

Bath and North East Somerset Council  
Development

# Draft Beechen Cliff and Alexandra Park Character Appraisal Bath Conservation Area

April 2020



**Bath & North East  
Somerset Council**





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# 1. Introduction and description of the Character Area

## General description and form

This document is a character appraisal for the Alexandra Park and Beechen Cliff Character Area of Bath Conservation Area.

The character area sits to the south of the City and comprises Lyncombe Hill with the steep wooded slope of Beechen Cliff on its northern face and Alexandra Park at its peak. The character area is unusual as, bar the school and minor structures within the park, it is entirely green space.

The whole character area covers approximately 23ha of land, comprising:

- Alexandra Park (approx. 4.5ha) a designated public park
- Beechen Cliff School (approx. 8.2ha) comprising school buildings and playing fields
- Beechen Cliff and Magdalen Gardens (approx. 5.2ha) an area of north-facing woodland
- Lyncombe Hill Farm (approx. 4.3ha) pasture land with mature hedgerows on ancient field boundaries
- Lyncombe Hill Farm Allotments (approx. 0.7ha) adjoining the eastern edge of Alexandra Park.

The Alexandra Park and Beechen Cliff character area is part of Widcombe Parish. The remainder of the parish is within two further character areas “Widcombe and the Kennet and Avon Canal” and “Entry Hill, Perrymead and Prior Park”.

## Beechen Cliff and Alexandra Park Character Area and the World Heritage Site

Core values and significances of Bath:

- Bath is a World Heritage Site, the only entire city in Britain to be so designated
- It is not a museum but a living city
- It has a remarkable degree of visual homogeneity
- Authenticity of the Site is of the essence; its preservation and enhancement are key criteria for all development
- Its complex and delicate hierarchy of interrelated urban spaces, landscape and architecture could be easily disrupted by overbearing or misinformed development and by the accumulation of harm.

Bath was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1987. The designation describes the City as “a masterpiece of human creative genius whose protection must be the concern of all”.

The World Heritage Site designation was awarded for its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) with six attributes:

### *1. Roman archaeology*

Many of the City's Roman remains are centred around the Roman Baths. These include the archaeological remains of the Roman temple of the Goddess Sulis Minerva and the extensive bathing complex. The Roman town of Aquae Sulis was a walled settlement. Beyond the city wall are Roman and Iron Age remains including hill forts, field systems and villas, demonstrating the extent of the settlement. The road system and Roman street plan influenced the Medieval and Georgian layout.

### *2. Hot springs*

Bath's hot springs are the only ones in Britain, producing 250,000 gallons of water every day. There are three main springs - the King's Spring, the Hetling Spring and the Cross Bath Spring. They have been central to every stage of the city's development, creating a unique social history and culture where the waters are central to healing and recreation.

### *3. 18th century architecture*

Neo-classical architectural style dominates in Bath. Architects including John Wood the Elder, John Wood the Younger, Robert Adam, Thomas Baldwin, John Palmer, John Eveleigh and John Pinch followed Palladian principles to build houses, public buildings, bridges and churches. The Georgian arrangements of crescents, squares, the Circus and terraces form iconic, internationally recognisable structures. The widespread use of local limestone and the uniform scale and height of buildings contribute to Bath's beauty today.

### *4. 18th century town planning*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bath was re-invented as a fashionable health resort, expanding dramatically beyond its city walls. Medieval streets were transformed into a spacious and beautiful classical city, where architecture and the natural landscape complemented each other. Uniformity of design was enhanced with the universal use of honey-coloured Bath limestone. Innovative forms of town planning including squares, crescents and the circus were introduced. Attractive views and vistas were deliberately created. Bath's Georgian town planning influenced subsequent developments in the UK and beyond.

### *5. Green setting*

The City of Bath lies within a hollow of the hills. There are green views in every direction from the city centre. The countryside stretches right to Bath's doorstep. The hilly, green landscape was exploited by Bath's 18<sup>th</sup> century architects and developers, who created elegant terraces and villas on the slopes. The hills to the south of the city provided the Oolitic limestone from which the city was built. Trees and woodlands populate the skyline, and lend natural beauty to the river, canal, parks and gardens. Open agricultural land on the edge of Bath is still used for grazing animals, just as it was by the Georgians.

### *6. Social setting*

Bath's Georgian architecture reflected 18<sup>th</sup> century social ambitions. The city was a destination for pilgrimage, and for playing out the social aspirations of fashionable spa culture. The social, economic

and physical re-birth of the city as an internationally famous spa resort was largely due to three key characters: the architect John Wood the Elder, wealthy postmaster and stone entrepreneur Ralph Allen and Bath's famous Master of Ceremonies Richard 'Beau' Nash. Visitors flocked to Bath. The list of famous and influential people who visited, lived in or wrote about the City is extensive. Customs and practices associated with 'taking the waters' were practised and developed here. The fashion for promenading influenced the design of Bath streets and gardens. The rules and etiquette governing polite society were embodied in buildings such as the Assembly Rooms and Pump Rooms.

### **How does this character area contribute to the World Heritage Site?**

#### *1. Contribution to Roman archaeology*

There is no known Roman archaeology within the boundary of the character area.

#### *2. Contribution to hot springs*

There are springs that issue from Beechen Cliff, which have been important in the development of Bath, but they are not part of the hot spring system that feeds the Roman Baths.

#### *3. Contribution to 18th century architecture*

There is no contribution to 18<sup>th</sup> Century architecture within the character area.

#### *4. Contribution to 18th century town planning*

Prior to the city council's acquisition of Beechen Cliff and the creation of the park, the character area had significance to 18<sup>th</sup> Century town planning as it was a location for walks from the city and provided the back drop to the south for the principal 18<sup>th</sup> century developments.

