

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



## Bell Road Cemetery, Sittingbourne



March 2022



# **Bell Road Cemetery**

Sittingbourne, Kent

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## INTRODUCTION

This site description and accompanying dossier have been prepared by the Kent Gardens Trust as part of its wider review of ***The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens***. This part of the review, carried out for Swale Borough Council in 2020 -22, covers sites within the Swale local authority area with the aim to:

- a) Review the historic nature, content, current state and significance of the sites currently identified in the ***Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens*** for the Swale local authority area along with others identified by Swale Borough Council. The review has been undertaken using Historic England's criteria for identifying the significance of local heritage assets to provide a consistent approach. The revised list of sites has the potential to support development of a Local List of historic sites in Swale should the Council wish to progress this in future<sup>1</sup>. The list of sites researched and evaluated in this review would be subject to consultation as part of any Local List development and is therefore not intended to be final.
- b) Inform future funding applications for historic spaces by the identification of significance
- c) Inform future conservation and/or any development of sites by the identification of the significance of key historic character, features and association including that of setting and viewpoints.

The extent of the area identified represents the current surviving area of the designed landscape, the boundary line generally reflecting the maximum extent of the historic gardens or parkland (although there are exceptions such as where land has been irreversibly lost to development). The boundary line 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.

Swale Borough Council  
Conservation and Design  
Swale House  
East Street  
Sittingbourne  
ME10 3HT  
[www.swale.gov.uk](http://www.swale.gov.uk)

Kent County Council  
Heritage Conservation  
Invicta House  
County Hall  
Maidstone  
ME14 1XX  
[www.kent.gov.uk](http://www.kent.gov.uk)

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

Historic England  
[www.historicengland.org.uk/](http://www.historicengland.org.uk/)

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<sup>1</sup> English Heritage (2012) 'Good Practice Guide to Local Listing'

**KENT**

**BELL ROAD CEMETERY**

**SITTINGBOURNE**

**Centred on 590596 163032**

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

### **Evidential**

The cemetery at Bell Road, Sittingbourne is a well-preserved example of a provincial burial ground dating from 1860. The site retains the original lay-out of the grounds consecrated for Anglican use and grounds unconsecrated for the use of Nonconformists. The 1860 built structures consist of the chapel buildings (listed grade II), lodge house (listed grade II) and a wall fronting Bell Road (listed grade II). Trees remaining from the original planting include yew, cedar and evergreen oak. Within the cemetery are located scattered war graves from World War I and a small section, separated off by a privet hedge from the main area, of world War II graves looked after by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

### **Historical**

The cemetery was developed within a decade of the 1852 - 7 Burial Acts, in response to the overcrowded churchyards in the mid nineteenth century. Its plan appears to have drawn on advice given in John Claudius Loudon's influential 1843 book *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries*. Sittingbourne Cemetery and its chapels were a factor in the original siting of the World War I memorial in 1921, now removed to another location.

### **Aesthetic**

The layout of the original cemetery grounds on largely level ground followed the dictum of 'neatness and simplicity' with straight paths and trees punctuating plots and defining the boundaries. This has been maintained in subsequent extensions to the grounds. The adjacent recreation ground provides a continuity of green space on the southern edge of Sittingbourne town. A branch of the 1921 tree-lined Avenue of Remembrance provides a dignified approach to the northern cemetery entrance.

### **Communal**

The cemetery is still in use (2020) for both burial and cremation and its war graves are used as a learning resource in educational school visits. The location of the cemetery next to the recreation ground and a public path means that it is used regularly by local people walking their dogs.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

Bell Road cemetery has only moderate archaeological potential. A medieval farmstead has been located c. 300m east of the cemetery (HER no. TQ 96 SW 268) and two historic farmsteads existed to the south-east (MKE85352) and east (MKE85351). The cemetery does have three listed buildings associated with it though, including the chapel (TQ 96 SW 1081), the cemetery wall (TQ 96 SW 1139) and the lodge (TQ 96 SW 1204) and these could have potentially archaeological remains associated with them.

