

# The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



## Esplanade Gardens, Rochester



September 2014



# Esplanade Gardens

## 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  
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Dock Road  
Chatham  
ME4 4TR  
[www.medway.gov.uk](http://www.medway.gov.uk)

Kent County Council  
Heritage Conservation  
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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'

**KENT**

**ESPLANADE GARDENS**

**MEDWAY**

NGR: 574314 168403

### **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Esplanade Gardens are associated with well-known and frequently-illustrated former Rochester landmarks, namely C17 Ladbury Cottage, the subject for many artists, and the C19 Watts Charity Baths, this site offering archaeological interest as the footprint of the Baths survives as parch marks in the grass. Several surviving features demonstrate architectural interest related to various periods of Rochester's civic development: the mid C19 and C20 reclamation works incorporating the stonework (grade II listed balustrades) from the medieval bridge, and the Pier entrance's mid-Victorian granite plinths and fine decorative ironwork lamps from McFarlane's Saracen Foundry, rescued from the Old Bridge. The Gardens' shoreline was previously home to river-dependent commercial and industrial organisations such as barge builders and marine engineers.

The Gardens' artistic interest lies in their position and open character, offering wide and varied scenic views over the river, up to the Castle, Cathedral and Satis House (associated with Charles Dickens) and south to St. Margaret's church.

The Gardens provide valuable public open space including a riverside walk which forms part of the 28 mile long Medway Valley Walk from Tonbridge to Rochester. The pier, once the focus of ferry traffic from as far away as London, is still operative for craft but also serves local events such as the annual July concerts at the Castle when firework displays are set up on it.

### **SITE DESCRIPTION**

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

At least since Roman times, when the first bridge over the River Medway was built on the bend of the river where Rochester then became established, the area around it was tidal mud banks and marshland. The origins of Esplanade Gardens (officially named The Esplanade) lie in two pieces of land that jutted out westwards over the mud, immediately below the town. These are clearly shown on George Russell's map of 1717 and the R. Sale map of 1816, and although not named, the smaller area to the north, immediately south-west of Rochester Castle (and upstream of the medieval bridge), shows a building which is probably C17 Ladbury cottage. The 1819 Mudge map shows a pier projecting from this northern piece of land which, by 1822 is referred to as Ladbury Quay (after the nearby cottage which takes its name from its original builder). At this date the larger area to its south is named Court Hill Marsh (William Bushell's map and an 1831 lithograph).

In 1835 the Medway Bathing Establishment was built just to the north of Ladbury Quay. The baths were later, about 1878, to be bought by the Watts Charity and converted into hot water and private baths and ultimately, in 1933, to be taken over by Rochester Corporation.

In 1857 the medieval bridge was demolished and replaced by a cast iron bridge (now known as Old Bridge) opened the previous year. In association with the new bridge works being undertaken by the Bridge Trust, who were rebuilding (and straightening) the river bank from its previous earthen construction between the old and new bridges, the Corporation drew up a 'Specification and Plan of Esplanade and River Wall' (City Archives) to continue this a further 100m southwards as far as the site of the Bathing Establishment and adjacent Rochester Pier. The plan included a wide public walk to be known as the Esplanade, adjacent to this new river wall. The works utilised stone from the demolished bridge including the cornice and balustrades which were used to form the top section of the new river wall.

In 1860, the southern part of the site, Court Hill Marsh, still comprised pasture, arable or woodland (Tithe Map apportionments). By the end of the century however, its whole area had become the town's cricket ground with a pavilion on its south-west edge.

The new public walk, known as The Esplanade and running southwards as far as the now-renamed Watts Baths, is shown on the 2nd edition OS map of 1897-1900.

Rochester Corporation embarked on further riverside reclamation in about 1899 when it acquired land from Frances Ladbury (1821-1900). The picturesque but ruinous Ladbury Cottage, drawn or painted by generations of artists, was demolished about this time. Plans were drawn up in 1902 to construct an embankment encompassing Ladbury Quay, with a more radical extension outlined for future consideration; a licence was granted in 1907 to fill the land for this purpose (Town Archives). The potential future extension is shown (on the plan) as following a straight line from a point north-east of Rochester Pier as far as the north-west corner of the cricket ground. It is not known exactly when the first embankment work took place but an aerial photograph dated around the time of WW1 shows a small section of it just visible at a point south-west below the Castle (Rochester from Old Photographs 1985).

In the early C20 a new road, Willis Avenue, was built as a continuation from the south end of the Esplanade, by then also used by vehicular traffic, to the south end of the Cricket ground (OS 3<sup>rd</sup> ed). This road was later further extended southwards, to a point level with St. Margaret's Church on the ridge above and in 1951 the Corporation renamed its whole length *Esplanade*.

In 1910, the Old Mathematical School, then situated in Rochester High Street, bought the cricket ground as their new playing field. Plans were drawn up for 'baths' (for swimming) in the south-west corner of the ground. The baths were to be fed by the river and "surrounded by a red corrugated shelter around the sides and provided with 60 dressing boxes plus an open shed" (Chatham News

21.9.1912). This new facility was opened in 1914, the same year the Old Bridge was reconstructed and re-opened.

Other leisure activities were also starting to occupy the newly-embanked ground: in 1905, the Rochester Cruising Club (RCC) was inaugurated, initially occupying a disused barge moored in a creek adjacent to nearby Bakers Walk (OS 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1907-1923) as a club house. The first Commodore was Richard Wadhams, the Foreman Barge Builder working for the Borstal boatyard further upstream where he was involved in the construction of "Susannah", the largest Bawley barge ever built on Medway. By 1922 the club was renting land at 'Ladbury' (sic) between tennis courts built on the newly-embanked land (OS 4<sup>th</sup> ed.) and the land wall for laying up boats over winter. In 1934 its address was given as 10 Willis Avenue (Kelly's Directory). In 1937 they erected their first clubhouse on the site.

Reclamation began again in 1946 when the Corporation was granted a licence to fill in the portion of foreshore west of the Castle between the 'Mathematical School cricket ground' and 'Esplanade pier' (sic) as proposed in the 1902 plan (but not north of the pier at this time). The site under consideration comprised c3.5 ha (9.5 acres) of continuous frontage, from Rochester Pier (immediately north of the old Watts Baths) to a point known as Point Barge Yard which lay beyond the south boundary of the Old Mathematical School playing field. The school sold its field to the Corporation in 1948 for £3500, having bought 30 acres at Great Delce just before the outbreak of war for a new building and sports ground. About one fifth of the low lying part of the field was then filled in. This took place very slowly but had gathered momentum by 1959 when substantial chalk fill became available and was very gradually tipped and allowed to settle. The final plan, drawn up in 1960, shows an extra triangle of land downstream (north) of the pier, about 32m (105ft) beyond the embankment as originally envisaged, thus extending the new river frontage for an additional 41.5m (135ft) northwards to a point mid-way along the wall of the Castle opposite.

