

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Sevenoaks District



Knockholt House, Knockholt



August 2012

Knockholt House

Sevenoaks, 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 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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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Age, rarity value and survival: the site possesses a main phase of development post 1840 which is of special interest; the historic layout survives relatively intact along with considerable above ground garden structures (although partly obscured by overgrowth), the original layout of avenue and several surviving mature ornamental trees. Other significant surviving features include extensive late C19 water management systems and a swimming pool with bath house;

Historic Association: the site is important in local social history; its creator, James Vavas seur was a well known local “eccentric” and the distinctive building design led to the name “Vavas seur’s Folly” by villagers. The Vavas seur family was distantly connected to the Livingstone Family (James Vavas seur and David? Livingstone were” brothers in law”.)

Social and communal value: the garden is perceived as a highly –valued source of local identity, distinctiveness, social interaction and coherence. It is managed by the Knockholt Village Tree Society as local community woodland with associated facilities (benches, pathways etc) and provides a place for local community meetings and activities.

Aesthetic & Design Merit: the garden in its heyday showed qualities of style and distinctive characteristics relative to the area; significant surviving features include extensive late C19 water management systems specifically for designed leisure landscape utilising the water and geological characteristics of this area.

Archaeological interest: The site has high archaeological potential for extensive buried remains of house and garden structures.

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT
SEVENOAKS
KNOCKHOLT PARISH

KNOCKHOLT HOUSE

TQ 5473 1591

SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST

A community woodland with surviving remnants of structures, above but mostly below ground, and of mature ornamental trees, of a mid to late 19C house and designed landscape.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Knockholt House lies in the hundred of Ruxley and the parish of Knockholt. There is no evidence of a dwelling on the site before 1843 when the tithe map and apportionment (Kent History and Library Centre, KHLC) record a house, substantial buildings and a garden of about half a hectare together with 4.5 hectares of pasture, occupied by William Hemsworth.

When the freehold property was offered for sale in 1846, the house was described as being 'of the style of an Italian Villa' and possessing 12 acres (c5 hectares) of land, including gardens, lawns, timber and meadowland. According to the sales details, the house stood 'at an agreeable distance from the road, enclosed in an iron palisade fence, and screened by a laurel hedge, having a stone-paved veranda to the front, with a well-planted sloping lawn'. Other buildings, including stabling and a coach house, lay to the east. Included in the details is a map showing a lawn to the south of the house and a series of rectangular pathways surrounding garden beds, all occupying a similar position to that shown on the tithe map. The timber and meadowland lay to the south of this area (KHLC). It was bought by John Amor for £960 (Sevenoaks Library).

In 1863, James Vavas seur who bought Knockholt House from John Amor for £1650, further enlarged the property by buying Chine (Shine) Farm to the east and land from Henry Turner to the west, to a total of 26 hectares (Smithers). Initially, Vavas seur established formal gardens with specimen conifers close to the main house and an orchard to the south east. He extended the garden southwards, cutting down timber and creating paths and a circular area, possibly based on an old quarry. A photograph shows this to be lawn surrounded by a circular path. The western boundary of the garden was planted with a mixture of trees, including some orchard, and to the east a roadway, lined by mixed deciduous and conifer trees, was constructed to Chine Farm (OS 1865-72).

James Vavas seur, a silk merchant from London, was married to Helen née Moffat (1829-1902) who had been born in Bechuanaland where her father, Dr Robert Moffat, was a famous missionary. Helen's eldest sister, Mary, was married to David Livingstone who had gone out to Africa, expressly to work with Dr Moffat (Smithers). Dr Moffat regularly visited Knockholt and finally retired to Leigh in Kent.

Having laid out the garden at Knockholt, Vavas seur then demolished the old house, erecting a vast new building which reputedly had 40 bedrooms, and which was not completed until 1890. The chimney flues were contained in a tower 120 feet high from which it was possible to see St Paul's Cathedral. The house was partly built of ragstone and partly of brick with cement rendering and had a flat roof which was glassed over to form a winter garden. The whole building seems to have been very eccentric in design and was subsequently named Vavas seur's Folly by the villagers (Smithers).

The OS map (1897–1900) shows these new buildings directly fronting Main Road with a driveway leading in from the west from the junction of Blueberry Lane with Main Road, sweeping round to the east, suggesting the front entrance of the house was now south facing. The grounds had been extended much further southwards in a linear plot and clearly defined boundaries are shown. There were formal lawns to the south of the house with woodland further to the west and south. The OS map suggests that mixed woodland with specimen conifers was created down the eastern side of the garden and Smithers says that Vavas seur carried out extensive planting with Wellingtonias, monkey puzzle trees, Thujas, fig trees and shrubs. A feature of the grounds was the large number of reservoirs and wells built to store water.