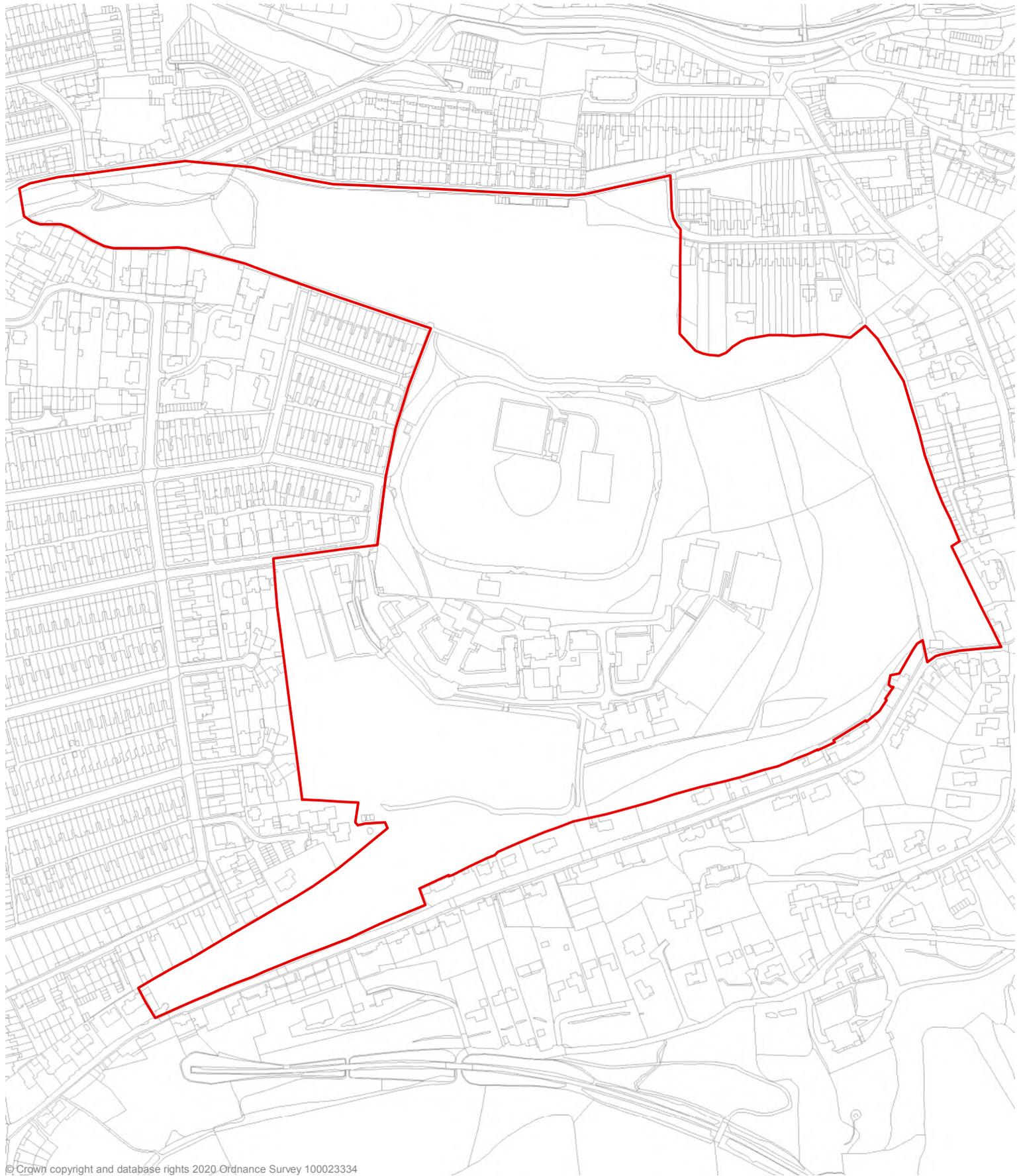
#### *5. Contribution to green setting*

The character area has great significance to the green setting of the World Heritage Site as it is the focus of long views to the south from the City Centre, and from Lansdown and Camden to the north of the centre. Of particular importance are the woodlands on Beechen Cliff including the skyline trees along the northern edge of Alexandra Park.

The character area also contributes to the green setting in views from Bathwick, and from the Kennet and Avon canal as it progresses from Bathwick to Widcombe.

#### *6. Contribution to social setting*

The importance of freely available public parks became popular during the Victorian period and continued the established importance of Georgian pleasure gardens.



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## Draft Beechen Cliff and Alexandra Park Character Area Map



## 2. Summary of key characteristics

- Lyncombe Hill forms the major landmark geographical feature immediately south of the River Avon from the centre of Bath, with the 46m high Beechen Cliff ('Beach Cliff') forming its dramatic northern edge, the result of a major landslide and erosion by the River Avon in pre-history.
- The hill with its wooded slopes, forms a key green backdrop to the south of the city, as well as from the immediately surrounding areas, particularly Widcombe and Bathwick to the East and Lyncombe Vale to the South.
- Alexandra Park, at the top of Lyncombe Hill, occupies the site of historic fields, giving superb views across the city to the northern slopes and along the Avon valley to the East and West. It can be assumed that these views have been appreciated for as long as the City has existed: before the Abbey, the Roman Baths and Temple Complex, would themselves have been impressive sights, and there is archaeological evidence to support this contention.
- A public allotment is based within an ancient field boundary on the eastern slope of the hill, immediately east of Alexandra Park. Open fields further to the east also provide excellent scenic views of Widcombe and Bathwick, across to Sydney Gardens and beyond.
- The southern aspect of the character area is dominated by Beechen Cliff School with green open space along its boundary with Greenway Lane.



### 3. Historic development

#### Physical influences – geology and landform and drainage patterns

Bath lies at the southern end of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in which the uplifted limestone has been eroded into broad-topped hills separated by steep-sided, water-cut valleys. The old part of Bath is built on the floor of the Avon valley, on alluvium overlying Lower Lias Clay which extends to the lower slope of Beechen Cliff. Overlying the Lias Clay are the Midford Sands, silty, sometimes with hard bands of calcareous concretions. Above the Midford Sands is the Inferior Oolite comprising fossiliferous limestones, important for their water-bearing capacity. The Lower Fuller's Earth Clays lie above the Inferior Oolite; they are made up of Illitic Clays and mudstones with thin bands of limestone. A thin band of limestone, called Fuller's Earth Rock forms the plateau of Alexandra Park, its upper clays having been weathered away.

Alexandra Park occupies the highest land to the immediate south of the city centre, a flat-topped plateau between the river-cut valleys of the Avon and Lyn Brook. The highest point in the Park being 127m aod (above ordnance datum) compared with approx. 20m aod by the new bus station. Beechen Cliff was created following the last Ice Age when vulnerable strata were progressively washed away by the river Avon as the melting ice sheet to the north retreated. The cliff is 46m high with slopes of 38° - 52°, the steep slope being the back wall of a land-slip occurring in the unstable Lower Lias Clay. Land to the south-eastern side of Beechen Cliff and Lyncombe Hill Farm falls steeply into the lower slopes of the Lyn Brook/Widcombe Brook valley, where the tributary springs have caused steep-sided combs towards their sources by headward erosion.

#### Historic influences

The earliest historic records for the area refer to the district of 'Cliftune', covering most of the land of the Manor of Lyncombe and Widecombe. In 970 Saxon King Edgar granted the area to Bath Priory, forerunner of (and based in the same location as) the present Bath Abbey.

