

# The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



## Churchfields, Rochester



January 2015



# **Churchfields**

Rochester, Kent

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## INTRODUCTION

This site description and accompanying dossier have been prepared by the Kent Gardens Trust as part of its wider review of ***The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens***. This part of the review, carried out for Medway Council in 2013 -14, covers sites within the Medway local authority area with the aim to:

- a) Review the historic nature, content, current state and significance of the sites currently identified in the ***Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens*** for the Medway local authority area along with others identified by Medway Council. The review has been undertaken using English Heritage's criteria for identifying the significance of local heritage assets to provide a consistent approach. The revised list of sites has the potential to support development of a Local List of historic sites in Medway should the Council wish to progress this in future<sup>1</sup>. The list of sites researched and evaluated in this review would be subject to consultation as part of any Local List development and is therefore not intended to be final.
- b) Inform future funding applications for historic spaces by the identification of significance
- c) Inform future conservation and/or any development of sites by the identification of the significance of key historic character, features and association including that of setting and viewpoints.

The extent of the area identified represents the current surviving area of the designed landscape, the boundary line generally reflecting the maximum extent of the historic gardens or parkland (although there are exceptions such as where land has been irreversibly lost to development). The boundary line takes no account of current ownership. Further information is available from the contacts listed below. The partnership would like to thank the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much of their time, effort and hospitality to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Medway Council  
Greenspace, Heritage  
& Library Services  
Gun Wharf  
Dock Road  
Chatham  
ME4 4TR  
[www.medway.gov.uk](http://www.medway.gov.uk)

Kent County Council  
Heritage Conservation  
Invicta House  
County Hall  
Maidstone  
ME14 1XX  
01622 696918  
[www.kent.gov.uk](http://www.kent.gov.uk)

Kent Gardens Trust  
[www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk](http://www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk)

English Heritage  
[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> English Heritage (2012) 'Good Practice Guide to Local Listing'



**MEDWAY****LANDRANGER SHEET NUMBER: 178****STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Churchfields is an example of Medway's several open spaces acquired in the late C19 and early C20 through public philanthropy, being donated to the City of Rochester in 1906 by Councillor Charles Willis, later to become an Alderman, Mayor and freeman of the City. As with several others in Medway (The Vines and Rochester Cathedral Precincts) the site has associations with the King's School as it was previously a meadow owned by the headmaster of the school in the mid C19, Robert Whiston. It has archaeological potential as it is underlain by an extension of the large network of tunnels, constructed during World War II by Short Brothers, aviation pioneers and famous for their 'Sunderland Flying Boat', to extend their adjacent factory underground to counter the perceived vulnerability of the Medway estuary. Its situation on a hillside above the river offers one of the best panoramic and scenic views in Rochester and has provided recreational space for the local community for the last hundred years.

**CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

In the mid C19 Churchfields was known as Church Mead and was pasture land for cattle. Edwin Harris wrote in 1934 in the Chatham Observer: *"In my young days it was known as The Back Fields and in order to keep the cattle in, there was a contrivance called the scissors, resembling a large pair of wooden blades, which had to be pressed back and held back until one had passed through, when they came together with a snap."* Churchfields was owned by Robert Whiston, headmaster of the King's School and later vicar of St Margaret's Church but was leased to George Weller (Tithe map of 1841). There was a public right of way along the upper, south-east side, allowing people to walk from Love Lane to a path called Backfields, but Whiston would regularly chase people off other parts of the green. At some point (date unknown but probably around the turn of the century) ownership passed to Charles Willis, a well-known local dignitary and benefactor and mayor of Rochester from 1906 to 1909. Sheep grazing continued on the site into the early part of the C20 (photograph of 'Backfields' undated but early C20 – Medway archives). The name of the site seems to have changed twice around this time – first to Backfields and then, by 1906, to Church Field. Councillor Charles Willis donated Churchfields to the City of Rochester in 1906 for use as public recreation ground in memory of his parents. A plaque on the site's south-east boundary wall (the site's name is recorded on this as Church Field) commemorates this donation and an elaborate scroll was presented to him in recognition of his gift. He later donated Willis Gardens, some 200m further north along St Margaret's Street, in memory of his son who was killed in World War I.

