

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Sevenoaks District



Larksfield, Sevenoaks



April 2012

Larksfield

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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Kent Gardens Trust
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Aesthetic value: The garden, contemporary with others in this area of Wealden ridges, represents an example of the period in which London families, enabled by the coming of the railway, looked for homes in the open spaces of the nearby Kent countryside

Evidential value: The association of the site with Octavia Hill is well documented locally and nationally in contemporary literature including Hill's own letters, local organisations such as the Kent and Sussex Footpaths Committee; local travel guides emphasize her legacy in respect of footpaths and nearby National Trust land.

Historic association: As the country home of Octavia Hill from 1884 until her death in 1912 the site has strong associations with her like-minded friends and colleagues who were prime movers in health, housing and educational reforms. Together they were founders of organisations for the preservation of open spaces, footpaths, the countryside and its amenities, as enshrined in the National Trust. Octavia Hill's own contribution is well documented in her own letters, several biographies and in the archives of the National Trust.

Landmark status: Larksfield, at the western edge of this locally and nationally-valued area forms a significant feature albeit well-hedged, in the setting of footpaths leading to the local churchyard where Octavia Hill is buried.

Social and Communal value: Octavia Hill and her associates worked to safeguard the neighbouring hills and open spaces, securing perceived locally-valued landmarks for the National Trust and preserving historic footpaths in the Wealden ridges.

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT
CROCKHAM HILL
WESTERHAM PARISH
TQ 4425 5133

LARKSFIELD

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST

A hillside garden with informal planting, woodland and orchard associated with a C19 cottage with later additions, and from 1884 to 1912, the country home of Octavia Hill (1838-1912), housing reformer and co-founder of the National Trust.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

With the coming of the railway in the late 1840's, access to the Wealden hills became less difficult and by the 1870's, London families came to lease or buy country homes for holiday use. In 1877 Octavia Hill's sister Gertrude Lewis took 'The Warren', across the common from the Larksfield plot, and so began the long association of the Hill family and their friends with the Kent and Surrey Hills. Octavia Hill (see figure in CD file) came from a family of radical thinkers and reformers in health, housing and education. By the 1870's she was an established figure in social housing reform, dedicated to improving conditions for the London poor. With the help of her mother and her four sisters, the individual schemes could run independently and they needed to do so when overwork brought on a physical and emotional collapse. Octavia's companion in a European travel convalescence in 1881 was a Miss Harriot Yorke, a lady of independent means who became a lifelong support and work associate, particularly in the founding of the National Trust and in its early development.

The plot of land that was to become Larksfield was purchased by Harriot Yorke, and the house designed by Octavia's favourite architect Elijah Hoole, who had worked on model dwellings in the London housing schemes. The Misses Yorke and Hill took possession of 'the cottage' in 1884, 'and called it Larksfield. It was sited on high, lightly wooded ground with a magnificent view over the Kent and Sussex countryside to the south' (Darley). From the mid 1880's to her death in 1912, Octavia's advocacy of the need for open spaces developed strongly, in London via the Kyrle Society and the Commons Preservation Society and in the High Weald, again via the CPS and specifically, the Kent and Sussex Footpaths Committee. One successful acquisition of open space in London, The Lawn (Vauxhall Park) was achieved in 1890, after which 'Octavia retired to Larksfield exhausted but triumphant "for long years as long as our people need it and wish it flowers will grow and sunlight have leave to penetrate there" ' (Moberley Bell).

Little information is available as to quite how much gardening was done by Misses Hill and Yorke at Larksfield. Visitors were expected to help with the wheelbarrowing of stones from the plot (Darley) and Octavia is said to have 'positively enjoyed struggling with thistles...collecting a little earth to make a grass plot.' (Moberley Bell) but there is no evidence that garden designers of

the day, such as Gertrude Jekyll, Emmeline Sieveking and Fanny Wilkinson, all known to Octavia and Harriot, had any input into the garden design. Emmeline had been responsible for garden design in Octavia's housing developments as 'they were being built' (Pevsner) but no link has been found to the Kent country cottage. In its early days Larksfield and especially its garden seem to have been a source of rest and recuperation. Octavia's work in housing for the urban poor and her growing desire to protect unspoilt countryside around London were two strands of the same theme as she worked to raise awareness of the need to protect spaces, landscapes and buildings at risk. Closer to Larksfield, and together with friends and her own family, she raised money for the purchase of parts of the Kent landscape she walked in and valued: Mariners Hill, (less than 1km due east of Larksfield) Toys Hill (3km due east) and Ide Hill (4km to the north east) were all acquired for the National Trust between 1898 and 1912, a total of 68 hectares in all (National Trust). After Octavia's death, Larksfield remained in the ownership of Harriot Yorke (a committee member and honorary treasurer of the National Trust until 1920) until her own death in 1930.

