

Samuel Palmer's Earthly Paradise - The Darent Valley Landscape Partnership

OVERVIEW



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What is a Landscape Partnership Scheme?

Landscape Partnership schemes is a funding stream available through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) that puts heritage conservation at the heart of rural and peri-urban regeneration. Grants of between £100,000 and £3 million are available to help local, regional and national organisations work together to make a real difference to landscapes and communities for the long term. They do this by conserving habitats at landscape-scale, promoting joined-up management, reviving long-lost skills, and much more. HLF-funded projects make a major contribution to work in the UK on implementing the European Landscape Convention.

Current position of the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership

Following an unsuccessful application in 2013, a second application led by the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was awarded a stage 1 pass and earmarked a grant of £2.1 million towards a total scheme cost of £3.65 million. An 18 month 'stage 2' non-competitive development period will shortly begin to prepare the detail of scheme and secure the remaining match funding. If this receives the approval of HLF, it is anticipated that on the ground delivery will begin late in 2016 or early 2017.

Whilst the Partnership is led by the AONB, it is guided by an informal partnership consisting of the following partners:

North West Kent Countryside Partnership; Kent Wildlife Trust; Dartford Orienteering Klubb; Ashmolean Museum; Sevenoaks District Council; Dartford BC; Natural England; Environment Agency; Connect Plus; National Farmers Union; Kent Country Parks; Westerham Town Partnership; KCC Heritage; Farningham and Eynsford Local History Society; Farningham Parish Council; Sustrans; Chevening Parish Council; Sutton-at-Hone and Hawley Parish Council; Otford Parish Council; Explore Kent; Eynsford Village Society; KCC: Flood Risk and Natural Environment; Kent Archaeological Society; English Heritage; Horton Kirby Environmental Studies Centre; Westerham Parish Council; Darent Catchment Improvement Group; Wide Horizons; The Quadrangle Trust; Campaign for Drawing; Bexley Council; Royal Geographical Society; Clean Kent; Butterfly Conservation; Lullingstone Castle and World Garden; Highways Agency; UK Power Networks; Victoria & Albert Museum.

Overview of the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme

Two hundred years ago, influential landscape artist Samuel Palmer described the Darent Valley as an 'earthly paradise'. Today, he would still recognise the special qualities conveyed through his visionary paintings. It remains a landscape of surprising beauty, rich in diverse habitats and with an impressive cultural heritage.

But this is a landscape on the edge. London has expanded to the brink of the valley, bringing multiple and dramatically increasing pressures that are dissolving its natural character. People lack an awareness of this rich and attractive landscape on their doorstep, further threatening the future of the valley.

Our partnership brings together a unique mix of organisations that will work with and empower local communities to ensure the survival of this exceptional area. Through them we will achieve genuinely sustainable conservation of its natural and cultural heritage, with communities that feel emotionally and physically reconnected with their landscape.

The Heritage of the Darent Valley

The River Darent and its valley is the focus for our landscape partnership scheme. The area has been informed by a comprehensive Strategic Landscape Enhancement Plan undertaken in 2014. It covers an area of 133 km² extending from the Greensand Ridge to the river's confluence with the River Thames (see map overleaf).

It is a landscape of remarkable rural beauty with over 60% within an AONB, and just 14 miles from Big Ben at its closest point. It is a landscape that literally wraps itself around London, with the boundary of the project area never more than 4 miles away from the Capital's suburbs.

