

# The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Sevenoaks District



## Stonepitts Manor, Seal



December 2011



# Stonepitts Manor

Seal, Kent

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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 Council 2011 - 2013** and supported by English Heritage, Kent County Council and The Kent Gardens Trust. This site is one of many 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 Garden Trust with support and training from Virginia Hinze

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.

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[www.kent.gov.uk](http://www.kent.gov.uk)

Kent Gardens Trust  
[www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk](http://www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the owners of Stonepitts Manor for giving access to the garden, showing and allowing us to copy their private research papers.

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

**Rarity:** the garden retains a significant built feature - a set of terraces – designed in 1925 by the internationally-known designer, plantswoman and writer Gertrude Jekyll

**Aesthetic Value:** The garden shows Jekyll's imaginative use of the sloping site set in open countryside, combined with a series of compartments surrounding the house, illustrate typical elements of her style nationally.

**Group Value:** Stonepitts Manor is one of two gardens within the same parish designed by Gertrude Jekyll. It was commissioned by Lady Rhondda who previously lived at Chart Cottage where Jekyll's design had been commissioned and implemented by Bernard Blunt in 1911.

**Evidential value:** Site plans for several areas of the garden by Gertrude Jekyll are kept at Berkeley College, University of California. It is also featured in Fenja Gunn's book 'The Lost Gardens of Gertrude Jekyll' 1991 which, with a number of other books, represents the continued high level of significance of Jekyll's place in garden history

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

KENT

STONEPITTS MANOR

SEAL  
SEVENOAKS  
TQ 569570

## **SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST**

A garden containing, on its southern slopes, a set of terraces designed by Gertrude Jekyll in 1925 and for which her drawings survive, laid out on a site of C16 origin.

## **CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

Stonepitts is situated in Seal Chart, in the parish of St Lawrence. Prior to this being established in 1867, Seal Chart was part of the parish of Seal, which in turn was originally in the combined manor of Kemsing and Seal. For many years most of the land was included in the St Clere estate, centred in Kemsing. The Domesday Book records that Geoffrey of Rots controlled this manor with part of the 840 acres also under the jurisdiction of Richard of Tonbridge.

The estate of Stonepitts came into the possession of the Theobald family during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Parts of the house possibly date from the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the name Stanpette appears in a deed of 1250. The Piers family of Westfield in Sussex then acquired the property by marriage in the mid 1600s. After the death of Sir George Piers in 1720 the estate was sold to Richard Goodhugh whose female heir married Richard Round. (*Hasted*)

In the Tithe apportionments of August 1840 the owners were shown to be the executors of Richard Round – William Cronk and James Phillips, whilst the property was occupied by George Cornell who had married a Rimmelian Round. By 1851, according to a Tithe amendment, ownership had been acquired by John Thornton Rogers of Kemsing.

The Cornell family is recorded as occupying the house in the census records from 1841 until 1871 when it was the centre of a substantial farm (c 92h). Rimmelian died in 1876 ending the long association with the Round family.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century extensive farm buildings (now mostly gone) housed farm workers. The east portion of the house was once a self contained dwelling (sales particulars 1919), which would explain the census entry for 1881 when occupation was by a farm bailiff and a school at the same time. By 1891 the house was occupied by the considerable household of a Michael Pass, the retired head of a lime burning business. By 1901 the property had once again become the centre of a farm with Philip Symons and his family in residence and

he was still there in 1920 with his wife Lady Edith Auckland. In that year the house name had changed slightly to Stone Pitts Grange in the electoral register. Philip died in 1926 and Edith in London in 1931 (*Census Records & Electoral Registers*).

By 1919 the farm and land (now c55h) had become part of the Kemsing estate and was owned by Lt-Col J M Rogers DSO. In that year the whole estate was put on the market with Stonepitts as Lot 19 (*Sales Particulars*).