The service flat and garage on the east boundary of the plot, together with a garden now became a separate property: Larksfield Cottage. Ownership of Larksfield passed to the Harmans from 1930 to 1955 and then on through a number of owners. In 1975 it was given Grade II listing. Two families, the Lloyds, who opened the garden under the National Gardens Scheme, followed by the Dickinsons in 1985, then succeeded, with each developing the garden and from the 1990's, the house. Substantial and inevitable changes to the garden were made following the Great Storm of 1987; a sale brochure of 1985 shows very tall trees, coniferous and deciduous, which had flourished along the western boundary and overshadowed the house at that time. In the storm these were felled, and the site became open enabling subsequent controlled woodland planting, and the addition of herbaceous beds and borders and more formal box-edged plots. Larksfield Cottage, adjacent to the east boundary of Larksfield, and said to have been the original kitchen garden (pers comm) has had several owners, and many changes to the house have been recorded. Larksfield and Larksfield Cottage remain in private ownership.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Larksfield lies 2.75km south of Westerham and 750m north of Crockham Hill. The remains of the Roman Road from London to Lewes, now Kent Hatch Road (B269) lie 150m from the western boundary of Larksfield, which is located along a private road, also designated a bridleway. This private road runs eastward from the junction with Kent Hatch Road along the northern boundary of the site. Following the division of the site into Larksfield and the neighbouring Larksfield Cottage, the house is now positioned in the NE corner of the 0.86 hectare site which is roughly rectangular in shape, c125m wide from E to W and 125m from N to S at its maximum length. The northern site boundary is mainly laurel hedging, backed by fencing. The western boundary has high, close-boarded fencing, delineating it from the public footpath running alongside, while both south and east boundaries are hedged.

The site is on a ridge of lower greensand, overlooking the Weald with views south to the Ashdown Forest Ridge. Traditionally it was 'an area of limited settlement and early enclosure, constrained by poor soils, the elevation, a shorter growing season and winds' (Killingray). Described on the tithe map of 1841 as Westerham Chart, the area into which house and garden are set is bordered to the north by woodland (the Squerryes estate) and to the south by farmland. Neighbouring properties are similarly secluded in woodland, with views to the south. Larksfield is now partly circumscribed by footpaths as the area, with its proximity to National Trust land, has been maintained for public use. Footpaths run along the western and northern boundaries while the Greensand Way (1989) passes close to the NW corner before running along the private road and passing away from the northern boundary. House and garden are 'tucked' (Darley) into a slope, with the ground dropping gently from north to south, to a maximum of c15m, although the descent is lessened by terracing at the southern end.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance is at the north east corner of the site and is only for pedestrian use. Its wrought-iron gates (installed in the 1990's) lead to a flight of steps and the east-facing house front entrance. Prior to the renovation of this entrance, a very narrow slip of land was added to straighten the boundary at this point. A second entrance, for vehicle use only and also dating from the 1990's, is to be found 50m from the north-western corner of the site boundary; its close-boarded wooden gates lead to a parking area.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Larksfield (listed grade II in 1975) is a late C19 small house built in 1884 for Octavia Hill by the architect Elijah Hoole. It comprises one storey and attic, three windows, the upper ones in the gable ends and the casements leaded. The roof is tiled and has a Tudor-style chimney. The first floor is also tile hung; the ground floor is random rubble with red brick dressing. A central door under a flat bracketed hood has, to its right, a small lead relief of an angel playing a lute.

In the 1890's an extension by Elijah Hoole (Darley) to his original design enabled first floor balcony views to the south, and further rooms for visitors at the rear of the house, parallel to the northern boundary.

Further extensions in the late C20 follow these lines and include an early C21 conservatory attached to the south side of the house, with a long aspect to the south and the main viewpoint.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The house is surrounded on three sides by extensive cultivated beds and paved areas with about half the total area laid to grass, tennis court and play areas and the remainder, mainly to the south and west of the house, kept as cultivated orchard and woodland.

