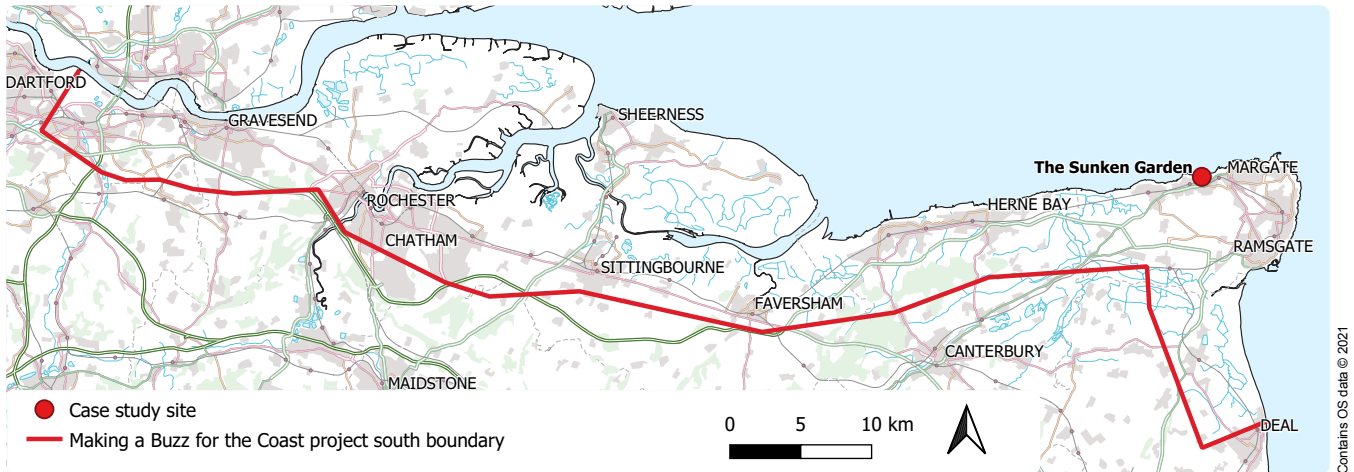


Making a Buzz for the Coast

The north Kent coast is recognised nationally for the diversity of bumblebee species it supports with 22 of the 24 UK species, including five of the seven nationally rare and scarce bumblebees. Much of Kent's cultural and economic heritage is intrinsically linked to bees, with a landscape of orchards, arable flowering crops and grassland. Kent's bumblebee diversity can be linked to its varied habitats and the milder southern climate.



The Making a Buzz for the Coast project was set up to re-address the decline and help to conserve wild bees in north Kent. Making a Buzz for the Coast is working to safeguard Kent's wild bees, focusing on coastal areas from Dartford to Deal. The aims of this ambitious project, are 1) to create and restore flower-rich habitat 2) recruit, train and support volunteers to take action for bumblebees and other wild bees 3) raise awareness about the value of these important insects and their conservation needs.

Making a Buzz for the Coast is a multi-partner project led by Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT) and with key partners including Kent Wildlife Trust, Kent County Council, Natural England, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Swale Borough Council, Thames Water and Thanet District Council, as well as numerous landowners and supporters. Its primary funder is the National Lottery Heritage Fund.



Sunken Garden interpretive panel.

Site introduction

The Sunken Gardens are located on the cliff-top grassland at Westbrook in the Isle of Thanet, and managed by Thanet District Council. The Sunken Gardens were originally created during the 1930s as a result of excavations to obtain materials to construct the railway bridge in Westbrook. Following WW2, the gardens, with their sweeping ramparts, limestone rock walls, grass 'pools' and lush bedding displays were a popular attraction for local visitors and holiday-makers. During the 1990s, council cuts meant that the gardens could not be managed as they had once been and they entered a period of neglect. Shrubs became overgrown and the flower beds were bare. Littering and anti-social behaviour became issues for this once well-loved and cared-for space.

The garden is managed with support from Thanet District Council by the Sunken Garden Society. The group was found by Peter Hasted, a local volunteer coastal warden and professional horticulturist.



Bumblebee-friendly planting.



Crocus planting.



Volunteers taking part in a Task Day.

Peter founded the society in 2018 after attending a Bumblebee Conservation Trust (BBCT) volunteer task day to plant pollen-rich shrubs on an adjacent grassland. He learned about the Making a Buzz for the Coast project and importance of the local area for rare bumblebees and plans for the project to provide bee-friendly plants to enhance the gardens for pollinators. Peter realised the gardens had no associated volunteer group so set about forming the society with the aim to revive and restore them.

