

SOULTON CASTLE ACCESS PROJECT

A Byrga Geniht report by James D Wenn



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Excavations by Dig Ventures (digventures.com) have revealed that a large mound (SAM / Scheduled Ancient Monument) on the Soulton Estate represents a substantial mediaeval fortification identified as a small castle. This orientation report outlines the first steps in convening stakeholders and quotations in order to compile planning and funding bids to increase free public access to this site, as well as a park amenity and public transport access, focused towards learning outcomes as well as social outcomes.

[End of Executive Summary]

THEORY OF CHANGE OUTLINE

TOC (Theory of Change) is used by organisations to clarify thinking about the connection between actions, outcomes and goals. Part of this method useful for this simple project is the concept of backwards mapping. Goals are identified to generate an understanding of unmet needs and barriers, then these barriers are identified to pinpoint contributive goals and specific actions.

PRIMARY GOALS AT SOULTON CASTLE

- Increased local access to heritage assets.
- Increased local access to the countryside and nature.
- Increased local engagement in heritage and environmental activities.

PRIMARY BARRIERS

- Low offer of free access to heritage assets representing the Middle Ages around the Wem area (local catchment).
- Unsafe / poorly accessible public transport to the Soulton Estate as a whole. Public transport access to the Soulton Estate is via bus. The bus stop is currently in the midst of two busy farm entrances that offer hard standing (as opposed to the grass verge).
- Unsafe / poorly accessible current potential routes to Soulton Castle (farm entrance from the B5065). (No public access is therefore granted to the SAM designated field, on road safety grounds).

CONTRIBUTIVE GOALS / OUTCOMES

- Information, amenities and opportunities for group activities at / around the Soulton Castle site.
- Safe / accessible public transport to the Soulton Estate.
- Safe / accessible public route from bus stops, footpaths and car parking to Soulton Castle.

CONTRIBUTIVE BARRIERS

- Funds are required to introduce information boards and secure local marketing of a new heritage amenity.
- A new paired set of bus stops with raised pavement, heightened and dropped (crossing) curbs and signage are needed to make the Soulton public transport connection safe and accessible.
- An enclosed pathway is required to link the bus stops with the SAM designated field.

PROJECT ACTIONS

- Land has been identified north of the B5065 for dedication as a 'Pocket Park' to free public amenity and access.
- This strip of land would be bounded by hedges (existing to the south, and new to the north).
- Existing field entrances would be filled with new hedges to separate the Pocket Park and SAM from the dangerous B5065.
- The Ashton family (on proposal acceptance) may agree to convert the Hall drive (historically a garden feature and not for vehicle use) back to pedestrian designation, allowing the mouth of the drive on the B5065 to be converted to raised pavement with specialist curbs for an accessible bus stop.
- A section of the opposite hedgerow would be cleared to allow a mirroring bus stop with a gate to the Pocket Park.
- A broad smooth path would run from the farm track that is designated as permissive footpath access to the Soulton Long Barrow and Sanctuary Theatre (west end), along the Pocket Park to the edge of the SAM

designated field (east end), where the SAM is maintained in a lawned state.

- The Pocket Park contains a set of drainage structures that would be capped with a paved area for amenity seating and information boards close to the bus stop.
- The soft areas on the Pocket Park would be used for mediaeval / heritage planting, creating community group and educational opportunities focused on 'food and farming', and subsistence, commercial production and amenity horticulture through history. This may include trees such as quince, medlar, cherry and heritage apple, along with flowery mead areas and herbs and vegetables.

PROJECT PRINCIPLES

It is important to restate the rationale of the project in line with the themes adopted by HLF and other bodies:

Saving heritage:

- Monitoring and maintenance of the SAM is currently point-loaded on the capacity of the Ashton family farming at Soulton, and this project will increase stakeholderhip and access for potential stewards.
- The Pocket Park will decrease erosion from vehicles accessing the SAM designated field for visits owing to current lack of safety for pedestrian access.
- The Pocket Park will provide infrastructure for rare and heritage species cultivation (botanic garden specialising in flora of the English/Welsh Middle Ages).
- Large lengths of newly laid traditional hedgerow will create a focus for preserving the intangible (skill/process) heritage of the craft of hedge-laying, with interpretation boards contributing to public awareness and learning outcomes relating to intangible heritage.

Protecting the environment:

- The correction of the bus stops at Soulton will reduce reliance on the private car for accessing amenities at Soulton Castle as well as the wider estate, making a substantial contribution to carbon emissions reduction.
- The Pocket Park mediaeval botanic garden will increase local biodiversity.
- Large lengths of newly laid traditional hedgerow will increase local biodiversity.

