

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Tunbridge Wells Borough



Old Wilsley, Cranbrook



July 2009

Old Wilsley

Cranbrook, 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 Tunbridge Wells Borough 2009**, and should be read in conjunction with the full project report which can be found at <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/>. This site is one of many sites that have been researched, visited and written about across the Borough and as a consequence has been included in the revised list of Historic Parks and Gardens covered by the Borough Councils Planning Policies. The list is not conclusive and further gardens may be added over time as research continues or information comes to light

The review for Tunbridge Wells Borough was a pilot project to establish a partnership and methodology for the review of the compendium across Kent and provide an example of good practice across the County and the region. The research was largely carried out by volunteers of the Kent Gardens Trust with support and training from the project consultants Virginia Hinze and Dr Barbara Simms.

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.

Planning Services Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Town Hall Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN1 1RS 01892 526121 www.tunbridgewells.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	High Weald AONB Unit Woodland Enterprise Centre Hastings Road Flimwell East Sussex TN5 7PR 01580 879500 www.highweald.org/

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT
TUNBRIDGE WELLS
CRANBROOK
TQ 7796 3700

OLD WILSLEY

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST

A 1920s garden with yew-hedged compartments laid out on the south and east sides of a C15 hall house with C16, C17 and C19 additions.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Cranbrook was once situated in the ancient forest of Andresweald. It is not mentioned in the *Domesday Book* but in the late Saxon period a settlement appears to have grown up in a clearing where several routes converged to cross the Crane Brook (*Kent Historic Towns Survey*). Cranbrook's period of greatest prosperity began during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377) when continental clothiers, particularly from Flanders, settled in the Weald and by the middle of the C15 the town had become the centre of the weaving and cloth-making industry of Kent. As the industry grew, the master clothiers built cloth-halls and a number of these 'mostly old-fashioned timbered buildings' survive in Cranbrook, of which Old Wilsley is one (Hasted).

Old Wilsley (known variously as Wilsley, Wylsley or Willsley) was probably built in the C15 and although the origins and names of the early owners are unrecorded, Hussey suggests that it might have been built by the Courthopes, a family of local wealthy landowners (Hussey, 9 July 1948). Certainly it is known that in 1569 Richard Courthope's widow Anne married the Revd Thomas Lawes, whose will in 1594 left 'Wylsley in Cranbrook' to his daughter Katherine and her clothier husband William Sheafe. It remained in the Sheafe family until the mid-C17 and it is likely that Harman Sheafe made internal alterations to the house before selling on to another clothier, John Weston. He also made internal changes to the house, probably between 1685 and 1694, when he died (Hasted; Hussey, 21 August 1920).

A 1769 map shows an unnamed house on the site of the present Old Wilsley (Andrew, Dury and Herbert) and in 1798 the widow of John Weston's grandson, also John, was in residence (Hasted). The 1840 Tithe Map for 'Wilsley House', then in the hands of 'the heirs of the late Mr Weston', records a house, garden, orchards and adjacent fields on a 5ha site, with a further 7ha of fields and woods. A Lady Louise Despaen and then her daughter, Caroline Cleaver, lived at Wilsley (Pigot, Kelly's) until 1857 when the Westons sold the property to the brewer Robert Tooth, the third son of William Tooth, the latter, who had purchased the adjoining Great Swifts estate in 1847.

From 1863 Wilsley was let to the Cranbrook Colony artist, George Bernard O'Neill and his family at a rent of £37 per annum (Donovan). The 1862 OS map shows gardens laid out on all sides of the house and the property boundary was

later marked by iron hurdles installed in the mid-1860s by O'Neill (Donovan). Robert Tooth died in 1867 in the wake of the Overend and Gurney Bank crash of 1866 and his family were forced to sell Wilsley along with Great Swifts in 1871 (Allen).

The Sales Particulars for the 1871 auction of the c.158ha Swifts Park Estate include details of Wilsley House, 'the picturesque manorial residence' set in grounds of less than 0.05ha. The estate was bought by a retired Scottish Colonel, Boyd Alexander, who renewed O'Neill's tenancy. During the following 15 years O'Neill made a number of changes to the house and laid out the gardens (undated photograph; Hussey, 21 August 1920). He left in 1886 and two sisters, Sarah and Julie McNaughton, became the new tenants (Census). In the late 1890s Colonel Alexander carried out major works at Wilsley with the assistance of the Arts-and-Crafts Movement architect Mervyn E. McCartney (1853-1932) who was also at that time building a neo-Georgian lodge at nearby Angley Park. The works included the addition of a north service wing, redesigning the gardens around the house and laying out a park with serpentine walks on the site of a former orchard (3rd OS map; 1902 postcard).

