

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Sevenoaks District



Otford Court, Sevenoaks



November 2011

Otford Court

Sevenoaks, Kent

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Kent History and Library Centre U2396E7

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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.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to Keith Crombie, Headmaster of St Michael's School, for allowing access to the school's archives and grounds, and to the Kemsing Heritage Centre to allow the use of their archives.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Age, rarity value and survival: the site possesses two main phases of garden layout, the 1880s and the end of the C19 (completed by 1904) which are of special interest. Significant surviving features from the earlier period include three levels of terraces and steps, drive routes, a walled kitchen garden and an extensive *Pulhamite* rockery by James Pulham III. From the later period field evidence survives under grass of circular walks on gravel paths through pleasure grounds which also contain surviving mature specimen ornamental trees.

Evidential Value: An extensive archive is held by the school and Kemsing Heritage Centre.

Historical Association: Barclay and George Field, brewers, were benefactors to Kemsing village during late C19 early C20. The site became St Michael's Home for boys in 1925 when it was purchased by Father Arthur Tooth.

Designed Landscapes: Evidence suggests that the rockery was designed and built by James Pulham III, the third generation of the nationally-known firm of Pulham. Pulhamite, a patented anthropic rock 'material' was invented by James Pulham (1820-98) of the firm James Pulham and Son, though from the 1870s the firm preferred to construct rockwork with natural stone.

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT
SEVENOAKS
OTFORD PARISH

OTFORD PARK

Landranger sheet 88
TQ 5430 5965

SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST

A school occupying a former residential sporting estate laid out in the late C19 with informal pleasure grounds, gardens and parkland surrounded by woodland. The gardens contain a Pulhamite rockery which evidence suggests was built by James Pulham III.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Otford Court, known as Beechy Lees until about 1924, was built in the early 1880s for Barclay Field, a wealthy brewer and hop merchant. Barclay Field had purchased land from Earl Amherst in 1875, 1877, 1881 and 1887 so that he owned approximately 605ha (1500 acres) in the parishes of Shoreham, Otford and Kemsing to the north-east of Sevenoaks. The house was designed by Thomas Roger Smith FRIBA, Professor of Architecture at University College London in the gothic style together with stables, walled garden and entrance lodge. Smith wrote books on Greek, Renaissance and Gothic Architecture and had designed a similar house for Barclay's brother George Hanbury Field in 1866 at Hitcham in Buckinghamshire. Barclay and George were business partners, taking over a brewery in 1863 known as Field & Co which was to become the Cannon Brewery Co in 1876 (The Brewery industry: A Guide to Historical Records, Lesley Richmond and Alison Turton (1990 LMA Library reference 60.43 RIC).

The estate was used for country pursuits including shooting, with Barclay involved in the breeding of gundogs (Personal papers of V W Bowden Kemsing Heritage Centre). In 1896 the gardens were limited to an area immediately in front of the south-east face of the house and included a walkway to a fountain approximately 100m north-east of the property (OS 2nd edition 1896). The gardens were situated within an area of 3.5ha, delineated by park fencing, which was to become the pleasure grounds. By 1904 the gardens and pleasure grounds included terraces, circular walks, an avenue to the fountain and others trees (OS 3rd edition 1909) "laid out under the supervision of a well known Landscape Gardener" (Sale particulars 1904); no evidence has been found to identify this designer.

Barclay was unmarried and on his death at Beechy Lees in 1892 the estate passed to his older brother George who lived at the family estate of Ashurst Park near Tunbridge Wells. Although the house was often unoccupied (*Kelly's Directory* 1895, 1897 and 1899), George used Beechy Lees as his second home, having his first son Reginald George, from his second marriage, baptised

in Kemsing church in 1895. George became the people's churchwarden in 1899 but died in 1901 and Cuthbert, his son from his first marriage, inherited the estate. It is presumed that Cuthbert decided to sell, as a sales catalogue was produced in 1904 to accompany the auction of the 605ha (1500 acres) estate comprising of a "residential sporting estate known as Beechy Lees" of 385ha (950 acres) and other farms and associated buildings. A condition of the sale was that in the event of the Beechy Lees estate not being sold the remaining farms and other buildings would be withdrawn. There is no record that the house or estate was sold at that auction. The house remained unoccupied (*Kelly's Directories* 1903 to 1909) but the estate continued to be used for fox hunting (*The Times* 1905 and 1906). In 1911 James Murray Tulloch JP leased Beechy Lees estate until his death in 1916 (*The Story of Kemsing in Kent* by V E Bowden).