By 1960 all the tenancies of the affected land had been terminated, with the exception of that of the RCC, the location of whose site cut the newly-embanked ground into two, unequally-sized areas, the smaller one to its north and the larger to the south. At this point in the planned redevelopment of Esplanade, called Phase Two by the Council, it was proposed to move the club to a different site but in 1961, a new lease for 21 years was signed for the existing site, backdated to 1959 but with the proviso that a new clubhouse be built. However, this didn't happen until 1973 with the new building finally opening in November 1974. It was subsequently refurbished and extended on the occasion of the club's centenary in 2005.

The construction of the new embankment was well under way in 1961 and the following year a plan for laying out the newly-reclaimed ground was drawn up. This proposed the demolition of Watts Baths (by then called the Rochester Open Air Pool) and replacing them with a new open air pool, a refreshment room, toilets, and a model boating lake in the former, now-derelict, Mathematical School's pool. In the event the Baths were retained, along with a proposed layout for a garden walk nearby, (presumably an early section of the present riverside walk), and the triangular area north of the Pier was grassed over for



toddlers. None of the other proposals came to fruition. In the early 1970s there was a proposal to build a major public baths complex covering most of what had been the Old Mathematical School playing field but this was eventually abandoned due to escalating costs and the project moved to a site in Strood. The Rochester Open Air Pool beside the Esplanade was closed in 1976 due to irreparable damage and was finally demolished. Part of its site was later incorporated into a road widening scheme, probably after a new Rochester Pier (on the site of the earlier one) was inaugurated in 1989, its access embellished with a grand entrance comprising Victorian granite piers surmounted by decorative metal lamps. These had been removed in the 1970s from their previous position on the Old Bridge when the adjacent derelict railway bridge was converted to take road traffic. The whole site of Esplanade Gardens remains in the ownership of Medway Council.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

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

Esplanade Gardens are situated on the east bank of the River Medway, between the Esplanade road and the river Medway's embankment, immediately south-west of and below the steeply-rising walls of Rochester Castle. The site is largely level, roughly wedge-shaped and covers about 4ha with its narrowest point (barely 3m) at the northern end mid-way opposite the Castle but at its widest point, some 300m further south, it is about 140m broad from river to road.

Its flat nature allows for views both up to the Castle, Cathedral and Satis House immediately above it, and to St. Margaret's church beyond it on the heights to the south, as well as open views across the River and the Victorian cast iron bridge to Strood on the west side.

The site is divided into two unequal sections by the presence of Rochester Cruising Club's (RCC) grounds which occupy a strip roughly 30m in length (north to south) and extending westwards from Esplanade Road to the riverside. The smaller section (north of RCC) is bounded on its east side, from its northernmost tip to the entrance to Rochester Pier (30m to the south), by balustrade walling (listed grade II), relocated as part of the embankment works in 1857 from the demolished medieval bridge. South of the Pier entrance, south as far as the RCC's grounds, the Gardens are bounded along the pavement by a low, staggered brick wall of four or five courses with a brick coping.

Similar walling continues southwards beyond the RCC's grounds to form a boundary at the back of the pavement to the larger, southern section of the Gardens. On the river side, the boundary along the embankment wall from the northern tip comprises a pre-cast concrete wall 110cm high topped with coping stones. This continues about 50m beyond the RCC's grounds at which point it is replaced by a simple 22cm high concrete kerbstone. The southern boundary abuts a housing estate where a 2m high wooden fence with trellis is screened by shrubs and small trees.



## ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Although in practice the Gardens may be entered at any point as the very low brick wall is easily stepped over, the gateway to Rochester Pier also serves as a formal entrance to the Gardens. It lies c32m south from their northernmost tip and comprises a 4.6m wide open gateway (blocked by padlocked, removable stanchions). The gateway is flanked by two substantial granite plinths, set on concrete bases, which measure c120cm x 120cm x 120cm; each is topped with a substantial bronze-finish metal pillar with four scroll feet and acanthus leaf ornamentation. Each pillar originally supported a (gas) lamp now (2014) missing but due to be restored and refurbished by the Bridge Trust in 2014 as part of the centenary celebrations of Old Bridge's reconstruction in 1914. The ornamental metalwork was made by the famous Saracen Foundry, established in Glasgow by Walter McFarlane in 1850 which moved to its purpose-built site at Possilpark in 1872. The firm was the most important producer of ornamental ironwork in Scotland, supplying the Empire and the wider world.

There are four further semi-formal entrance points in the form of gaps in the brick wall where internal paths meet the pavement. Three are located in the southern section (two allowing vehicular access and again blocked by stanchions) with the fourth, for pedestrians only, located beside the RCC's northern boundary.

## GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

A riverside path runs the length of the Gardens forming the final part of the Medway Valley Walk from Tonbridge. It is asphalt-surfaced from the northern tip until about 50m beyond the RCC's site when it becomes less formal with a gravel surface. It continues south beyond the Gardens, skirting the adjacent housing estate.

The northern c0.5ha section of the Gardens, opposite the Castle wall, is laid to lawn where in a dry summer the footprint of the C19 Watts Charity Baths survives inside the main entrance as marks visible in the grass (Google Earth 2013). The lawn is bisected north/south by a Y-shaped asphalt path which branches off the main entrance path. Several new (2014) park benches are placed at intervals beside this path to take advantage of the river view. The path, flanked by four free-form flowerbeds cut into the turf and planted with annuals, curves gently southwards to meet (50m south) a centrally-placed, circular, brick-built raised shrub bed edged with box. Ringed by its own path this bed is divided into three wedges by further paths, one leading west to the riverside walk, the other eastwards to an entrance from The Esplanade. Set in the grass on a blue grey brick base, some 20m east of the Pier and 10m from the entrance is a canon, relocated from the Chatham Dockyard after its closure in 1984 (pers.com). The boundary with the RCC's grounds to the south is formed by a clipped hedge; a few young, ornamental trees are informally planted nearby.