It was also Willis who sold the adjacent Tower Field to the south of Churchfields to the three Short Brothers (aviation pioneers and of 'Flying Boats' fame) for their factory after being instrumental in persuading them to move from Sheppey to Rochester in 1913, where they could have larger premises right by the river ([www.borstal.org](http://www.borstal.org): Charles Willis, Borstal benefactor by Stephen Rayner, 2004). In the heyday of Shorts' activities part of Churchfields was used as a car parking area for the workers (photograph of car parking – Medway archives, undated) and the Esplanade road along the river became a bottleneck of buses at the start and end of the shift. During World War II Shorts extended their factory underground and constructed a large network of tunnels under both their own factory site and Churchfields. Shorts closed the factory in 1948 and it was then taken over first by CAV and later by Blaw Knox. The latter continued to use the tunnels for storage. Since the cessation of factory activities in the 1990's flats have been built on the adjacent Shorts site. There is a commemorative plaque to the Short brothers on the south-west boundary wall (photograph 2014).

In 1989 Medway Council proposed building a hotel on Churchfields. This was vigorously opposed by The City of Rochester Society as the site had been specifically donated for recreation. The site is well-used as a shortcut from the centre of Rochester to the flats on the former Shorts site and further north along The Esplanade. It is also used for leisure activities and commands one of the best views of the river in Rochester. The site remains in public ownership.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM and SETTING**

Churchfields is a roughly rectangular, 2.4 hectare open, green space which lies 500m south-west of Rochester's High Street and the main A2 road, on a north-west-facing slope overlooking the river Medway, c150m inland from the Esplanade and the river. It is bounded to the south-west by a brick wall with a steep flight of cobbled steps running alongside it, south-west of which blocks of flats occupy the former Short Brothers factory site. The south-eastern boundary is a continuous succession of walls, mainly brick, which at the south-eastern end separate Churchfields from the adjacent churchyard of St Margaret's Church and, at the north-eastern end, from gardens of large properties in St Margaret's Street. To the north-east a C20 wooden fence separates it from the 1930's bungalows on the Esplanade and from early C21 development in Love Lane. The Esplanade, formerly named Willis Avenue, forms the north-western boundary, separating the site from the Esplanade Garden and the river. Although now (2014) surrounded on all sides by housing, its upper slopes still offer extensive views west over the Medway from the 1914 bowstring truss bridge to the north (now known locally as the Old Bridge), to the late C20 M2 motorway and high-speed rail bridges to the south with the North Downs in the distance. From The Esplanade below, St Margaret's Church, with its historic tower and churchyard, dominates the site.

## **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

There is open access along the whole of the north-western boundary with the Esplanade and two further pedestrian entrances: from the southern end of Love Lane on the north-east boundary and in the south-east paths from Backfields, Churchfields Terrace and St Margaret's road converge to enter at the site's corner.

## **PARK**

Churchfields is laid out as a grassed open space crossed by two diagonal paths which intersect some 30m south-west of its central point. Two further paths run parallel to the upper, south-eastern and lower, north-western boundaries. A single row of semi-mature lime and sycamore trees line most of the boundary with the Esplanade but the site is otherwise unplanted. In the 1970's there were flower beds alongside the line of trees but these are now (2014) gone. Six benches are located on the upper part of the green.

## **REFERENCES**

### **Maps**

OS Map 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 25" (1862-1875)  
OS Map 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 25" (1898)  
Tithe map 1841

### **Books and Articles:**

Rochester – The past 2000 years, City of Rochester Society, 1999  
Historical Notes, Canon Wheatley (Vicar of St Margaret's 1915-1947), 1992  
Chatham Observer, Recollections of Rochester, 1934, No 88 Edwin Harris  
Charles Willis scroll, 1906, *private collection*  
Stephen Rayner, Charles Willis, Borstal benefactor, [www.borstal.org](http://www.borstal.org) 2004  
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, entry on Robert Whiston  
The Time Chamber ([thetimechamber.co.uk](http://thetimechamber.co.uk)), 17/1/2014 – Shorts Tunnels and Factory