Beechy Lees remained in the ownership of Cuthbert Field until his death in 1917, having stated in his will that Charles George Bullock Marsham and Lionel Henry Hanbury, executors and trustees, were to convert the estate into money, but that they could delay the sale (Personal papers of V E Bowden, Kemsing Heritage Centre). In order to pay death duties the estate, now 690ha (1710 acres), was put up for sale by auction on 10 September 1919 in fifty lots, with several smaller lots adjacent to roads surrounding the estate being advertised as building plots (Sale Particulars). The house and 145h (360 acres) remained unsold at the auction but were finally bought by George F Dalton in c1922 but the property continued to be unoccupied (*Kelly's Directory* 1922-24). Various subsequent sales reduced the estate to 75h (190 acres) including the house which had been renamed Otford Court (*The Times*). In June 1924 *The Times* announced "Otford Court for sale with 35 acres (14ha) for £7000 or let at £600 per year". Otford Court and 36ha (90 acres) of parkland and woods were finally sold to Father Arthur Tooth in February 1925 using his own personal wealth (*St Michael's School, Otford*, Sally Maria Jones).

Father Tooth had founded St Michael's Home for Boys and the Community of Sisters of the Holy Paraclete in 1872 in Hatcham, New Cross. The orphanage and convent moved to Croydon in 1878 but compulsory purchase by Croydon Council forced Father Tooth to find a new home. The original intention was to use the stable block as classrooms and the main house as living quarters for the thirty boys and rooms for the two Sisters, Father Tooth and other staff. It was Father Tooth's wish that the Sisters would continue to run St Michael's Home after his death and in his will he bequeathed all his personal wealth to the two Sisters. Following his death in 1931 a body of trustees was set up to run Otford Court and St Michael's Home and the Sisters duly had wills drawn up leaving their legacies to the newly-created St Michael's Trust Association.

In 1938 the school was put up for sale being described in *The Times* as "admirable for school, hotel, nursing home" but it remained unsold and continued in the ownership of the trust. The legacies were used to finance the running of the school together with fund raising and donations to finance a new hall in the 1960s. In order to provide financial security for the school, a planning application was made in 1970 to sell 3ha of scrubland (former parkland) for

housing alongside the Pilgrims Way. The application was refused on appeal in 1971.

The stable block was converted into a pre-prep school which opened in 1982. Conversion of derelict greenhouses in the walled garden in 1991 provided additional pre-prep classrooms. The grounds remained unaltered from 1925, when the house was purchased, until 1984 when the headmaster Revd Paul Cox organised for large areas of the grounds to be opened up by cutting back the scrubland followed with frequent mowing (Jones). About 1000 trees were destroyed during the Great Storm in 1987. During the headship of Simon Cummins in the 1990s approximately 5ha of former parkland were re-landscaped together with additional buildings built to the north-east of the original house to provide improved sporting and teaching facilities for an increasing school roll. Further building work was carried out in 2002-3 to provide new laboratories and additional classrooms. The school continues to be administered by the St Michael's Trust Association.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM and SETTING

Otford Court lies 1.5km east of the village of Otford and 1.5km north-west of Kemsing village. The town of Sevenoaks lies 4.5km to the south-west. The c 32ha (78 acres) site lies between the Pilgrims Way, a narrow lane, which forms the southern boundary and Rowdow Lane which borders the western limit of the site. It is bordered to the north and east by Rowdow Wood, a proportion of which lies within the site. The south-east corner abuts a small residential estate built in the early C20 on land formerly part of the Beechy Lees estate. A similar residential estate bounds the site in the south-west corner.

Large areas of scrubby shrubbery and woodland have grown up adjacent to the southern boundary with the Pilgrims Way. The original house and the many school building extensions are set into the south facing slopes of the North Downs and enjoy extensive views to the southeast over playing fields laid out on a series of terraces descending towards the village of Kemsing. The view is framed by Rowdow woods to the east and specimen trees to the south planted in the late C19 among the rolling foothills of the North Downs.