Following Vavas seur's death, in 1906, the house was offered for sale in three lots. The description of the gardens includes tennis and croquet lawns, lime and conifer avenues, with ornamental shrubs and shaded walks with a fish pond and three summer houses. In addition there was a kitchen garden and a large greenhouse on the southern side of the main house, heated with hot water pipes (KHLIC). However, a 1907 photograph attached to the details of the sale suggests an avenue of trees leading south from the house were in poor condition. Following the death of Vavas seur, the site appears to have deteriorated and the house was already requiring repairs to prevent major structural problems.

Lots 2 and 3 of the 1907 sale included Chine Farm which, although described as a 'pleasure farm of 25 acres', appears to have changed only slightly since the tithe apportionment of 1843. There had been some realignment of field boundaries with planting of shelter belts along Main road, the creation of the avenue and roadway from the farm to Knockholt House and large 'ornamental ponds' in each of the pastures, features still visible today.

The sale failed and Vavas seur's two unmarried daughters continued to live there despite the continued deterioration of the property. Later editions of the OS maps (1909 and 1929-52) appear to show no major changes to the garden but, clearly, problems were developing. A Dr Gerd Peters described

visiting the house in 1936 as a boy when 'it seemed to resemble a fabulous fairy-tale house, with a slightly eerie atmosphere that was almost ghostly' (Bygone Kent). Robert Songhurst recalled visiting the house in the 1930s with his parents and commented that 'the grounds were then much overgrown and everything looked mysterious' (Bygone Kent).

When Clara Vavasseur died in 1940, the estate passed to Girton College and was then bought by Hubert and Norman, uncles of Prof. D Smithers (who was later to live at Ringfield in Knockholt). They in turn sold part of the land to the Chevening Estate. Damaged by a landmine early in the war, the house was finally demolished in 1942 by a company who paid £230 for the materials and who left the site clear (Smithers).

The land was subsequently sold to Percy Rogers in 1954 and various plans were put in turn to Bromley, to Orpington and to Sevenoaks Councils to build a small estate of houses; all these plans were turned down. Chine Farm had been sold off separately and following the failure of the last planning attempt for a single house, the Department of the Environment forced Sevenoaks Council to acquire c2.5 hectares of the northern part of the site immediately surrounding the house (Smithers). This was bought by Knockholt Parish Council and leased to the Knockholt Village Tree Society (KVTS) which was inaugurated in 1992 to manage it as community woodland. KVTS have carried out major work, planting new native trees and clearing scrub in order to create paths and picnic areas where wooden seats have been placed for visitors' convenience. The paths offer good access to two thirds of the remnants of Vavasseur's 19C garden.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM and SETTING

The site lies on the top of the North Downs between the village of Knockholt and its subsidiary, Knockholt Pound, 6 km northwest of Sevenoaks and 7 km southeast of Orpington, the northern boundary bordering onto Main Road. The c6 hectare site is roughly triangular in shape with a base of 200m on Main Road and a length of c500m, lying on land gently sloping to the south. The ground is chalk with overlying clay and flints containing some pockets of sand and gravel. The estate is within the North Downs AONB and is just within the North Downs Landscape Character Area (JCA 119) which suggests that the site is predominantly pre-1810 woodland merging with woodland of the Chevening Park Estate to the south.

The property is bounded to the east and west by agricultural land from which it is separated by 1m wire and post fences. The boundary to the north is formed of further wire fencing together with hedging of mixed species along Main Road. To the south the woodland becomes continuous with that belonging to the Chevening Estate and this includes that part of Vavasseur's property sold to the estate in 1940, now apparent as the area of the former

designed landscape south of the North Downs Way and separated off by a barbed wire fence carrying 'private' notices.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance to the site is from the southern side of Main Road, 200m to the east of its junction with Blueberry Lane. This is through a metal field gate set into the hedge beside which is a metal 'kissing gate' for pedestrian access. Immediately inside the entrance is a wooden lychgate erected by KVTS with 'welcome' notices. The position of this entrance is approximately where that to the service area of the house was in the early 20C. The main entrance which Vavasasseur made near Blueberry Lane is no longer apparent.

The OS maps (1865-1952) show a former entrance to the gardens by a roadway from Chine Farm lying to the east, this being marked now by a line of trees 100m south of Main Road.

