

# The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



Clarence Gardens,  
(incorporating Willis Memorial Garden),  
Rochester



January 2015



# **Clarence Gardens (incorporating Willis Memorial Garden)**

Rochester

---

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**INTRODUCTION**

**SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST**

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

**SITE DESCRIPTION**

**REFERENCES**

**LIST OF FIGURES**

FIGURE 1: Boundary map

FIGURE 2: Key views map

FIGURE 3: Aerial photograph

FIGURE 4: Tithe map (1830s/1840s)

FIGURE 5: 1<sup>st</sup> edition 25" Ordnance Survey map (1862-1875)

FIGURE 6: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 25" Ordnance Survey map (1897-1900)

FIGURE 7: 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 25" Ordnance Survey map (1907-1923)

FIGURE 8: Ordnance Survey 6" map (1934)

FIGURE 9: 4<sup>th</sup> edition 25" Ordnance Survey map (1929-1952)

FIGURE 10: Map of heritage designations

FIGURE 11: Heritage designations

FIGURE 12: 2013 Photographs



## 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)

---

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



## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

**KENT**

**CLARENCE GARDENS  
(INCORPORATING WILLIS MEMORIAL GARDEN)**

**MEDWAY**

**ROCHESTER**

NGR: 573830 167690

## **SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST**

A grassed and wooded recreation ground donated by a local councillor and mayor, Charles Willis, as public open space in 1925 on land previously owned by the War Department and formerly part of the grounds of Fort Clarence, a Napoleonic fort dating from 1808.

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Clarence Gardens, incorporating Willis Memorial Garden demonstrate a surviving part of the military history of the Medway Towns in particular a military line on the land front allied to a surviving fortified tower, a defensive arrangement regarded as 'rare, if not unusual for its time' (Pattison). Once known as 'the improvement', (pers. comm.), the Gardens display one of the few remains, together with the Tower of the Fort, which are clearly recognisable as part of the C19 military operational footprint. These military remains, both above and below ground and now largely hidden in woodland, hold high archaeological potential.

The Gardens are representative of a common origin of civic open space in the Medway towns in the late C19 and early C20 – the gifting of former military land by local benefactors. In this case they both commemorate Charles Willis, a former mayor of Rochester and philanthropist who tried to improve the lives of local people and include a memorial garden to a son lost in WW1.

The sites' current maintenance, partly still as gardens but partly as scrub woodland, also represents communal changes in attitude in terms of public safety towards the use of and access to, surviving military structures.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

### **CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

Clarence Gardens, which include the Willis Memorial Garden, lie to the south east of Rochester's Old Bridge on a ridge above the River Medway known in the C18 as St Margaret's Heights. The Gardens and the landforms within them together with the Clarence Tower are now the only visible remains of a Napoleonic defensive Line (a type of fort), running east to west between the

Maidstone Road and the River Medway. Negotiations for securing 23 acres of land (History Forum) for this purpose were begun between the Board of Ordnance, the Bishop of Rochester and the City Corporation in 1804, with purchase not finalised until 1812-15. However by 1808 acquisition was regarded as secure enough (Kendall) for construction and earthworks to begin. By 1811 the perception of imminent threat of invasion was beginning to change and, with it, concern to protect the Medway crossing from the landward side was lessening. Fort Clarence was the only part of the extended flank defences of Chatham Dockyard to be constructed as a Line, this comprising a continuous rampart, a revetted ditch, 'a massive gun tower positioned on the crest of a ridge in a central pivotal position' (Pattison), a guard house on the Maidstone Road and a small gun tower to the west on the banks of the Medway. All was to be undertaken by the Royal Engineers, to designs by Lt. Col Robert D'Arcy, with tunnels and casemated gun rooms linking the various parts.

With peace after 1815, the purpose of the tower and its surrounds slowly changed. From serious fortification it became over the next 100 years by turns a naval lunatic asylum, a hospital and then a military prison, finally transferring to use as a TA Centre in 1913. Earlier in the C19 land in the open section of the Line was let to tenant graziers and the Tithe Apportionment of 1846 confirms tenants occupying land which was to become Clarence Gardens. The Rochester to Borstal road ran north/ south past the tower, crossing the Line, at this part a ditch, via a drawbridge accessed through a casemated guardhouse and arched gateway. Land to the north of the fort was developed residentially in the mid C19, starting with the Governor's House in the early 1860's. Change in the military nature of the area is further indicated by the fact that the fort 'hosted' military tournaments for the local population (City of Rochester Society) in the years leading up to WW1.