In 1925 Helen Archdale and Lady Rhondda moved from nearby Chart Cottage (qv) to Stone Pitt Grange, as the property was then known. In collaboration with the architect G L Kennedy extensive alterations were carried out to the house including the demolition of parts of the south elevation. Because they had been so impressed with the garden at their former home, Archdale and Rhondda approached Gertrude Jekyll to design a garden for Stonepitts, which she agreed to in June 1925. Twelve of her detailed designs for the south garden survive together with an outline drawing for a rose garden (*Berkeley Catalogue*).

Helen Archdale corresponded with Jekyll sending a survey of the garden and fifteen pages of very detailed, descriptive notes. These covered each section of the garden giving suggestions on the elements they hoped to change or seek advice on. On several occasions she invited Jekyll to come to the garden and offered to collect her but it never happened. Rhondda and Archdale intimated that the work wouldn't be carried out at once but be implemented over a number of years. There were delays because of the work being carried out in the house and the uncertainty of how it would affect the garden. Letters were still being exchanged in August 1927 and by 1935 Helen Archdale and Lady Rhondda had moved out.

Apart from constructing the south garden's terraces to Gertrude Jekyll's plans, there is no surviving evidence that her clients implemented Jekyll's detailed layouts or planting proposals.

In 1935 Sheila and Mervyn Wingfield were living at Stone Pitts, creating yet another version of the name.

During the Second World War the house was used by the London Choir School. After the war the house was bought by a Mr and Mrs Dudley A Comonte who were there until c1975 when the Reed family then purchased it. The property was at that point advertised with just 4h (10 acres) (*Sales particulars*). The Reeds relocated to one of the nearby cottages when a Mr and Mrs H V A Ellingham bought the property in 1994.

The Ellinghams began the work of enhancing several areas of the garden and restoring Jekyll's surviving terracing in the south garden (as shown on her drawings of 1925).

The property remains in private ownership.



## SITE DESCRIPTION

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

Stonepitts Manor is located on the west side of Watery Lane, 2 km north of the hamlet of Seal Chart, which is 1.5km east of Seal Village. Seal Village lies on the north side of the A25 to Sevenoaks (3km to the south west).

The site lies approximately 110m above sea level within the northern extremity of the Weald of Kent (designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), in a valley bottom west of Oldbury Hill, on which there is a vast Iron Age hill fort. Some sizeable areas of ancient woodland survive to the south with the north mostly given over to arable farming on undulating, stony countryside, this character being reflected in the name Stonepitts.

The site is on a steep north-facing slope and occupies an area just over 3 ha (8 acres). It is bordered to the north, south and west by agricultural land and to the east by Watery Lane.

### ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The access to the site is on the west side of Watery Lane onto a gravel parking area north east of the main complex of buildings comprising the Manor. In a letter to Gertrude Jekyll in 1925, Lady Rhondda's surveyor, Alfred Savill, informs her that his client intended to extend this drive westwards approaching the northern (front) elevation of the house through already existing decorative iron gates which were hung on brick stack pillars, topped with stone ball finials. From here the drive was to continue west to join the lane on the boundary. The gates and piers still survive, however no evidence of that drive can be found and almost certainly this plan was never implemented (*Letter to Jekyll from Alfred Savill*). From the present access a wooden farm gate opens into a brick paved courtyard enclosed by the eastern elevation of the house and a stable block.

### PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Stonepitts Manor House is a Grade II\* listed house of Elizabethan appearance although there have been so many alterations that the date is uncertain. Inside however, remains of an older house of possibly 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century survive. The main entrance, through a carved stone doorway, is on the north elevation in one of the two coupled projecting gables. The house has a stone plinth, Tudor brickwork and tile roof. A number of the large Elizabethan style windows are later additions although some of the original Tudor carved brick mouldings above them survive. The south elevation has been restored with brick and tile hanging. There are small areas of stonework found mostly in the walls of the side elevations (*LB description*).

The house once formed the centre of a complex with farm buildings. Of these a stable block and two oast houses survive. In addition, a cottage and a lodge house, now in separate private ownership, stand in adjacent fields. The alterations undertaken by Lady Rhondda significantly reduced the size of the

house by her demolition of the southern central wing completely and shortening the southeastern wing.