ENTRANCES and APPROACHES

The entrance to the school is located on Rowdow Lane, approximately 250m north from its junction with the Pilgrim's Way. This entrance and drive, now the sole entrance to the house and main school buildings, was built in 1991 to accommodate the increase in traffic generated by the rising school roll. The drive runs eastwards for approximately 200m to join with the original drive, constructed with the house in the 1880s, about 100m from the house, where it turns to the north-west. Car parking has been constructed along either side of this section of the drive for about 50m. The main drive to the house passes through the western end of the former pleasure grounds before entering the walled courtyard in front of the main entrance to the house on the south-west

elevation. This drive replaces a service access, also dating from the 1880s, from Rowdow Lane which led to the rear of the stable block and to the head gardener's cottage. This cottage, brick built with a tiled roof, is now (2011) in separate private ownership with its own access from Rowdow Lane

The current main entrance replaced the main lodged entrance to the estate which was located at the junction of the Pilgrims Way with Rowdow Lane. The lodge is a two storey, brick built structure with a tiled roof. Part of the south and east elevations at the first floor are timber framed with render infill to match the main house. This building is now (2011) in separate, private ownership. The lodge and the surrounding 2ha of parkland were sold for housing development in the early C20 but this entrance and drive remained as the principal access to the school until 1991. The original drive is approximately 600m long, rising in a north easterly direction with the general ground to the house but it is now gated 250m from the lodge entrance at the boundary between the school grounds and the early C20 housing.

A second entrance, now overgrown and disused, but also constructed when the house was built in the 1880s, is located approximately 550m along the Pilgrims Way east of the original main entrance. The drive from this entrance, some 300m long, originally provided an access from the east, along the Pilgrims Way, crossing the grounds in a north-westerly direction to join with the main drive near the stables. The drive is still used as an access route around the estate except for the first 50m near the entrance which is now also overgrown.

Large areas of scrubby shrubbery and woodland have grown up alongside the first 250m of the two original entrance drives.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Oxford Court (formerly known as Beechy Lees) was built in the early 1880s as a large three storey house of red brick with terracotta embellishments, stained glass windows, tiled roof and a tower with a cupola. The house contains oak panelling and carving to many of its rooms. The house is approached through a courtyard on the south-west face which leads to the main entrance, which now serves as the main entrance to the school. Low walls surround the courtyard constructed with brickwork and terracotta features to match the house exterior. The walls enclosing the courtyard have been partly demolished and the original entrance gates are absent (Sale Particulars). Sections of the second floor south-east elevation are tile hung, replacing the original timbered frame with rendered infill. Attached to the eastern end of the original property are the various classrooms, laboratories, hall and swimming pool which have been built in the last thirty years.

Two hundred and fifty metres to the south-west of the house is the former stable block which is now used as the pre-prep school. The two storey building is built in a similar style to the main house and is arranged around three sides of a courtyard with entrance gates on the south side. Additional temporary buildings have been arranged around the stable block to provide extra classes (Planning permission was granted in October 2010 to replace the temporary buildings with

a new pre-prep school and convert the stable block into the Headmasters house).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

Three grass terraces, separated by sloping grass banks about 2m high, extend along the entire south-east elevation of the house. The uppermost terrace, 9m wide, includes a 2m wide tarmac path connecting a series of bench seats. The central terrace is 2m wide whereas the lowermost terrace, at 3.5m width, provides a fire access path to the newer school buildings and has been reinforced with concrete blocks. These terraces are reached from the south-western end of the house by stone steps which lead down from an opening in the low wall surrounding the entrance courtyard. The terraces and steps are two of the significant surviving features of the gardens and pleasure grounds, to the south-east of the house, which were laid out in two phases in the late C19. These terraces were created from two parallel banks alongside the south-east face of the house, formed during the house construction (OS 2nd Edition 1896 and map with Sale Particulars 1904).

