

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



The Great Lines Admiral's Gardens or Lower Lines Chatham and Gillingham



January 2015

The Great Lines

Admiral's Gardens or Lower Lines

Chatham and Gillingham, 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 future¹. 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

Kent County Council
Heritage Conservation
Invicta House
County Hall
Maidstone
ME14 1XX
01622 696918
www.kent.gov.uk

Kent Gardens Trust
www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk

English Heritage
www.english-heritage.org.uk

¹ English Heritage (2012) 'Good Practice Guide to Local Listing'

SITE DESCRIPTION

CHATHAM AND GILLINGHAM

THE GREAT LINES

ADMIRAL'S GARDENS or LOWER LINES

MEDWAY

Centred on 576707 168555

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Lower Lines Park, also known as the Admiral's Gardens, is part of The Great Lines defensive fortifications, a Heritage Park and a potential World Heritage site. Although the Admiral's house is gone its site and that of its surrounding formal gardens has potential for garden archaeology while the Park's alternative name is a key to its historical association with its military past. The Park is also of significant archaeological potential as one of the few areas of the Lines where, because the defensive structures survive relatively intact, it is possible to appreciate the defences in their original form. The park is of value as a tranquil space and thoroughfare for both students of the adjacent college and for the wider community.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The area of the Great Lines fortifications, of which the Lower Lines (a scheduled ancient monument) forms part, was the site of the medieval town of Chatham. Together with surrounding farmland and common grazing, it was destroyed when displaced by the defence fortifications. Opposition by local people to the loss of ancient rights of way and cricket pitches were ineffective as the town became dominated by the military.

The need for some kind of linear bastioned artillery fortifications was realised after the Dutch Raid of 1667 when the Dutch navy was able to sail unimpeded up the River Medway into the heart of our naval anchorage. This resulted in heavy fortifications being installed along and at the mouth of the river. However, the landward approach to the dockyard had been left entirely unprotected. An Act of Parliament passed in 1708/09 recognised this fact and led to the compulsory purchase of the necessary land to provide defences. A plan showing the proposed defence lines drawn up by engineer Hugh Debbieg in 1756 called 'Plan of the Intrenchment' shows the Lower Lines Park area as farmland surrounded by mudflats to the west (Kendall, p.23).

The Lower Lines was the last section of the Chatham Lines to be constructed. The works were started in 1803 in advance of the Napoleonic Wars. This part extended the earlier section in the southwest, as far as St Mary's Creek and effectively to the River Medway at Gillingham.

A plan of the extended Chatham Lines dated February 1819 by Robert D'Arcy, senior resident engineer, shows the Park area enclosed by defensive ditches to the north with St Mary's barracks behind them (Kendall, p.50).

In the 1860s advances in the power and range of artillery made the entire Chatham Lines obsolete. The Lines, in the form of ditches, had been installed to defend the Chatham Dockyard from any invading army by allowing British mobile forces to attack from a position of safety utilising gun emplacements positioned at intervals. At that time the area of today's Park was still totally undeveloped farmland. (1st Ordnance Survey map c1860 and Kendall, p.74)

According to 'The historical landscape – Great Lines City Park' report, from the late C19 and throughout the C20, including both world wars, the deep, brick-lined ditches with ramparts and gun emplacements were used for military training and experiments by the Royal Engineers. By building temporary bridges and other military engineering structures they learnt the elements of siege warfare. Any damage sustained was repaired as another practical exercise for the soldiers. Use of real explosives proved a popular public spectacle (Illustrated London News 22 July 1854). One such event appears in Pickwick Papers by Charles Dickens. In the 1890s unique prototype searchlights were developed on site.

In the later C19 a house was built to provide offices and accommodation for the Admiral, his family and staff. Known as Admiralty House it was surrounded by formal gardens, a kitchen garden, vinery and tennis court. It and the gardens were in use until 1959 (as recorded on the OS 4th edition 1929-1952) but were eventually demolished in the 1960s. The area of the gardens forms the core of the Park that exists today and is the origin of the alternative name 'Admiral's Gardens'.