### **Illustrations**

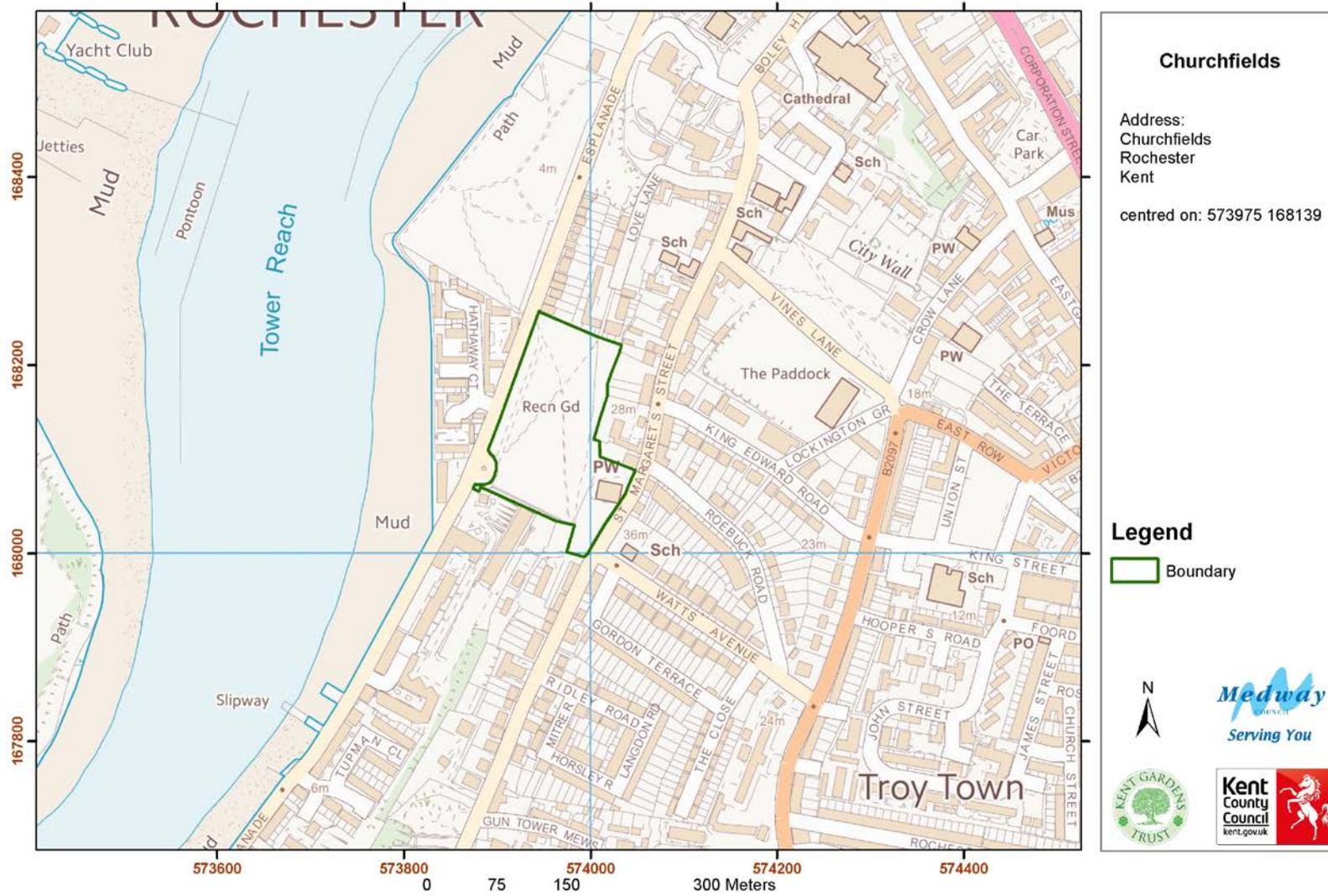
Boundary map  
Boundary map with key views  
Photograph of 'Backfields' undated (early C20), Medway Archive and Local Studies Centre (MALSC)  
Illuminated address to Cllr Charles Willis in recognition of his donation of Church Field to the City, *private collection*