## GARDENS

The garden is arranged in a series of compartments surrounding the house on three sides - north, south and west. The 1840 Tithe map shows a garden of informal, curved paths cut into meadow. By the first edition Ordnance Survey map (1862-75) paths laid in straight lines radiated from the west of the house with an area of orchard to the north (front) of the house, in the eastern corner. Subsequent OS maps show no detail of the garden layout. However, Helen Archdale's letters to Gertrude Jekyll in 1925 describe it in great detail. The ground closely surrounding the house had been covered with farm buildings that at that time had been pulled down and replaced with poorly maintained lawns, cobbled paths and old neglected shrubs and trees.

To the north, adjacent to the house, is a York stone terrace bordering an area of mown grass with views northwards over a wide valley. The grass is bounded by shrubs and trees and enclosed by a low stone wall on the north, in which is set a pair of iron gates hung on pillars. A small orchard is recorded in the northeast section of the grass on the first edition of the 25" Ordnance Survey map (1862-75). The eastern boundary is formed by a brick wall (3m high) and the west by an ornamental box hedge (1m high). Also shown, in the northwest corner, is a mature tree identified as a mature silver lime tree, *Tilia tomentosa*, (Patrick Roper Associates). Further north of the low stone wall the ground slopes down to a field where horses, llamas and chickens are kept.

The York stone paving continues from the terrace as a path around the western elevation close to the house and is bordered on its west side by a continuation of the box hedge. Bordering the pathway to the west, in the northwest corner of the site, is a square rose garden enclosed by a brick wall on two sides (north and west and c2.5m in height), by the box hedge to the east and a low (0.5m) evergreen hedge to the south. The roses are displayed in four symmetrical, rectangular beds set in lawn and centred on an *Araucaria araucana* (monkey puzzle tree). The brick wall was already built by the 1920s and mentioned in Archdale's notes to Jekyll and also described in the sales particulars of 1919. Jekyll only supplied an outline plan of this area which, from its present appearance, was not executed.

South of the rose garden is another lawn and herbaceous area for which Jekyll did not provide plans.

The south, rear garden rises steeply to the boundary of the property. This is the area covered by Jekyll's surviving plans.

The southwest sector contains a swimming pool enclosed on two sides by beech hedges (3m high) and surrounded by a stone patio with a seating area and flowerbeds. In this part of the garden Jekyll had planned a lawn with four rectangular beds. South of that was to be an oblong kitchen garden extending to the western boundary. Neither appears to have been implemented. Further

south along that western boundary Jekyll had drawn a greenhouse, potting sheds, compost bins etc. that are now south of the pool.

The remaining southwest corner of the garden on the south, rear side of the house, which Jekyll divided into four by straight paths, is now a kitchen garden. Four formal vegetable beds edged by low brick walls or box hedges radiate from a central ornamental pergola. An orchard of fruit trees planted in the early 1980s is sited on the southernmost boundary. This area is enclosed on the two boundaries by a 2m beech hedge. A stone wall (2m high) running south/north creates a division from the section of garden to the southeast.

Steps down from the pool area on its eastern side lead eastwards to a further York stone terrace running across the southern elevation of the house and feature a brick well head, covered by a canopy of mature wisteria. Two further wisterias of a similar age grow against the walls of the house on this south side. The terrace extends some 4m from the house before becoming a lawn enclosed by a decorative brick wall about 2m high. From this lower level of garden two sets of decorative iron gates hung on brick pillars, matching those on the northern boundary, lead out to two further sectors of garden; the eastern garden and, via the gates in the south wall, Gertrude Jekyll's terraced garden laid out on the steep slope.

Before a flight of eight stone steps in front of the gates a few shrubs stand on either side unlike the more formal approach planned by Jekyll. She drew matching borders of tubs on raised stone plinths. However, the configuration of the terrace was changed after she had made her initial drawings, when building works in 1926 demolished part of the house and created the present, much wider terrace area.

From the gates the ground climbs southwards via successive raised terraces each supported by stone walling. The first wall is backed by a mature crenellated yew hedge that protrudes above it. Specimen palms trees planted on either side of the path mark each new level but don't appear on Jekyll's plans. She suggested mass herbaceous planting in beds 3m deep.