During WWII an extensive bombproof underground command centre for the Royal Navy's Nore Admiral was constructed in the gardens on the part of the site now occupied by the Mid-Kent College car park (and excluded from the designated area of historic designed park and garden). It contained offices, stores, workshops, sleeping quarters, telecommunication rooms and a telephone exchange. At the centre was a large room, staffed by Wrens, with a table for plotting enemy and allied shipping. During WWII two air raid shelters were also installed in the park for the Wrens who had their living quarters nearby.

From 1964 until 1989 the underground bunker was used by the Royal Naval Reserve during which time it was known as HMS Wildfire. It was deep enough to be suitable as a nuclear-proof bunker for the period of the Cold War. After it ceased to be used for military training in the late 1980s, the site became derelict and overgrown.

Recently discovered countermine galleries, from the Napoleonic period on the site on land now occupied by the MidKent College buildings (and similarly excluded from the designated area of historic designed park and garden) are the only examples of their kind in the country. They comprise an underground network of brick-lined tunnels designed for listening for the approach of an enemy (Kendall, p.51). The underground command centre remains in sealed

underground chambers. The Wrens' air raid shelters are also now (2014) sealed (although serving as bat roosts) and the surface area marked by a concrete pad.

In 2010 the Lower Lines Park became the first part of the Great Lines Heritage Park to be revitalised by clearing overgrown areas, laying access paths, installing benches and constructing a children's play area in the north east corner of the Park. The Park opened to the public with funding and support from MidKent College, English Heritage and Canterbury Archaeological Trust. The paths are used by students as a route between campuses. The Park is owned and managed by a community volunteer group called the Friends of Admiral's Gardens, who promote it as an open space amenity and wildlife sanctuary. It is home to a variety of wildlife, which has been encouraged by the installation of bat and bird boxes. The Park continues to fulfil its recreational role for present-day (2014) adjacent military housing.

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

The Lower Lines Park lies south of a bend in the River Medway between Chatham to the west and Gillingham to the east. Sited on high ground above and to the north-west of the River Medway its 5.5ha of gently undulating ground includes a finger extending westwards from its main area. The Park is bounded by roads and housing on three sides: Princess Mary Avenue and Johnson's Avenue to the northwest, Cumberland Road to the east and part of Medway Road to the south. The westward finger abuts the car park and campus buildings of the MidKent College Medway Campus, which also form a boundary to the park to the south-west and contributes to the Park's setting.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

There are four entrances to the Park: one on Medway Road, two on Johnson Avenue, one on Cumberland Road and one from within the campus north of [its](#) main building. The entrances lead into wide tarmaced paths.

THE PARK

The main part of the Park is laid out around a centrally-placed, slightly domed, plateau which is the site of the former C19 Admiral's House (demolished in the 1960s) and its former surrounding formal garden of which only superficial traces as parch marks survive. The area is managed as mown grass and is skirted around its entirety by a tarmac path from which other paths branch off to further areas. Immediately to the north is a children's adventure play area from where further paths lead to the two entrances in Johnson Avenue.

On the west side of the plateau, above a steeply-sloping bed of C21 mixed shrub planting, on a bank created when the defence trenches were dug, is a re-constructed military-style bridge that crosses the Lower Lines defence trenches. This brick-lined ditch runs just inside the Park perimeter from its north-west corner southwards to the north of the MidKent College [campus](#). Paths on either side of this ditch pass various sites of relic military installations, mostly below ground but marked with description panels, including two C19 gun embrasures, a

searchlight seesaw and a WWII gunfast and bunker. At the southern end of the ditch is a wide section of moat, a searchlight vertical lift, a C21 earth bridge over the moat, countermine galleries and chamber and WWII gunfast with ammunition lockers and bunker.

To the south of the plateau is an extensive area of late C20 mixed woodland intersected and surrounded by paths. Amongst the trees are surviving remnants of the WWII Medway Road Camp for Wrens and concrete slabs marking the site of its underground air-raid shelters. On the southern boundary of the woodland, adjoining the MidKent College campus, is the site of the Nore Command, HMS Wildfire.

A path running down the boundary on the extreme eastern side of the Park through mixed woodland connects MidKent College with the campus for the University of Kent, Medway, in Johnson's Avenue.