### **Research and description by Terri Zbyszewska**

### **Virginia Hinze (editor)**

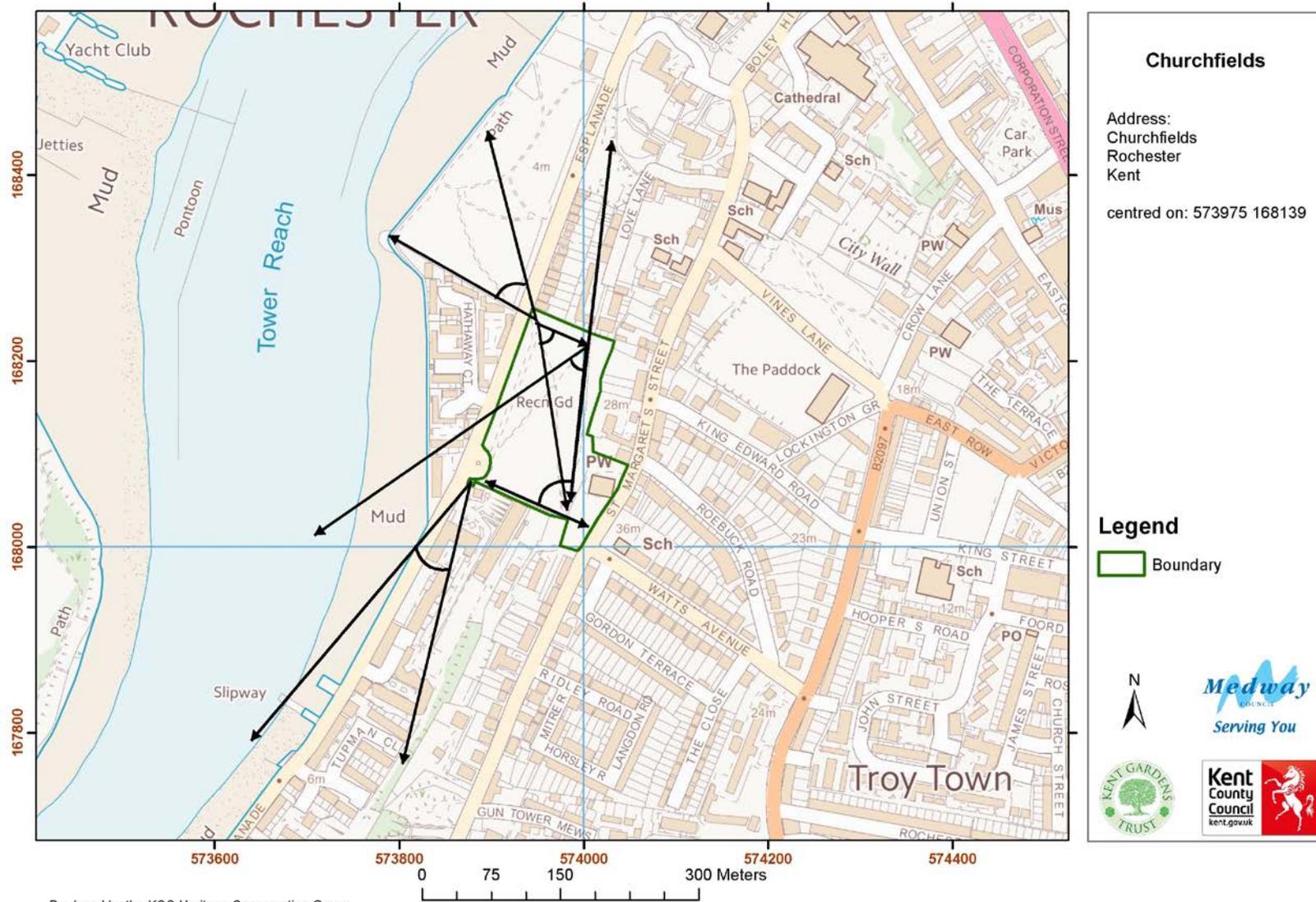
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 1 Boundary map