The terraced pathway ascending southwards from the lowest level towards the southern boundary of the garden is cobbled and edged by narrow borders of mixed planting. Most of the terracing survives from the 1920s and is gradually being restored by the present owners. This hard landscaping is shown on Jekyll's plans and reflects the suggestion by Lady Rhondda and Helen Archdale in their correspondence with Jekyll. The herbaceous borders designed by Jekyll contained white plants with each terrace featuring a different colour accent beginning with yellow nearest the house. The next terrace had highlights of red and yellow with the furthest bed being a typical Jekyll design of blue and pink complemented by silver and grey foliage. Her drawings show wider beds than exist today.

The top level of terrace is laid out as mown grass featuring a curved stone seat framed by a 2m beech hedge. Jekyll had suggested a yew backdrop and this was still in place in 1991 (*Fenja Gunn*)

East of the terraced garden is a hard surfaced tennis court dating from at least 1919 as described in the sales particulars of that year. Beyond the court, along the southeast side of the garden and stretching from the southern boundary to the entrance courtyard of the house, is a more informal area of garden. On the eastern boundary a belt of mature trees and mixed hedging shelters the garden and provides privacy from Watery Lane. The ground slopes away eastwards from the tennis court level providing the setting for a rock garden overlooking a large pond. This pond, already in existence in 1839 (Tithe map), is fed by spring water. Jekyll suggested ways to consolidate the banks to make it more of a feature. By 1991 it had become choked with weeds but the present owners have cleared and enlarged it and installed a Japanese-inspired wooden bridge across it.

## REFERENCES

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OS 25" to 1mile: 1<sup>st</sup> edition surveyed 1862-1875

OS 25" to 1mile: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition surveyed 1897-1900

OS 25" to 1mile: 3<sup>rd</sup> edition surveyed 1907-1923

### Archival items

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Census Records – [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

1911 census [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

Messrs J Carter Jonas & Sons, London. Sale particulars The Kemsing Estate, 1919 – Kent History and Library Centre SP289

Letter to Gertrude Jekyll from Alfred Savill, Surveyors, 21 August 1925.

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The Lost Gardens of Gertrude Jekyll by Fenja Gunn. MacMillan. 1991. p98 -101

English Heritage Listing Entry, last amended 16 Jan 1975

The Times, 23 Jul 1975 - Sale particulars

Bernard Thorpe, Aug 1975, Sale particulars & advertisement in Country Life, Sep 1975

Hampton & Sons, Sep 1986, Sale particulars – Kent History and Library Centre

Kent Gardens Compendium entry 1996 with photographs from 1981/2

Parks and Gardens UK entry [www.parksandgardens.org.uk](http://www.parksandgardens.org.uk)

