

Chiddingstone Castle – Volunteer Training Day

It was a typically cold, wet and grey morning in mid-February when members of the Sevenoaks volunteer research group gathered together at Chiddingstone Castle to begin a training day. In spite of the weather, we were all greeted warmly by the organizer on behalf of Chiddingstone Castle, Ali Ditzel, the chairman of the Kent Gardens Trust, Elizabeth Cairns, and the group's chairman, Hugh Vaux.

So far 22 gardens in the town of Sevenoaks, and its surrounding area, have been identified for their historical importance, and are now being reviewed under the aegis of the Kent Gardens Trust, in association with English Heritage and Sevenoaks District Council. This is the second project of its kind. The first pilot project, conducted in the borough of Tunbridge Wells, largely by volunteers, has proved to be very successful, resulting in reviews that are now included in the revised list of the Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens.

The main purpose of the day was to carry out a site survey (aided by archival maps) of what is now the 12 hectare designed landscape that surrounds the castle. After a welcome cup of coffee, we spent the morning (with the help and guidance of our project consultant, Virginia Hinze) studying the vagaries of maps and

plans spanning several centuries. Clearly, this was a necessary precursor to the day's proceedings, as sound preparatory research of such material (if available) is essential when tracing a garden's historical development.

By the end of the day, we were required to produce a written review of the garden that was both accurate and consistent in its descriptive style, so it was also important to conform to the specific requirements of an English Heritage format. Notes on precise locations with distances and compass point directions, site hectarage, boundary features, topography, and details of entrances and approaches, supported by archival evidence, were all necessary prerequisites to complete the survey. Given a limited time scale (under two hours) and wholly inclement weather, it was to become a good test of the group's abilities to survey accurately the whole garden in order to promote good practice.

Unlike a number of the Sevenoaks gardens under review, the general history of Chiddingstone Castle is well documented. Any basic guide book would tell the reader that it was once the site of an early Tudor manor house, and since 1500, home to the affluent Streatfeild family. In 1680, the manor was demolished by Henry Streatfeild, and replaced with a handsome, red-brick Carolean mansion. By the early 19th century, considerable additions

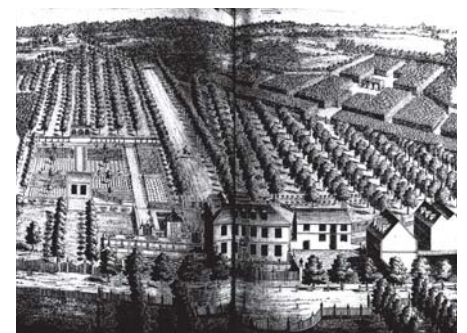
were made to the original building by the architect William Atkinson. He was responsible for the building of the Gothic-style crenellated towers and battlements that we see today, and probably designed the garden buildings such as the gazebo, well-house and orangery, linked by the limestone wall that stretches away southwards from the east side of the main building.

Our detailed studies, however, allowed us to go beyond the guide book approach.



KGT Volunteers braving the weather at Chiddingstone

Following our survey, and an enjoyable buffet lunch, we gathered together in the boardroom to discuss our findings. We agreed that Chiddingstone Castle lies in the undulating river valley of the lower greensand ridge with northerly views towards the Downs. We noted that the garden today is largely made up of parkland and woodland areas surrounding a c.1 hectare lake, and has altered significantly, as evidence shows by the first documented survey of 1702 and a detailed Badeslade engraving of 1719.



Thomas Badeslade engraving from John Harris History of Kent 1719



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Kent Gardens Trust

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