

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Sevenoaks District



Hextable Gardens, Sevenoaks



April 2012

Hextable Gardens

Sevenoaks, Kent

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SITE DESCRIPTION

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Boundary map.

FIGURE 2: Aerial photograph.

FIGURE 3: Map of listed buildings at Hextable Gardens.

FIGURE 4: Listed buildings at Hextable Gardens.

FIGURES ONLY ON CD

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

FIGURE 6: Old photograph of Hextable House.

FIGURE 7: Photocopy of old print of Hextable House at Heritage Centre.

FIGURE 8: 18th century wrought iron gate looking on to Avenue of Limes

FIGURE 9: Looking south over rock garden to allotments

FIGURE 10: Pool and disused rock garden

FIGURE 11: Gingko biloba

FIGURE 12: Two old limes either side of central path

FIGURE 13: Formal rose garden with box hedges

FIGURE 14: Hedge between 1st and 2nd compartments. Hawthorn berries?

FIGURE 15: Derelict glasshouses outside northern boundary

FIGURE 16: First compartment looking south.

FIGURE 17: Heritage centre. Former botany laboratory of the college

FIGURE 18: Looking south to old gates and Avenue of Limes.

FIGURE 19: 5th compartment looking west

FIGURE 20: Blazer badge of Swanley Horticultural College on display at Heritage Centre.

FIGURE 21: Wisteria on pergola with Heritage Centre on right.

FIGURE 22: Looking back to Hextable Gardens from Avenue of Limes.

FIGURE 23: Plan for development of Hextable Gardens drawn up by Freemont Landscape Architects in 1994.

FIGURE 24: Outline Design drawn up by Freemont Landscape Architects in 1994.

FIGURE 25: Illustrative plan of the gardens at Swanley Horticultural College. This plan is at the Heritage Centre. Artist not known.

INTRODUCTION

This site dossier and description has been prepared as part of the **Review of The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Sevenoaks District 2011 - 2013**. This site is one of many sites that have been researched, visited and written about across the District and as a consequence has been included in the revised list of Historic Parks and Gardens covered by the District Council's Planning Policies. The list is not conclusive and further gardens may be added over time as research continues or information comes to light

The research was carried out by volunteers of the Kent Gardens Trust with support and training from the project consultant Virginia Hinze. The project was supported by English Heritage and Kent County Council.

The extent of the area identified represents the remains of the designed landscape and does not necessarily cover all remaining elements or the historical extent of landscape changes and 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.

Development Services
Sevenoaks District Council
Council Offices
Argyle Road
Sevenoaks
TN13 1HG
01732 227000
<http://www.sevenoaks.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

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Age, rarity and survival: The site survives as the location of what was possibly the first horticultural college in the world, being established in 1889 as a private venture in experimental horticulture. It subsequently became the renowned Swanley Horticultural College which trained a number of the most famous women gardeners of the C19 and C20.

The orchards and gardens which were features of the site in its 78 years use as teaching grounds were typical of the Swanley area which during the C19 and C20 was a major centre for horticultural nurseries supplying the London markets.

Garden compartments together with remnant paths and planting survive from various periods of the site's use as teaching grounds; the 1928 botanical laboratory survives as the only building from the College's occupation. The former College's entrance gates survive from their installation in the early C18 when the site was laid out as the private Hextable House estate; a lime avenue connecting Hextable Gardens with Swanley and probably dating from the late C17 estate layout also survives.

Historic association: The College is associated with a number of highly regarded plantswomen and authors who were trained there, including Dame Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin (founder members of the Landscape Institute) and Frances Perry.

Evidential value: There is an extensive archive on the Horticultural College and on the former Hextable House.

Landmark status; the lime avenue linking Hextable Gardens with Swanley is a significant landmark contributing to the aesthetic of the local scenery.

Social and Communal value: Hextable Gardens are significant as the location of Hextable Parish offices and demonstrate its independence from Swanley.