Inclusion, access and participation:

- Access to a free heritage amenity by public transport will substantially lower financial barriers to engagement with culture, the environment, nature and heritage for people on low incomes in North Shropshire.

- The mediaeval botanic garden concept offers sensory experiences in scent, touch, sight and sound to enrich the lives of community members, especially those with different sensory disabilities. Taste may be added with a community group coming forward to offer food-based heritage events.
- The proposed interventions are made with a view to wheelchair accessibility.

Organisational sustainability

- Having a facility which presents infrastructure, amenities and activity opportunities for local heritage, environmental and community groups represents an opportunity for the Ashton family to be supported in their stewardship of the SAM site by the wider community, and makes this stewardship more resilient to the benefit of the shared heritage asset as well as the engaged community.

STAKEHOLDERS AND NEXT STEPS

- Whilst a key consideration in this proposal is addressing the needs of the SAM without affecting the SAM designated field, Historic England will be a key recipient of this outline paper, and key stakeholder going forward.
- Local planning authorities both directly and within committees responsible for public transport and other related concerns will be key stakeholders.
- It is noted that Helen Morgan MP, member for North Shropshire, has expressed endorsement for this project at this exploratory phase, and is an interested stakeholder going forward.

Following engagement with the authorities listed above:

- CPRE have discussed the possibility of providing hedge laying on a charitable basis (in line with their strategic objectives), which requires exploration and discussion.
- Quotations must be sought from landscaping companies to establish the cost of delivering the two bus stop pavements, the gates to the Pocket Park, and the paving within the Pocket Park.
- Dig Ventures must be engaged to arrange the terms and costs of developing information board designs / content reflecting their archaeological and research work.
- Services of Byrga Geniht Ltd., with advice concerning aesthetic choices in landscaping, and information board copy from research concerning the importance of the Castle mound as a garden feature in later phases related to the Old Sir Rowland Hill phase (1550s/60s). *

- Quotations must be sought from signage manufacturers for information boards.
- Costings must be estimated for other expenditure (benches, advertising for the opening).

Funding:

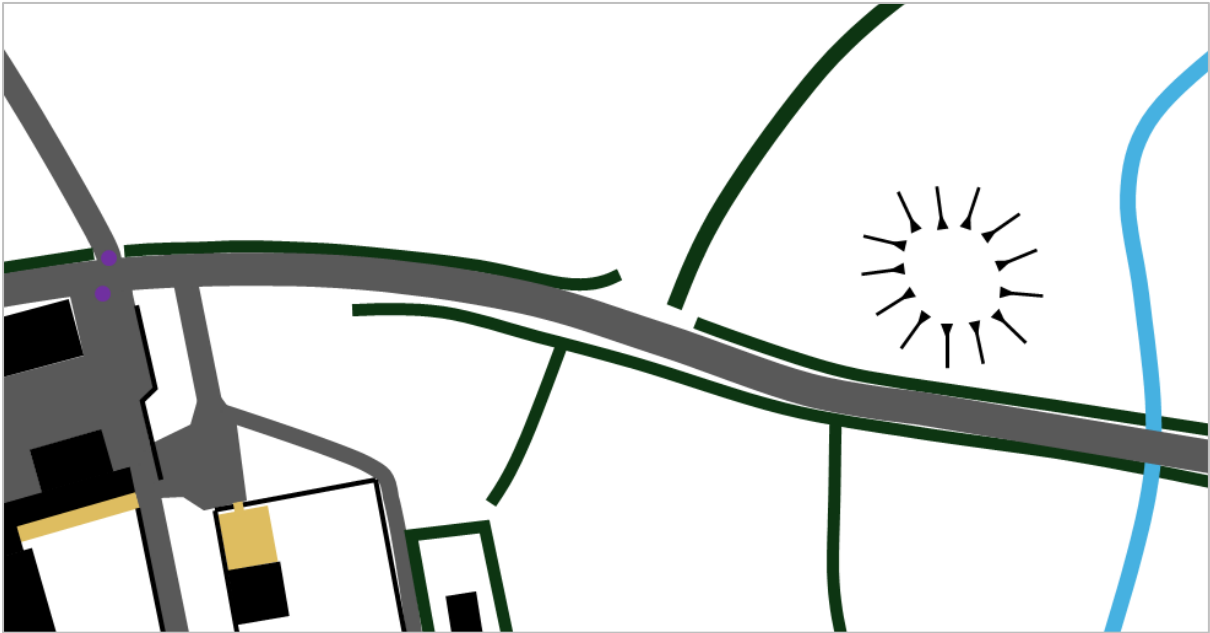
- CPRE have been identified as potential funders for hedge laying.
- There have been initial introductions between the Ashton family and the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- Sponsorship from Sacred Stones (of Soulton Long Barrow) may be explored, given the greatly enhanced amenities that this project adds to the landscape.
- Funding from local government branches may be explored.