REFERENCES

Books, Articles

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

'*The Historical Landscape - Great Lines City Park*' report prepared by EDA on behalf of Medway Council and Chatham World Heritage steering group, 2008

Maps

1st edition Ordnance Survey map 1862-1875

4th edition Ordnance Survey map 1929-1952

Websites and illustrations:

Friends of Admirals Gardens (www.foag.org.uk)

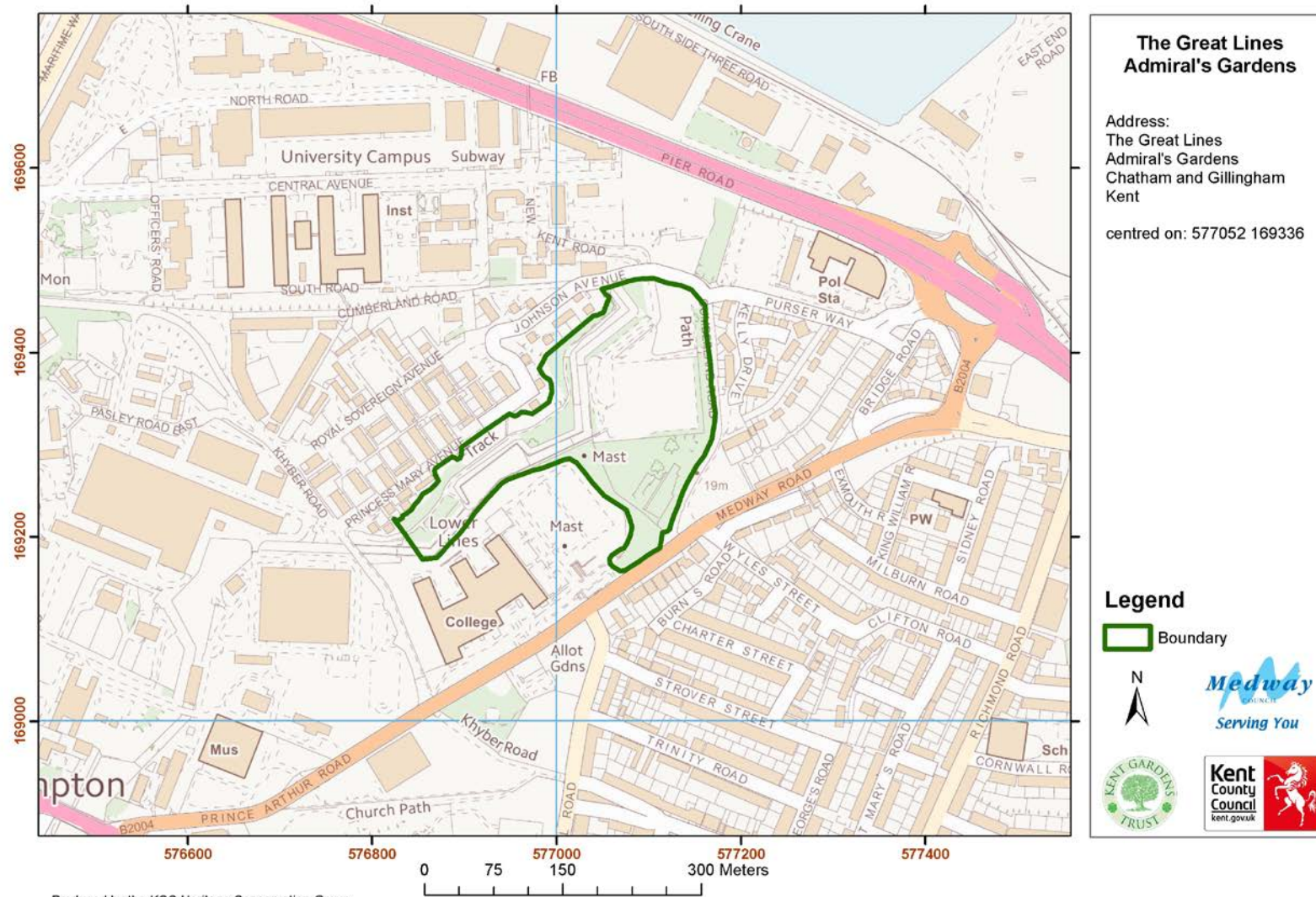
MidKent College website (www.midkent.ac.uk)