During the years 1914 to 1918 the fort and its grounds were used as a recruiting and training centre. Charles Willis, a local business man, former mayor and philanthropist, known as the Borstal Benefactor (Borstal History Forum) who lived close to the fort in St Margaret's Road, had begun buying small plots of land from the Board of Ordnance from 1909 onwards, including land to the west of the fort, towards the river. A solicitor's letter of 1924 (MALSC) informs the City Corporation that Mr Willis proposes to 'lay out two pieces of land as a whole as a public recreation ground and then present the ground to the Corporation.' The progress of this plan was not simple, reflecting the turmoil and disarray of the years after the Great War. Mr and Mrs Willis had lost a son on active service after the Armistice who was buried in France (War Record), and the intention was for the recreation ground to be divided, respecting the terrain, with the northern portion laid out as a memorial garden, while south of the revetted ditch there was to be a public pleasure ground. Deeds of Gift filed with the Land Registry (Medway Council) indicate that this happened in respect of the Willis Memorial Garden in 1925 and of the portion to the south, Clarence gardens, in 1928.

A civic reception for this gift was requested by the Corporation in May 1925, but declined by the donors as Mrs Willis' distress was too great. According to newspaper report, City Corporation appreciation was warm and Mr Willis was 'glad of the opportunity to secure this extra lung for the city...' Plans had been

made to lay out the land with terraces and shrubberies, seats and a shelter (Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News). There was to be a strong fence to make safe the perimeter. Published by-laws restricted activities in the Memorial Garden (MALSC).

There were, and remain today (2014), real hazards in the conversion of former military land for public use. The dividing revetted ditch contained the western casemates, where a further ditch dropped steeply westwards down to the Medway Tower. When the archway and guardhouse spanning St Margaret's Road was demolished in 1924 for the purposes of road widening, the rubble was used as ditch infill, but the first floor of the casemates remained accessible. A wooden footbridge was placed across the east/west ditch (OS 4<sup>th</sup> edn 1925-1952) to allow access between the north and south areas of the Gardens and this remained in place until the 1980's (pers. comm.). However, the area of the Gardens returned to military use when the east/west ditch with its partially-buried casemates was called into service in WW2 as a small artillery range (Gulvin) and the Memorial Garden saw the placement of a light AA gun and platform, with the platform a remaining feature in 2014. The west end of the revetted ditch was truncated by the creation of an artificial cliff face (a gabion wall) in c2000 and now lies within an adjacent housing development. Access to the eastern end of the ditch, adjacent to Borstal Road, is currently discouraged by the heavily-wooded banks and by the erection of metal security fencing by Medway Council.

Wider access to the historic fortifications beneath and between the two sections of the Gardens, including the adjacent tunnels built into the bottom of the chalk cliff by Shorts Aircraft Factory in the inter war years, remains possible, but work has been done to make this difficult as activity in this area is perceived as dangerous by the local community (History Forum).

The area donated for public recreational use has been managed differently in recent decades as compared to the inter war years. Since the 1950s there has been vigorous growth in the belt of trees along the west margin of Clarence Gardens, as well as the proximity of a sheltered housing development to the south, Queen Elizabeth Court which has closed two paths. To the north, a rapid growth of trees and shrubs has occurred in the area of the ditch and also to the north and west of the Willis Memorial Garden.

The installation of fencing now (2014) separates the scrub woodland from the open grassed areas of the Gardens, thus reducing the publically- accessible area from that originally intended for public recreation. The original views open to the west, still extant in the 1950's, are now (2014) lost (Kent Photo Archive).

## LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Clarence Gardens lie about 1.2km south of Rochester's Old Bridge, at the point where St. Margaret's Road becomes Borstal Road, immediately west of Fort Clarence on the chalk ridge overlooking the river Medway to the west. They occupy land either side of (i.e. north and south of) the revetted defence ditch which runs west to east from the Lower Fort at river level (now demolished) to the upper section of the Fort (and Clarence Tower) above.

The setting comprises housing to the north and buildings around Fort Clarence to the east, woodland and further housing (on the river's edge) to the north, west and south-west.

The Willis Memorial Garden (included within the boundary defined for the whole Clarence Gardens site), the smaller of the two sites and with its accessible area reduced, lies to the north of, and on higher land above, the ditch. Fenced with early C21 green-painted, metal security railings on its northern, western and southern boundaries, the dense, overgrown trees and shrubs on the steeply-sloping land immediately beyond the railings now (2014) obscure the original views west over the Medway which survived until the 1950s (Kent photo archive). A clipped hedge runs along the eastern boundary beside the pavement immediately west of Fort Clarence itself on the east side of the road.

The larger part of Clarence Gardens lies to the south of the ditch, its now (2014) roughly rectangular, accessible area reduced by about half from its original extent. It is situated on land sloping unevenly westwards down towards the River Medway c 200m below. The eastern boundary is open to the pavement bordering Borstal Road except for a c15m length of tubular metal railings along the edge of the pavement to steps at the north-east corner where the slope is steep. There is also a short, c10m stretch of timber post and railing along part of the southern boundary from the south-east corner to its junction with The Queen Mothers Court Road. This latter road has a tubular metal railing along its pavement from the junction with Borstal Road to the point where the road curves away down the slope to the south-west. From this point the boundary, as far as the site's south-west corner, is formed of clipped hedging interspersed with two small metal gates. The western and northern boundaries of the garden are also fenced with similar green-painted metal security railings. There is a locked gate in the western section giving access to the steep woodland beyond.

## ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Although originally conceived in 1924 as Clarence Gardens, a single area for public use with its two parts joined by a bridge across the ditch, each part is now (2014) managed as a separate garden. The smaller Willis Memorial Garden is entered through an informal gap in the clipped hedge along its eastern boundary with St. Margaret's Road. The larger part of Clarence Gardens is similarly entered informally in the north east corner (at the point where the ditch meets St Margaret's Road) where a flight of 12 concrete steps with a tubular metal hand rail descends westwards. Otherwise access to the Gardens is directly from the pavement on to the grass where a second path exits. There are also two private, gated access points leading directly from The Queen Mothers Court (retirement complex) into the Gardens in the south-west corner.

## GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The surviving open area of the Willis Memorial Garden is roughly hoop-shaped, fairly flat and laid to mown grass. Three ornamental trees of early C21 origin are planted at intervals along the northern boundary railings. A memorial stone and plaque which give the Garden its name are sited c5m west of the southern

entrance in the railings on the southern boundary. Some 2m from the railings in the north-west corner of the Garden is a circular concrete plinth (now, 2014, damaged) c2m in diameter and 0.5m high. Built as the base of a WWII AA gun, it was briefly converted into a circular wooden seat with a central wooden cone to lean against but was removed mid/late C20 due to vandalism (pers.comm). The overgrown shrubs and trees beyond the railings in the remainder of the site now obscure any views towards the river 200m below to the west.

In contrast, the larger, main part of Clarence Gardens, on its sloping site, is laid to open, mown grass with paths around its north and west perimeter. Other paths cross the site roughly north to south before merging to exit at the Borstal Road pavement, midway along the eastern boundary. Just to the north of this, beside the pavement, is an artificially-raised grass platform, once the site of a public shelter, (OS edition 1934) removed mid/late C20 due to vandalism (pers.comm.) and now (2014) replaced by a simple rustic wooden seat and litter bin. The seat offers a view, particularly in winter, of the river below to the west. There are a further three or four seats placed around the garden. A few specimen shrubs dot the grass and there is a small shrub bed close to the junction of the northern perimeter path with a path branching south across the site. This bed features a small concrete bird bath at ground level. Along the western perimeter path is a line of nine mature lime trees.

## **REFERENCES**

### **Books**

Paul Pattison, *Fort Clarence, Rochester*, (English Heritage 2002)

Peter Kendall, *The Royal Engineers at Chatham, 1750-2012*, (English Heritage 2012)

Keith Gulvin, *The Medway Forts, A short Guide*, (Kent Archaeological Review 1977)

Ronald Marsh, *Rochester, Evolution of the City and its Government*, (Rochester upon Medway City Council 1974)

### **Archival items**

Tithe Award Schedule 1845 St Margaret's Rochester (Kent Archaeological Society)

Deed of gift from Charles Willis to the Corporation of Rochester, MALSC, Rochester City Council 1227 1974/RCA TC1 24 02

Byelaws relating to Fort Clarence Recreation Ground 1925, MALSC, Rochester City Council 1227 1974/RCA L1 02 03 21

Medway Council Legal Department, Land Registry papers LR K714310, MALSC 1974

Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News, 16.01.1925, and 09.10.1943  
(Obituary of Charles Willis)

### **Online sources**

[www.medwaylines.com](http://www.medwaylines.com)  
[www.historyforum.co.uk](http://www.historyforum.co.uk)  
[www.borstal.org.uk](http://www.borstal.org.uk)  
[www.chch.ox.ac.uk](http://www.chch.ox.ac.uk)

### **Maps**

Tithe Map for St Margaret's Rochester 1845 (CKS)  
Ordnance Survey, 4th edition 25" map (1925-1952)  
Ordnance Survey, 6" map (1934)  
Property Register Map, Copyright with Land Registry,

### **Illustrations**

Historic Images DE0402 Couchman ephemera and MSS DE0402 09/on MALSC  
Kent Photo Archive WanPs (shows view from Gardens across R Medway c1950)  
MALSC