North-east of the house, additional school buildings and hard courts have been constructed over the 1904 gravel walk, which ran 100m from the north-east corner of the house north-eastwards, and the lily pond with a fountain which was damaged by a WW2 bomb. By 1904 the south-east face of the house opened onto a garden and pleasure grounds which had been extended to include the surviving terraces with grass banks and circular walks on gravel paths through conifers and flowering shrubs over an area of 4ha (8.5 acres) (Sale particulars 1904 and 1919). The routes of the various paths around the pleasure grounds are still visible although the whole area is now grassed.

Approximately 65m south-west of the house, where the drive enters the former pleasure grounds on its way to the house, stands a white painted metal gate, (3m wide by 1.5m high) hung on square white metal posts. Sections of the park fencing which are shown on the earliest photos of the site enclosing the pleasure grounds and surrounding the parkland have survived (Sale Particulars 1904).

A rockery extends from the entrance gate to the pleasure grounds for 120m north-eastwards, initially alongside the drive and thence beside the access drive to the rear of the house where it is constructed on ground that slopes steeply down to the north-west elevation of the house. Field evidence suggests that the rockery is Pulhamite and was built by James Pulham III in the 1880s (Festing 1997 *Garden History* 25 (2) 230-7). Stone steps up from the edge of the drive are still visible at the western end from which a walkway leads through the rockery which is now (2011) completely covered by dense undergrowth and trees.

PARKLAND

Some 100m south of the house, beyond the terraces and former pleasure grounds, an area of sports pitches, laid out in the 1990s in former parkland, is

surrounded by the remaining parkland planted with mature specimen trees surviving from the late C19 layout and more recent intermediate growth and scrubby shrubbery. The OS map 2nd edition (1896) shows the trees (including horse chestnut, copper beech and firs) planted singularly and in groups to form clumps but significant numbers of these trees were lost during the great storm in 1987. The 2nd edition map shows these clumps surrounded by parkland fencing but most of the fencing has been removed except around the trees along the site's southern boundary with the Pilgrims Way. To the east of the sports pitches on the hillside is the area known as the Warren, 3ha of grassland and rabbit burrows with wild flowers including primroses, wild orchids and cowslips. It is shown on the OS 2nd edition (1896) as being part of the parkland and still has a sparse scatter of parkland trees but the topography of the land and recent intermediate tree growth prevent the Warren being visible from the house. Rowdow Wood lies on higher ground to the north of the Warren; this mixed wood was in existence prior to 1869 (OS 1st edition). The woods extend around to the north of the house with about half their 20ha lying within the estate.

KITCHEN GARDEN

Some 300m south-east of the house, adjacent to former stables, is the walled, former kitchen garden which is now used as a grassed play area for the nursery and pre-prep schools. The 3m high brick walls surround an area approximately 60m square, which slopes to the south south-east. The kitchen garden was constructed in the early 1880s at the same time as the house and stables. Glasshouses existed along the north wall until at least 1936 (OS 4th Edition) but became derelict and were replaced by classrooms in the 1990s (Planning permission was granted in October 2010 for the building of a new pre-prep school adjacent to the south wall of the kitchen garden retaining the walled garden as a play area. Construction is due to commence September 2011). A circular, railed pond, now (2011) infilled, forms a central feature with four old apple trees and the remains of a fig tree on the east wall being the only features which have survived from the 1880s layout. Most of the original paths around the kitchen garden are still visible as minor variations in the ground level. The foundations of cold frames which formed part of a vegetable garden up to 1936 (Sale particulars and OS 4th Edition), are still visible outside the walled garden against the southern wall. Grassed landscaping around the main entrance drive from Rowdow lane in 1991 has replaced an area shown as garden in the 1919 sale particulars.