Entrance steps leading down from wrought-iron gates on the east-facing front of the house, bisect a small formal terraced area which includes a box parterre around a sundial. This planting, carried out in the late C20, replaces a coal bunker and a grassy slope dating from the early days of the garden (pers comm). The paved area at the foot of the steps, bordered with small shrubs and planted containers, provides access to the front door and extends southwards, opening out into a larger terraced area paved with York stone, with steps from the east front to the south lawn, again replacing former slopes. The easternmost end of the terrace is used as a large seating feature and viewpoint to the main unrestricted vistas to the south and south west and so to the Ashdown Forest Ridge. A series of stone paths bordered with gravel lead westwards past the house with doors opening from other ground floor rooms into the garden. These are overlooked by a first floor balcony, a feature created for Octavia Hill's mother, probably in the 1890's by Elijah Hoole (Darley). The borders to the south of the paths have been developed as an area of planting with shrubs interspersed with perennials and pots of seasonal plants and serve to separate the house from the area to the south which is laid to grass. Running between the conservatory and the garden is a low stone and rubble wall against which roses are underplanted with perennials; this leads to a more formal wall, built parallel to the northern boundary which at its western end screens the parking area. At this point, c75 metres from the north western corner of the site, most of the replanting of the garden since the storm of 1987 has taken place. Prior to this date there was a concentration of very tall trees (OS 4th edition and Sales brochure 1985) which overshadowed much of the west and south western area; only one, a copper beech, now remains.

In this area to the west of the house, where the south-facing lawn meets the wood at the site's north-west corner, a series of smaller 'rooms' have been created in the early C21, distinctively planted and with seating placed to enjoy the progress of the sun across the garden (pers comm.). Two areas have formal borders of box hedging and small clipped trees; larger areas are planted with bordering herbaceous plants, acers, small conifers and roses. Between this planting and close to a small pond, there is an entrance to the lightly planted woodland which becomes a 'walk' running due west to the boundary fence. This has been planted in recent years with 1000 yellow crocus, a memorial gift from the Octavia Hill Society (pers comm). At the south end of the wood, which still has older specimens of cornus and rhododendron and one Douglas fir untouched by the storm, a path runs east, parallel to and c50m from the southern boundary. This path, evident on the OS 3rd edition and OS 4th edition maps, divides the main grassed and planted area of the garden from a lower grassed area leading to the tennis court in the south east corner of the site, where access is by sets of steps cut into the slope. The upper path has an informal planting of roses and clematis, supported on framework and leading to very mature orchard trees which are recorded on both OS maps, thus dating planting from earlier than 1907 (OS 3rd edition). The tennis court first appears on the OS 4th edition.

Access to the eastern boundary is across the main south-facing area of grass and towards a long island bed which runs north-south, parallel to the east

boundary and features earlier planting (a yellow Irish yew recorded, pers comm, as being there in the 1930s) and other mature trees. This serves as a further screen to the east hedged boundary and for the terraced seating area at the foot of the main entrance to the garden, at the north east corner of the site.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The site of Larksfield Cottage is said (pers comm) to have been the original late C19 kitchen garden to Larksfield. The OS 3rd and 4th edition maps record that the orchard extended across both the gardens of Larksfield and Larksfield Cottage, parallel to the southern boundary. A 1946 aerial photograph does not indicate a distinct boundary between the two properties at this point; the eastern boundary of Larksfield is now (2012) clearly defined by hedging.

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- Red Cross Gardens (Bankside Open Spaces Trust), www.londongardensonline.org.uk, 1 September 2009.

Maps

- Fig 1 Boundary Map 1996 Compendium
- Fig 2 Philip Symonson, *Map of Kent* (1596).
- Fig 3 J. Andrew, A. Drury and W. Herbert, *A Topographical Map of the County of Kent* (1769).
- Fig 4 W. Mudge, *An Entirely New and Accurate Survey of the County of Kent* (1801).
- Fig 5 Tithe Map for Crockham Hill 1840 (Kent History and Library Centre).
- Fig 6 Kent County Council *Explore Kent; The definitive guide to public rights of way and green spaces in the Garden of England* (2007).
- Fig 7 Ordnance Survey 1st edn. 25" map (1862-75)
- Fig 8 Ordnance Survey 2nd edn. 25" map (1897-1900)