By the time of the Domesday Book of 1086, the district of Clifton lay in the Hundred of Bath Forum. The entry for Lyncombe in the Domesday Book is as follows (from Morris: 1980):

*The Church holds Lyncombe itself. Before 1066 it paid tax for 10 hides. Land for 8 ploughs, of which 7 hides are in lordship; 3 ploughs there; 8 slaves; 4 villages and 10 smallholders with 3 ploughs and 2 hides. 2 mills which pay 10s; meadow, 30 acres; pasture, 200 acres. 1 cob; 8 pigs, 108 sheep.*

*The value was £6, now £8.*

#### *Beechen Cliff and Magdalen Gardens*

The Thoms Thorpe Map of Bath of 1742 shows Lyncombe Hill laid out as large, open fields, and Beechen Cliff as a steep wooded escarpment.

The site was purchased by public subscription in 1869 after Bath Corporation submitted a memorial to the Lords Commissioners of HM Treasury regarding the acquisition of Beechen Cliff dated 10th February 1869. *.....that a cliff or precipitous side of a hill forming the southern boundary of the city and known as Beechen Cliff and forming with the shrubs and trees thereon a picturesque object from most parts of the City, has been recently purchased by public subscription with the view of preserving the same as an ornamental appendage to the City. That the promoters of the subscription propose, with the approval of the subscribers, that the land so purchased shall be conveyed to the Corporation of Bath and be held in trust in perpetuity accordingly; and they have requested your memorialists to accept thereof*.

At the time of acquisition, woodland covered only the uppermost part of Beechen Cliff, the lower slopes comprising domestic dwellings and extensive gardens. Building had started in the 1830s to benefit from the spectacular views north across the City, with terraces called 'Bath View' and 'Beautiful View'. Excluding the area designated as 'Magdalen Gardens' at the western end of the cliff, the tree cover on Beechen Cliff before the redevelopment of the land off Holloway in the 1960s and 70s was only 35% of the tree cover seen today. All houses were removed from the hillside on Beechen Cliff during redevelopment and woodland has taken the place of some of the former houses and gardens.

It has only taken about fifty years for tree planting and some natural regeneration to cover the whole of the Cliff scarp woodland. Nonetheless, a great deal of demolition debris and the footprints of demolished houses are easily discernible on the woodland floor, including the rusting remains of a WW2 Anderson shelter high up on the slope.

A long-forgotten feature in the midst of the remains, bordering Holloway, are the walls of the Holloway Pound, covering about 40m<sup>2</sup>, where stray animals were impounded, only to be released to their owners on payment of a fine to St Mary's Chapel. The old chapel, a water fountain and trough for horses remain on Holloway, on the edge of the character area, as a reminder of the past significance of this public right of way.

In 1993 the former Bath City Council commissioned a Management Plan for Beechen Cliff, which concluded urgent action was required: the beech trees were nearing the end of their natural life and there was no evidence of management. Action was required, the report concluded:

- To maintain the landscape contribution of the trees to the City
- To secure the long-term stability of the cliff
- To retain the existing nature conservation interest

In 2012, Bath and North East Somerset Council reviewed the situation, noting that little implementation of the plan had taken place, that some mature trees had fallen, and several more were leaning at an angle of 20 degrees. An attempt was made at the time to lease the land in perpetuity to the National Trust, with the Council retaining the freehold. This plan was eventually rejected by the National Trust, over concerns about liabilities arising from the unstable nature of the cliff face. However, the Council noted that:

*“Whilst no large-scale mass movements of the landslide appear to have occurred in recent centuries, there is evidence of small slips and instability over the past 200 years, with falls of trees on the steep upper slopes within the last 30 years. The cliff has a slope angle of 45 degrees plus but appears to be currently stable with no recorded movements in the last 100 years. Small land slips and instability are commonly associated with human activity and heavy rainfall.”*

Since that time, the Council has continued to undertake some management work on the slopes, including improving public footpaths.

### *Magdalen Gardens*

The Gardens are approximately 1ha in size, extending from the 'new' Jacob's Ladder steps (built around 1915-1920) in the east, to Holloway to the north and to the western footpath that rises up Beechen Cliff towards Alexandra Park.

Before the dissolution, the land now known as Magdalen Gardens was owned by the Abbey in Bath and probably was tended by those living in the adjacent St Mary Magdalen Hospital in Holloway; certainly they would have used the waters issuing from the springs on the sloping land.

Subsequently, Hugh Sexey, Auditor to the Exchequer during the reign of James 1, acquired this land when he was appointed Lord of the Manor of Lyncombe and Widcombe in the early C17<sup>th</sup>.

After his death in 1619, the trustees of his will set up a charitable institution in Bruton, Sexey's Hospital, which for many years received income from the use of the spring waters and from tenants of its lands in Bath.

Bath Corporation took on the lease for the land and use of the spring water as an important part of the City's public water supplies and over many years made improvements and repairs to meet increasing demand. Eventually, after some negotiating over terms, Bath Corporation purchased the land in late 1863; this included the adjoining properties of Magdalen Place, Union Place and associated gardens.

In 1902 Bath Corporation arranged 'for a field and gardens at the west end of Beechen Cliff just above the drinking trough in Holloway to be handed over to the Pleasure Grounds Committee to be laid out by them as a public pleasure ground in connection with the land on top of the hill' (Alexandra Park).

Instructions for the purchase of flowering shrubs (predominantly evergreen Laurel) for Magdalen Gardens were issued in 1909 and in 1913 approval was sought from the Water Works Committee to plant 50 Pine trees on the cliff adjacent to the Gardens.

The Gardens served the primary purpose of being part of the walk up Beechen Cliff to the panoramic views at the top, but also provided fine vistas over Bath without the need for further exertion!

Considerable damage to the Gardens was caused by bombs in WW2, when nearby Springfield Place was completely demolished and the roof of the Chapel opposite destroyed. Funds from the War Damage Commission were obtained for the repair of retaining walls and general reinstatement.

### *Lyncombe Hill Farm and allotments*

The Hill behind Beechen Cliff consisted of open fields and grazing land (shown on the Charlton 1799 map of Bath), linked to Holloway Farm to the West and Lyncombe Hill Farm to the East.

Most of today's field boundaries are the same as those of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when Lyncombe Hill Farm comprised fields occupied by Lord Howarden (land later built on as villas in Lyncombe Hill), trustees of Magdalen Hospital, Richard Atwood and Mr Tucker (Ralph Allen's nephew), part of whose field, 'Brakely', is now taken up by the allotments.

Some of the historic features of this land persist to today:

- The ancient field boundaries, for example of 'Barn Close' are clearly visible, despite being in a neglected condition;
- and the old barn shown on Thorpe's Map of 1742, adjacent to Greenway Lane, still stands, with its replacement corrugated steel roof and a 'dangerous condition' warning sign on the door.

In 1936 a proposal to build 170 houses on Lyncombe Hill Farm fields was rejected by Bath Surveying Committee, whose engineer said that the site was the green spot adjoining Jacob's Ladder which could be seen from a large area in the centre of the City and that he objected on the grounds that it was going to be an eyesore for many years.