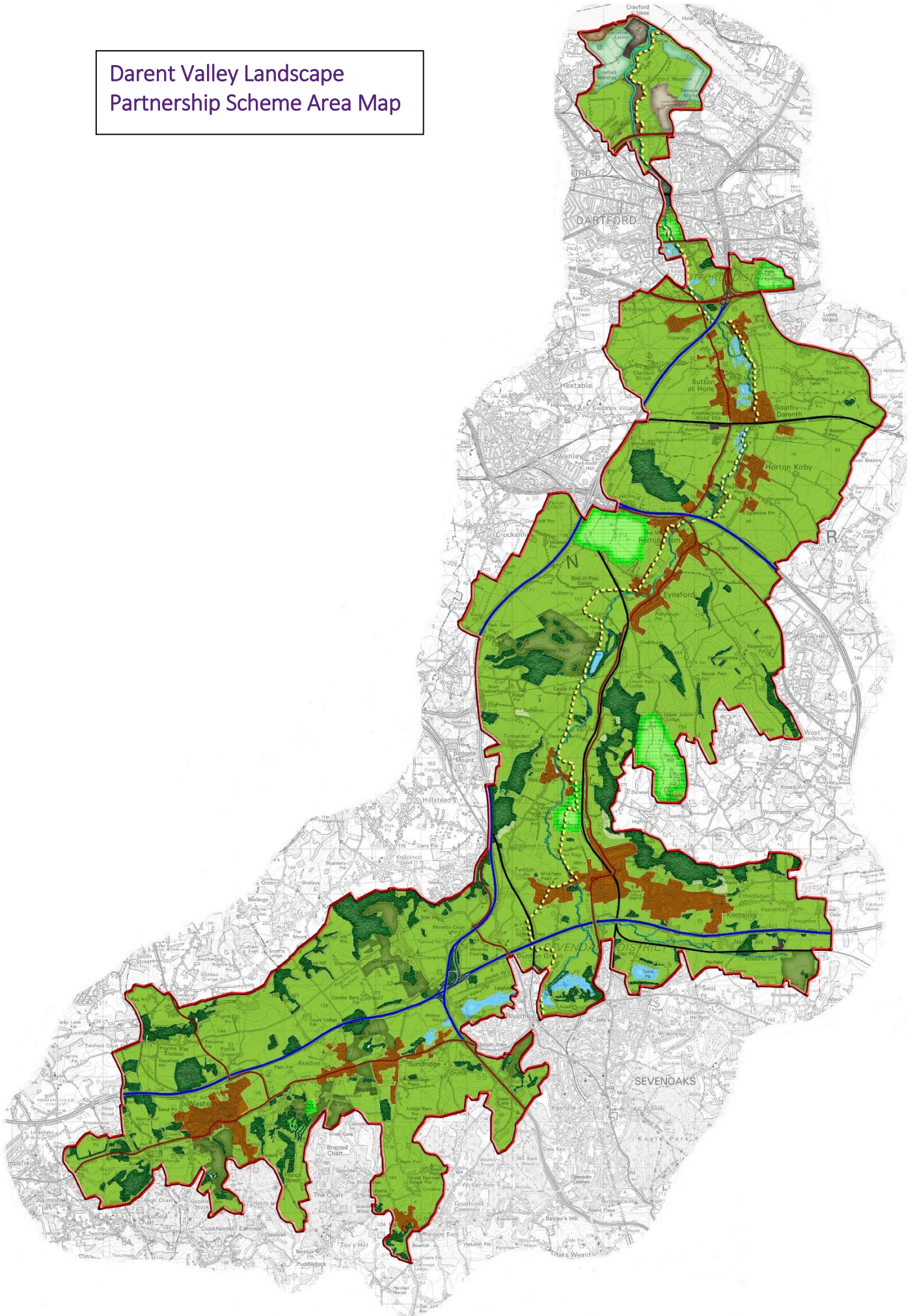
It is a landscape of great aesthetic appeal, emerging as a green oasis upon leaving the outskirts of London. A mix of woodland, chalk grassland and parkland, it is supplemented by arable farmland with the lower reach open marsh and within the Greater Thames Nature Improvement Area. Eight extensive SSSIs are spread throughout the valley and are supported by 29 regionally important Local Wildlife Sites.

There is evidence of Palaeolithic communities near Dartford and it has one of the highest densities of Roman villa sites in the country. Its built heritage includes the flint-walled Eynsford Castle, the Lullingstone Castle Tudor gatehouse and the Archbishop's Palace at Otford that once rivalled Hampton Court Palace. The waters of the Darent also supported numerous mills including England's first commercial paper mill near Dartford.

The legacy of the Darent Valley's heritage is considerable: 28 Scheduled Monuments, 5 registered parks and gardens, 16 conservation areas, 13 Grade I listed buildings and several hundred others at lower grades. This is a landscape of considerable time-depth with a complex untold story to tell.

The valley also has a significant association with the renowned Victorian landscape artist, Samuel Palmer. As a young man he lived in Shoreham and is considered to have produced his greatest works at this time. Palmer felt a close, almost spiritual connection with the landscape, and was something that he tried to communicate to others through his paintings. He described the Darent Valley as his 'earthly paradise', and many of his paintings conveyed an ethereal quality.

Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme Area Map



Why the Darent Valley's heritage is at risk

The Darent Valley landscape is a survival story. In the 200 years since Samuel Palmer painted the valley, London has grown at an exponential rate. This landscape, once considered to be deep in the Kent countryside, now finds itself on the doorstep of London with its lower reaches deeply embedded in the Thames Gateway growth area. And yet it has managed to retain the appearance of a rural valley.