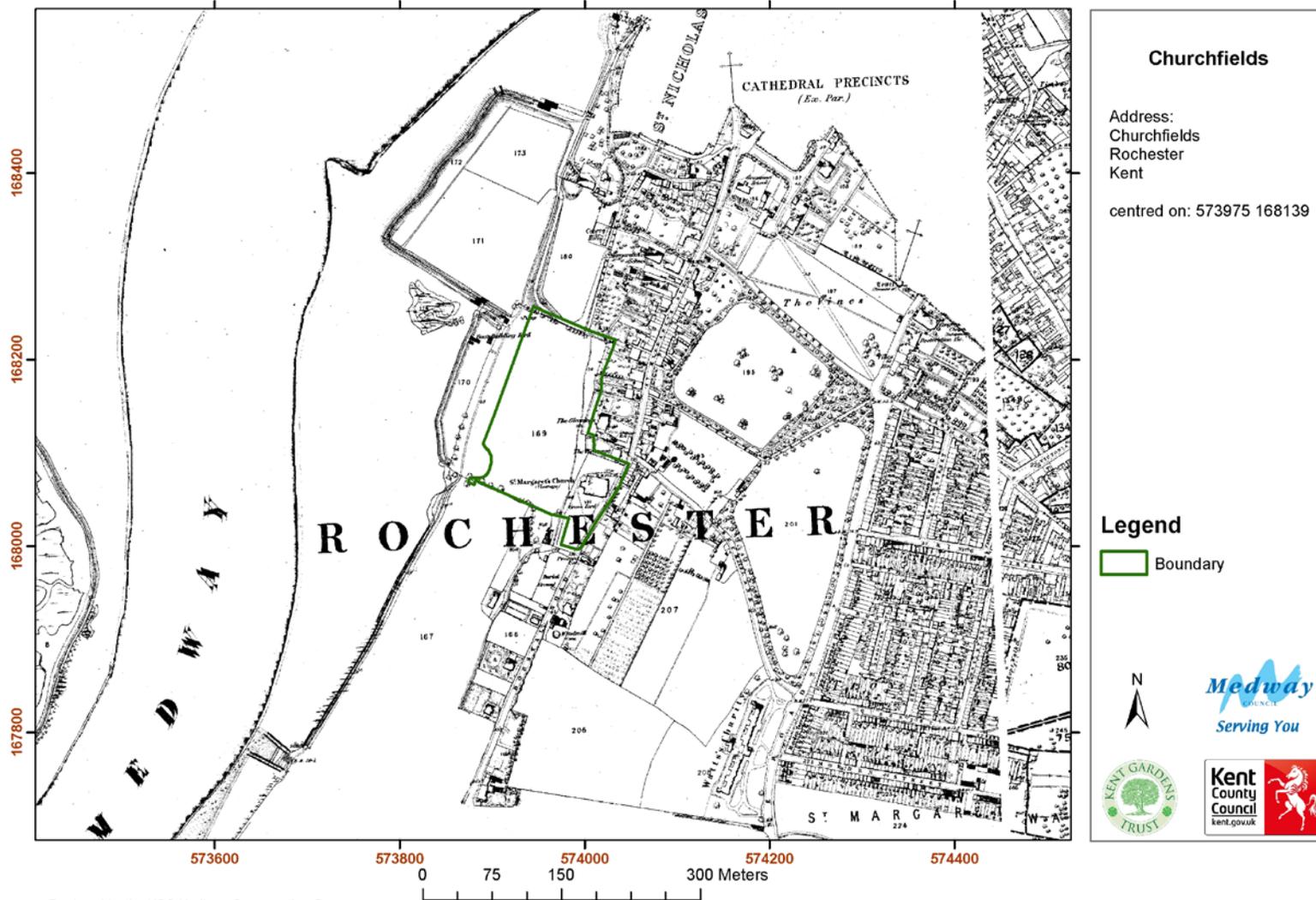
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 2 Key views map