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT
SWANLEY
SEVENOAKS

HEXTABLE GARDENS

Landranger Sheet 188
TQ512700

SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST

Hextable Gardens are formed from surviving parts of extensive gardens and grounds developed by Swanley Horticultural College (and later the Kent Horticultural Institute) between 1889 and 1967, on the site of a demolished C18 house, for training horticulturalists, students including later well-known practitioners such as Dame Sylvia Crowe, Frances Perry and Brenda Colvin. A lime avenue of C17 origin leading from the Gardens to the adjacent Swanley Park (qv) survives from C17 and C18 phases of the site's development.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The first mention of a house on the site of Hextable Gardens was when George Killingworth acquired the estate in 1526. Some time at the end of the 17C "the original timber house was replaced by a brick house. This would have been the largest house in the area" (Rainer, nd post 2008). It is probable that the lime avenue which still leads south from the Gardens towards Swanley Park (a public park laid out in 1983 on land acquired by Swanley Town Council) was planted in the C17. "There is a tradition that the Eggesfields (who owned the house at that time) were friendly with Sir John Spielman, Queen Elizabeth 1st's jeweller...Sir John brought over two limes from Nuremberg which he planted at Bignores (his house) and it is said that the Eggesfields planted Hextable's famous avenue from slips of these trees" (Balls 1961). The wrought iron gates which, although modified, still exist, were erected in the present position in 1729. The house was extended in the 18C and again after 1860 by the Reverend John Egerton who had acquired half of the estate. Hextable House was bought by the naval architect Sir Edward James Reed in 1879; he added a curious-looking saloon taken from the SS *Bessemer* which was used for lectures and concerts until 1939. The house was sold for the last time in 1889. "It was bought by Mr. Arthur Harper Bond for £5000 in order to experiment in horticulture and so became 'The Horticultural College and Produce Company'. This private venture was probably the first horticultural college in the world" (Rainer, nd post 2008). The Swanley area was for many years a major centre for horticultural nurseries supplying the London markets. Hextable House became the main building for Swanley Horticultural College along with 43 acres of grounds. The house was badly damaged by bombing in 1944 and was completely demolished in 1946.

Swanley Horticultural College became a renowned training place for female gardeners. For the first two years of its existence only male students were admitted. This was not financially viable and after 1891 five female students

were admitted and were educated together with the men which would have been very unusual at this time, although their living arrangements were highly segregated. By the end of the century the student intake of the College had become entirely female. A particularly formative influence was the strong minded Miss Emma Cons who was one of the governors of the college and who was also responsible for the founding of the Old Vic theatre in London and building improved dwellings for the poor (Morrow 1984). A number of highly regarded plantswomen and authors were trained there, including Dame Sylvia Crowe, Brenda Colvin (both founder members of the Landscape Institute) and Frances Perry . After the bombing, in which one of the students was killed, the College grounds were bought by Kent County Council.

When first opened, the college established a small farm with orchards and other gardens extending over 43.5 acres; no plans of these or any subsequent garden layouts apparently survive. However over the years the College acquired more land and erected more buildings. The only survival from the post-war period (1928) is the Botany Laboratory which now houses the Hextable Parish Office and a Heritage Centre. A 'French Garden' was established in 1909 "using vast quantities of manure and cloches to form hot beds" (Morrow 1984). This apparently led to complaints from nearby residents. By this time there were 20 acres of mixed orchards, nut plats and beds for soft fruit. In 1922 the rose garden was replanted and a long herbaceous border was planted with perennials to serve as a teaching collection. In 1924 Wallace's built the Rock Garden at cost price and generously donated 200 alpine plants. The following year an iris border was planted with the gift of 29 varieties from Mr. G P Baker 'a knowledgeable plantsman' (Morrow 1984). A wider and more interesting selection of shrubs was also introduced at this time