The main section of the Gardens lies south of the RCC's grounds. It is laid to grass crossed by asphalt paths and informally planted with ornamental trees

about 25 years old and, in season, swathes of daffodils. The northern boundary with the RCC's grounds is planted with an informal hedge of tall conifers (slightly damaged by the storms of early 2014). About 20m immediately south of the hedge and adjacent to the riverside walk is a triangular-shaped playground for small children, protected by railings, with a further play and picnic area to its east. This part of the Gardens' fenced, southern boundary with the adjacent housing estate is screened by shrubs and small trees.

## REFERENCES

### Books, articles

*A Short History of Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School 1701-1951* (edited by D.E.L. Flower)

*The Sun Sets on a 100 Years: Rochester Cruising Club 1905-2005* (Chris Andrews)

*The Rochester Bridge Trust* (private publication post 2005)

*Recollections of Edwin Harris* (1930s) (Medway Archives)

*Chatham News*: 21-9-1912, 10-09-1976, 4-08-1989

*Clock Tower Newsletter* (Medway Archives)

### Maps

Modern Reproduction of George Russell's 1717 plan based on an earlier survey by James Almond in 1674 (Medway Archives but original lodged with Bridge Warden's Trust)

The City of Rochester by R. Sale surveyed and planned 1816 (Medway Archives)

Mudge 1819 Survey 1" to mile: Tithe Index Reprint (Medway Archives)

City of Rochester surveyed by William Bushell 1822 (Medway Archives)

Tithe Map 1841: St. Margaret's Ward

Ordnance Survey maps:

1<sup>st</sup> ed. OS 25" (based on tithe map) 1862-1875

1866 Rochester City XIX (Medway Archives)

2<sup>nd</sup> ed. OS 25" 1897-1900

3<sup>rd</sup> ed. OS 25" 1907-1923

4<sup>th</sup> ed. OS 25" 1929-1952

1954 OS Rochester & Chatham (Medway Archives)

### Illustrations

- The Couchman Collection (Medway Archives): Bridge Series DE402/2 - Ladbury Cottage pre 1856 DE402/2/9; 1914 New Bridge showing Gas Lamps DE402/2/41 (I); Esplanade Series DE402/3 - 1914 Pier & Watts Baths DE402/3/32(L); 1931 Bridge House to Watts DE402/3/28 (U); 1932 Pier & Flying Boat from Bridge DE402/3/39 (U)
- Plan for Embankment 1902 (Medway Archives MP/RW/6/1)
- *'The City from Above': Rochester from Old Photographs* 1985 (City of Rochester Society) published by Meresborough Books

- Esplanade Embankment in Progress: May 1961 (Medway Archives RCA/CS1/9/40)
- Google Earth 2013

### **Archival Items**

Rochester Tithe Award, Schedule St. Margaret's Parish (Kent Archaeological Society)

Rochester Corporation Records: MP/RW/4/1; MP/RW/6/1; MP/B/15/4;

RCA/CS1/9/35-41; RCA/A2/1/15-17; RCA/A2/16/1; RCA/TC1/13/1;

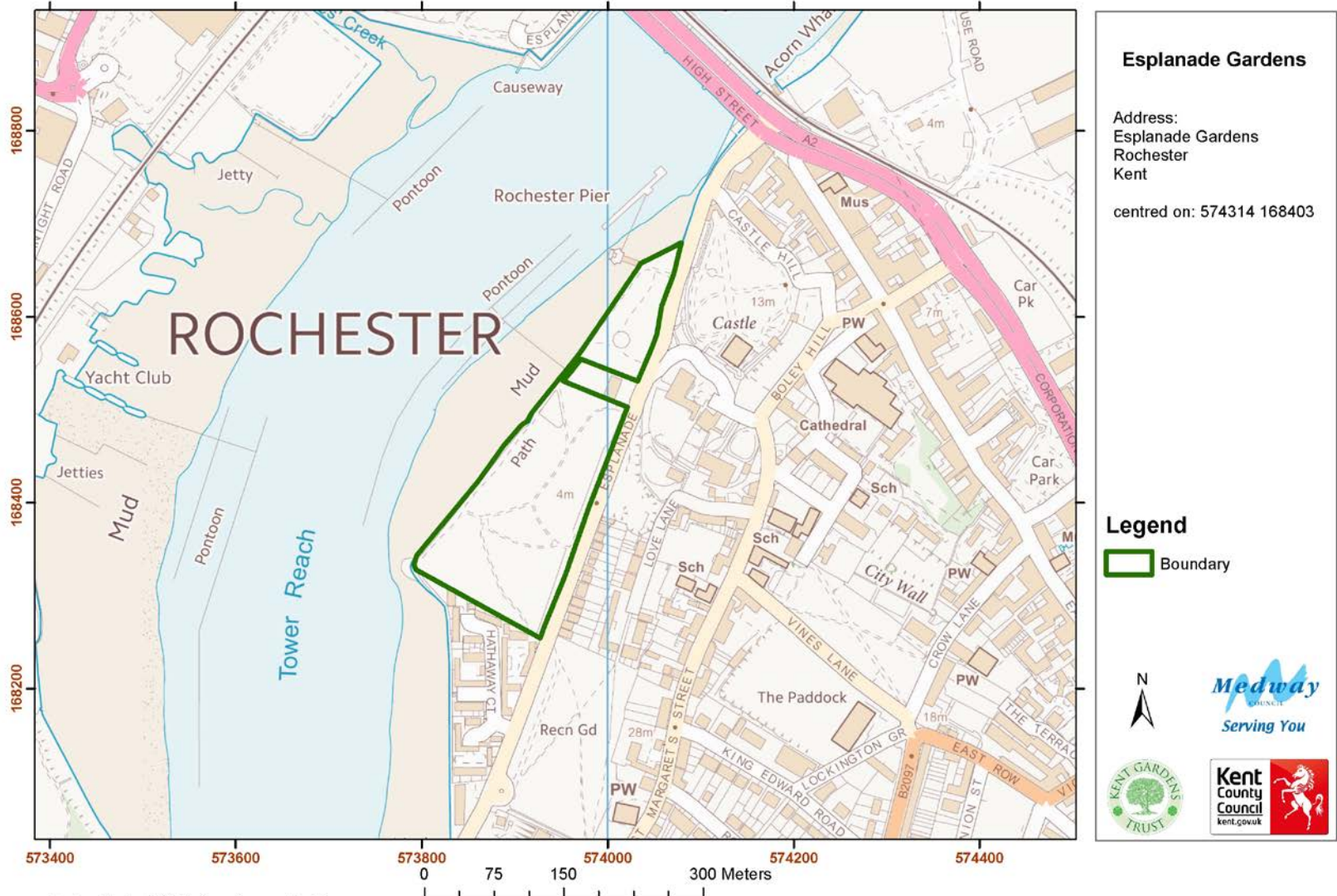
RCA/TC1/24/7; RCA/12/1/17; RCA/CS1/9/ (Medway Archives)