The Sunken Garden Society now has a dedicated committee supporting their work and planning for the future. Monthly task days regularly attract between 20–30 volunteers for planting, tidying and litter-picking tasks with training provided in horticultural skills by Peter and bumblebee identification and ecology by the BBCT. Volunteers have contributed well over 600 hours to practical management.

Bumblebee-friendly planting and management

One of the main aims for the Sunken Garden was to improve the range and abundance of pollinator-friendly plants. Plants were initially supplied by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust and planted on volunteer task days. A ‘wish-list’ of plants, drought-tolerant and suited to a coastal environment was created, many of these plants were grown and donated by volunteers.

The gardens now contain a variety of plants chosen to suit the needs of a diversity of bees and to extend the forage season for bumblebees and other pollinators throughout the year. 1,000s of spring bulbs including crocus, snowdrops and muscari have been planted in the beds and lawns. Tree echiums, planted in 2018 as tiny plants are now towers of foraging bees through the summer months.

For more bumblebee-friendly planting ideas see BeeKind beekind.bumblebeeconservation.org

Local volunteers walk a monthly bumblebee monitoring transect (BeeWalk) in the garden and surrounding area. All common and widespread bumblebee species are recorded on the route. 2020 saw the first record of the scarce Ruderal bumblebee (*Bombus ruderatus*).

Lessons learnt

Garden Maintenance

One of the key issues for this garden was the lack of a water source. The garden is located in a very dry part of the country and with regular periods of dry weather, particularly in the summer months. Solutions include installation of a large 1000L water container which is topped up regularly during the summer months using a bowser by Thanet District Council. The container tap is padlocked to avoid it being deliberately emptied.

Littering and evidence of anti-social behaviour had become a problem in the gardens. Every month, as part of the monthly task day, volunteers are provided with litter picking equipment. As a result, although some littering continues, it has become far less of a visible issue. Bins are provided in the garden and waste collected by the council team. One of the society volunteers is a professional designer and has created sets of attractive signage to encourage visitors to take litter home or use the bins provided.

Community Involvement and Engagement

Fantastic efforts have been made to engage with the local community. The group set up a public Facebook group ‘Sunken Garden Society’ which has over 550 members, a place to share images of the gardens and to inform members of upcoming events and practical task days. There is also a quarterly newsletter with information about planting events, promoting BBCT and other supporters, raising awareness of bees and celebrating achievements. A variety of communication methods are required to ensure engagement and inclusivity of the wider volunteer and supporter groups. For those without access to social media, this requires updates via e-mail or phone contact and in some cases receiving a print copy of the newsletter.

Community participation and awareness raising is key to the success of this project. A regular practical task day takes place on the last Saturday of every month, throughout the year. Volunteers are trained in the safe use of tools and in horticultural activities such as planting and pruning. Local rotary clubs have donated 1,000s of bee-friendly, spring bulbs. School and nursery groups have visited to plant sunflowers and Cosmos whilst learning about the importance of pollinators.

An eye-catching interpretation panel, funded through Making a Buzz for the Coast, has been installed in the gardens. The panel aims to inform visitors about bumblebee-friendly gardening and a little about the history of the sunken garden. A notice board, created by a volunteer, keeps visitors informed by displaying upcoming tasks and the awards the garden has won.

The society regularly features stories in local media and community newsletters so that the local community is kept informed of activities, events and achievements at the gardens.

Further advice, support and awards schemes

Important steps to ensure the development of a gardening community group include setting up a society and committee as soon as possible to ensure the group are able to take donations and receive financial support, and setting up regular and direct communication between committee members and core volunteers allowing for fast decision making and aid in management.

A useful and rewarding way to gain additional advice and to raise the profile of your gardening community group and possibly attract funding is to enter into the various community gardening awards and schemes available.

Already the group has received acclaim from local community organisations and wildlife groups. In 2019 the society entered the Royal Horticultural Society's 'It's Your Neighbourhood' awards for the first time and achieved a level 5 'Outstanding' for their efforts. They also received awards from Kent Wildlife Trust's 'Wild About Gardens' scheme and were runner-up in Kent Life magazine's 'Best Community Garden'. In 2020, the society won a Defra 'Bee's Needs Champions' award.



Sunken Garden, July 2019.

Photo-credit: F. Waters

Society community outreach.

