbeyofstedmund.org.uk)

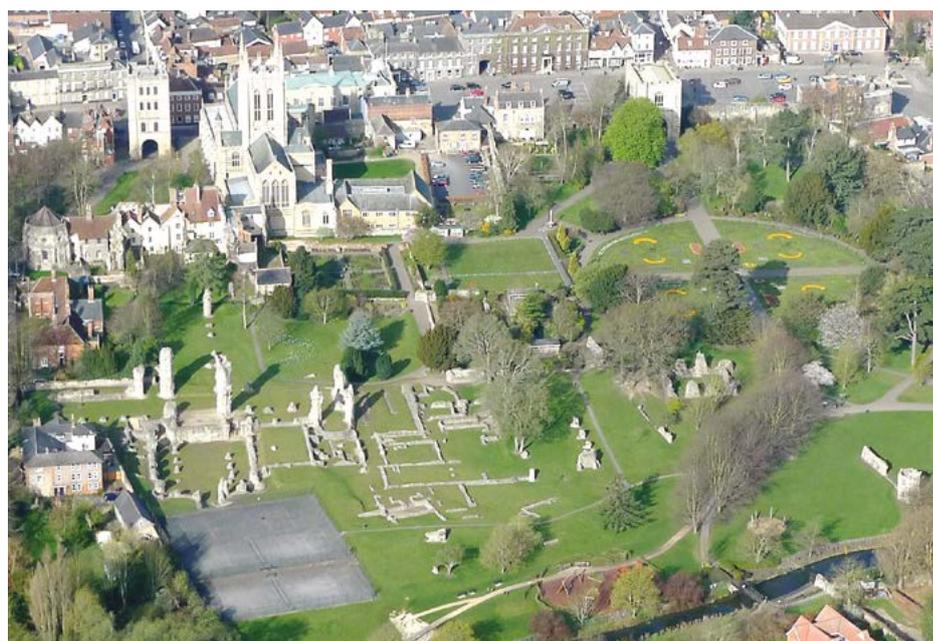


St Mary's Church and Norman Tower  
Photo: Richard Summers

## Future Work

**Our future work will carefully develop the Overarching Plan into more specific plans and projects.** This will include how we fund and deliver a programme of projects in stages during the next ten years. It will extend the scope and impact of the present Local Management Agreement between West Suffolk Council and English Heritage.

Our future work will develop the present Draft Action Programme which was worked up from the Heritage Assessment and the Conservation Plan. We will implement a public and private sector fundraising strategy and we will secure best value in commissioning projects. We will then progress project management and programme monitoring and review.



Aerial view of the Abbey of St Edmund  
Photo reproduced with permission, 2015