Rochester Conservation plan 2009

**Research and description by Peta Hodges  
Virginia Hinze (editor)**

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Fig. 1 Boundary map





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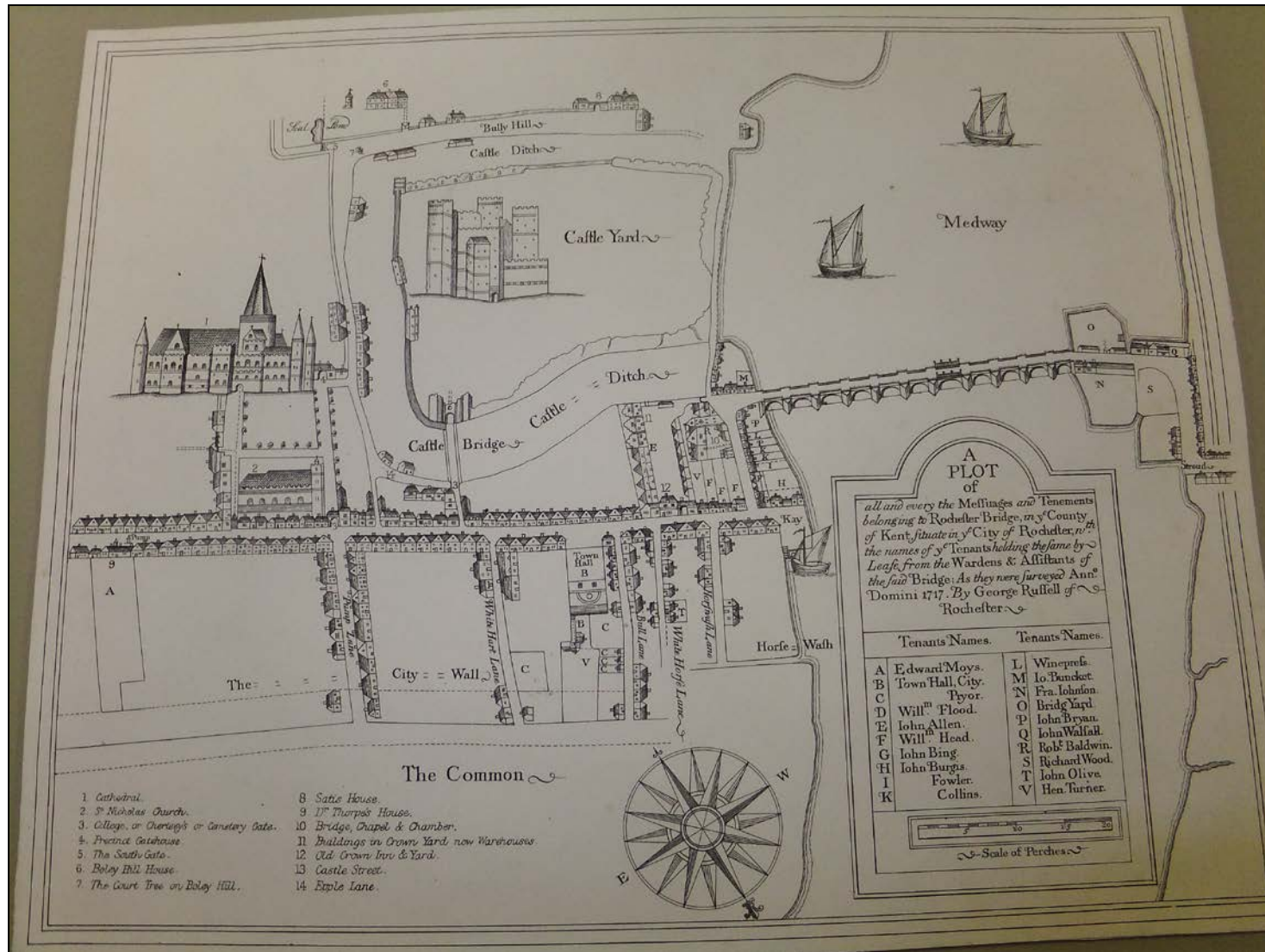
## Fig. 2 Aerial photograph (2012)



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
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Fig. 3 Modern reproduction of George Russell's 1717 map based on a 1674 survey





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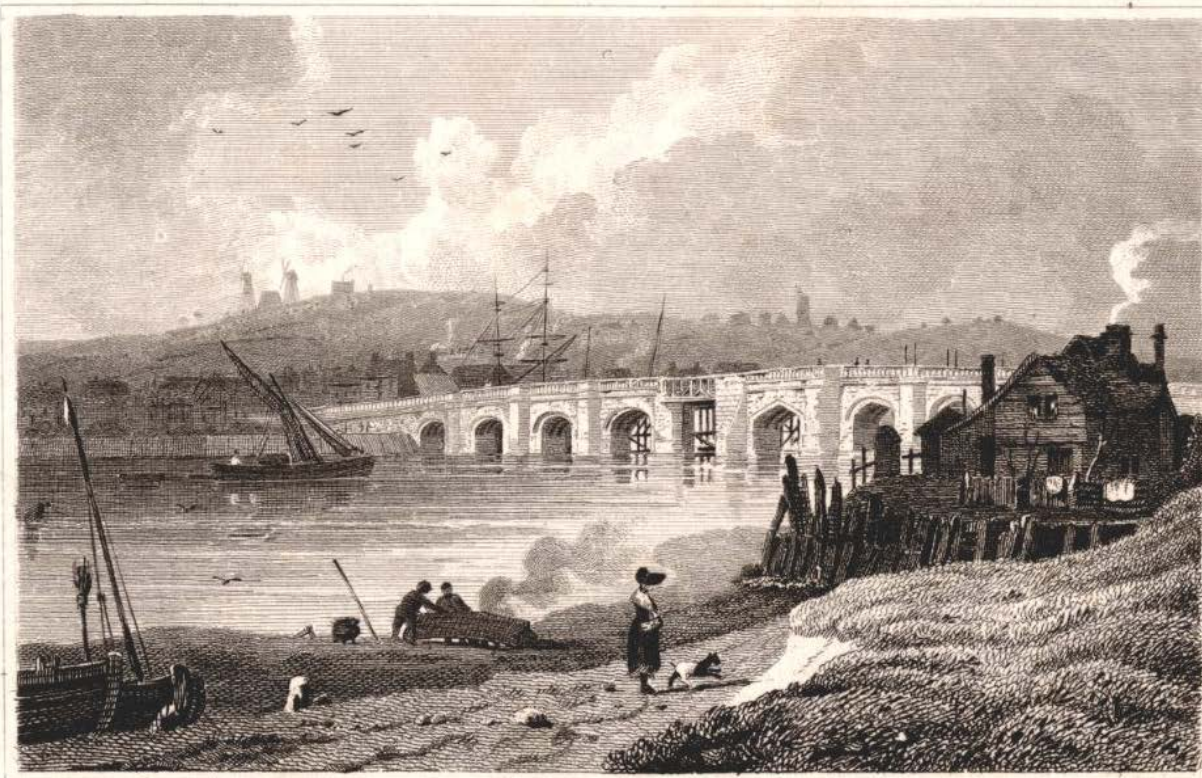
Fig. 4 Map of 1816 R. Sale