**Research by Janet Mayfield and Peta Hodges**  
**Edited by Virginia Hinze**

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

Fig. 1 Boundary map



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 100019238, 2013

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

## Fig. 2 Key views map



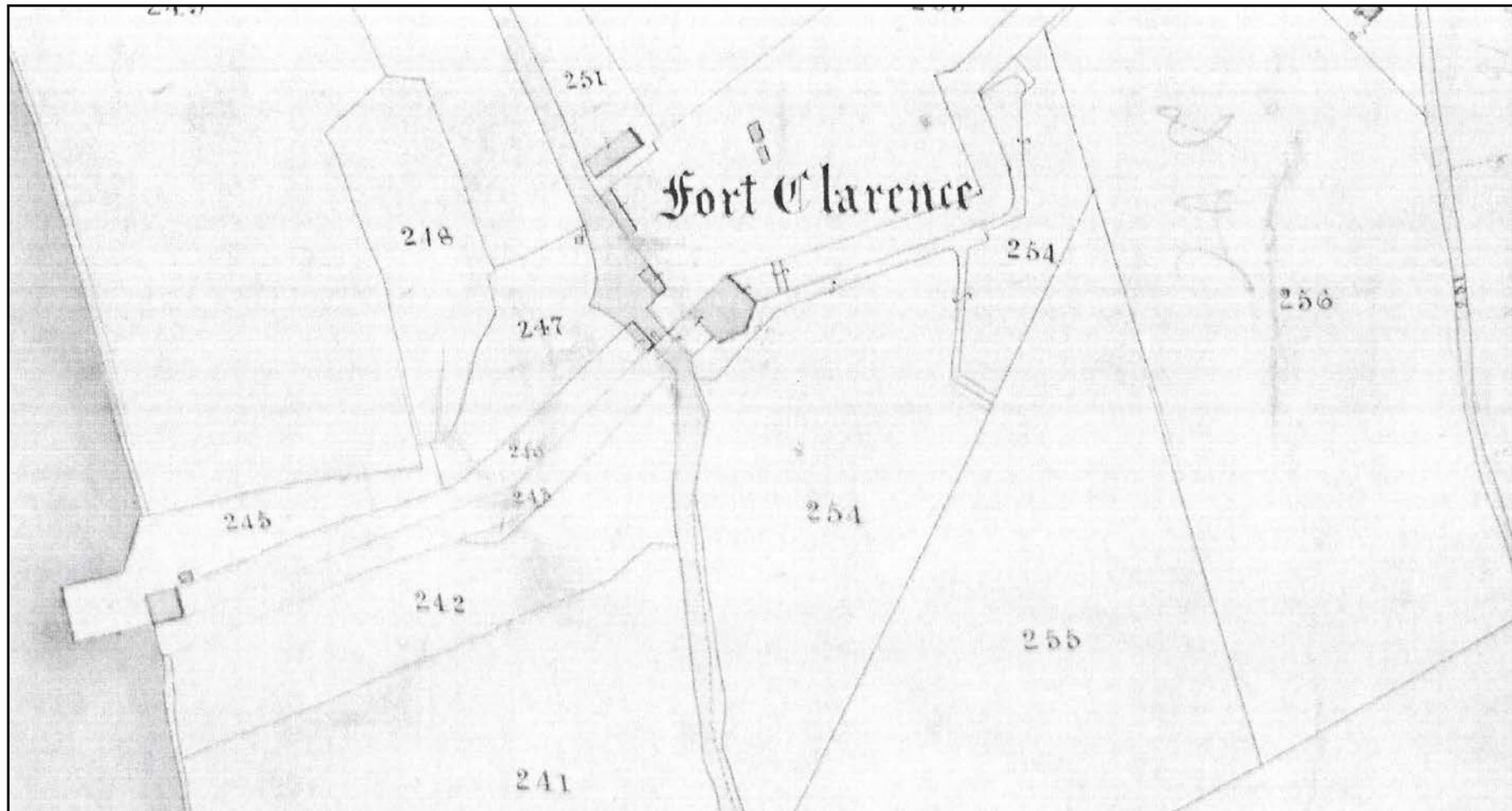
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 3 Aerial photograph (2012)