Explanatory Boards at the Park

**Research and Description by Jane Davidson
Virginia Hinze (editor)**

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Fig. 1 Boundary map



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Fig. 2 Key features map



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Fig. 3 Aerial photograph (2012)



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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Fig. 4 1st edition Ordnance Survey map 1862-1875

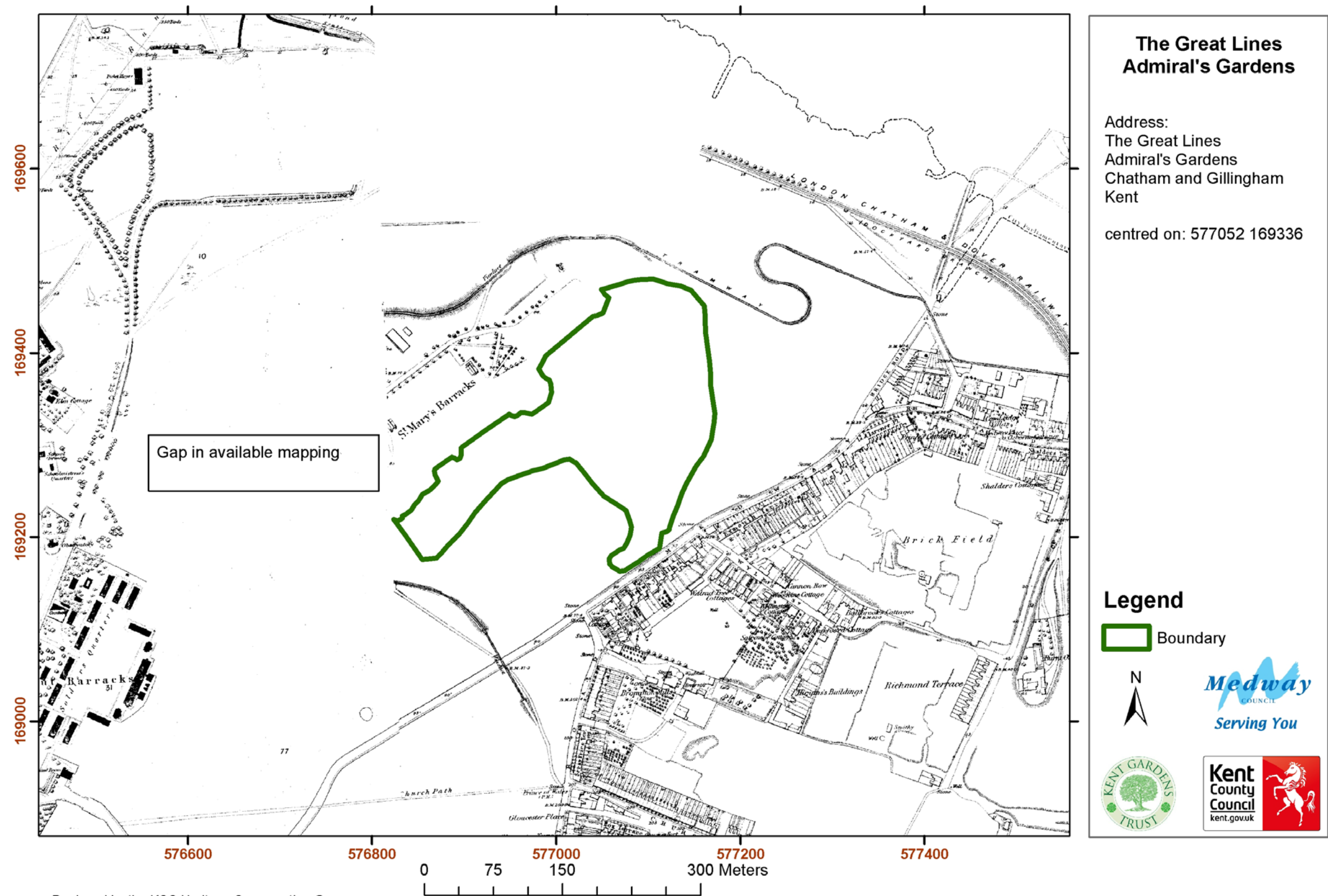


Fig. 5 4th edition Ordnance Survey map 1929-1952

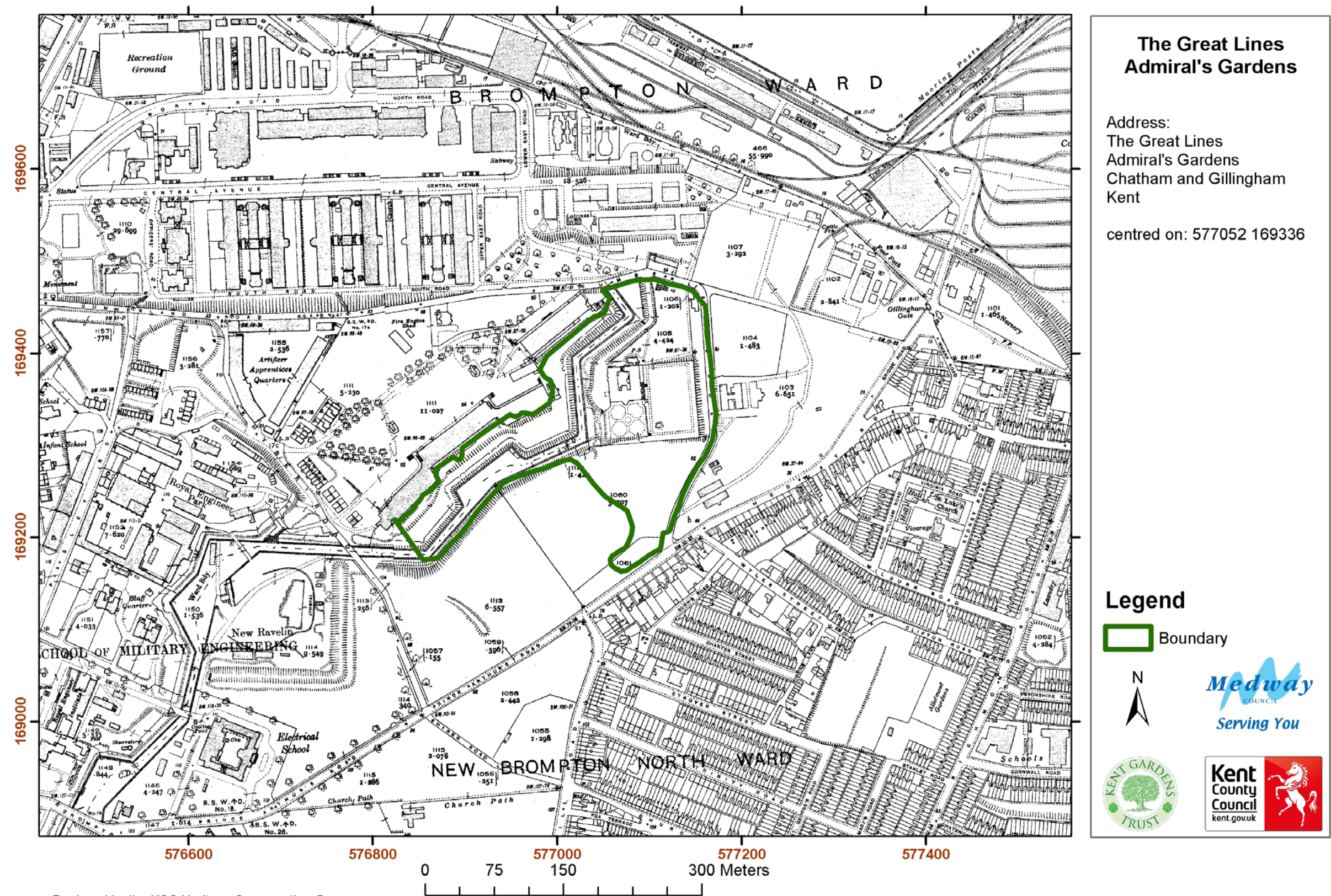


Fig. 6 Main route through the gardens 2013



Fig. 7 Air raid shelter remains 2013



Fig. 8 Plateau, shrub planting with military-type bridge to rear 2013



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Fig. 9 Defence trenches 2013