Fig 9 Ordnance Survey 3rd edn. 25" map (1907-23)
Fig 10 Ordnance Survey 4th edn. 25" map (1929-52)

Illustrations

Fig 11 Aerial photograph RAF 1946 (Photo Number 5020)
Fig 12 Aerial photograph 2003 (Kent County Council)
Fig 13 Octavia Hill, painted by John Singer Sargent in 1898
Fig 14 Larksfield, 2003 (English Heritage)
Fig 15 and 16 Photographs from Sales Particulars, Savills 1985

Archival items

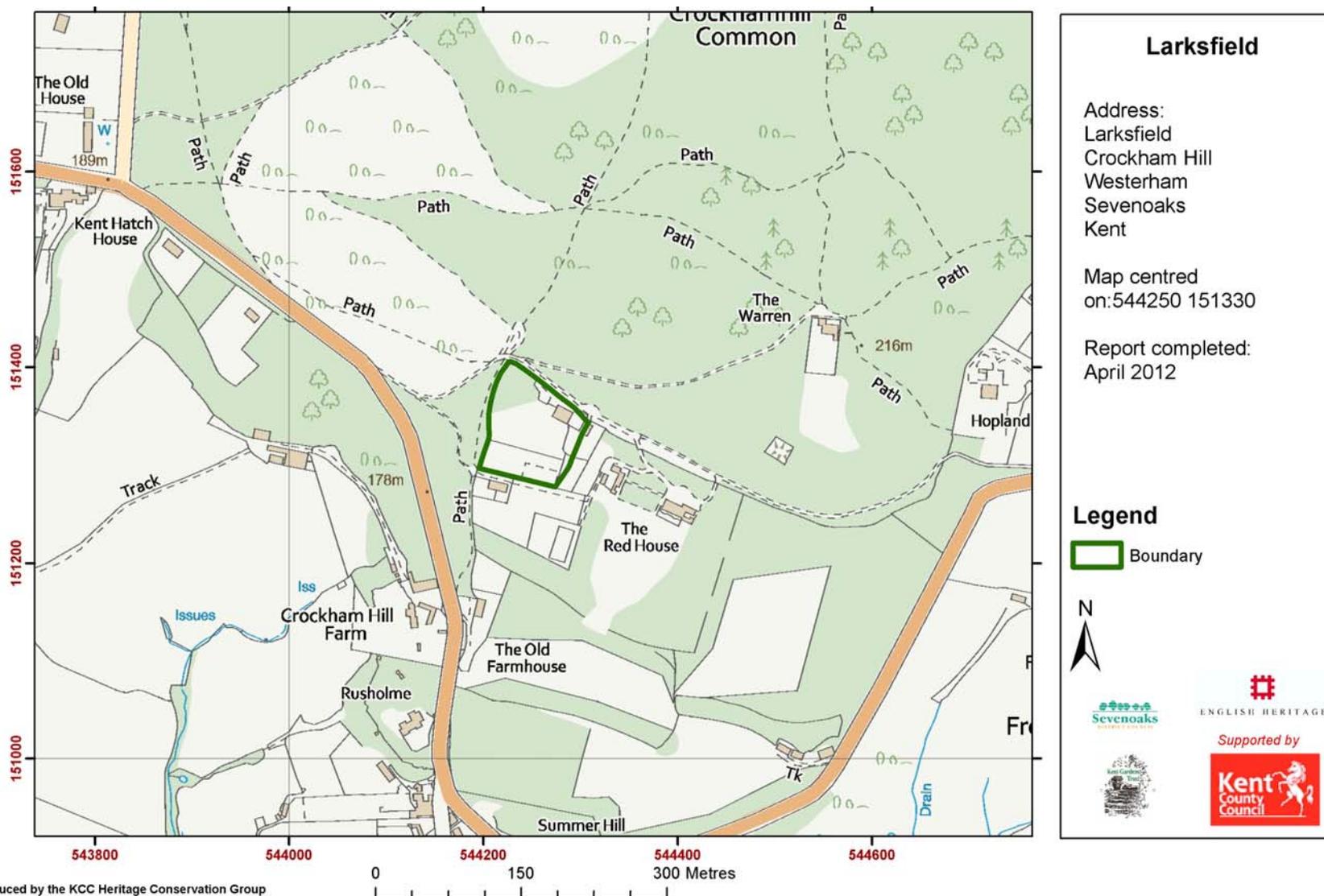
Larksfield Sales Particulars, Savills 1985, private collection
Electoral Rolls 1930-1995
Kelly's Directory 1927-1945
The Octavia Hill Society, www.octaviahill.org