Three other entrances now exist; one on the eastern boundary, c250m south-east of the present entrance where the North Downs Way crosses the property, access being through a metal pedestrian field gate set in the boundary fences. The second is in the western boundary as the Way leaves the property through a gap in the fence.

The third is a wooden five-barred field gate set in the barbed wire fence south of the North Downs Way, 60m west of the eastern boundary gate. This is padlocked and allows no access but a possible track leading south from this point appears to mark the course of the north-south way marked on the 1862 OS map which subsequently formed part of the main north-south path from the house to the southern point of the property. There are no apparent remains of the path going northwards either on the map or on the ground and, apart from the North Downs Way, this is the only track marked on the current OS map.

C21 aerial photographs show continuous woodland covering the site with the line of the North Downs Way apparent. The only other feature visible is a path way leading south-westwards from the main entrance to the western boundary 50m north of the Way, this being the main KVTS pathway (it follows a line of electricity poles). Although not apparent in the photograph, two other paths lead east and west from the main entrance to the appropriate boundaries before turning south to eventually reach the North Downs Way. Access is good to two thirds of the remnants of Vavasasseur's 19C garden although the present network of paths bear little relation to those of the historic garden.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The former Knockholt House appears to have extended to the east and west of the present site entrance, the northern wing of the building bordering onto Main Road to the west of the gateway. The site is now covered with scrub and

vegetation, some parts of the foundation being apparent in the concrete and stone bases of the footpaths. Other areas are marked by changes in ground levels but no part of the building is visible above ground.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The site of Knockholt House and gardens now (2012) comprises mixed woodland, very overgrown and overwhelmed by secondary woodland and scrub, the former designed garden being no longer managed. In addition to the three main paths, the site is criss-crossed by small tracks which do not especially relate to the historic framework as shown on OS maps 1890-1952 but do provide some access to and views of the surviving elements of historic interest.

The site holds a rich, diverse mixture of specimen conifers, mature native beech, ash and silver birch together with self-seeded sycamore trees and shrubs with diverse woodland fauna and flora. There is however archaeological potential (humps and bumps) and it is likely that substantial remains of structures relating to the historic, designed landscape survive below the present vegetation, some of which, together with some of the mature trees, can be tentatively linked to the features marked on the early OS maps. The following account gives some description of what is visible today and may survive just below the surface.

Immediately inside the present Main Road entrance gate there are some specimen trees, including a mature redwood, surviving within native trees planted partly as part of the designed landscape and partly later secondary growth. From here the main path leads south and two others lead east and west.

The southern footpath traverses an area of rhododendrons, secondary woodland and scrub which now occupies the former open lawn to the south of the house site, for 50m before turning south-westwards. 30m south of this point and directly south of the house, is the site of a circular area which is such a prominent feature on the early OS maps but which is no longer identifiable.

Continuing along the main path south-westwards for c50m, there is, to the south of the path and c25m within the woodland, the remains of a brick structure now covered in rubble and vegetation, marked on the 1907 sales map as a summer house. Returning to the main KVTs path and continuing southwest for a further 100m, this is joined by the western boundary path. This path has led westwards for 100m from the main entrance, travelling parallel to the northern boundary as far as the western edge of the site and then turned south through an avenue of yew trees to join the main KVTs path.

The combined paths continue southwards for 100m to meet the North Downs Way which transects the site for 100m in an east/west direction but swings south at this point to continue through dense woodland for 30m before

entering the Chevening Estate. Although the Knockholt site extended southward for a further 150m in Vavasour's ownership, there is now a barbed wire fence running parallel along the south side of the North Downs Way in which is a locked field gate 60m from the eastern edge of the site, preventing any access to the southern section of the historic site area.

However c30m westwards from this point is a small path from the north side which leads some 50m northwards through the woodland to a distinctive crescent-shaped structure with water pipes and drainage grills whose function is not clear but which appears to be associated with water management and which can be identified on the early OS maps. 30m to the east of this, also within the woodland, is a swimming pool which still survives although trees and scrub are encroaching. A bath house, adjacent to the swimming pool, survives in rather better condition with the roof currently intact although branches and ivy are beginning to threaten it. As the roof is in place, the interior retains glazed pale yellow tiles on the walls, floor to ceiling.