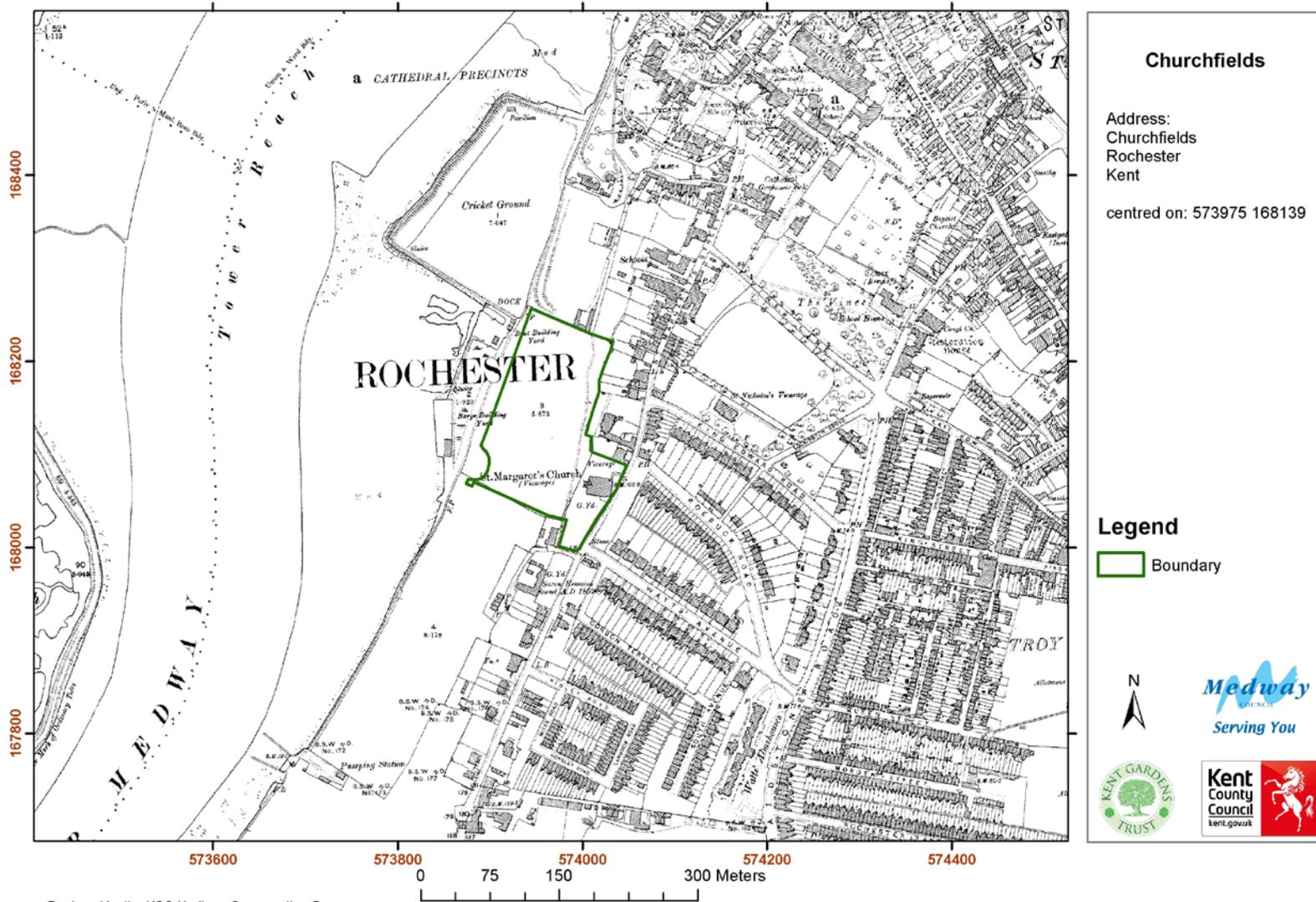
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