### *Alexandra Park*

The project to open a park on the top of Beechen Cliff started in 1896 when a proposal to acquire the land was first discussed at the Council's Pleasure Grounds Committee. At this time, Bear Flat was undergoing change with major new housing development and the construction of the "Poets Avenues". In 1898 the Council agreed to purchase a field of 11 acres on the highest part of the cliff together with a right of way over the new road (now known as Shakespeare Avenue) then being constructed from Wellsway. The cost of the land was £2750 with a further £1250 set aside for laying out the park and building the road around it.

Alexandra Park was named in honour of Queen Alexandra and opened in 1902 to commemorate the coronation of Edward VII. It provided an accessible and attractive area of open space for the new residents of Bear Flat. Its position at the top of Beechen Cliff gives magnificent panoramic views of the city and the surrounding wooded vales and hills.

As the Bath Chronicle said at the time of the opening 'it would be difficult to find in any part of England a short drive so near a city in which so wide and varied and beautiful a series of views is disclosed to the visitor'. Some of those views are still visible, other partly obscured by trees in and around the Park, by adjacent houses and by Beechen Cliff School.

A Friends of Alexandra Park Group has been established in the local community, which is leading on efforts to protect and upgrade the Park itself, by improving planting, sign-posting and management. The Park hosts a bowls club, established in 1914, which remains active.

## *Beechen Cliff School*

The school was established in its current buildings (on land belonging to Lyncombe Hill Farm) in 1932, as the City of Bath Boys' School, having previously been based in the Guildhall (since 1896) as the Bath City Secondary School. The boundaries of the school (and Alexandra Park) closely follow the historic field boundaries shown on the original Ordnance Survey map of Bath of 1852.

The school was taken out of local authority control in 1990, and, after several changes of identity, is now an Academy School within the Bath Education Trust.

In the early 1970s sixth form, science, technology, humanities and sports buildings were built on the eastern playing fields to support the merger of schools into a comprehensive school. Further building work to the east took place during 2010 to 2016, when a large sports hall, open air sports area, new classrooms and boarding block were built.

In 2000 the school proposed to sell off the lower part of its playing fields for housing development. Although the latest school inspection report had remarked that the playing fields were small for the school the required consent was obtained from the DFEE, but there was vigorous opposition from the local community and planning permission was refused.



## 4. Cultural influences

### Leisure

The entire area, apart from the school, was intended to and continues to provide green space for leisure activities, encouraging walkers and visitors to the City to enjoy the space and the views across the City.

The park has provision for disabled visitors arriving by car, and, with the assistance of the Friends of Alexandra Park, there are efforts to encourage a more sustainable 'nature friendly' planting regime, such as the provision of meadow areas and wild flower beds. There is a children's play area and every year the park plays host to a community picnic and entertainment community event.

### Sports

Today the park has a bowls club and boules pitch and is also used by a local fitness club as a "bootcamp" for working out.

The school offers sports facilities including tennis courts, rugby and football pitches. The school has an all-weather pitch with floodlights which is used by clubs in Bath outside school hours.



## 5. Archaeology

Lyncombe Hill would have afforded impressive views of the city of Bath and its great civic buildings, and the surrounding area, as far back as Roman times. A Roman copper alloy plate or scale, 24mm square, was found on Beechen Cliff and donated to the Roman Baths Museum by the finder. It was probably once riveted to a belt or cuirass by two holes punched from front to rear. In addition, a Roman Coin of unknown type was found in Alexandra Park in 1964.

There is also evidence for habitation on the lower slopes close to the study area, including a high status Roman villa to the north-west, on the site of the previous Oldfield Boys School, on the northern edge of the Wells Way, just beyond the western edge of the study area.

## 6. Landmarks and views

*See map, Appendix 1.*

### Landmarks

Beechen Cliff is visible from many vantage points including the City Centre. It forms the backdrop to views looking south from the city. From within the wood on Beechen Cliff there are only limited views out towards the north. To the east of the park and the school are allotments and fields that slope down to the rear of houses on the west side of Lyncombe Hill. There are limited views into these fields.

The most striking natural feature in the landscape to the immediate south of the centre of Bath is the line of mature Beech trees crowning the rim of Beechen Cliff, seen from the City and all entry points to Bath from the east, north and west.

Of the very few man-made structures in this character area, the broad sweep of the 1932 main building of Beechen Cliff School, set up on an embankment, dominates the view from the south, together with other newer school buildings. School buildings are clearly seen from the southern approach road to the city (the A367).