The last of the three KVTS paths runs eastwards for 100m from the main entrance to the eastern boundary of the site then turning south. This path leads initially through a mix of mature trees and native trees, recently planted by KVTS, and travels north of part of the site of the former house. On turning south, it passes the remnants of a further brick building, perhaps a storehouse but not easily identified on the map. After a further 30m southwards along the eastern boundary the path reaches the end of the trackway from Chine Farm marked by a line of mature broadleaved trees. Continuing to the south for 150m, the rather overgrown path, perhaps representing the remains of the eastern pathway recorded on the OS maps, reaches the North Downs Way at its eastern entrance gate.

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Maps

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Ordnance Surveyors Field Drawings: OSD26 & OSD27
Ordnance Survey 1st edition, 25" map, sheets 28/7 and 28/11 (1862 -1875)
Ordnance Survey 2nd edition, 25" map, (1897-1900)
Ordnance Survey 3rd edition, 25" map, (1907 -1923)
Ordnance Survey 4th edition, 25" map, (1929 -1952)

Illustrations

Knockholt Village Tree Society, <http://www.kvts.org.uk>

Knockholt Village History, <http://www.knockholtparish.org.uk>

Knockholt Village in Pictures (Sevenoaks Library, D 678).

Archival Items

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Sale details, Knockholt House, 1846 with receipt from J Amor (Sevenoaks Library, D 678).

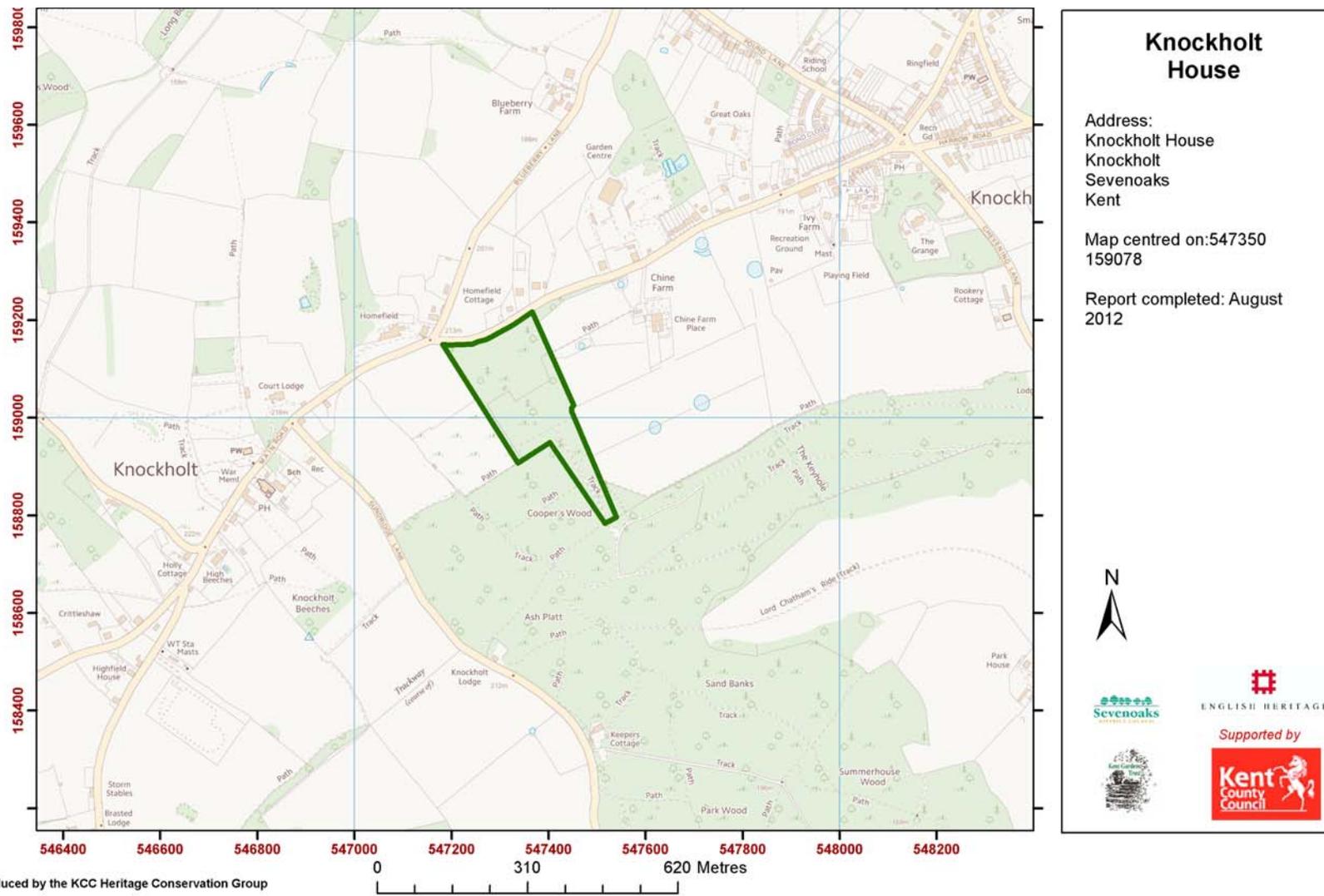
Sale details, Knockholt House and Chine Farm, 1907 (KHLC, SP 638).