REFERENCES

Books and articles

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Garden History 25 (2) (1997) Notes: James Pulham 3 pp 230-7
V E Bowden, *The Story of Kemsing in Kent* (1994), various pages
L Richmond, A Turton, *The Brewery Industry, a guide to historical records* (1990)
M Parkin, *Kemsing Remembered- The Memories of Village People Part One* (1990), pp 3-8

Maps

OS 25" to 1mile: 1st edition 1869 (Sheet 29/10)
OS 25" to 1mile: 2nd edition 1896 (Sheet 29/10)
OS 25" to 1mile: 3rd edition 1909 (Sheet 29/10)
OS 25" to 1mile: 4th edition 1936 (Sheet 29/10)

Illustrations

Garden photographs (black and white) 1930s. Private collection
Garden photographs 1980s. Private collection
Aerial photograph of walled garden pre1980. Private collection
Aerial photograph (2003) KCC

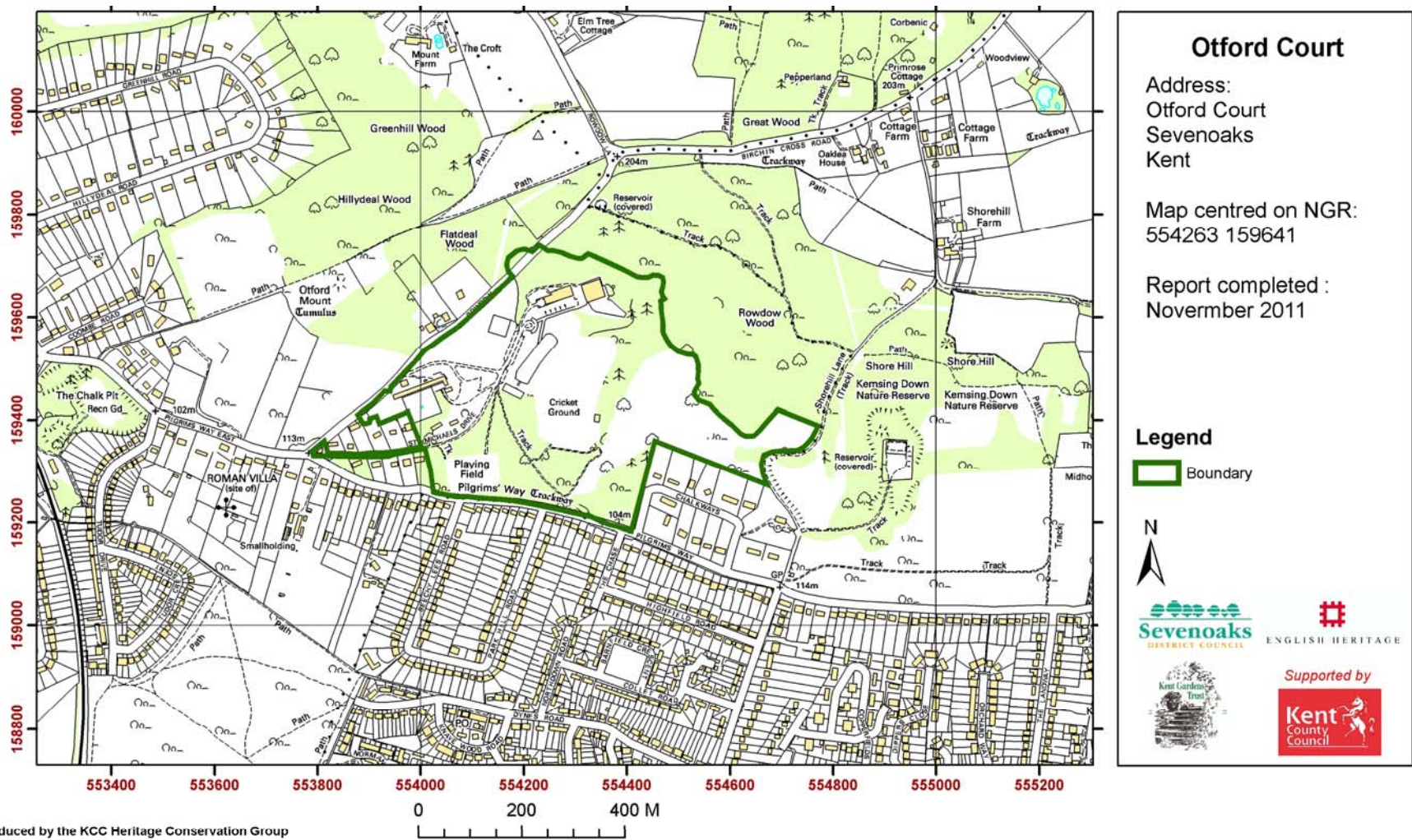
Archival items

Kelly's Directory 1882-1934
Beechy Lees Estate Sale Particulars with estate map 1904. Kent History and Library Centre ref U1287 E 67
Beechy Lees Estate Sale Particulars with estate map 1919. Kent History and Library Centre ref U2396 E 7
Kent Compendium entry 1996
Parks and Gardens UK entry
V E Bowden personal papers, Kemsing Heritage Centre