Last year, we stated that the Darent Valley had reached a tipping point. The combined effect of development pressures in the north, anti-social behaviour, increasing visitor pressure, uncoordinated habitat management, changing agricultural practices, transport networks and climate change are all having a combined impact. This 'death by a hundred cuts' makes it difficult to assess when a line has been crossed and the tipping point reached... but we firmly believe we are there now.

The valley has a rich array of priority Biodiversity Action Plan habitats: extensive areas of lowland calcareous grassland, chalk river, lowland wood pasture and parkland, native woodland, standing open water and ancient/species rich hedgerows. Notable areas of coastal grazing marsh and lowland fen are also present. Several woodland and chalk grassland Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) have been assessed by Natural England as being in unfavourable and/or declining condition due to insufficient management and require immediate attention.

The river is slowly recovering from very low flows in 1990s remains extremely vulnerable. This has had an impact on riparian habitats that remain largely in poor condition and are still to recover. Management of veteran and notable trees at one of the most important wood pasture and parkland sites in the county is all but absent, and there is a gradual degradation of the connected hedgerow network in the central valley, and approaching a total loss in the lower valley. Publicly owned countryside sites have highly restricted resources and can only undertake essential maintenance, with little forward planning.

Flytipping is also considered by local people to be the most significant and increasing threat to the Darent Valley's landscape and heritage.

Built heritage in the valley is also at significant risk. The remains of the Archbishop's Palace at Otford have been returned to the 'at risk' register by English Heritage. There is also concern over buried archaeology and hidden heritage away from known sites. The landscape context of the Roman occupation of the valley is not understood well, but the density of known sites and the discovery of new evidence suggest that this lack of knowledge may be meaning that important heritage is being inadvertently lost.

On a landscape scale, there is an erosion of local distinctiveness and heritage 'village-scapes' as modern influences and pressures take their toll. There is also a significant detrimental effect of the motorways on the wider heritage landscape in a more general way. The fading awareness and lack of knowledge of Samuel Palmer's influence on and translation of the valley is also concerning, and is reflected by a declining engagement of young people the landscape. It is this latter point that puts this landscape at greatest risk in the future.

What the Darent Valley Landscape Partnership Scheme will do

We have strong and dynamic partnership that is enthusiastic about making a significant change in the Darent Valley and brings together organisations and groups that would normally work independently. We have a common aim, and are prepared to make a big difference.

Our bid is centred on restoring the emotional connection with a beautiful valley, using Samuel Palmer as its inspiration and engaging with the many people and communities that live within and around the valley to become actively involved in not only its conservation but also in its appreciation.

The delivery of the DVLPS is split in to five programmes:

PROGRAMME 1. AN INSPIRING DARENT VALLEY

This programme will regenerate in communities the deeper understanding of the Darent Valley that was conveyed by poets, writers and painters of the past to culture. It will instil an appreciation for the forces and influences that created the landscape, so that emotional connection is enhanced and there is greater investment in securing its future.

PROGRAMME 2. THE HISTORIC DARENT VALLEY

We will take a community led approach to revealing a complex interwoven story, and ensuring that it is not lost to future generations. It will use innovative techniques to engage with new and wider audiences, and work through partners to ensure the long term protection of some of the valley's iconic built heritage features and communicate how they relate to the wider landscape.

PROGRAMME 3. DARENT VALLEY EXPLORATION

Through this programme we will provide sustainable access throughout the valley to enable greater appreciation and interaction with the landscape and heritage by a wider audience, and reduce pressure where high visitor numbers are becoming unsustainable.

PROGRAMME 4. DARENT VALLEY NATURAL & HISTORIC LANDSCAPES

The natural landscapes provided the look and feel of the landscape that so appealed to Palmer. We will ensure the long term protection of the key components of this landscape, identifying and recording habitats and species at risk, improving connectivity, ensuring long-term management, resilience and appreciation.

PROGRAMME 5. DARENT VALLEY LEARNING AND FUTURE SKILLS

Through this programme we will ensure that the knowledge and skills are provided to communities, professionals, and delivery partners to actively participate in the conservation of the Darent Valley's heritage, and be able to care for the landscape and communicate its importance in the future. We will particularly focus on children providing the opportunity to enjoy, appreciate and engage with the landscape to ensure long term protection.