## Fig. 3 OS Map 1st Edition 25" (1862-1875)



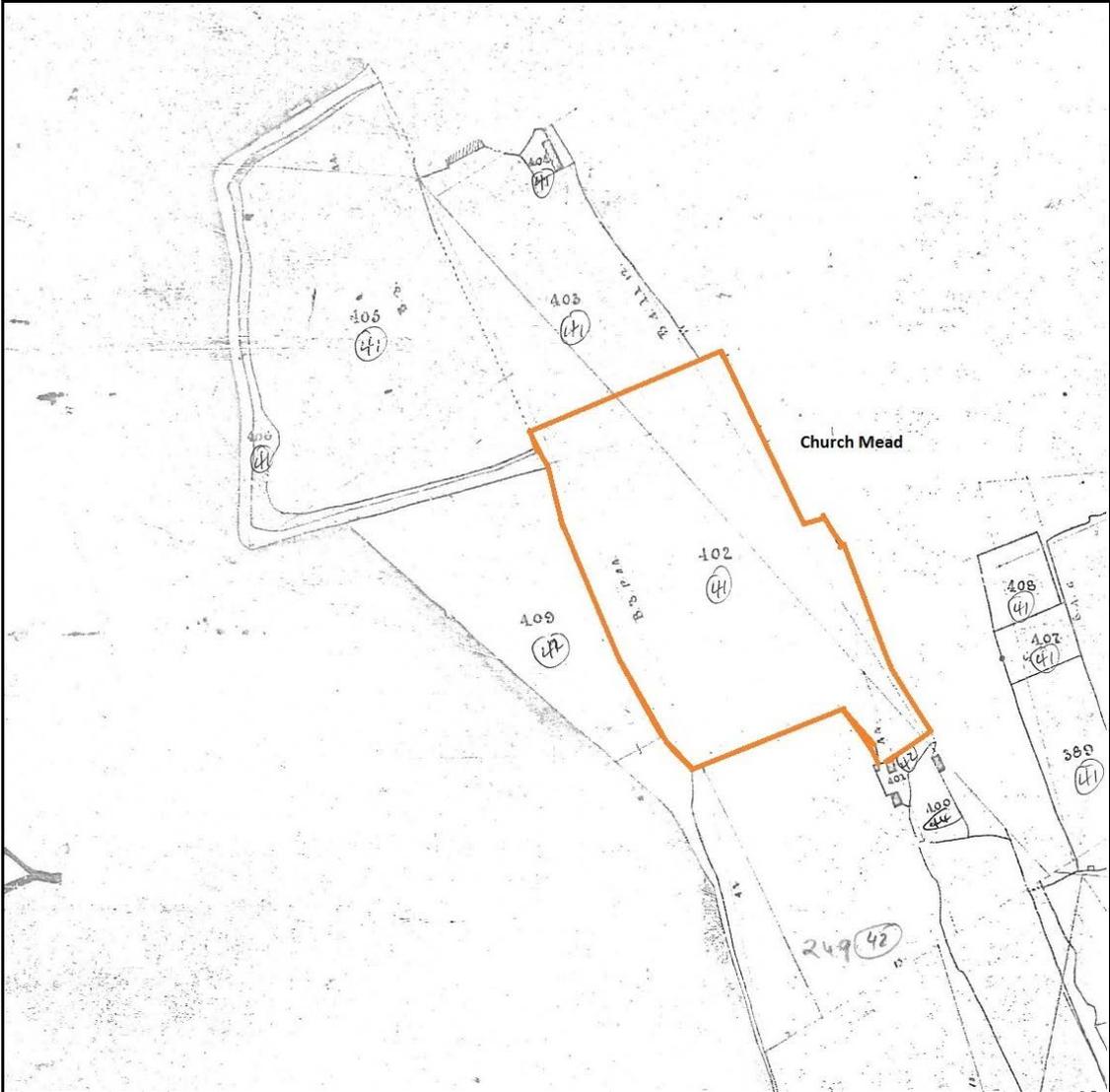
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

## Fig. 4 OS Map 2nd Edition 25” (1897-1900)



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Fig. 5 Tithe map (1841)



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Fig. 6 Photograph of 'Backfields' (early C20) (MALSC)



Fig. 7 Illuminated address to Cllr Charles Willis (Private Collection)



In recognition of Alderman Willis's gift of Church Field, the Council presented him with this illuminated Address, a fine example of 20<sup>th</sup> century calligraphy.

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**Fig. 8 View of the Medway to the north**



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**Fig. 9 View of the Medway with motorway bridge**



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**Fig. 10 View of St Margaret’s Church from Churchfields**



Fig. 11 Short Brothers plaque by the former factory site