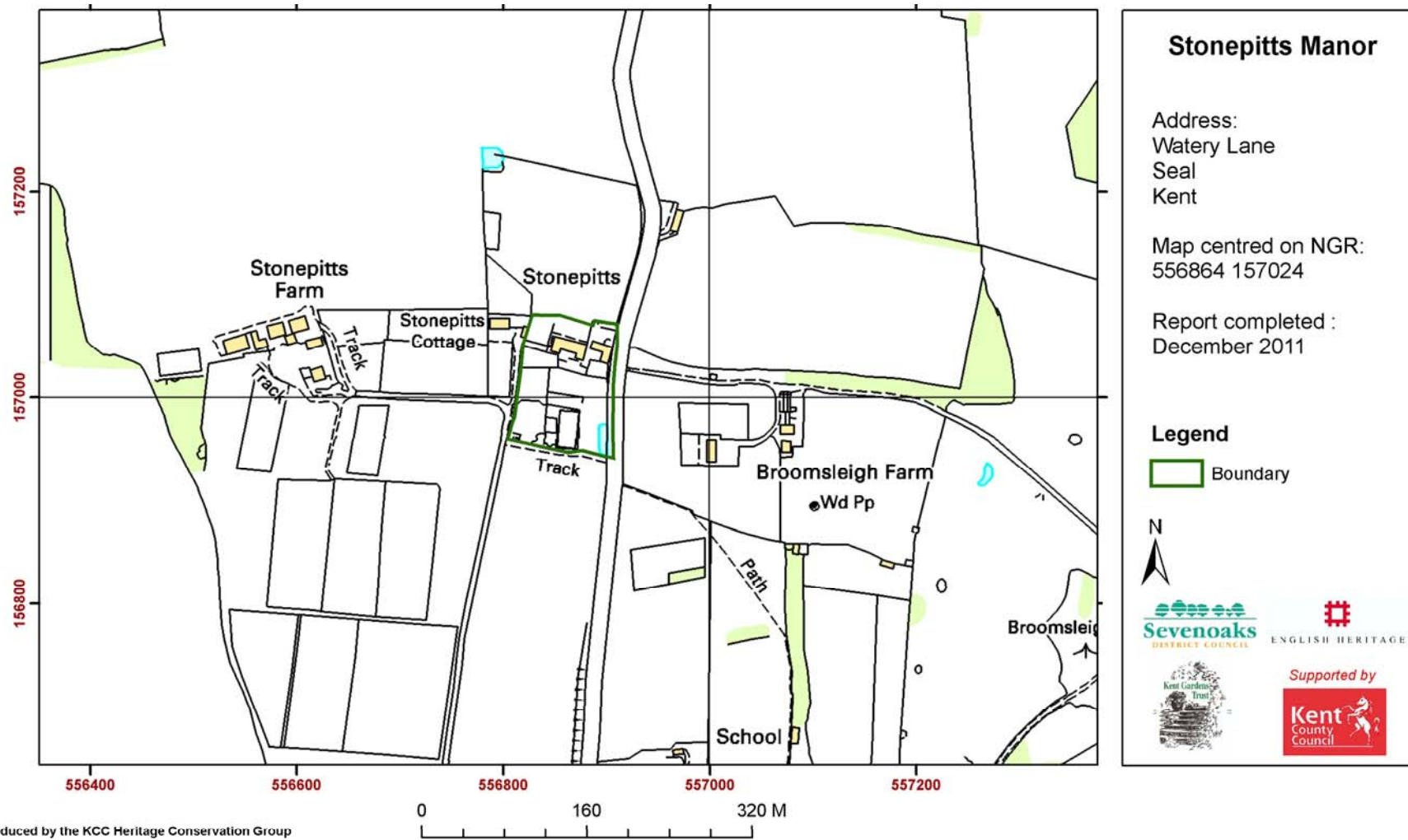
Information about *Tilia tomentosa* kindly supplied by Patrick Roper, Patrick Roper Associates.