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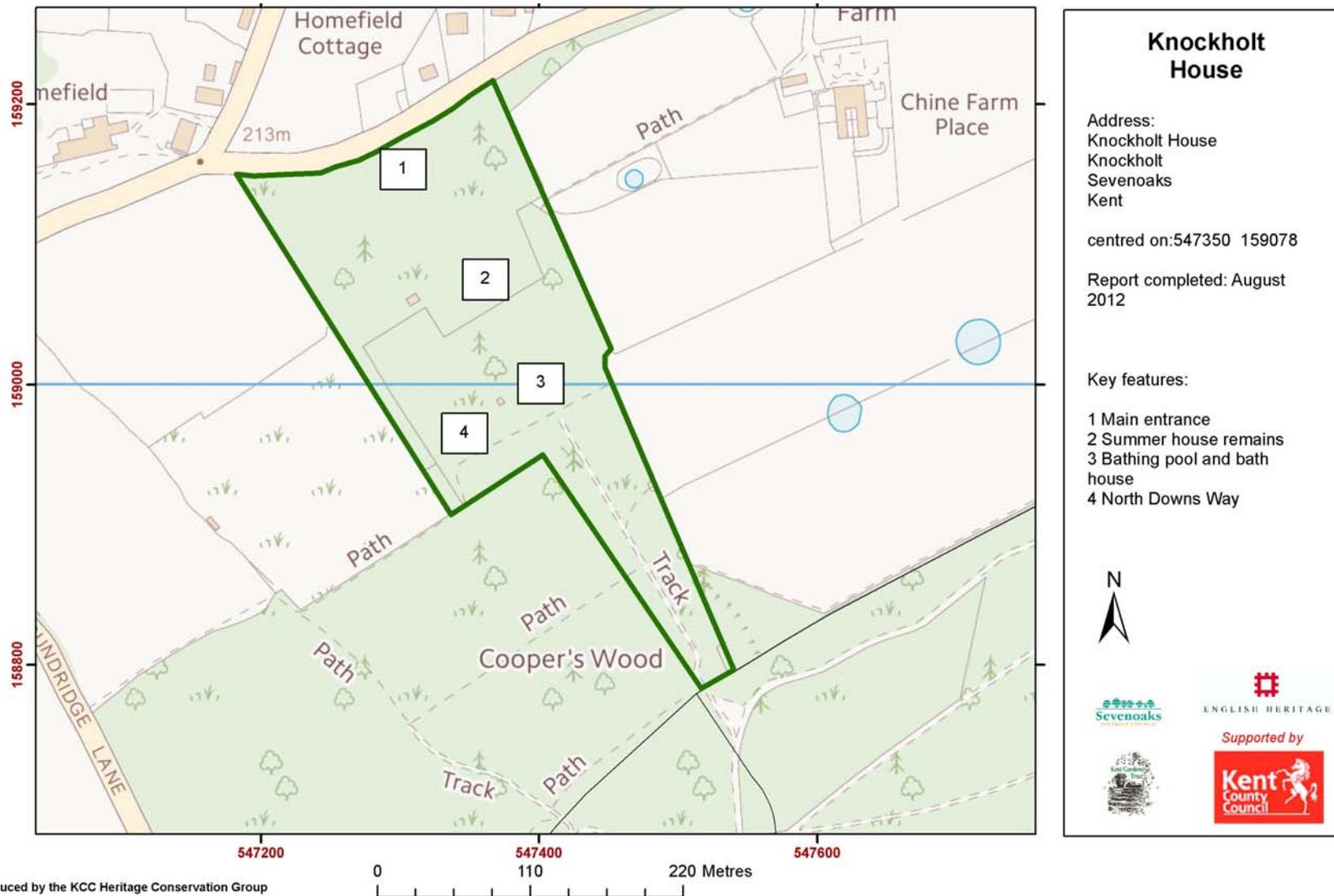
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Fig. 1 Boundary map



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Fig. 2 Key features map



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Fig. 3 Aerial photograph (2008)



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