Research by Janet Mayfield

Virginia Hinze (editor)

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Fig. 1 Boundary map

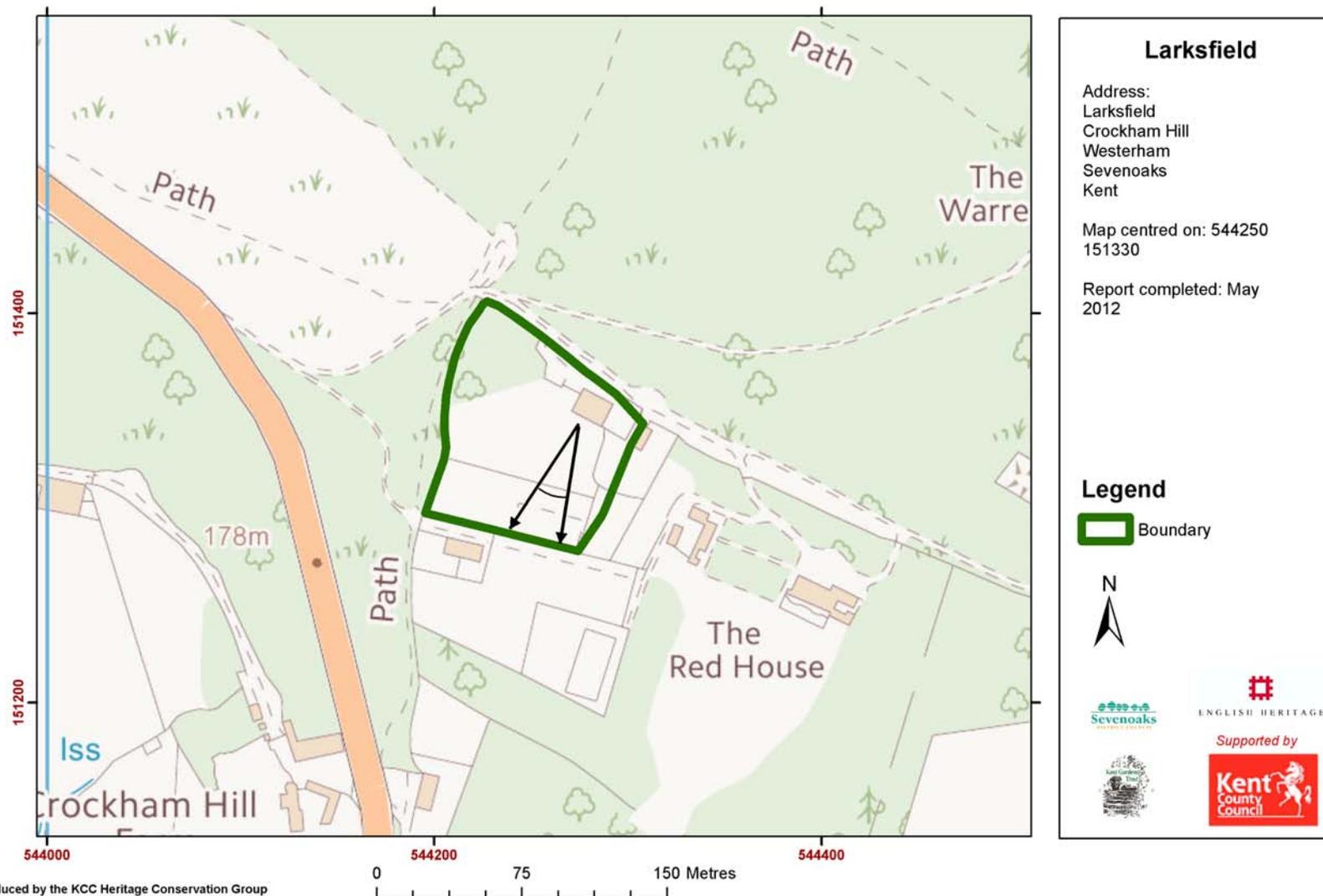


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