After 1946 the Kent Horticultural Institute, under the auspices of Kent Education Committee, used the grounds for the training of ex-service personnel and others in horticulture. In 1967 the Horticultural Institute moved to Hadlow when it was merged with the Kent Farm Institute. The gardens then became very neglected but a volunteer group started to restore the current 2ha area of the Gardens. Plans were drawn up by Freemont landscape architects for Swanley Town Council in 1994 but it has only been possible for volunteers to partially realise these plans. Following a petition Hextable Parish Council became a separate administrative entity from Swanley Town Council in 2008 and since then has had responsibility for maintaining the gardens although the area of Hextable Gardens and the avenue of limes still belong to Kent County Council.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM and SETTING

Hextable Gardens lie 500m to the south west of the village green of Hextable, which is some 6 km south-west of Dartford on the B 258 to Swanley. To their south is Swanley Park, a public park on the northern edge of Swanley Town, to which they are linked by the 360m long avenue of limes The Gardens, approximately 2 hectares in size and trapezoidal in shape have their main axis running in a roughly north-east to south- west direction.

The southern boundary is formed by College Road; the eastern boundary is formed by Dawson Drive which leads to a small car park inside the boundary of the site. The western and northern boundaries are formed by private properties which were originally part of the grounds of the Horticultural College. These properties were acquired by Kent County Council in 1946 but the current ownership is not clear. The northern boundary is tree-lined and abutted by, at the north-eastern end, several derelict glass houses which probably once belonged to the College. Apart from the brick walls around the main gate the boundaries consist of shrubby hedges with wire fencing. The site is level with a very slight slope in a northerly direction. The elevation above sea level is 49 m. Although Hextable village itself is rather suburban, the setting beyond the boundaries to the north, west and south is open fields; to the south west the Gardens overlook the avenue of limes.

ENTRANCE and APPROACHES

There are two entrances to the gardens. On the eastern boundary there is a vehicular entrance off Dawson Drive via a car park. The pedestrian entrance lies on the southern boundary through grand gates opening on to College Road and looking south east to the lime avenue stretching up to Swanley Park. These gates (listed grade II) are of wrought iron and are aligned with the axis of the avenue. The gates, although modified, were erected in the present position in 1729 (*Balls 1960*).

Two hard surfaced paths run south west from the Dawson Drive car park for the full 150m length of the Gardens to the south-western, hedged boundary; one path runs just inside, and parallel to, the northern boundary; the other runs centrally, just to the south of, and again parallel to, the Gardens' east-west axis)

BUILDINGS

All the buildings surround the car park at the eastern end of the site. Most of them are undistinguished modern brick or concrete structures which provide a base for a local gallery, the scouts and the air cadets. The only one of historic interest is the Botany Laboratory of the original Swanley Horticultural College, which dates from 1928; it has been adapted to form a Heritage Centre and, more recently, the offices for Hextable Parish Council. It is a tall, white painted structure with metal windows.

GARDENS

The gardens are divided into six unequally-sized compartments, three either side of the central path. They are more or less demarcated by overgrown plantings of trees and shrubs which are largely native species, many self-sown. They are described in an anti clockwise direction from north east to south east.

From the car park, and immediately to the north of the northern path, the first compartment comprises a rectangular area of lawn bounded to the east by a mixed herbaceous border backing onto a concrete building. To the north a

battered berberis hedge screens the northern boundary path and behind this is an overgrown mixed shrub hedge which forms the boundary of the site. .

The second compartment is the most formal area in the garden, with three grass terraces bisected by a brick path with 2 short flights of steps. In the centre of the lowest terrace the path runs through a circular bed divided into six sections by small box hedges with symmetrically-arranged bush roses. At the south-eastern corner of this part of the garden are two large limes which from their girth and height appear to be at least a hundred years old and are likely to be survivors of a line of trees running the full width of the current gardens shown in the 1st edition OS map of 1862-75

The third, north-western compartment is heavily planted with trees, including a particularly fine *Ginkgo biloba* and large *Cornus mas*. There is a very overgrown rock garden approximately 5m across which surrounds a picturesque oval pool. This is presumably the rock garden built in 1924 although there is little trace of alpine planting.