Research by Mike O'Brien**Virginia Hinze (editor)**

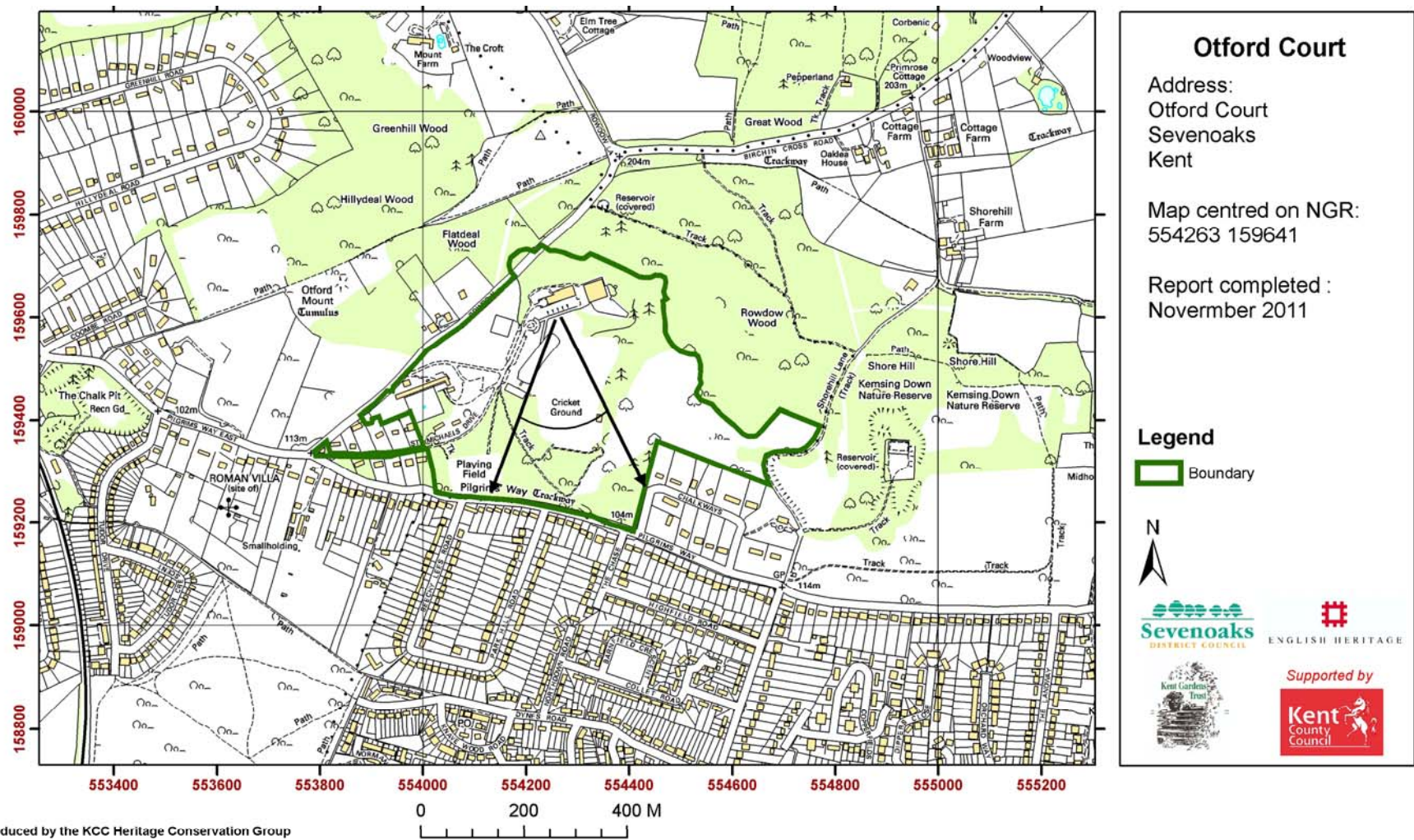
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Fig. 1 Boundary map