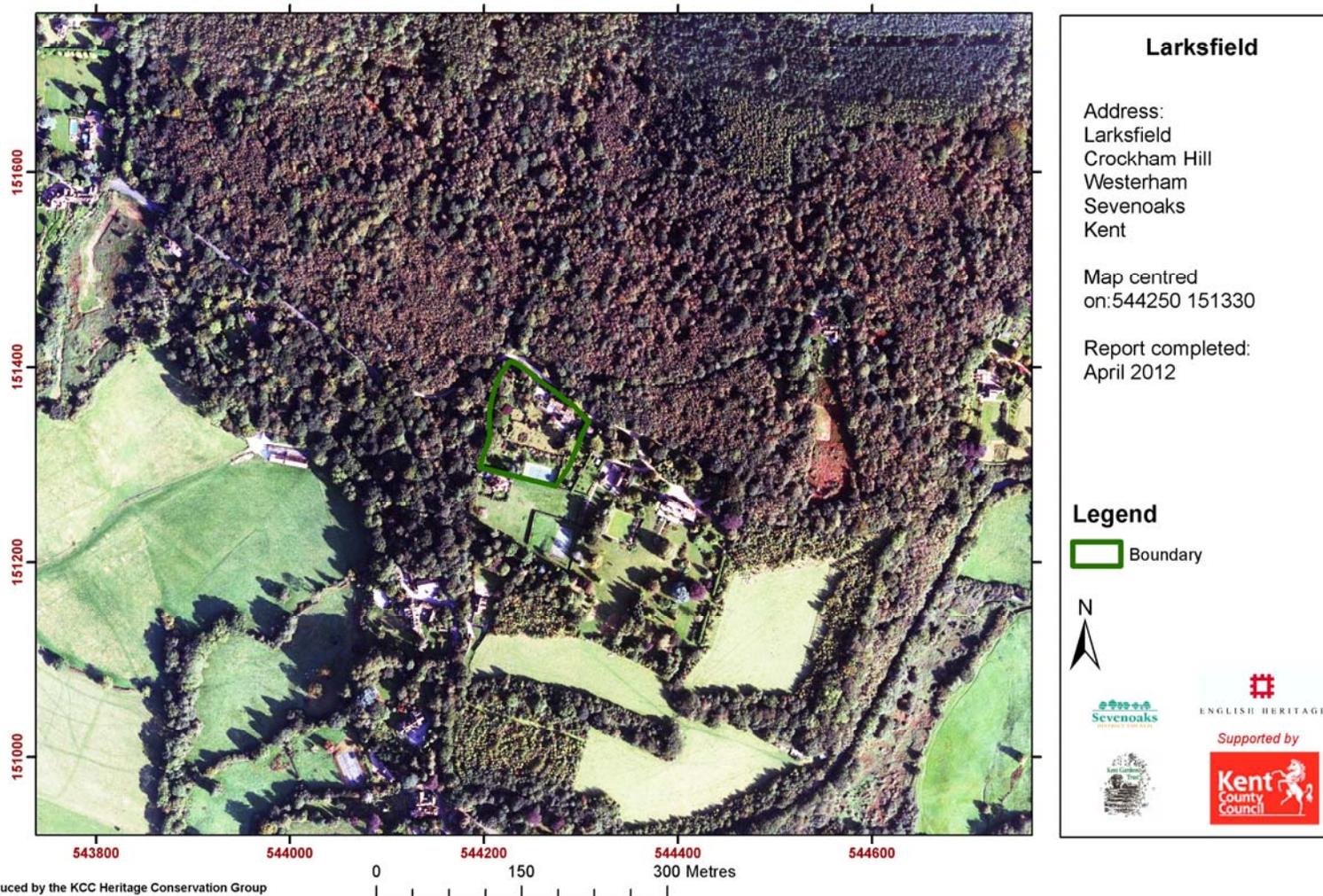
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Fig. 2 Key views map



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Fig. 3 Aerial photograph (2008)