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Fig. 5 Ladbury Cottage, 1820 (Couchman DE402/2/9)



*Engraved by J. Orsig. from a Drawing by H. Goussier. for the Excursions through Kent.*

ROCHESTER BRIDGE,  
KENT.

*Pub<sup>d</sup> Feb. 1820. by Longman & Co. Paternoster Row.*

DE402/2/9

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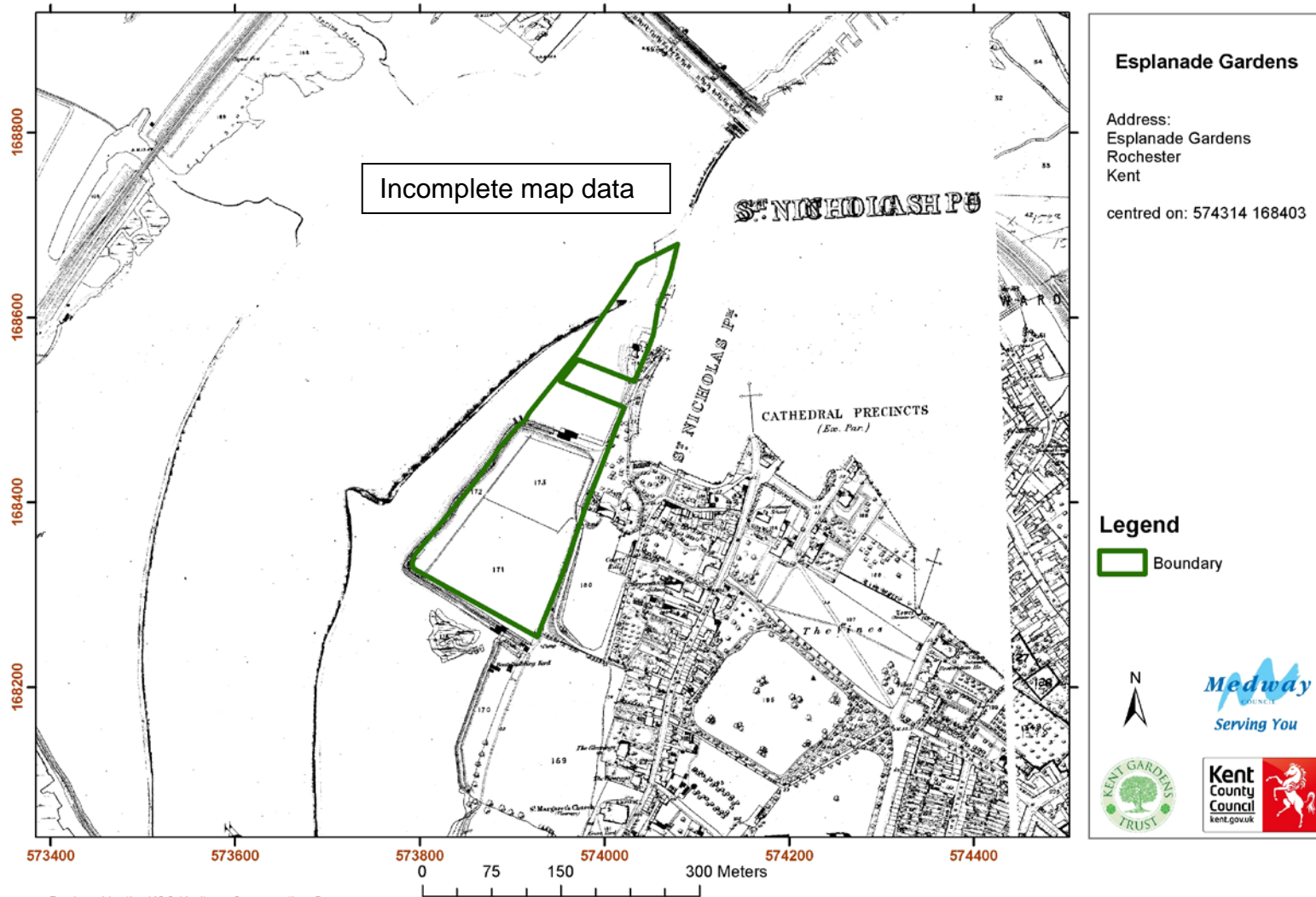
Fig. 6 1822 William Bushell Map