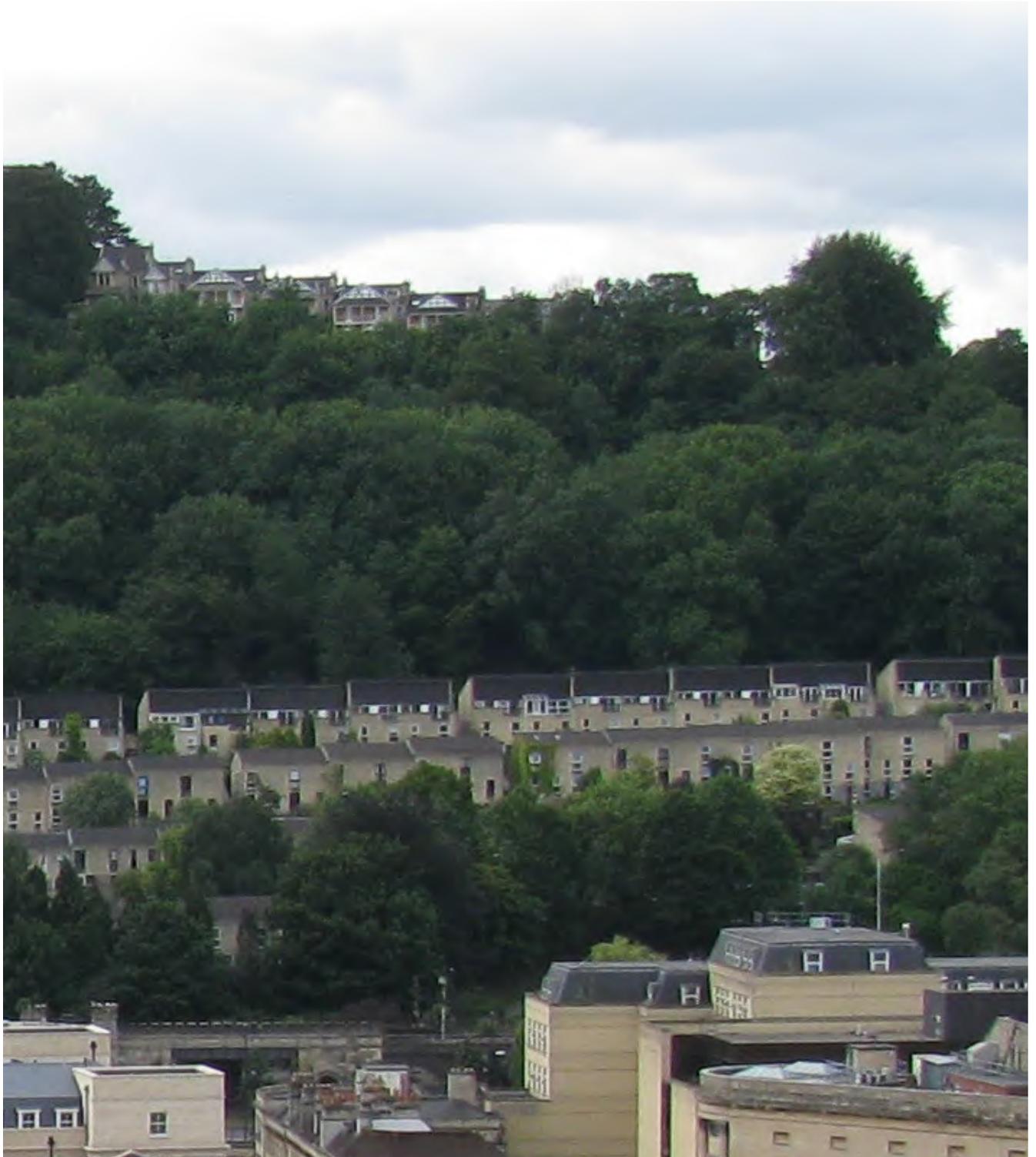


## Views of the area

The bulk of Lyncombe Hill and the dramatically steep face of Beechen Cliff dominate all views of Bath when approached from east, north or west. These views have been commented on, recorded in pictures, poetry, literature and tourist postcards throughout Bath's history as a destination for healing and tourism.

An early illustration of the relationship of Beechen Cliff with the river and city below was drawn by Buck in 1734.

Despite her dislike of the social life in Bath, Jane Austen described Beechen Cliff in 'Northanger Abbey' as 'that noble hill, whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking an object from almost every opening in Bath'.





## Views from the area

Impressive views surround the area due to its elevation; those of particular note are:

- from Lyncombe Hill Farm to the south and east, with the wooded slopes of Prior Park and Rainbow Wood and across to Claverton Down and the University.
- from Alexandra Park to the west towards the hills bordering the lower River Avon valley.
- from Beechen Cliff viewing points, a remarkable panorama from west to east across Bath city centre and the Georgian terraces clothing the south-facing hillsides to Lansdown and across to Solsbury Hill and the Avon valley with Bathampton Down.
- the first and only viewing panel for the aid of visitors was installed above Magdalen Gardens through the generosity of Cedric Chivers, past mayor of Bath for seven years during the 1920s. Several buildings shown on this panel no longer exist, so plans are in hand to provide one or two modern viewing panels in Alexandra Park.



Two of the most well-known early views of Bath from Beechen Cliff were drawn by William Stukeley in 1723 and by Thomas Robins in 1754.



## 7. Land uses and their influence

In considering land use, the character area falls into two parts, Beechen Cliff and the rest. The steepness of Beechen Cliff has precluded development on all of it but the lower reaches along Calton Road and Alexandra Road. The building of small houses for workers, especially for the railway, came in the Victorian period. By the mid-20th Century many of these dwellings had become unfit for human habitation and were demolished. The remains of some of them can be seen in the woodland that has established itself over the whole cliff. The woodland is now managed as public space with paths through it to Alexandra Park at the top. Today, the cliff and its woodland is an important back drop to the City Centre, it is a significant reserve for wildlife and is important for walking and taking exercise.

In 1868 the City Council purchased land on the lower slopes of Beechen Cliff opposite the St Mary Magdalen church, and early in the 20th Century laid out the Magdalen Gardens as a small public park. This is now amalgamated into the woodland, although traces of the gardens can still be seen.

Beechen Cliff is the source of a number of natural springs that, at one time, were one of the City's principal water supplies. This is evident in records from circa. 1230. Due to contamination the supply was abandoned in 1887.

Traditionally the remainder of the character area was farmland, and the vestiges of that remain with the fields of the former Lyncombe Hill Farm. In the late 19th Century Bath City Council purchased part of Holloway Farm to establish Alexandra Park, and in the early 1930's, the land for what is now Beechen Cliff School, was purchased. The fields that were left remained in agriculture, until recently for keeping horses. A consortium of local residents' groups is negotiating to take over the remaining fields of Lyncombe Hill Farm on licence, to maintain the public access and to manage them as a nature conservation area.



## 8. Buildings, architectural quality and townscape

The study area contains few buildings, other than the school, the original portion of which was built in 1932.

The entrance to the park is identified by two imposing stone piers, which unfortunately have over- dominant signing. The park itself contains the bowls pavilion and public lavatories.

On the slopes of Beechen Cliff coming down to Holloway there are remains of the water collection and distribution system that served parts of the city including the surrounding area. These are largely buried. The only listed structure within the character area is a well head with walls and steps. The well head is listed grade II, but it is not absolutely clear to which part of the system it relates.

Located in the retaining wall to Holloway is a horse trough, dating from the times when Holloway was the main road out of Bath to the south and south-west. The trough was fed by collected spring water. Attached to the wall by the trough is a plaque with a 19<sup>th</sup> Century poem lamenting the death of a horse, testament to the plight of the animals used to transport goods up and down the hill.



## 9. Materials and detailing

The only significant buildings in the character area are those of Beechen Cliff School. The original school building is in local stone, and the. Major extension to the school took place in the 1970s, with further major development in 2010-2016, in both cases utilising modern techniques and materials.

The school is one of the relatively few art deco buildings in the City, and the exterior detailing is unaltered since it was constructed. Despite the more recent development, it is the 1930's building that is the most prominent, and is an important example of its period in Bath.





## 10. Streets and movement

### Density and degree of enclosure

Sitting on a high point at the top of Beechen Cliff, there are views from the park over most of Bath. The reverse is true, and there are views of the park from the centre of Bath, and from Lansdown, Bathwick and the Lyncombe Valley. Within the precinct of the school there is a more of a sense of enclosure, although it is exposed locally to houses on Greenway Lane and the eastern side of Poets' corner. Approximately half the school site is taken up by buildings, the remainder by open playing fields including the lower part of the site which slopes down to Greenway Lane.



### Street pattern

The only vehicular access to Alexandra Park is from Shakespeare Avenue. Vehicular access to the school is from the top of Kipling Avenue, although there is a double gate that could provide access to the lower field from Greenway Lane.