## **SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST**

The establishment of the Sittingbourne Burial Board in 1859 and the opening of the new cemetery of approximately 3 acres in 1860 was a timely response to the 1854 Burial Act. The grounds were laid out in sober, functional style in a grid pattern with focus on the central avenue through the chapel buildings provided by paired trees on either side. Enlargement of the grounds to the west, north and south-west took place on three occasions resulting in a site at least four times the size of the original. The lay-out and planting schemes of the burial grounds have been largely maintained in keeping with the original design, with some removal of larger trees after 1960. The new part of the ground has some variation in style, with a tree-lined avenue and the siting of commemorative benches.

## **CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

In the Burial Act of 1854, town councils were enabled to form Burial Boards to establish cemeteries deemed to be for the parishes within the Borough. Under this act,

It shall be lawful for any Burial Board to lay out and embellish any Burial Ground provided by such Board in such Manner as may be fitting and proper, and to build on any Land to be purchased or appropriated for a Burial Ground under this Act', the expenses to be covered by the 'Rates for the Relief of the Poor'.

First mention of the desirability of preventing further use of the churchyard in Sittingbourne 'on account of its crowded state', and of establishing a cemetery, was made in the East Kent Gazette on 6 August 1859. A vestry meeting on 29 August 1859 was convened to establish a burial board (consisting of 9 members), which was attended by 'upwards of 40 ratepayers'.

On 11 August 1860, George Smeed of Gore Court sold for £600 a piece of farmland, not exceeding three acres next to the Sittingbourne/Tunstall road, to the Burial Board of the Parish of Sittingbourne. The square plot of ground was established as a new cemetery for Sittingbourne with a specially commissioned set of two linked chapels in Gothic revival style, designed by architect John Wimble of Walbrook. The northern chapel, described as 'Episcopal' on the 1<sup>st</sup>

Edition O.S. map, was for use by the established church and the southern 'Dissenters' chapel was to serve non-Anglicans.

The foundation stone for the chapels in the new cemetery was laid in a ceremony on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1860 'in the presence of a very large assembly.' It was noted by the chairman John Dixon Dyke that the location for the cemetery was not of the board's choice but that the ground was the only one at all eligible which they were able to procure. Consecration of the ground for the established Church of England was effected on 26<sup>th</sup> October in a service led by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, John Bird Sumner.

In October 1860, an advertisement in the East Kent Gazette addressed to 'Gardeners and Others' was looking for a Superintendent of the Burial Ground for digging of graves and to keep the ground for £1 per week with residence at the entrance lodge. A table of fees and payments for internments was developed, in which the use of the bier (described by current cemetery staff, 2021, as a 'hand hearse') appeared to be gratis.

The first enlargement of the original site occurred in 1875 with purchase of approximately 1.5 acres of land at the back (west and a section south) of the cemetery. This ground was acquired from Arthur Milman by the Sittingbourne Burial Board on 24 December 1875 for £517. Around this time, the adjoining area to the west became the public Sittingbourne Recreation Ground.

In May 1878 the Sittingbourne Burial Board (Clerk: W. J. Harris) advertised in the East Kent Gazette for an active 'man' to assist the sexton in digging graves, mowing and maintaining the cemetery at £1 per week. In August 1881, a Lodge Keeper and Sexton, George Kemsley of Sittingbourne, was appointed at 22/- per week with house and gas.

The Local Government Act of 1894 passed the responsibility of cemeteries to the newly constituted local authorities at district, town and parish level, in this case to Sittingbourne U D C.

In December of 1919, the East Kent Gazette reported on a meeting of the general committee in connection with the Sittingbourne War Memorial which made suggestions relating to the siting of a War Memorial between the Recreation Ground and the Cemetery. Although for some this would seem to be too far out of the town, it appeared to be a suitable spot at the time. There was suggestion of widening the entrance to the Cemetery from the Recreation Ground to 'make a bold approach to the memorial'. The actual site selected was just outside the western entrance of the cemetery at the edge of the Recreation Ground. Two chestnut trees were felled and the fence adjacent to the Recreation Ground path was set back to clear a circular area approximately 15m in diameter, which can be seen on the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition Ordnance survey map. A report in the East Kent Gazette 28 May 1921 covering the unveiling of the Cenotaph on Sunday 22 May describes the new space:

...a portion of the cemetery having been taken in to give a clear sweep of view [...] Looked at from the main avenue of the



Cemetery, the Cenotaph stands clear-cut against the sky-line, putting a finishing touch to the vista. The effect will be enhanced when the present western gates are enlarged.