## Research and Description by Jane Davidson

### Virginia Hinze (editor)

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## Fig. 1 Boundary map

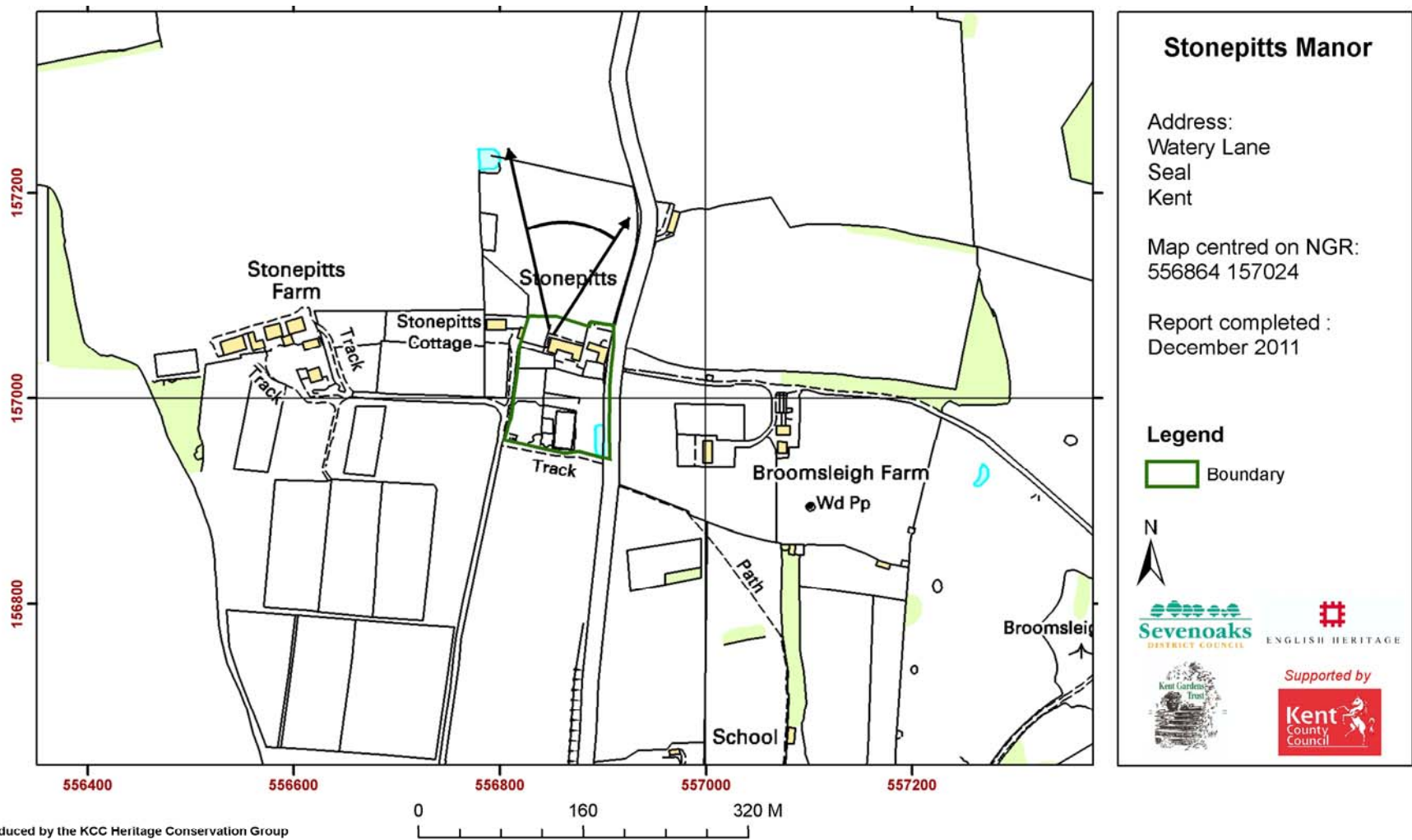


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## Fig. 2 Key views map