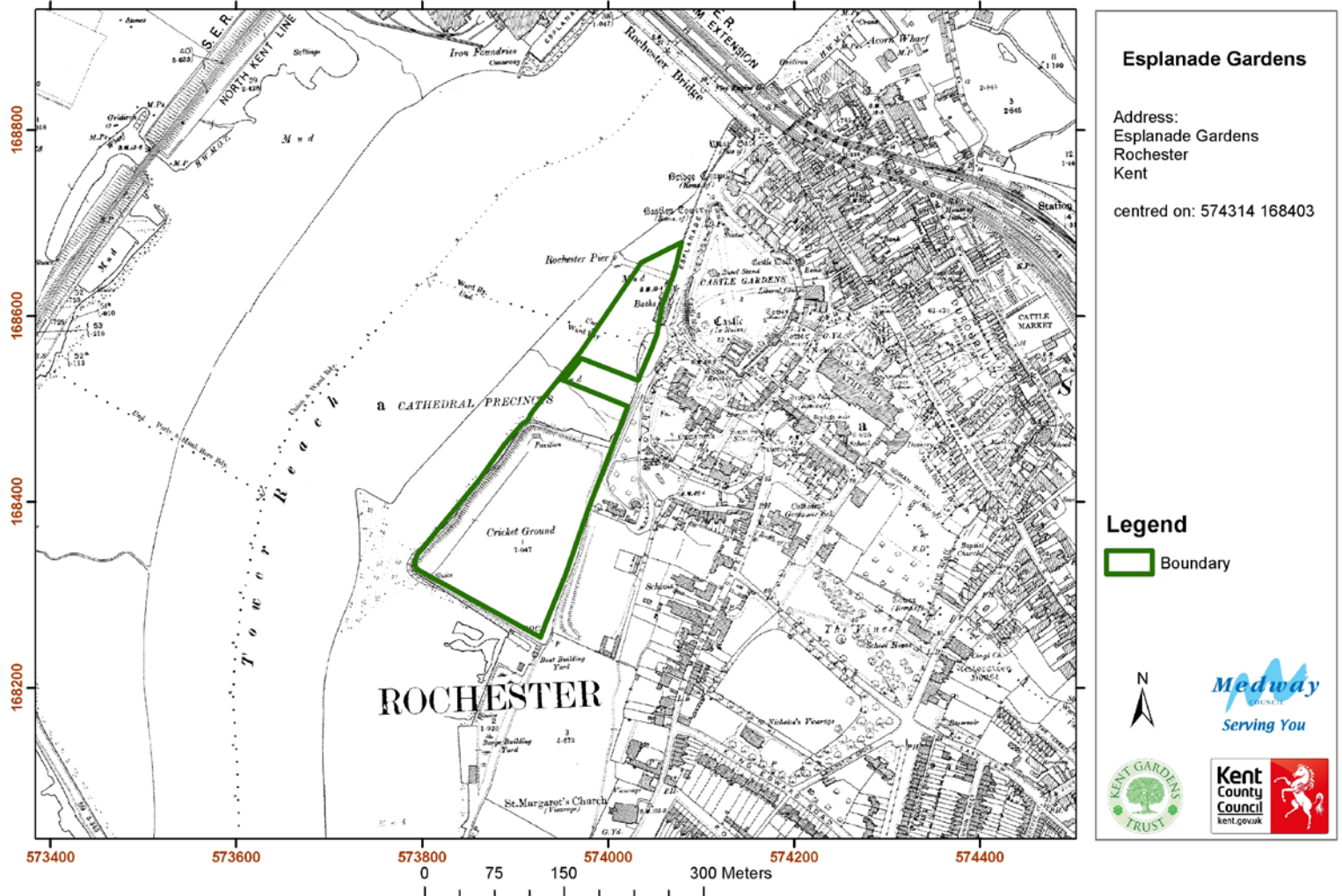
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 7: 1<sup>st</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 25" map 1862-1875



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Fig. 8 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 25” map 1897-1900



## Esplanade Gardens

Address:  
Esplanade Gardens  
Rochester  
Kent  
  
centred on: 574314 168403

## Legend

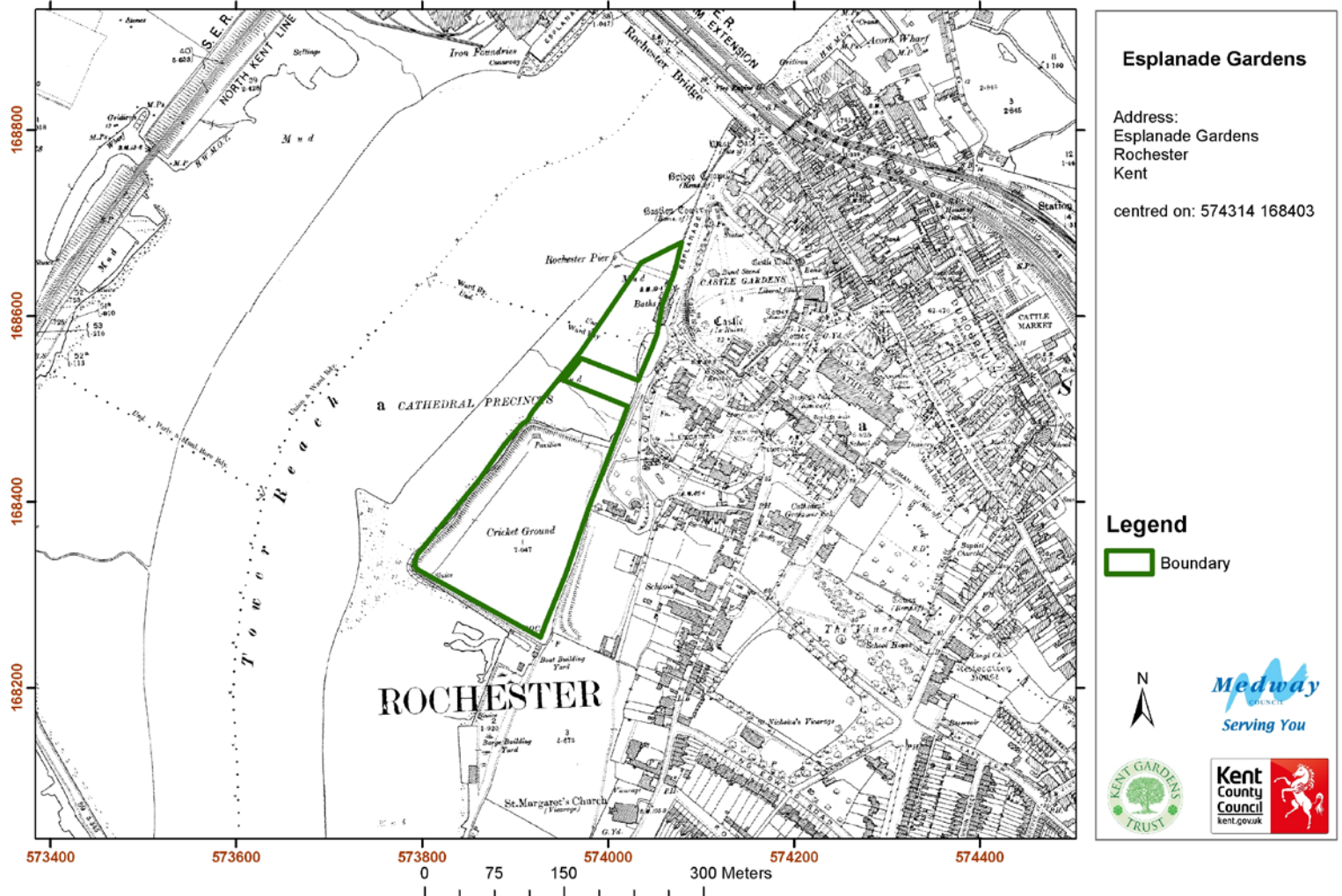
 Boundary



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
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# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 9: 3<sup>rd</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 25" map 1907-1923