The fourth, south-western corner of the garden is given over entirely to allotments.

The fifth, central, southern area comprises roughly equal areas of grass and trees and shrubs, mostly native species and is heavily overgrown with bramble; there are recent plantings of anemones and narcissi.

The sixth, area around the Heritage Centre to the north of the entrance gates on College Road, is the most intensively maintained part of the garden with herbaceous beds and specimen trees and shrubs. The slight irregularities in the lawn are the only evidence of Hextable House which stood on this area until its demolition in 1946. Around a brick built, large hut next to the Centre is an extensive wooden pergola planted with climbing shrubs probably over the past 20 years.

To the south of, and aligned on the 18C wrought iron, main entrance gates of Hextable Gardens, the lime avenue runs uphill in a south-easterly direction for 360m between College Road and New Barn Road in Swanley. It consists of some 60 lime trees. The avenue is 25m wide and the older trees, some 25 in total, are all at the Swanley end of the avenue. The Hextable end of the avenue has been replanted with some 35 lime trees over the past 20 years.

The avenue was probably first planted at the end of the C17 in association with the rebuilding of the house (Balls 1961) and the older trees appear to be of a great age. The Heritage Centre displays a section of a lime tree dating back to the beginning of the C18 (with various significant dates marked on it) but it is not clear if this section was taken from one of the trees in the avenue or one of the former line of trees marked on the 1st edition OS map.

REFERENCES

Books, Articles

Horace J. Balls, *The history of Swanley Village and Hextable* 1961

Horace J. Balls, Historical notes on Hextable, compiled 1960 revised 1963

Elsa Morrow, *A history of Swanley Horticultural College*. 1984

Audrey Rainer, Ed. *A short history of Hextable*. Nd, post 2008

Maps:

1st edition Ordnance Survey Map (1862-75)