There is a circular road within Alexandra Park itself and vehicles are controlled by a series of tight chicanes, designed to restrict them to low speeds. Parking is allowed on one side of the road throughout most of the park. Until recently car parking in the Park was unrestricted. However the introduction of a Residents Parking Zone that includes Bear Flat and Alexandra Park has eliminated all-day parking on the road around the Park. It is now time-limited for visitors only. There are three access points to the park for pedestrians, two from Beechen Cliff and one through the main vehicular access from Shakespeare Avenue.



There are four points of access for pedestrians into the school, two from Greenway, one from the Park and one adjacent to the vehicular access off Kipling Avenue.

There are no roads within the woods on Beechen Cliff. In 2015, work was completed to provide a hard-surfaced flight of steps and footpath through the woodlands, from the play area by Alexandra Road in the east to Magdalen Gardens in the west. This footpath currently has 'permissive' status and is not designated as a right of way.

Other public access routes associated with Beechen Cliff are:



- The tarmac "skyline" path that runs along the top of the woodland, partly within Alexandra Park and which links the following routes,
- The historic footpath off Lyncombe Hill, existing before 1852, with steps leading from Alexandra Road (east) to the Park, previously called 'Jacob's Ladder',
- A flight of steps built around 1915-1920 also now confusingly called 'Jacobs Ladder', leading from Calton Gardens, crossing the woodland path, to the skyline path, formerly referred to as Beechen Cliff Lane
- An historic footpath ascending from Holloway, also existing before 1852, skirting Magdalen Gardens, leading to the 'skyline' path.

All these paths are used daily by visitors, school children and residents.

Access to the allotments is from the road around the park. Vehicular access to the allotments is gated to allow for maintenance vehicles only. The open fields adjoining the allotments can be accessed by a farm gate at the eastern end of Greenway Lane, but this is normally padlocked. There is a public footpath across the fields from the end of Greenway to the footpath that links Alexandra Road to the Park.

The coherence and connectedness of the paths and green space make the area special. One can walk from Holloway or Alexander Road via Alexandra Park to Beechen Cliff School without crossing a road. The absence of traffic is part of the character of the paths and of the area. The new path through the Cliff Woods, being rural in nature yet so close to the centre, is an astonishing piece of *rus in urbe*.

### **Public realm**

Alexandra Park is one of the major public open spaces within the city (and conservation area) and the quality of the public realm is paramount. The trees within and around the edge of the park are an important part of the green framework of the City. The retention and enhancement of the area as a public park is essential to maintaining the quality of this part of the conservation area. Beechen Cliff School is part of the public realm insofar as a public footpath crosses the playing fields from the entrances on Greenway Lane to the main gates.

Beechen Cliff was opened-up as a public space in 2015. The path through the woods is well used by school pupils, people going to work and by leisure users. The fields to the east of the park are also part of the public realm. The fields are not managed intensively, and the footpath is often muddy.

One of the unfortunate features of the park is the extent of signage. This is most apparent at the main entrance to the park, but there are other examples within the park. At the approach, there is a multiplicity of signs to the extent that they distract from the imposing gate posts and the sense of arrival. Signs within the park, especially those advising of the new parking restrictions, impact on the character and appearance of the park.

### **Vitality and tranquillity**

The park is well used at all times of the year. It is large enough to retain a sense of peace and quiet most of the time. However, the presence of vehicles does cause some disturbance. The road in the park is used for car parking and, even with the new parking regime, parked cars are visually intrusive as well as being noisy and a source of air pollution.

The paths through and up Beechen Cliff are tranquil. They provide glimpses of the remains of some of the buildings (mostly houses) that existed on the lower slopes of the Cliff until the 1960's. The same degree of tranquillity is true on the walk through the fields east of the park, which provides an unexpectedly rural and quiet space in the centre of the City.

## 11. Trees, open space, parks and gardens

See map, Annex 1

### *Beechen Cliff woodland*

Today, Beechen Cliff woodland and particularly the mature Beech trees on its uppermost slopes are highly prominent from the City of Bath and make an acknowledged and important contribution to its World Heritage Status. The retention of landscape trees on the skyline is a critical feature.



As well as the importance of the ridge top trees, the wider woodland plays an important landscape role within the city, extending a green corridor close to the City Centre and forming a green frame to the housing to the south of the City.

As well as being an important part of the conservation area and contributing to the attributes of the Bath World Heritage Site, Beechen Cliff is:

- Part of the Forest of Avon Community Forest;
- A site of Nature Conservation Importance;
- Subject to a Countryside Stewardship Grant for woodland improvement.



The woodland is broadly classified as lowland Beech woodland of uneven age structure, comprising:

- Ridge top mature Beech trees (about 20) and dense natural regeneration/coppice regrowth of Common Ash, Beech, Sycamore and Hazel with some maturing Yew.
- Ornamental planting of Corsican Pine and Cherry Laurel (now much reduced) as part of the Edwardian landscape in the Magdalen Gardens part of Beechen Cliff.
- Maturing secondary woodland and planted species throughout the woodland, mainly Ash and Sycamore, with occasional Yew, Hazel, Hawthorn, Elder and Blackthorn, and often open understorey which shows plenty of fallen timber.

The heavy clay soil does not support a diverse ground flora but it includes rampant Wild Garlic, Enchanter's Nightshade and Hart's-Tongue Fern.



Over recent years woodland management has been minimal, addressing issues such as fallen trees or those dangerously leaning. More recently, selected trees have been removed near housing, some replanting has taken place and work has opened out parts of the area to form glades.

### *Magdalen Gardens*

The limited Edwardian planting of the gardens persists to this day. The Pine trees make a fine stand, although all are nearing the ends of their expected life spans. A great deal of work has been undertaken in the last three years to transform Magdalen Gardens from an overgrown, neglected place into a more open, user-friendly public space that attracts many visitors and local residents alike. The gloomy invasive shrub-layer of laurels and bramble has been removed, whilst several notable mature trees (Copper Beech and Lime) remain as important



features and may even predate the Garden's official establishment. A new interpretation panel explaining the history and development of the Gardens has been installed in the last year.

### *Lyncombe Hill Farm*

Lyncombe Hill Farm is locally prominent, being part of the slopes of Lyncombe Vale, in which the Lyn Brook flows to the River Avon. The farm fields although not visible from Bath City Centre, are widely visible from eastern approaches to the City. The land is principally open and divided into five small grazed fields that are separated by outgrown hedges with a significant number of trees and shrubs. These, combined with surrounding woodland belts, make the site a prominent part of the local landscape.



As well as being an important part of the conservation area and contributing to the attributes of the Bath World Heritage Site, Lyncombe Hill Farm is:

- Part of the Forest of Avon Community Forest;
- A Site of Nature Conservation Importance;
- Important as it contains hedgerows of UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat;
- And contains some lowland meadow of UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat.