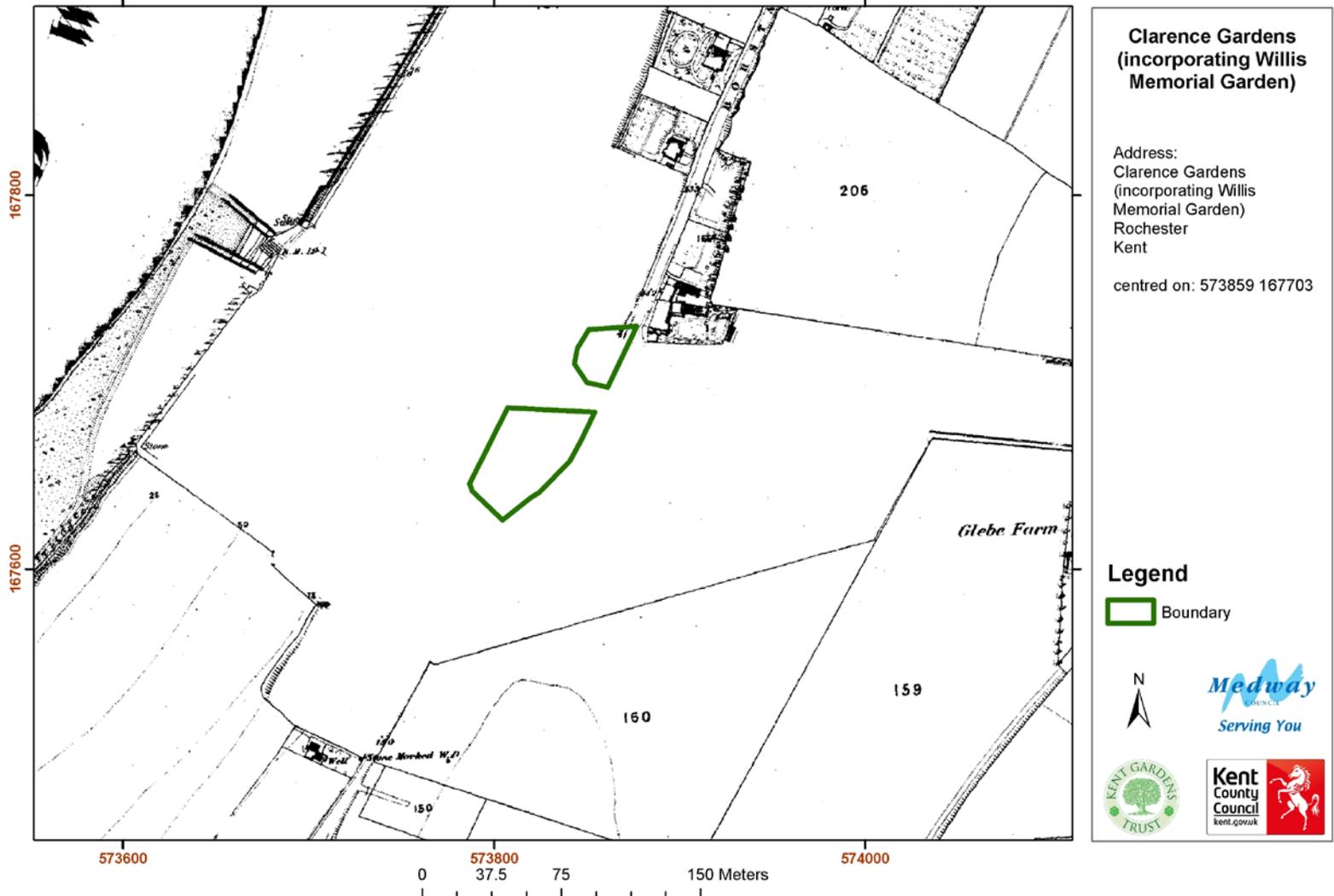
Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 4 Tithe map (1830s/1840s)



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

## Fig. 5 1<sup>st</sup> edition 25” Ordnance Survey map (1862-1875)



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 100019238, 2013

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

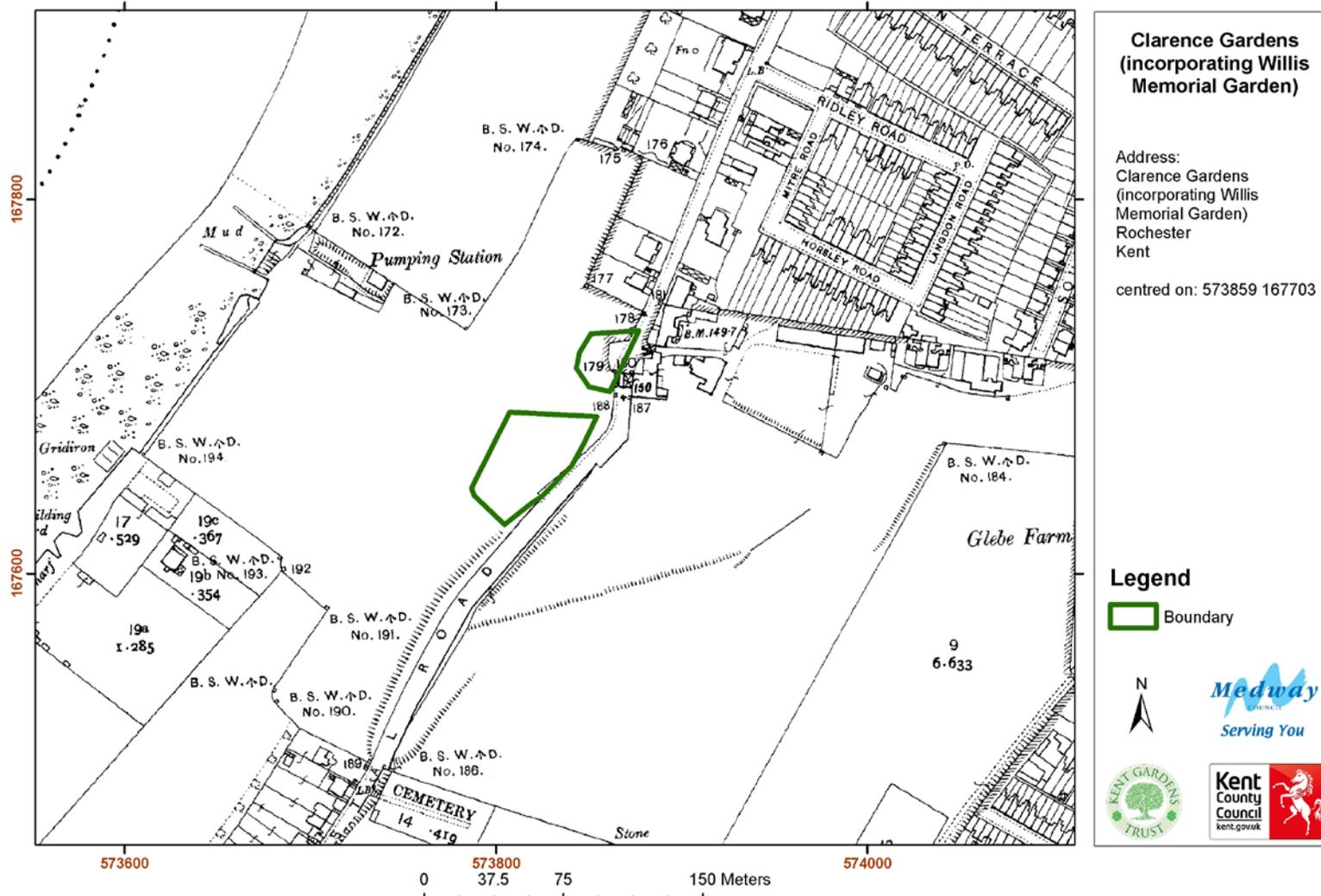
## Fig. 6 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 25” Ordnance Survey map (1897-1900)