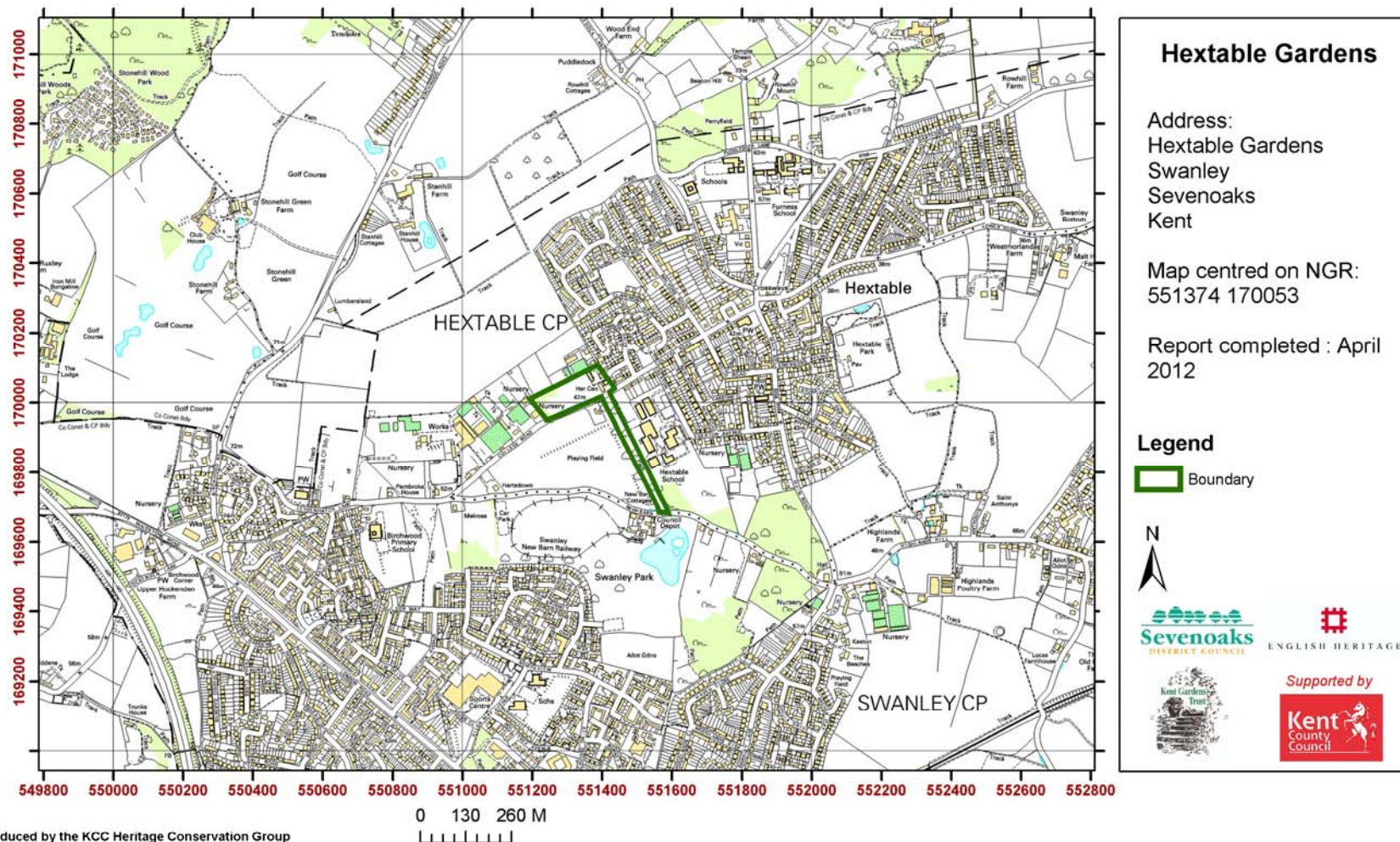
Google Earth 2010 aerial view of Hextable Gardens

Research by Paul Lewis

Virginia Hinze (editor)

Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens 2011 - 2013 review of Sevenoaks District

Fig. 1 Boundary map



Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens 2011 - 2013 review of Sevenoaks District

Fig. 2 Aerial photograph (2007)