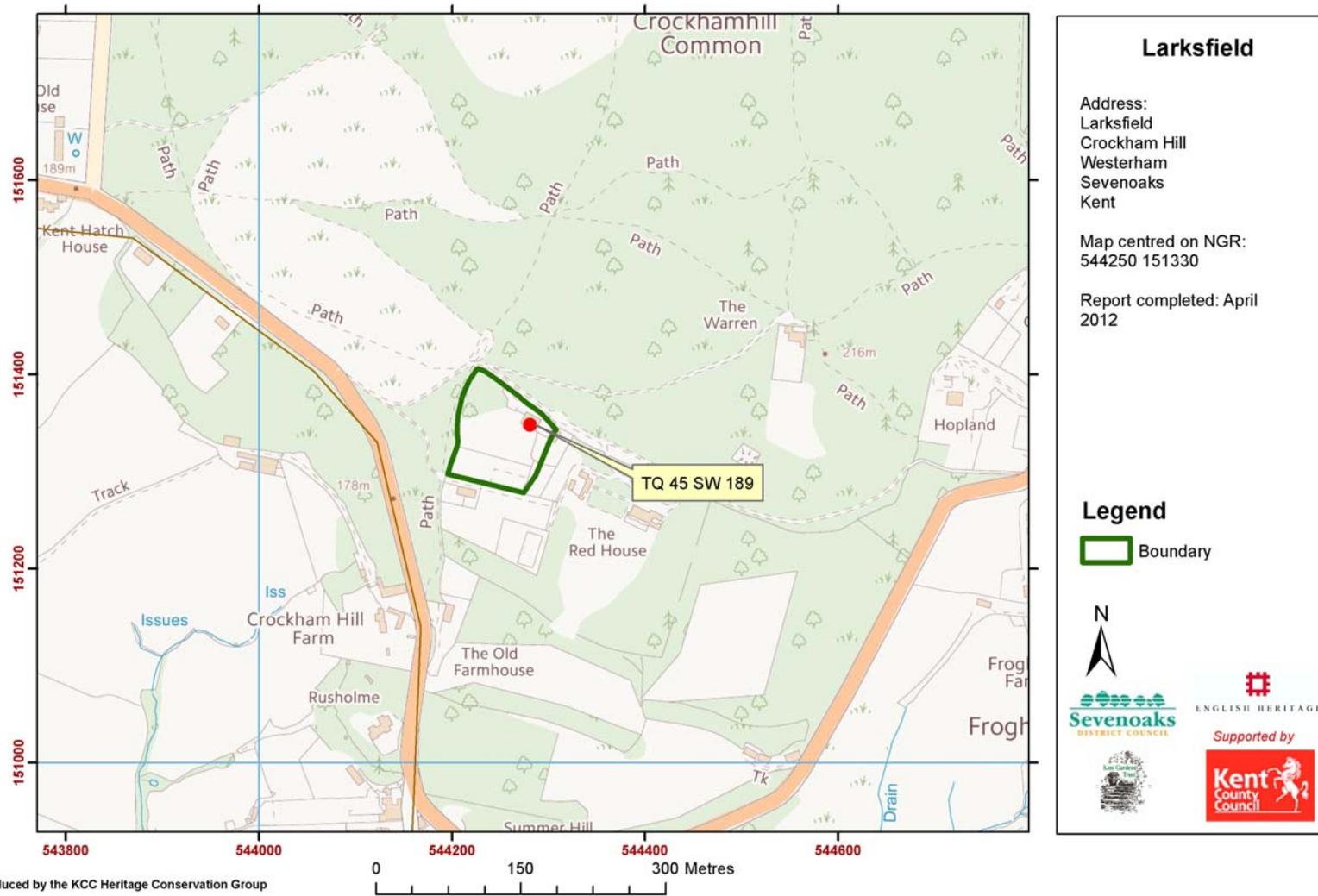


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Fig. 4 Map of listed buildings at Larksfield



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Fig. 5 Listed buildings at Larksfield (from the Kent Historic Environment Record)

Kent Historic Environment Record Reference: TQ 45 SW 189

The following text is from the original listed building designation:

1. 5280 WESTERHAM CROCKHAM HILL
Larksfield TQ 45 SW 44/1477

II

2. Late C19 small house 1877 built for Octavia Hill the housing reformer and founder member of the National Trust, to whom she gave several acres of woodland in the neighbourhood. 1 storey and attic, 3 windows, the upper ones in gable ends. Tiled roof with Tudor style chimney. Tile hung 1st floor; random rubble ground floor with red brick dressings. Leaded casements. Central door under flat bracketed hood. To right of door small lead relief of angel playing lute.

Listing NGR: TQ4431051357