## Esplanade Gardens

Address:  
Esplanade Gardens  
Rochester  
Kent  
  
centred on: 574314 168403

## Legend

 Boundary

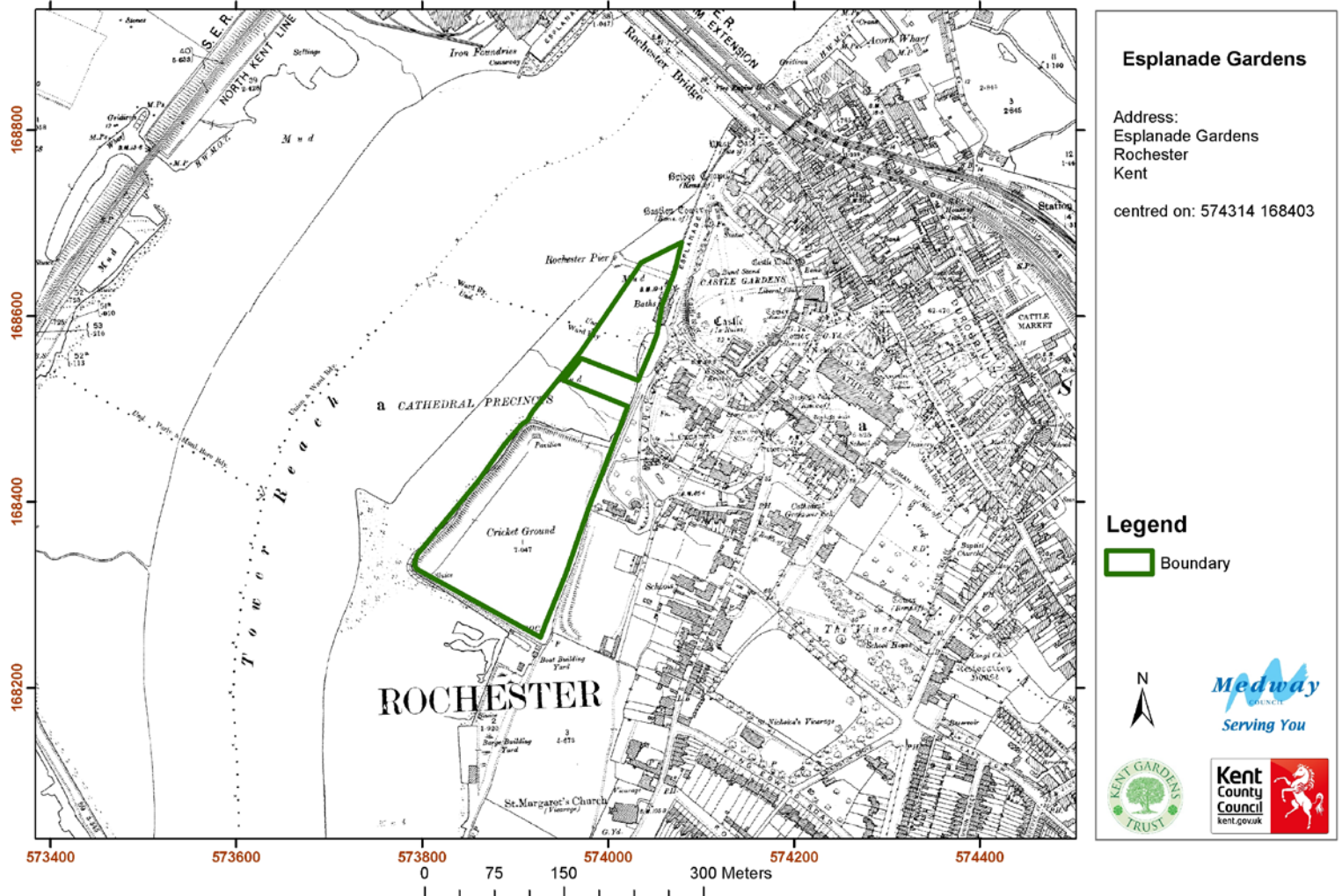


Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group  
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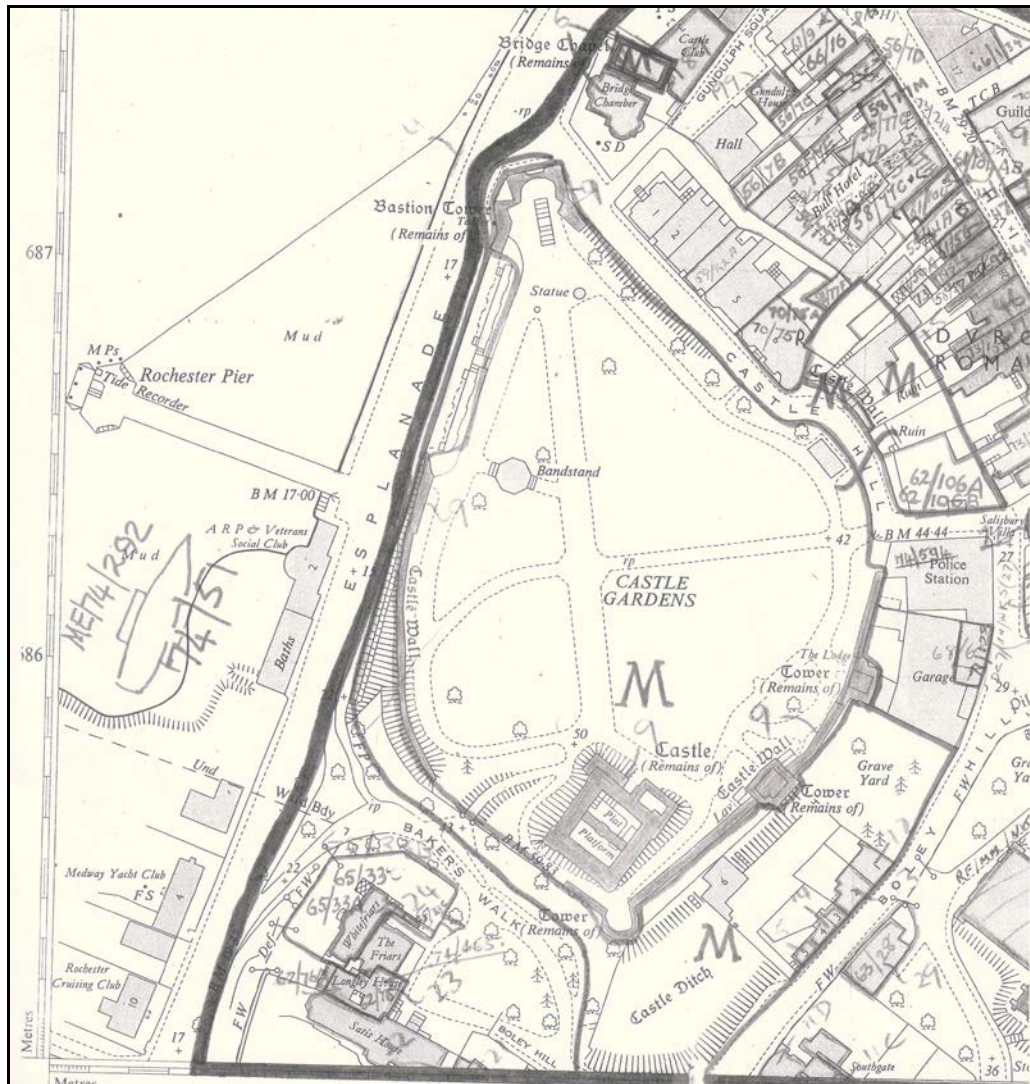
# Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 10 4<sup>th</sup> edition Ordnance Survey 25” map 1929-1952



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Fig. 11 Ordnance Survey map of 1954





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Fig. 12 1914 Pier & Watts Baths (Couchman DE402/2/41)