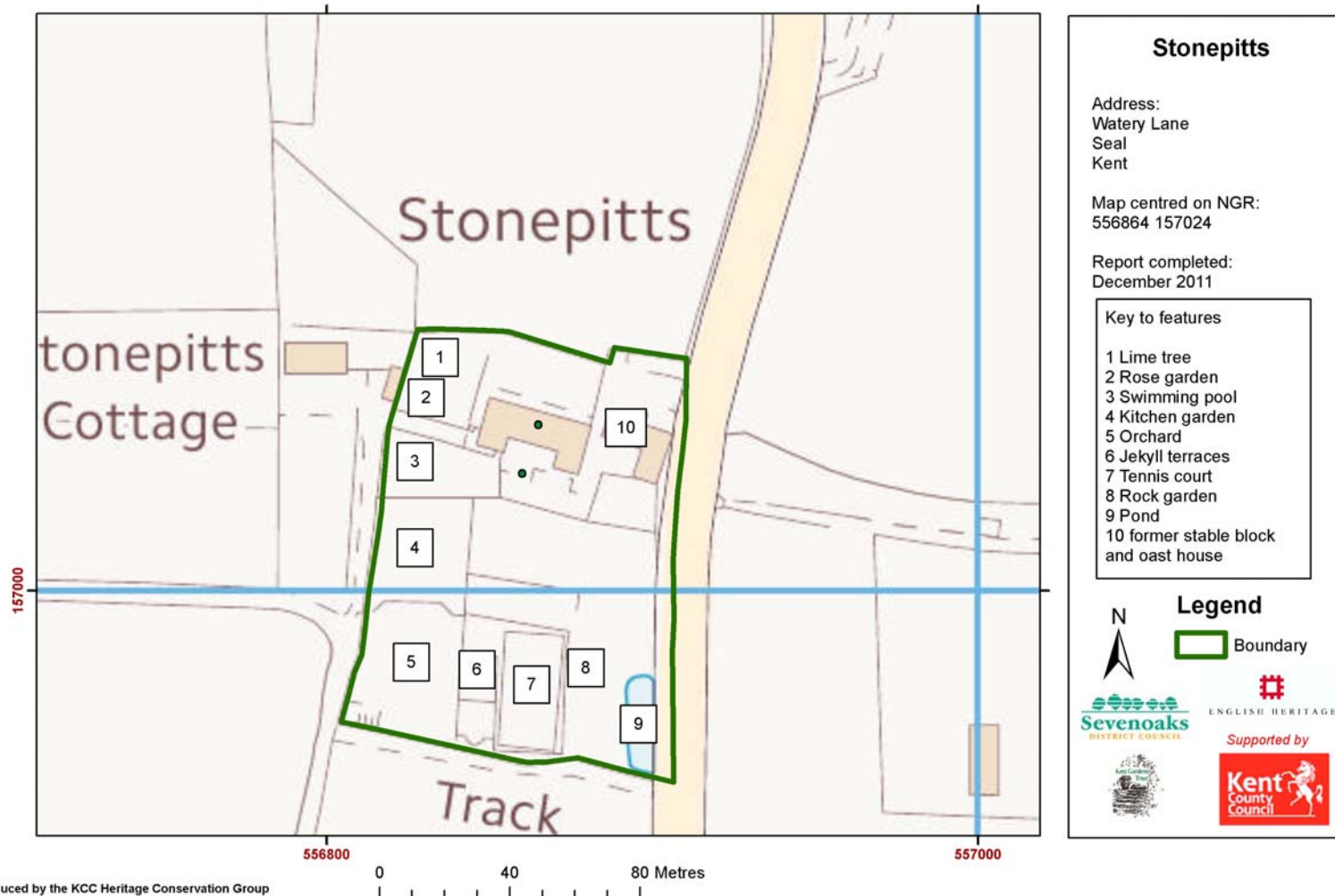


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Fig. 3 Key features map



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## Fig. 4 Aerial photograph (2008)