In 1899 Colonel Alexander and his family moved to Wilsley House and let Swifts Place to a Colonel Rashley. In 1906 Boyd's son Herbert, an artist, exhibited at the Royal Academy a painting of Wilsley entitled *My Home*. When he married Edith in 1910, his father gave them Wilsley as a wedding present and Herbert built an artist's studio in the grounds. Following World War One Herbert also redesigned the gardens, creating a series of yew-hedged rooms, a topiary garden and a theatre with green hedges forming the wings (Hussey, 21 August 1920; 4th edn OS map; Binney). In August 1929 the 'picturesque and delightfully set-out' gardens (the house by now renamed Old Wilsley) were opened in aid of the District Nursing Association (unidentified newspaper cutting August 1929). An exhibition of Herbert's paintings was held on the same day and included a number of Old Wilsley's garden.

Herbert died in 1946 and photographs survive that depict the house and 'charming garden' soon after (1947 aerial view and photographs; Hussey, 9 July 1948). His wife continued to live at Old Wilsley until the 1960s, when she gave the house to her daughter Camilla, also an artist, on the breakdown of her marriage. Camilla continued to maintain and develop the garden until she died in 2006 when the property with some 5ha passed to her son and two daughters. They sold to the present owners and it remains in single private ownership.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Old Wilsley is situated on an area of level ground close to Crane Brook and in the valley of the River Beult. It is set among the fields and small farmsteads that characterize the High Weald landscape but abuts the residential area outskirts of Cranbrook and lies c.1.5k from its town centre and The c.2.5ha site is bordered to its west by Waterloo Road (B2189) and to its north, east and south by the open landscape of the wider Oak Hill Manor estate.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Old Wilsley is entered from the east side of Waterloo Road, some 70m south-west of its junction with Angley Road, through a 1m high wooden gate (2009, in poor condition) that opens onto an enclosed, gravelled forecourt on the main, north entrance front of the house. The forecourt has a central, circular lawn planted with a mature oak tree. This arrangement dates from 1908 when Alexander Boyd constructed a new drive through treed lawns to serve the north, entrance front of the house although the forecourt was at that time rectangular in shape. From at least 1862 until 1908 (1st and 2nd OS maps) the main entrance to Old Wilsley from Waterloo Road lay approximately 20m south of the present one and opened onto a 20m long 'carriage drive' leading to the north front (1871 sales particulars). At that time, a further 20m south again, a second entrance led via a drive to the south front of the house. These C19 drives had gone by 1929, when the site and layout of the present entrance and forecourt are first recorded on maps. The removal of the C19 drives and entrances were probably made during Herbert Boyd's ownership.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Old Wilsley (listed grade 1) is a C15 hall house with C16 and C17 additions and a C19 wing that encloses a central courtyard. Oswald described the construction as 'of two paralleled half-timbered ranges joined by a modern north wing'. The west entrance front contains the C15 hall and has a 'two-bay centre and ends jettied out on the upper floor' (Pevsner) and is 'characteristic of the early Tudor houses built in the neighbourhood during the prosperous days of the Wealden cloth industry' (Oswald). Pevsner suggested that the gables with Gothic barge boards and bay windows under the overhangs were probably added in the C16.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The ornamental gardens lie on the south and east sides of the house and comprise yew-hedged compartments and lawns with mature trees, a layout that survives from the mid-1920s (4th edn OS map). Little is known about the gardens before that time although maps from 1862 indicate that there were small gardens on the west, south and east of the house and the 1871 Sales Particulars mentioned 'pleasure grounds with croquet lawn'. An 1866 photograph (Thomas), turn-of-the-C20-century photographs and illustrations in Hussey's 1920 article depict a path running along the foot of the south front of the house between narrow flower borders and a lawn with trees. Photographs of this date also show herbaceous borders either side of a grass path which is aligned on a Venetian wellhead in front of the north wing, and a lead statue of Narcissus on a lawn enclosed by young shrubs (Hussey).