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 100019238, 2013

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

## Fig. 7 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 25" Ordnance Survey map (1907-1923)



**Clarence Gardens  
(incorporating Willis  
Memorial Garden)**

Address:  
Clarence Gardens  
(incorporating Willis  
Memorial Garden)  
Rochester  
Kent

centred on: 573859 167703

**Legend**

Boundary

N

**Medway**  
COUNCIL  
Serving You

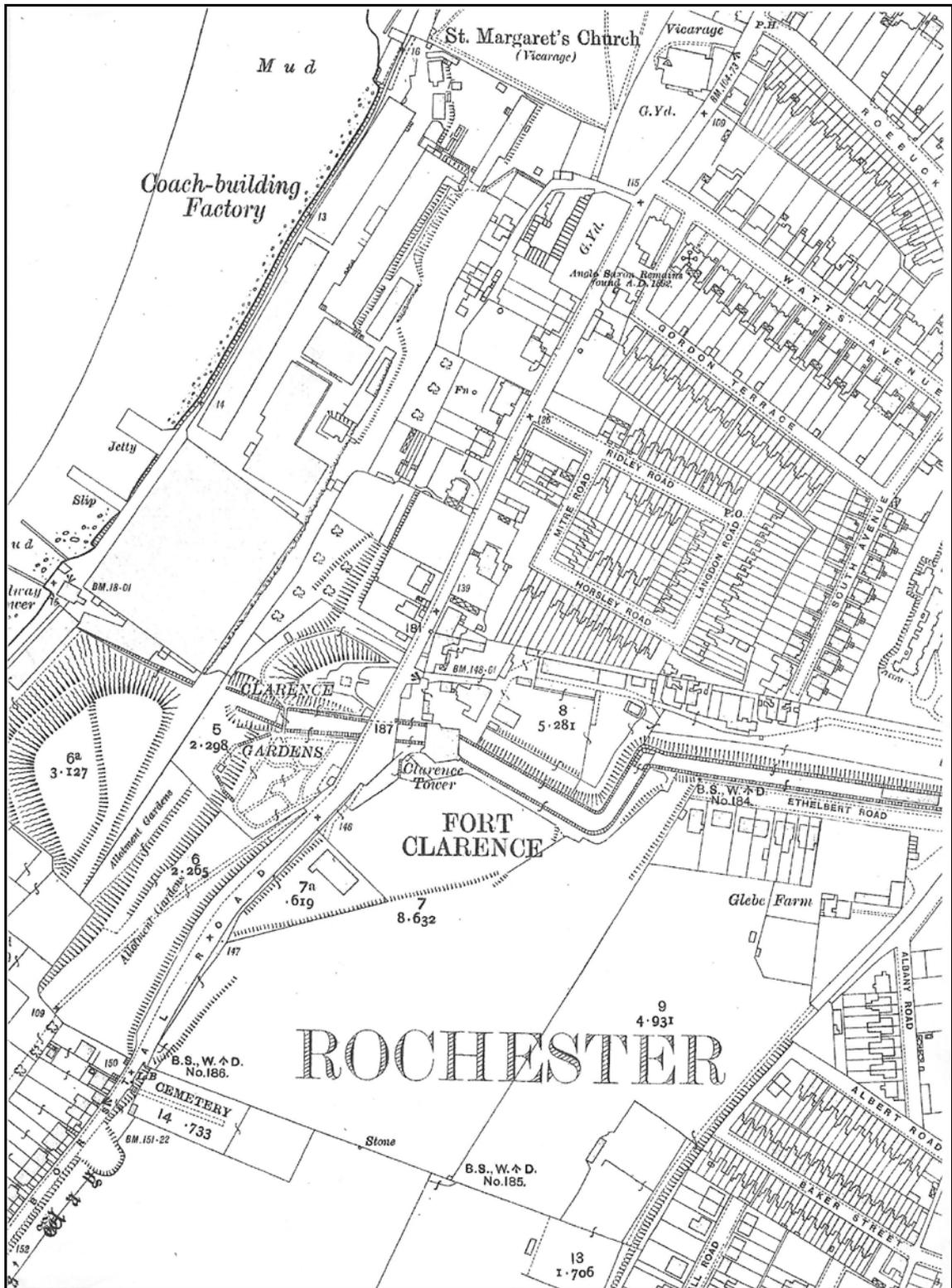
**KENT GARDENS**  
TRUST

**Kent**  
County  
Council  
kent.gov.uk

Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 100019238, 2013

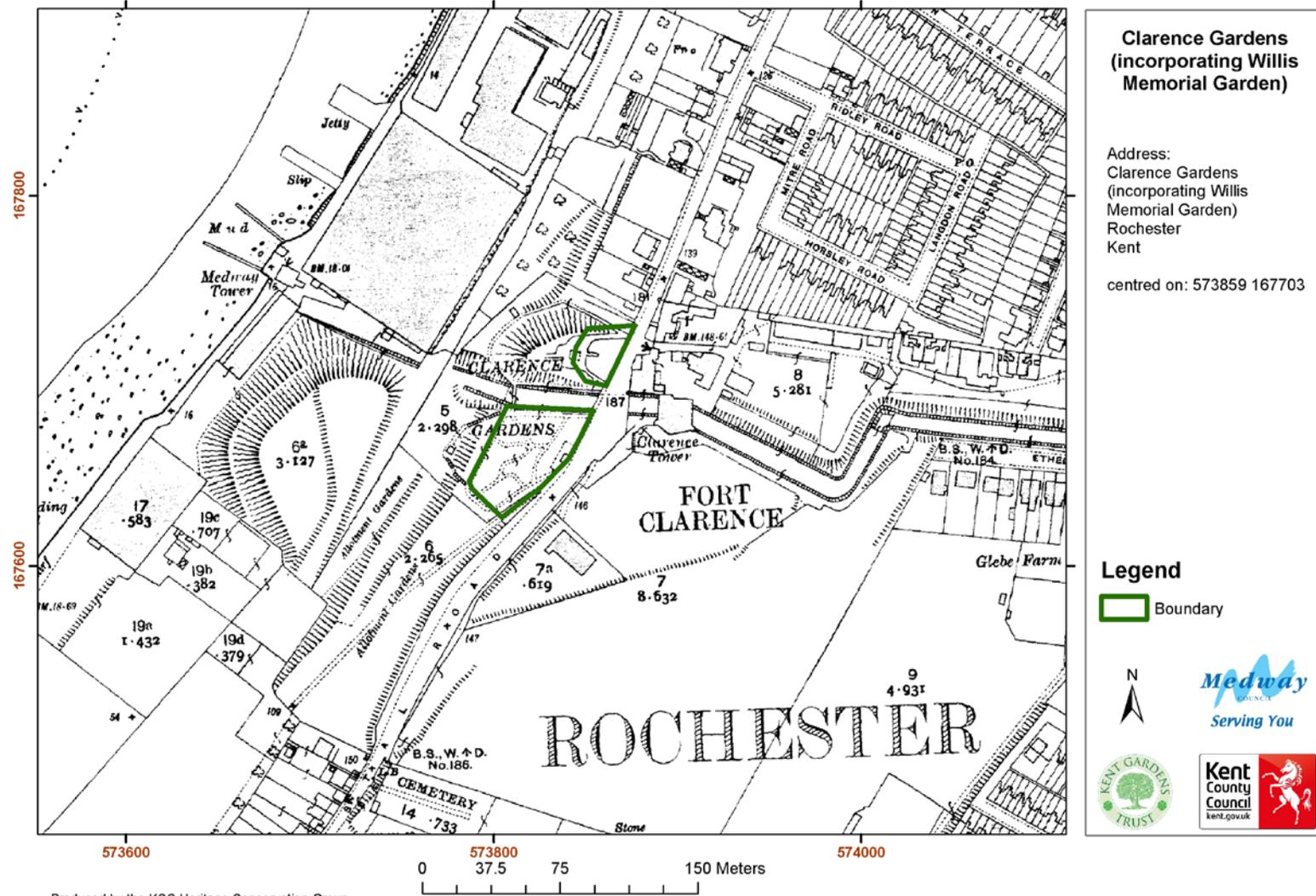
Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 8 Ordnance Survey 6" map (1934)