The planned enlargement of this western entrance and gate was not carried out and over the years the memorial fell into disrepair. After several attacks from vandals, it was re-sited in 1990 to Central Avenue, some 450m due north nearer the central High Street, at a cost of £23,000.

The Avenue of Remembrance (a west-east road with a branch off it extending south to the Cenotaph) was laid out in the early 1920s and lined with lime and copper beech trees at a cost of £116. Each tree carried a memorial name plate at its base.

In the 1920s the cemetery was extended once more, this time to the north with approximately 2.5 acres of land bought by Sittingbourne U D C from Charles D Twopenny for £1300 on 2 January 1923. Part of this ground had been orchards surrounding Glovers cottages, which were at removed for the Glovers Crescent development. An oak fence for the cemetery extension was erected by C. Debnam of Guildford for £460 16s 7d.

A number of burials of men killed in action were made in the World War I. In World War II there were also numerous internments of military personnel, including foreign nationals: a number of these were pilots involved in the 1940 Battle of Britain. In total, 68 war dead have been identified by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission as being buried at this cemetery.

In 1952, the dilapidated state of the western fence boundary was giving concern. A plan was put forward to incorporate the footpath at the edge of the recreation ground into the cemetery, widening the western margin of the original cemetery and using the path railings as the new boundary. This was turned down by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government on the grounds that there were insufficient reasons for closing the path. Chain link fencing remains at the original boundary separating the cemetery from the Recreation Ground path. No railings remain at the edge of the path in the Recreation Ground, although a metal post may be a remnant of this feature.

After the war, land which had previously been orchard to the south-west and across the other side of Capel Road, was bought by Sittingbourne U D C from C. Burley Limited for £1,960, on 23 July 1954 for a further extension to the cemetery. Part of this land was sold for housing on 28 March 1990 to Swale Housing Association.

Cemetery Lodge was sold on a 125-year lease from 20 October 2006 for £125,000; the lease was subsequently bought by the owner on 17 May 2013.

Sittingbourne Cemetery is still a working cemetery, as interments continue to take place. A small section is put aside for the burial of ashes from cremations.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

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

Sittingbourne Cemetery is located on level ground approximately 1 km south of the town centre on Bell Road which leads uphill towards Gore Court and further to the village of Tunstall. It is also 1km distant from St Michael Church in the High Street, which was the site of burials prior to its creation.

The pre-1950 site of approximately 7 acres lies on the western side of Bell Road, partially behind the twentieth century housing of Glover Crescent at the north end and The Mews at the south end where the Cemetery extends down to Capel Road. To the west the cemetery directly abuts the Recreation Ground; to the north-west stands Borden Grammar School. A northern entrance is the termination of the southern end of the tree-lined Avenue of Remembrance leading on to the Recreation Ground; Borden Grammar School stands to the west of the north end of the Avenue.

The burial grounds are completely enclosed by either walls or fences. The frontage towards Bell Road is walled by a rag-stone wall with piers (the wall is listed grade II) which was originally surmounted with iron railings. The red brick band detailing in this wall is reprised in the interior of the neo-Gothic cemetery chapel walls. The boundaries of the cemetery to the north, west and south consist of simple chain-link fencing held by concrete posts, although cast iron Victorian posts remain at the pedestrian gate entrances.

The newest post-1950s section of the cemetery of approximately 3 acres is sited separately south of Capel Road and is bounded by chain-link fencing and hedges.

### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The main entrance with a gate lodge (listed grade II) was erected c.1860 and is situated in the centre of the east frontage. There is vehicular access up to the chapels which are placed centrally and are connected by a covered carriage roadway. A secondary entrance is sited at the termination of the Avenue of Remembrance which leads south from town up to the original Cenotaph location. This avenue provides a grand approach to the northern cemetery gate which is currently kept locked to prevent unwanted vehicular access.

The path extending west through the chapels from the main entrance on Bell Road leads directly to a pedestrian exit to the adjacent Recreation Ground where the circular remains of the former site of the Cenotaph are still visible. There are two further entrances for pedestrians only at each end of the western boundary, both accessing the path at the edge of the Recreation Ground.