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

Fig. 13 1931 Bridge House to Watts (officially *Castle and Esplanade from Medway, Rochester*)  
Couchman DE402/3/28U (showing 1857 embanked wall)





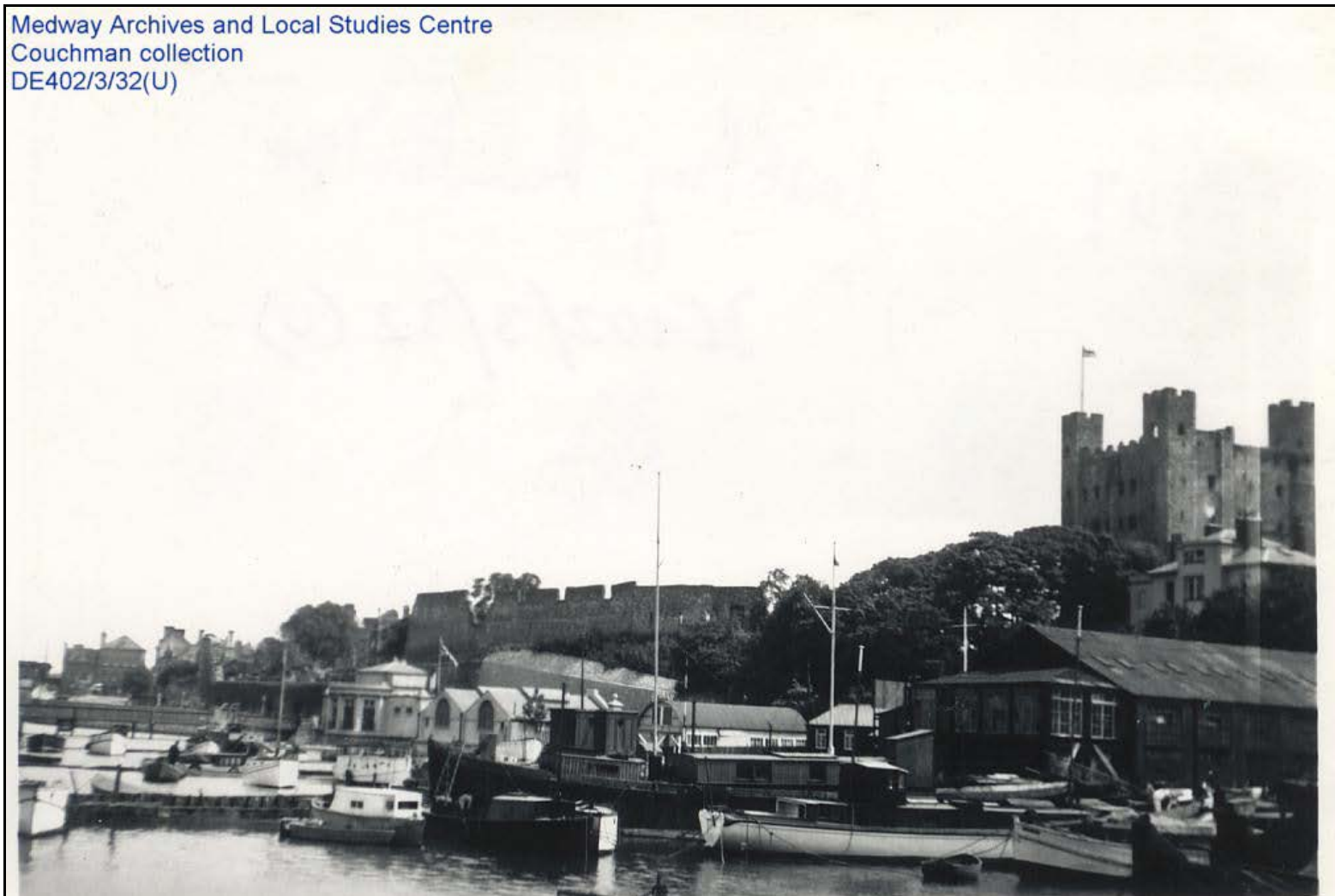
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**Fig. 14 1932 Pier & Flying Boat (far right) Couchman DE402/3/39 (U)**



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Fig.15 1934 Pier & Watts Baths Couchman DE402/3/32(U)



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

Fig.16 Selection of photographs from 2013/14