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

Fig. 9 4<sup>th</sup> edition 25” Ordnance Survey map (1929-1952)



**Clarence Gardens  
(incorporating Willis  
Memorial Garden)**

Address:  
Clarence Gardens  
(incorporating Willis  
Memorial Garden)  
Rochester  
Kent

centred on: 573859 167703

**Legend**  
 Boundary

N

**Medway**  
COUNCIL  
Serving You

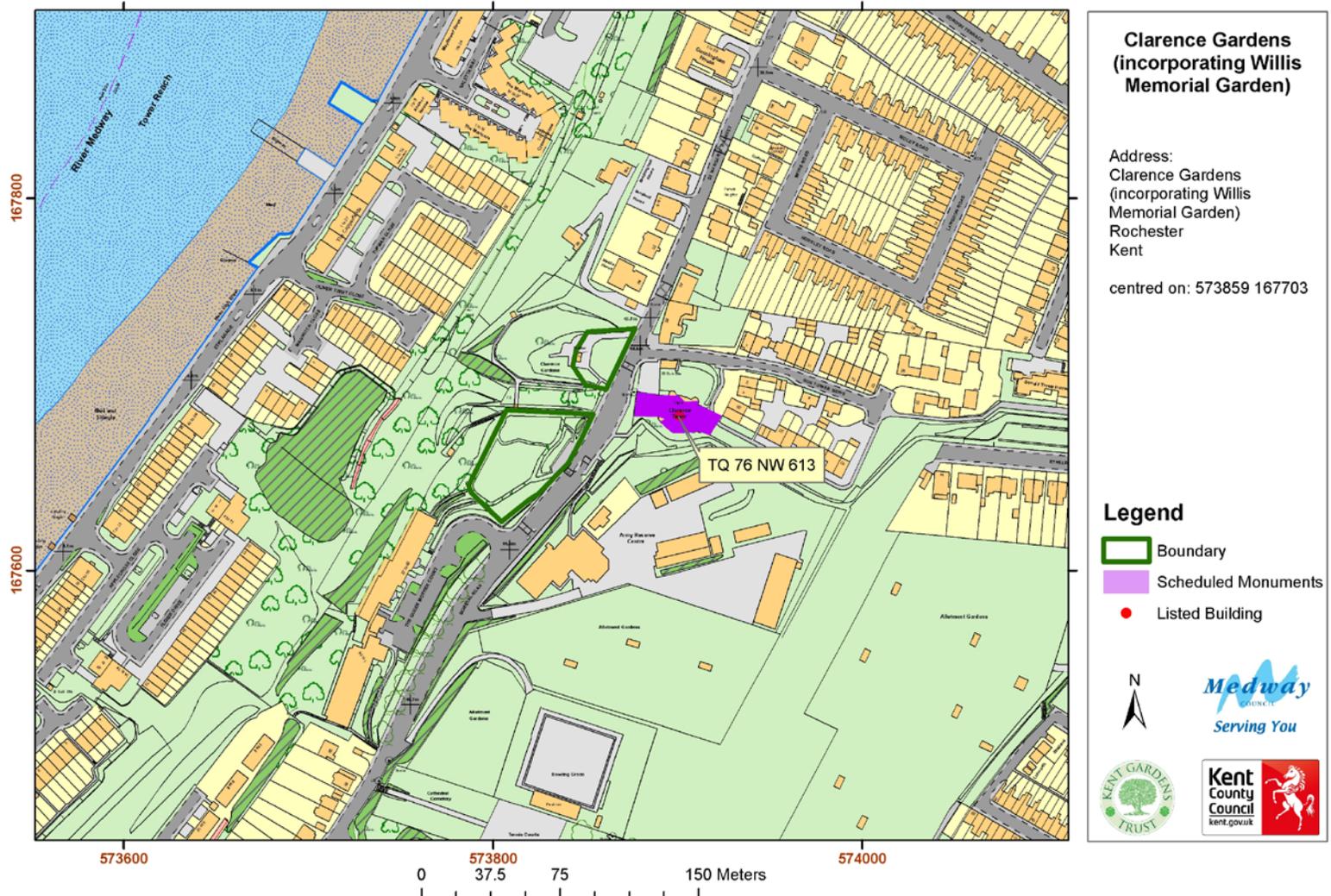
**Kent**  
County  
Council  
kent.gov.uk

**KENT GARDENS**  
TRUST

Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
 This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 100019238, 2013

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

## Fig. 10 Map of heritage designations



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved 100019238, 2013



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

Fig. 12 Photographs of Clarence Gardens (2013)



Across Clarence Gardens to the western boundary



View looking north-east across Clarence Gardens to Fort Clarence



View looking north towards the river



Willis Memorial Garden looking west