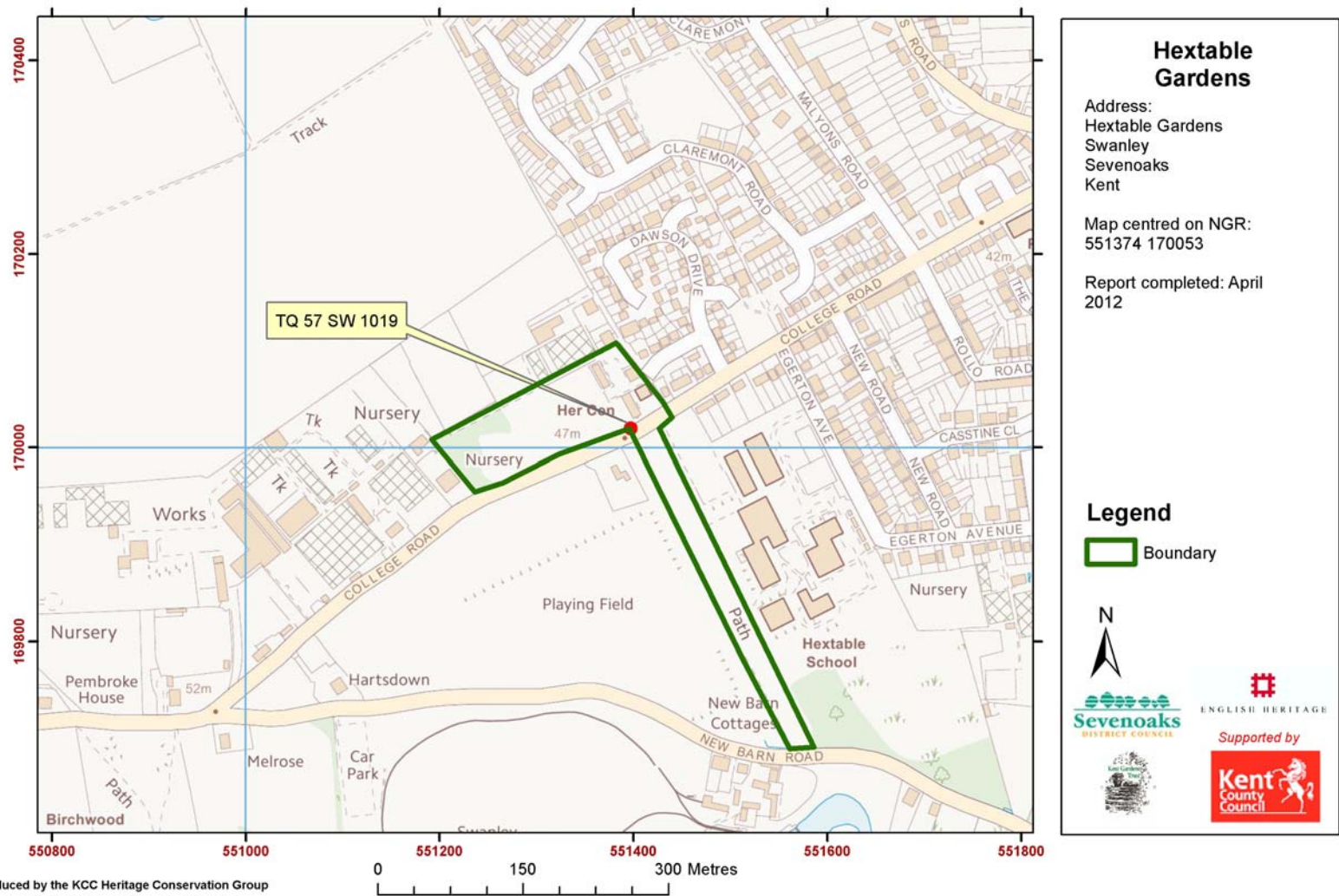


Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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 (C) Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. 100019238. 2007

Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens 2011 - 2013 review of Sevenoaks District

Fig. 3 Map of listed buildings at Hextable Gardens



Hextable Gardens

Address:
Hextable Gardens
Swanley
Sevenoaks
Kent

Map centred on NGR:
551374 170053

Report completed: April
2012

Legend

Boundary

N




Supported by




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 (C) Crown Copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. 100019238. 2007

Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens 2011 - 2013 review of Sevenoaks District

Fig. 4 Listed buildings at Hextable Gardens (from the Kent Historic Environment Record)

Kent Historic Environment Record Reference: TQ 57 SW 1019

The following text is from the original listed building designation:

SWANLEY

COLLEGE ROAD 1. 5280

Gate gate piers, wall and railings to Hextable House (part of North West Kent Teacher' Training Centre)

TQ 57 SW 1/217 II 2.

These C18 railings and entrance gates are all that remain of Hextable House which was demolished soon after the war. These consist of 2 square red brick piers, the left are now truncated to a height of about 6 ft, the right are about 8 ft high and having a moulded stone cornice. Stone band a few inches above ground level. Central stone step. Between these piers are wrought iron spear railings to a height of about 7 ft reinforced by intermediate spear railings about 18 ins in height and a central round-headed cast iron gate with elaborate scrolled decoration. (The whole is now covered in wisteria). The gate is flanked by piers with iron finials. To the right is a brick wall about 3 ft in height surmounted by iron spear railings. There is a round-headed gate and another square brick pier about 10 ft in height with stone cornice. Included for good C18 ironwork and for historical interest as the last remaining portion of Hextable House.

Listing NGR: TQ5145270060