The principal trees on the farmland are in outgrown hedgerow boundaries; there is a wide variety of species, indicating hedgerows of ancient origin, plus a few notable veteran trees such as Oak, Ash and Yew.



The five fields are semi-improved alkaline grassland. The species composition of parts of two of the fields meeting the criteria for Lowland Meadow BAP Priority Species.

The farm fields were grazed by cattle, and until recently by a few horses, but this has ceased due to excessive damage to the pasture. The land is a clay-limestone mix that drains poorly such that heavily used areas near gates and footpaths become badly poached in wet weather, forming bare scars across the land.

On the boundary with Beechen Cliff School is a large blackthorn thicket, with ash saplings providing succession growth further north on the site. Beyond the thicket, to the north-west of the farm fields, a belt of under-managed trees, mainly Ash and Sycamore, form the boundary within the School land. These trees and shrubs partly reduce the impact of light pollution, arising from the evening use of the floodlit sports facilities used by the school and by outside sports clubs.



### *Alexandra Park*

The park itself is a sizeable area of green space. The grass, pockets of trees and areas with wild flowers are maintained by the local community group, Friends of Alexandra Park, which also carries out regular litter picking exercises and hosts community events during the year. Alexandra Park includes children play space, bowls and boules facilities, and serves as an important informal recreational area and green space for local residents, including dog walkers, and visitors to the viewing area.

### *Beechen Cliff School grounds*

Apart from the strip of trees on the school south-east boundary with Lyncombe Hill Farm, and the buildings grouped on the northern side of the site, the school grounds are predominantly open grass playing fields which extend to the south and Greenway Lane.

The school grounds are crossed by two public footpaths:

- from Greenway Lane at the far south-west of the playing fields to the school main entrance in Kipling Avenue;
- and from midway along Greenway Lane across the playing fields to join the footpath above, or along the boundary hedge line into Lyncombe Hill Farm to the east.



## 12. Night-time character

While the park is usually closed to cars at night, it remains accessible at all times to pedestrians. The only lighting at night within the park is that continuing along the edge of Beechen Cliff. The main footpaths linking the park with Holloway and Widcombe are also lit providing pedestrian access and the opportunity for visitors to enjoy attractive views across the City at night.

The school provides floodlit football pitches as an evening sports facility.

## 13. Issues affecting the Character Area

### What are the assets of the character area?

- The character area is a key contributor to the green setting of Bath, framing views south of and from the City Centre. The entire space is threaded with footpaths providing a pleasant, well valued public amenity.
- Alexandra Park is considered by many to provide the best viewpoint of the city.
- For local people the character area provides a range of leisure facilities for all ages, including the allotments which add to the interest of the green space.
- The fields give a countryside feel to the east and a 'green edge' to Widcombe & Lyncombe Vale.
- Beechen Cliff School is a successful, valued boys Academy with well cared for buildings and grounds. The public footpath across the southern part of the school grounds provides additional public access within the character area.

### What are the weaknesses of the character area?



- The availability of funding and manpower to maintain the area as a visitor and community asset. Whilst local groups such as the Friends of Alexandra Park work hard to support and maintain the flora and fauna of the area the size of the task is daunting. As public funding has reduced, the maintenance of field and allotment boundaries along with the fields themselves have deteriorated.
- Parking of vehicles along Alexandra Park's circular carriageway. This impacts on the parks amenity for visitors.
- The impact of development on the green space to the south of the school.
- Floodlights at night-time can compromise the skyline view.

### What factors may be seen as threats?



- The availability of funding for upkeep of the area and the waning of local community support could impact on the character and appearance of the area as well as the availability of facilities and access.
- Ongoing pressures for car parking in the area and any increase in traffic.
- Any development which would adversely affect local views and the skyline.

- The special character of this area is derived from the landscape characteristics. Any change to Alexandra Park itself, Beechen Cliff, the allotments and Lyncombe Vale farmland could significantly affect the character of this area and its contribution to the setting of the World Heritage Site.

### What opportunities exist to improve the area?

- Future initiatives to develop further holistic care and managed use of the area recognising the interdependencies that exist between its parts.
- Greater recognition of the area as a visitor destination.
- Ongoing encouragement of voluntary support such as the Friends of Alexandra Park working with the Council to achieve better outcomes tailored to meeting local needs.
- Improvements focused on the management of the area, e.g. in relation to car parking and lighting.
- Improvements to the entrance to the park by the removal of changes to the over dominant signage on the stone entrance piers and similar opportunities to reduce signage within the park.