The 1929 OS map depicts Herbert Boyd's new layout of 'evergreen walls' to the south-east of the house, on the site of a late C19 kitchen garden and orchards (1908 OS map). The compartments included yew hedges with topiary peacocks to enclose lawns, herbaceous borders either side of a grass path leading to 'a circle of trellis arches clothed in ivy, with a lead figure of Narcissus in the middle' and an 'open-air theatre with clipped laurel wings' (Hussey 1948). There were also 'other rooms devoted to roses, flowering shrubs, and herbaceous displays'. The same layout is also shown on a 1947 aerial

photograph and in 1968, when the gardens were open to the public, the 'giant yew hedges, which have been patiently cut to various shapes' attracted attention (unspecified local newspaper cutting). The same news feature also noted the layout in the 1960s of a walk around 'an old hammer pond' some 80m south-east of the house and a rock garden along the route of a path 'which cows used to get down to the pond'.

Wright's 1985 description of the garden confirms that the 1920s layout of garden rooms, topiary and statuary survived at that time but that the rockery garden constructed in the 1960s was overgrown (Kent Compendium). He also noted that a new rhododendron and azalea garden had been planted south of the house, incorporating surviving apple and pear trees from the former orchard. In 2006 when Old Wisley was offered for sale the garden features mentioned included in the press included 'noble yew hedges ending in boldly clipped peacocks ... a large knot garden ... a bowling green ... a delightful green outdoor theatre formed of clipped hedges ... [and] a bog garden' (*The Times*).

KITCHEN GARDEN

The site of a hedge-enclosed kitchen garden dating from the 1920s (c.40m x 30m) lies 60m north-east of the house and is now laid to grass. 'A small kitchen garden and orchard neatly arranged' are first mentioned in the 1871 Sales Particulars and were probably located a few metres north-east of the house immediately north of 'a pony stable and chaise house, harness room and closet' (1870 OS map). In 1908 a kitchen garden and orchard are shown 20m east of the house but in 1929, after the yew-hedged compartments were constructed, the 4th edn OS map records two adjoining kitchen gardens on the site of the present one. A 1947 aerial photograph shows that this garden is by then laid to grass apart from a small, fence-enclosed, productive area.

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Map showing listed buildings on Old Wilsley site.

Modern Mastermap 1:2,500 2007

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Wilsley House 1902. Postcard (private collection).

Old Wilsley in F. C. Clarke, *Kentish Fire* (Adams & son, 1947), plate 19.

Aerial photograph 1947.

2 colour photographs (a) ring of roses (b) Venetian font 1981/2.

Aerial photograph 2003.

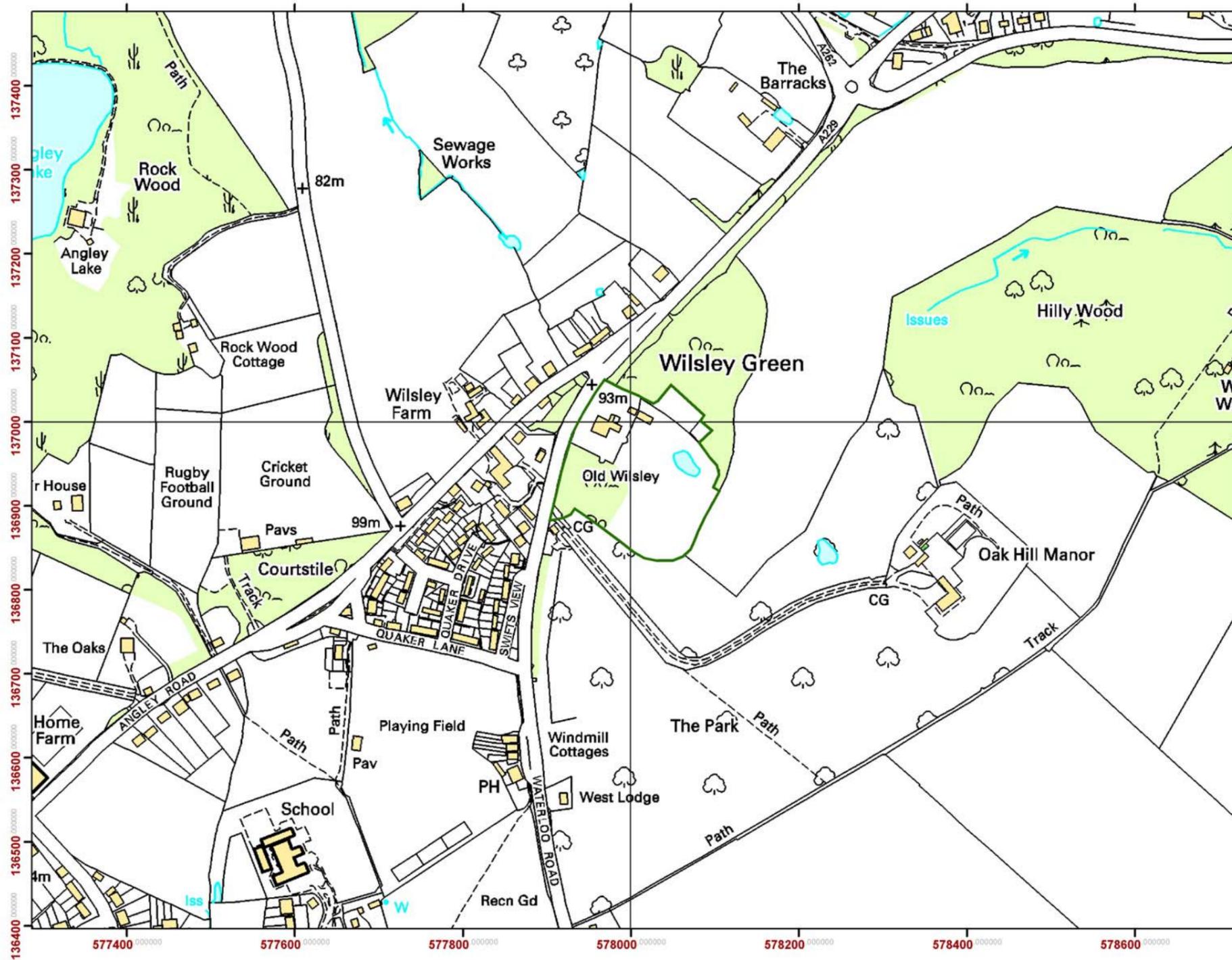
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Description written by Barbara Simms
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Fig. 1 Boundary map



