# Public access to Dorset’s Bridehead Estate to end amid sale and protests



In a poignant turn of events, the Bridehead Estate in Dorset, famed for its breathtaking lake and waterfall, has announced that public access will cease from 2 June 2025. This decision has evoked a wave of dismay amongst the many who have cherished the estate's scenic beauty for years, considering it a beloved retreat reminiscent of the tranquil landscapes found in the novels of Thomas Hardy. The estate, which has offered a permissive path for visitors, has become a sanctuary for those seeking solace amidst nature, drawing families, photographers, and nature lovers alike.

Longtime visitors expressed their heartbreak upon learning of the closure. Caroline Lewis, a retired civil servant from Weymouth, reflected on her fond memories of the estate, stating, “Coming here is like going back in time to the 1950s or 60s when life was much easier and simpler.” Many, like photographer Rachel Baker, have marked the seasons at Bridehead, particularly enjoying the dazzling autumn colours framed by the area's flora. Baker, who discovered the estate during a day trip, lamented, “It feels a tremendous shame that the access that has been given to the public for so many years is being taken away.”

The cultural significance of the estate extends far beyond its visual appeal. Creative writing lecturer Kevan Manwaring highlighted its literary connections, noting that Hardy drew inspiration from the area, even naming one of his characters, Sue Bridehead, after it. The estate's backdrop has also graced the small screen, featuring prominently in the ITV series "Broadchurch," where the landscape’s rustic charm added atmosphere to the drama's narrative. Manwaring underscored the importance of public engagement with nature, stating, “We should be encouraging people to spend more time in nature, not less.”

The rich history of the Bridehead Estate traces back over 400 years, originally owned by Cerne Abbey until its dissolution in the sixteenth century. The estate was then acquired by the Williams family, whose wealth generated from the East India Company and a flourishing furniture business allowed them to shape the land into the picturesque setting appreciated today. With its evolution, the estate nurtured both flora and community, allowing locals and visitors to donate for access, fostering a sense of connection to the land. It has even been a site of remembrance for many, where ashes of loved ones have been scattered amid the estate's serene surroundings.

The announcement of the closure coincided with the estate being listed for sale at a staggering £30 million, encompassing over 2,000 acres that include not only the iconic manor house but also the village of Littlebredy itself. The current owner, Sir Philip Williams, the seventh generation of his family to inhabit the estate, has opted to sell after nearly 40 years, marking the end of an era. While the identity of the new owner remains undisclosed, a notice declaring the withdrawal of public access has sparked considerable outrage, leading the Right to Roam campaign to vow a challenge against this restrictive measure.

Nadia Shaikh from the Right to Roam campaign articulated the broader implications of such closures, asserting, “Bridehead’s beauty and tranquillity should continue to be accessible to all, not locked away behind estate gates.” She characterised the situation as emblematic of a troubling trend toward the “paywalling” of England’s countryside, calling for legislative action to safeguard public access to natural spaces. Shaikh further reflected on the estate’s historical connections to colonialism, emphasising that maintaining public access not only honours a shared heritage but promotes community accountability and healing.

As the deadline for public access approaches, the emotional stakes are high for those who have found solace at the Bridehead Estate. The evolving landscape stands as both a physical and cultural landmark, its future access remains uncertain, underlining the delicate balance between private ownership and communal heritage, and igniting an ongoing debate about public rights in England’s verdant spaces.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[4]](https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/24360445.bridehead-estate-littlebredy-sale-30-million/), [[5]](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/property/the-30-million-dorset-estate-that-comes-with-a-200-year-old-mansion-a-cricket-ground-a-nature-reserve-and-an-entire-village-270615)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.dorsetbiznews.co.uk/news/estate-including-manor-house-of-broadchurch-fame-and-entire-village-on-market-for-30m-guide-price/), [[6]](https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/15158338.behind-the-scenes-at-broadchurchs-axehampton-house-known-here-in-dorset-as-bridehead/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[5]](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/property/the-30-million-dorset-estate-that-comes-with-a-200-year-old-mansion-a-cricket-ground-a-nature-reserve-and-an-entire-village-270615)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[3]](https://www.dorsetbiznews.co.uk/news/estate-including-manor-house-of-broadchurch-fame-and-entire-village-on-market-for-30m-guide-price/), [[4]](https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/24360445.bridehead-estate-littlebredy-sale-30-million/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark), [[5]](https://www.countrylife.co.uk/property/the-30-million-dorset-estate-that-comes-with-a-200-year-old-mansion-a-cricket-ground-a-nature-reserve-and-an-entire-village-270615)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/31/anger-as-dorset-bridehead-estate-withdraws-public-entry-stunning-local-landmark> - The Guardian reports that the Bridehead Estate in Dorset, renowned for its picturesque lake and waterfall, is withdrawing public access from 2 June 2025. This decision has caused dismay among long-time visitors who cherish the serene environment reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's novels. The estate, previously accessible via a permissive path, has been a cherished spot for decades, with many expressing sadness over the closure. The Right to Roam campaign plans to challenge this decision, emphasizing the cultural and natural significance of the area.
3. <https://www.dorsetbiznews.co.uk/news/estate-including-manor-house-of-broadchurch-fame-and-entire-village-on-market-for-30m-guide-price/> - Dorset Biz News reports that the Bridehead Estate, encompassing a manor house featured in the ITV series 'Broadchurch' and the entire village of Littlebredy, is on the market with a guide price of £30 million. The 2,047-acre estate includes a Grade II\* listed family home, multiple cottages, and a nature reserve. The sale marks the end of an era for the Williams family, who have owned the estate for over 200 years.
4. <https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/24360445.bridehead-estate-littlebredy-sale-30-million/> - The Dorset Echo reports that the Bridehead Estate in Littlebredy, Dorset, is up for sale with a £30 million price tag. The estate spans over 2,000 acres and includes an early 19th-century Regency manor house, a nature reserve, and the entire historic village of Littlebredy. The sale is being handled by Sir Philip Williams, the seventh generation of his family to live at Bridehead.
5. <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/property/the-30-million-dorset-estate-that-comes-with-a-200-year-old-mansion-a-cricket-ground-a-nature-reserve-and-an-entire-village-270615> - Country Life highlights the Bridehead Estate in Dorset, a 2,047-acre property featuring a Grade II\*-listed mansion, a cricket ground, a nature reserve, and the entire village of Littlebredy. The estate is on the market for £30 million. The current owner, Sir Philip Williams, is the seventh generation of his family to live there and has decided to sell after nearly 40 years at the helm.
6. <https://www.dorsetecho.co.uk/news/15158338.behind-the-scenes-at-broadchurchs-axehampton-house-known-here-in-dorset-as-bridehead/> - The Dorset Echo provides an inside look at Bridehead House, known as Axehampton House in the TV series 'Broadchurch'. The house, located in Littlebredy, Dorset, was used for filming key scenes, including the attack on Trish. Sir Philip Williams, the owner, opened the house to the public to raise funds for Dorset's Sexual Assault Referral Centre and the village church, capitalizing on the 'Broadchurch effect'.
7. <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/780889/broadchurch-location-filming-sir-philip-williams-bridehead-dorset> - Express.co.uk reports on Sir Philip Williams, the owner of Bridehead Estate in Dorset, and the impact of 'Broadchurch' filming on his property. The 17th-century estate was used as the venue for a birthday party at the fictional Axehampton House in the ITV series. Sir Philip expressed concerns about fans visiting the private property, as the show portrayed the house as empty, leading to unexpected visitors on the lawn.