Following construction:

- Liaison must be maintained with Wem Town Hall and other civic partners to assist in the formation of local heritage groups.
- Facilities at Soulton Hall and the farm will be offered to facilitate the formation of new groups connected to the Castle.

BYRGA GENIHT'S INTEREST

Byrga Geniht Ltd is a private consultancy specialising in the interpretation of cultural assets in England, focused on country houses. This exploratory report has been compiled on a speculative rather than Pro Bono Publico basis, recognising that Soulton Hall is an established client of Byrga Geniht, and that Byrga Geniht's ongoing commercial work on other areas of the Soulton Estate will benefit from the development of Soulton Castle as a community asset, and that specific advice units will be required in the course of the project (marked * above).



Current layout



Proposals

- | | |
|---|--|
|  Vehicular access |  River |
|  Pedestrian access |  Sightline |
|  Buildings |  Castle mound slope |
|  Hedgerow |  Bus stop |

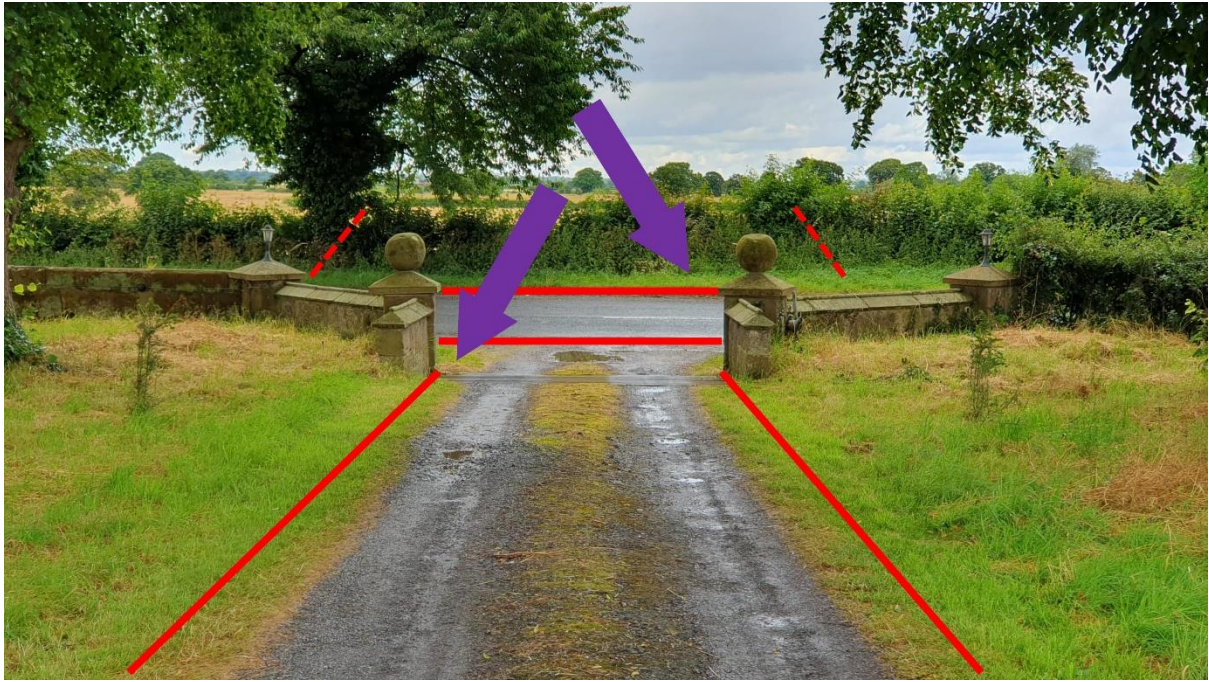
SITE PHOTOGRAPHS



Current bus stop eastbound.



Current bus stop westbound.



Red encloses proposed pedestrian area. Purple arrows indicate proposed relocated bus stops.



Red encloses proposed pedestrian area.



Red line indicates boundary of proposed Pocket Park (view from track to Soulton Long Barrow, southwards).



View from proposed Pocket Park into SAM area (Soulton Castle). Red arrow indicates aperture through boundary for access, currently blocked by a barbed wire fence.