

Case Study: Dorset’s Natural Influence at its best

St Leonards Hospital Site Development: best practice in development at a sensitive site

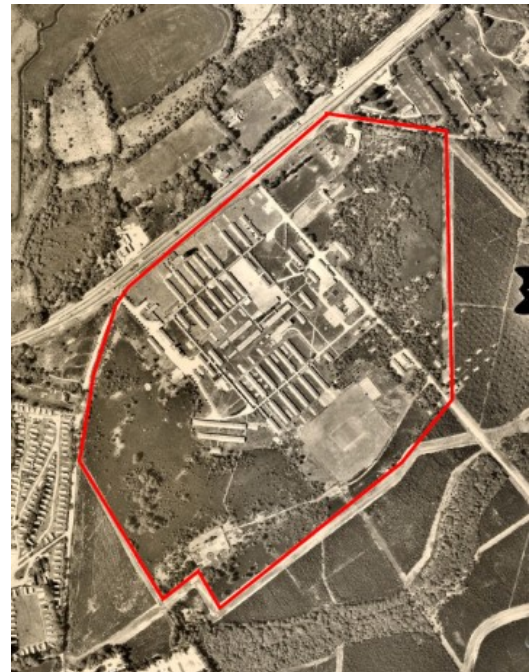
Lead Partner: Natural England

Other Partners: East Dorset District Council, Dorset Wildlife Trust, Homes and Communities Agency, Sovereign, Johns Associates and Forestry Commission.

Project Summary:

St Leonards was a former hospital built in the 1950-60s, used first for military staff and then for civilian patients. The site was maintained as ranks of single story wards linked by concrete paths and covered walkways and with tight mown grassland between. It also incorporated a cricket pitch, tennis courts and less well managed areas of pine woodland/scrub and heathland adjoining a forestry commission plantation. The site covers 25.9ha of which 7.75ha is the development site and 18.4ha is a Local Wildlife Site (called a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) in Dorset).

The planning application for the development of the site was approved by East Dorset District Council in December 2015.



Site area



Sand lizard area to be restored through careful tree and scrub removal © Amanda Marler



Acid grassland and heathland to the north prior to translocation © Amanda Marler

Problems / issues and opportunities:

Initial redevelopment of this Green Belt site was first proposed in the 1990s. Various permissions had been approved, and subsequently lapsed. The site was sensitive in terms of its biodiversity.

On-site biodiversity includes:

- Population of sand lizards (and smooth snakes in the past) with 5 species of reptile currently present
- Priority acid grassland and lowland dry/wet heath habitats
- Significant populations of rare/scarce plants: green winged orchids; autumn ladies’ tresses; mossy stonecrop
- Nightjars from the nearby Dorset Heathlands Special Protection Area (SPA birds) use the site
- 2 maternity bat roosts and roost sites in 16 of the buildings to be demolished on site, with 10 separate species present.

Natural England have advised on the redevelopment of the site for many years, and the resultant planning application protected the on-site and off-site biodiversity interest.



Translocated turf with flowering green-winged orchids © Amanda Marler

How partnership working benefited the project:

Natural England's advice was reinforced by the firm policy background for this site, which had been worked up with the Local Planning Authority within the Local Plan. This close working, and the involvement of Dorset Wildlife Trust, were critical in securing the environmental outcomes. By working with the Forestry Commission a new 25ha natural green space, enhanced for public access and biodiversity will be delivered.

A Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) steering group was formed with representatives from Natural England, Sovereign (housing association), Dorset Wildlife Trust, Drew Smith (contractor), Johns Associates (ecological consultants), East Dorset District Council, the hospital services Cricket Club and Alaska (translocation specialists). This enabled everyone to have continued involvement in the implementation of the plan that sets out the ecological objectives for the site along with the mitigation, enhancement and restoration measures and the long-term management of the future SNCI and nature reserve.

This is a good example of a unique partnership of public and private organisations working together to deliver biodiversity gain through a residential development. This work has been highlighted nationally by The Wildlife Trusts as an example of good practice.

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"... the project has benefited enormously from the ongoing involvement of Nick Squirrell [Natural England] at the pre-application stage. He has provided detailed advice...which has been both pragmatic and positive. Nick's contributions have enabled our client to...achieve full planning permission...and we feel his input has resulted in net positive biodiversity gain as well as improved quality of the development overall." Johns Associates



Area to be restored to heath through extensive removal of scrub and trees' © Amanda Marler

Outcomes:

- 18ha of priority habitat: restored to a high standard over 7 years
- Dorset Wildlife Trust will take ownership of new nature reserve, with grazing in place and a new community on its doorstep to work with
- Management secured and funded through an agreement for 50 years
- Key acid grassland/heathland communities in the development site (c. 2ha) will be translocated using expert contractors
- 12ha of tree and scrub clearance in the SNCI is authorised through the planning application to avoid the need for a separate felling licence
- A new bespoke bat maternity roost created from an existing brick building (cost saving) and a substantial number of new bat boxes are to be provided
- The Forestry Commission will deliver a new 25ha site, enhanced for public access and biodiversity. This will be maintained in perpetuity



Bat house © Amanda Marler