Old Wilsley

Address:

Old Wilsley
Cranbrook
Kent

Map centred on NGR: 578006
136395

Report completed : July 2009

Legend

 Boundary



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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Fig. 2 Map of listed buildings at Old Wilsley



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Fig. 3 Listed buildings at Old Wilsley

Kent Historic Environment Record reference: MKE1763

CRANBROOK WILSLEY GREEN TQ 73 NE
(east side) 3/298 9.6.52 Old Wilsley-
Grade I

Wealden hall-house and cloth hall, now house. Late C14 an early C15, altered in C16 and later C17, clad in C19 and altered and extended in early C20. Timber framed on red brick plinth, with sandstone ground floor under left gable, plastered elsewhere with exposed close studding in centre. Jettied over ground and first floors, with dragon-beam to right, under left and right return gables. Plain tiled hipped roof with bracketed eaves in centre and lower return gables to left and right. Main stack to right behind ridge of main roof; also end stacks. 2 storeys with attics in gables. 2 storey bay window to right of centre recess with windows on both floors. Irregular fenestration of 7 windows on first floor, 5 windows on ground floor, casements, those under gables late C17 cross windows, except on ground floor to right, with bay window. Circa 1600 transom and mullion windows elsewhere. Arched doorway to left of recess with boarded and ribbed door in Tudor-arched moulded surround. Main entrance now in left end. Large early C20 extensions to rear in angle formed by original former kitchen wing and forming small internal courtyard. Interior: Very substantial timber frame. Dining room: Mid C20 decorated Tudor-arched fireplace. Heavily moulded ceiling; inserted over ground floor of former hall. Embattled dais beam with rosette carved decoration. C16 panelling, including plank and muntin at dais end. C16 doorcase at dais end, carved with atlantes at capital level. Room at lower end. Fielded panelling with dado railing, painted with landscape scenes, 12 in all including doors; dogs coursing in panels below dado rail. Marbled wooden bolection mould fire-surround. Kitchen (beyond dais and stair): wide fireplace with sandstone cheeks and giant bressummer. Late C16 panelling. C18 mantelshelf. Wheel under eaves on outside wall for dog-powered spit. Bedroom in upper part of former hall: Crown post collar purlin roof. Moulded octagonal crown post on hall truss. Very heavily jowled posts. Ovolo mouldings on frames to windows. Close studding on end walls with curved braces above. Former solar: Late C16 panelling. Late C17 fireplace. Some engraved glass. See *Country Life*, Vol 104, pp 26 and 78.

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Fig. 4 Aerial photograph



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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