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Fig. 2 Key views map

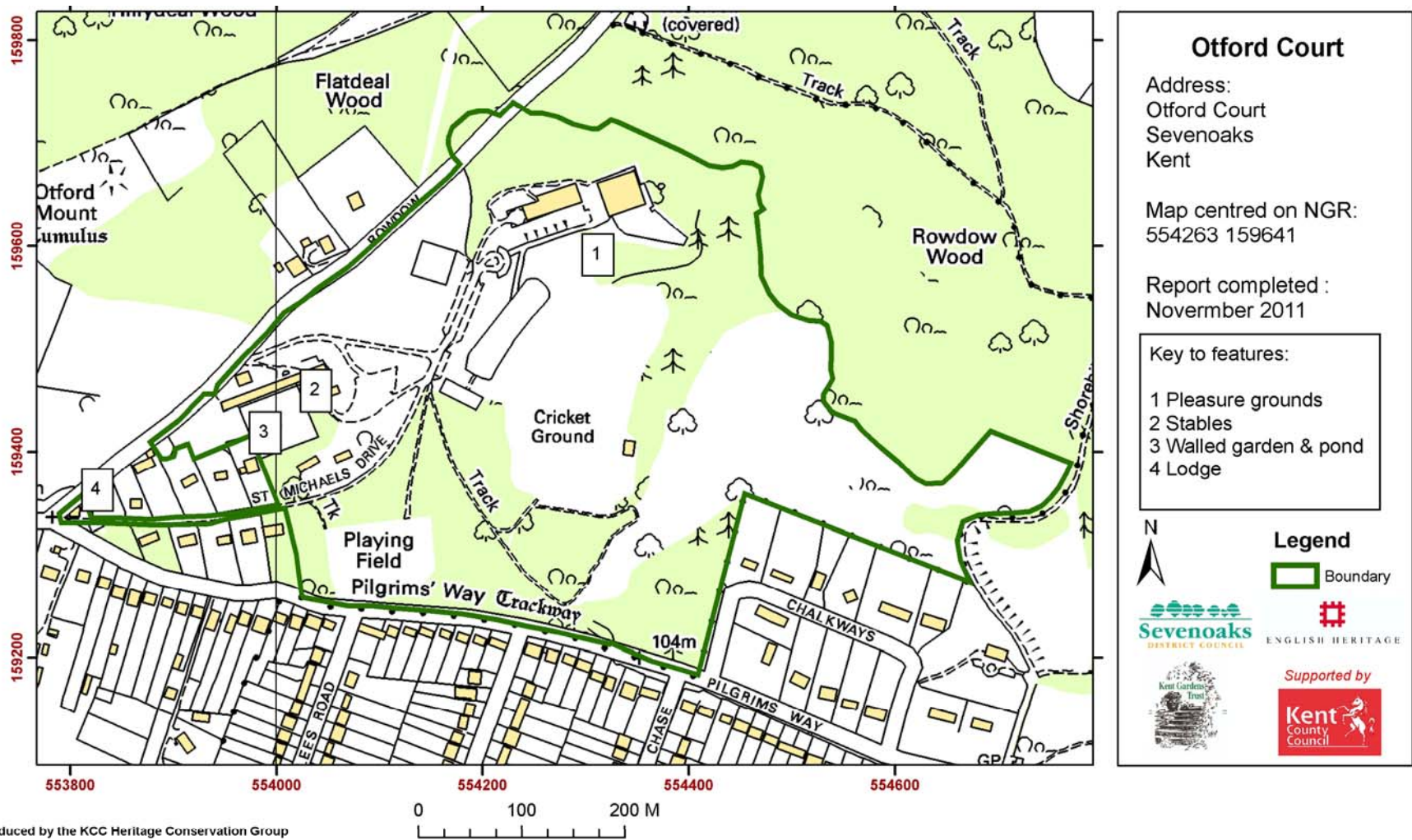


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Fig. 3 Key features map



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Fig. 4 Aerial photograph (2008)