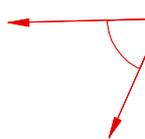




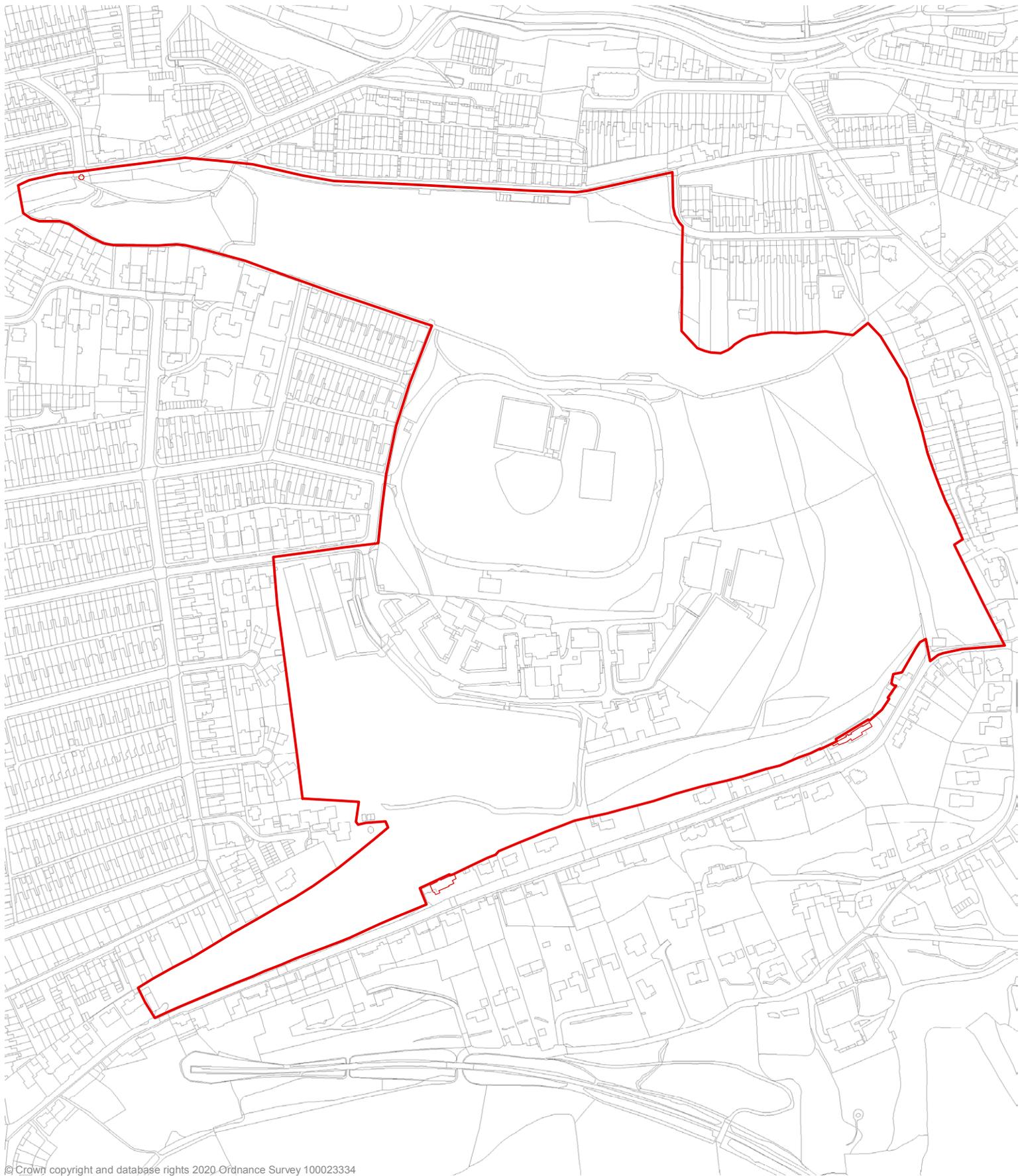
**Key:**

 : Landmarks

 : View

 : Panoramic view

**Landmarks and views**

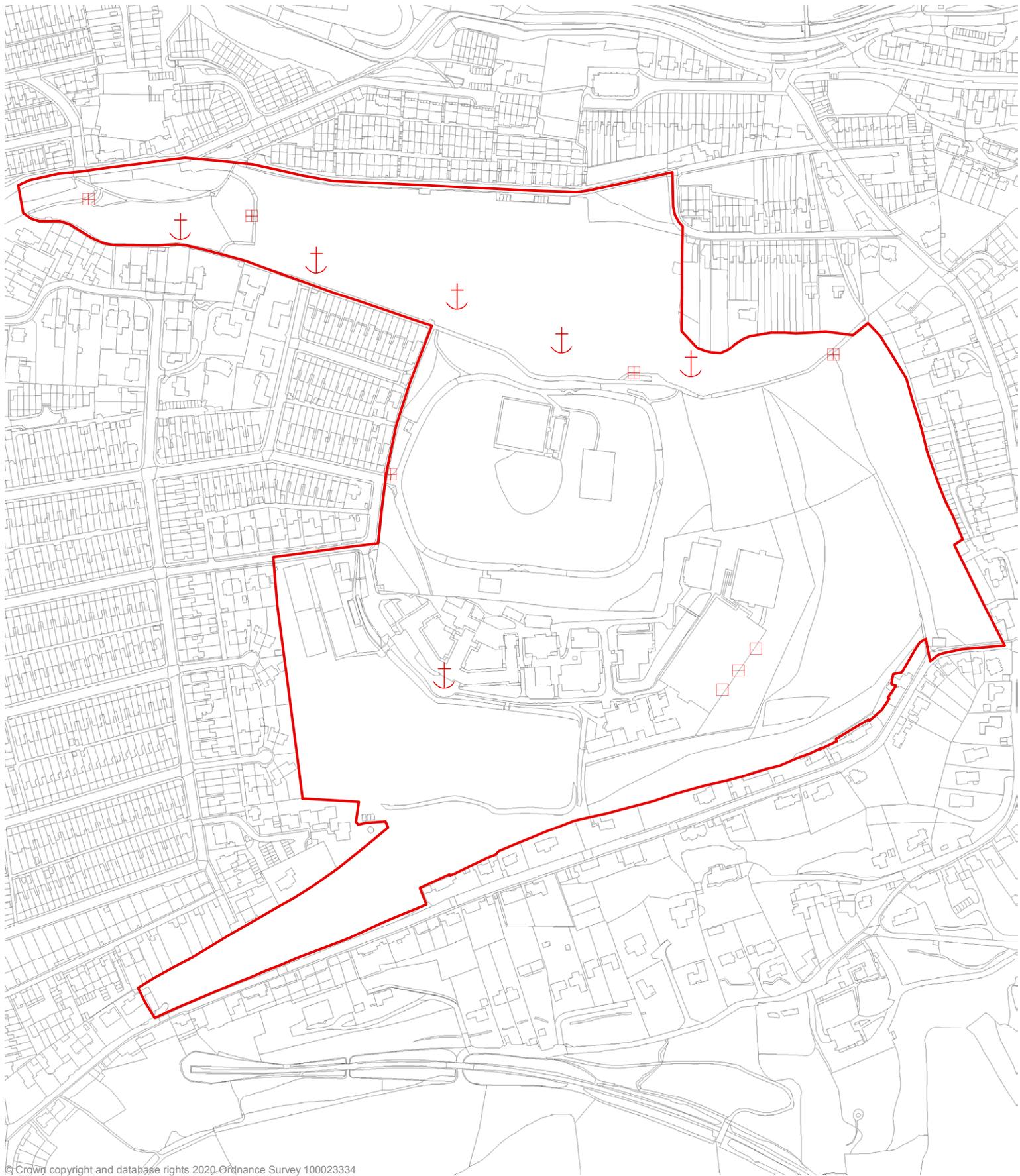


Key:



: Grade II

Listed buildings



**Key:**

 : Positive townscape feature

 : Negative townscape feature

 : Anchor building / feature

**Townscape features**



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**Key:**

-  : Open space
-  : Parks
-  : Private/Semi-private gardens (where significant)
-  : Trees

**Trees, open space,  
parks and gardens**

## Annexe 2 - Context

A conservation area is designated under the provisions of Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and conservation areas) Act 1990 and is defined as 'an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'. The quality and interest of the area as a whole, rather than individual buildings, is the main consideration when designating such areas.

Section 71 of the Act requires the local planning authority to periodically formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of conservation areas within the district. Section 72 requires that in considering applications for development in a conservation area, attention shall be paid to the desirability of conserving or enhancing the character of that area.

Conservation area appraisals are considered by Historic England to be vital to the conservation of these special areas.

More detailed policies are to be found in the Bath and North East Somerset Core Strategy and draft Placemaking Plan.