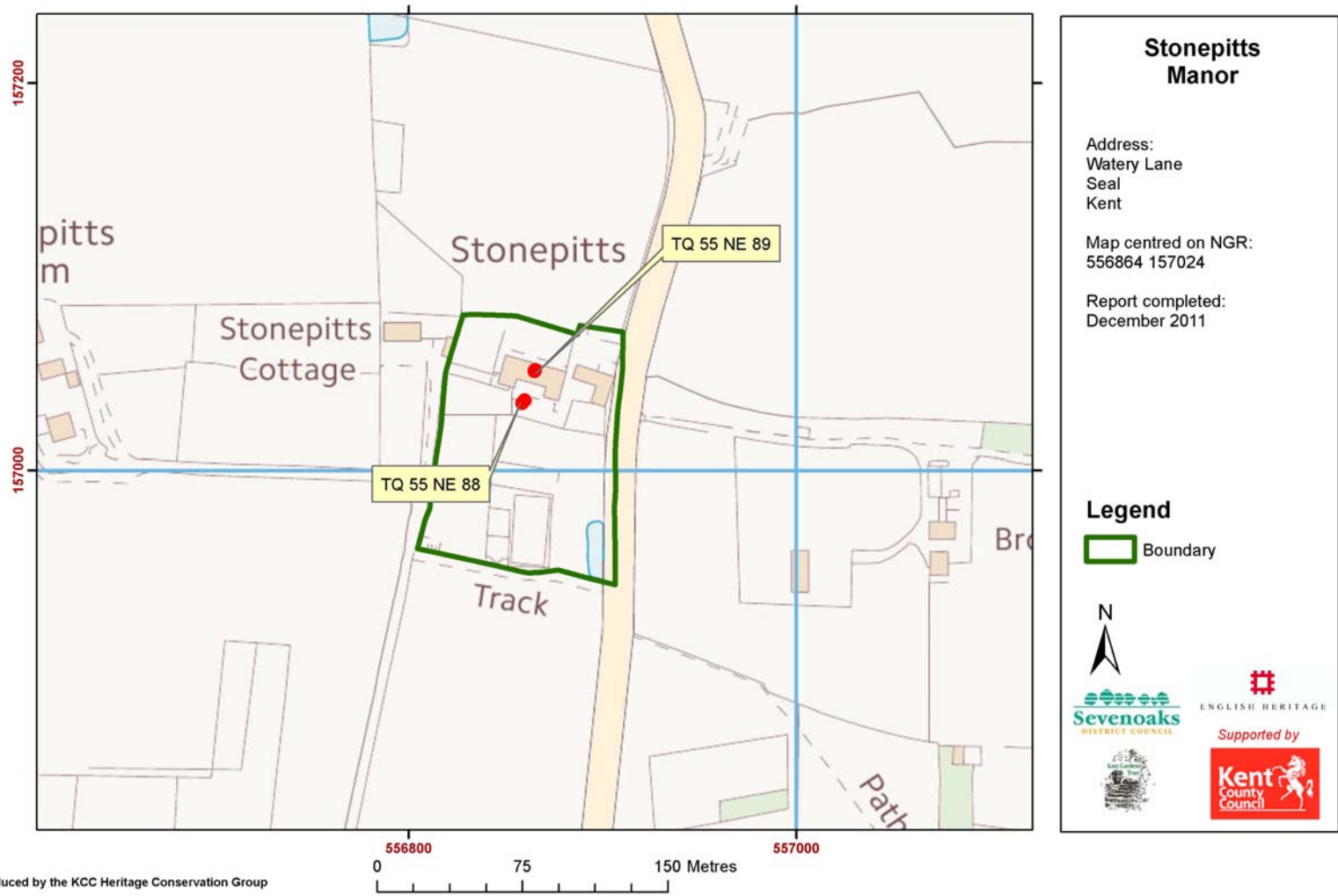


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## Fig. 5 Map of Listed Buildings



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**Fig. 6 Listed Buildings at Stonepitts Manor (from the Kent Historic Environment Record)**

**Kent Historic Environment Record Reference: TQ 55 NE 89**

1. 5280 SEAL STONEPITTS

Stonepitts Manor House, (Formerly listed as Stonepit)

TQ 55 NE 43/1058 10.9.54.

II\*

2. Large house of Elizabethan appearance on the outside although there is much restoration and large windows of Elizabethan style have been inserted. Inside there appear the remains of a much older house, possibly C14 or early C15. So much has been altered that certainty is difficult. North Elevation. Projecting coupled gables with main entrance and carved stone doorway. Stone plinth. Tudor brickwork. Tile roof. Casement windows with wooden mullions and transoms. Large mullioned window lighting the hall. Typical Elizabethan plan with large hall and staircase leading to gallery. The main entrance is placed to one side giving access to corridor under the gallery with the Hall to the right and kitchen and buttery to the left. Some original brick carved mouldings over windows. Side Elevations - Random stone with brick quoins. South Elevation - Mostly modern restoration. Brick and tile hung. Inside plenty of timber, much of it moved, including a beam with nailhead moulding and a good hall ceiling with heavily moulded beams and joists. Listing NGR: TQ5686457051

**Kent Historic Environment Record Reference: TQ 55 NE 88**

1. 5280 SEAL STONEPITTS

Garden Walls surrounding Stonepitts Manor House

TQ 55 NE 43/1060 10.9.54.

II

2. The house is surrounded by brick and stone walling enclosing formal gardens and terrace, with ornamental gates facing north and south, probably mainly C17.

Listing NGR: TQ5686457051