The newest, south-west, portion of the burial grounds has a single entrance from Capel Road which permits limited access for vehicles to burial plots.

## **GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS**

Since the financing of the cemetery was initially dependent on ratepayers, the cost of providing the chapels and grounds was an important consideration. As a result, the chairman of the Burial Board declared at the opening ceremony on 8 May 1860 that, 'Neatness and simplicity...shall be the characteristics of this Cemetery'. The lay-out of the cemetery is conspicuously unfussy and symmetrical with straight paths separating rectangular plots of burial ground and paired trees positioned regularly at intersections of paths. The Ordnance survey map of 1862-75 shows this lay-out clearly for the first section of land acquired. The 1875 extension to the west created new, smaller rectangular sections for burial plots, which were nevertheless laid out in line with the existing paths, maintaining symmetry and uniformity with the original grid pattern. The scheme was maintained as much as possible for the subsequent extensions of the cemetery.

All corners of the burial areas are rounded curves, producing a star-effect at the junctions of paths. These distinctive curved corners are most likely a practical response to the use of the bier, which would more easily be negotiated around such corners. The original wooden bier from the nineteenth century has continued in use until recently and is currently stored in the southern chapel. Nineteenth-century images show simple, neat grass edging to fine, smoothed gravel paths which has been superseded by municipal concrete round-topped edging to tarmac paths.

No record was found of any designer to lay out the grounds, but possible local candidates operating at this time and advertising themselves for cemetery landscaping services were William J. Epps at Maidstone and William Masters at Canterbury. The design of the original cemetery grounds closely followed advice given by John Claudius Loudon in his influential 1843 plan on the layout of cemeteries entitled *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries*: 'In general, straight roads and walks are greatly to be preferred in a cemetery to winding ones [...] contributing far more than curved lines to grandeur and solemnity of effect.' He further suggests a lodge at the main entrance and the siting of a chapel or chapels in a central and conspicuous situation to be seen from all the prominent points of view along the roads and walks. All these requirements were clearly implemented at Sittingbourne Cemetery. Further, the design avoided overcrowding by trees, which Loudon warned would 'confound the character and expression of scenes which are, or ought to be, essentially distinct [from those in public parks]'.  
  
Almost all the kinds [of trees] should be evergreen and of dark foliage; because the variety produced by deciduous and flowering trees is not favourable to the expression either of solemnity or grandeur. Evergreen needle-leaved trees, such as the pines, firs, junipers, yews, &c., we should prefer; because, when their foliage drops, it produces much less litter than

that of broad-leaved trees, such as the holly, common laurel, evergreen oak, &c.

Trees remaining from the original planting include yew, cedar and evergreen oak. From twentieth century aerial photographs, there is evidence of trees planted centrally in the rectangular plots, which were removed after 1960, presumably because root disturbance and trunk growth was affecting the grave plots as trees became larger.

Against the advice Loudon gave in his publications, the boundaries of Bell Road Cemetery were, however, planted with trees. The 1860s Ordnance survey map shows a mixture of deciduous and conifer trees at the northern and southern boundaries, with deciduous around the other sides and a pair of conifers at the main Bell Road entrance. The southern boundary appears to have retained three conifers and one evergreen oak at the corners of the original plot (two at each corner). There are also two old trees remaining against the east wall north of the main entrance. The original line of boundary trees on the western edge was removed for the enlargement around 1875, but the creation of the Recreation Ground adjoining the new section provided fresh planting of trees along the course of a path just outside the cemetery ground which are mostly extant. Trees from this period just inside the western cemetery boundary include two Cedars and a tall Sequoia. It is likely that another large Sequoia located in the centre of one of the oblong burial sections west of the central path was planted at the same time.

The design of oblong plots with curved corners at path intersections was maintained in the first two extensions of the original 1860s burial ground, preserving the intended 'neatness and simplicity' desired by the first Burial Board. The land to the south-west, purchased in the 1950s, is somewhat less regular in the lay-out dimensions of plots, the shapes accommodating a circular plot for re-interment of translated remains. Along the central south-east to north-west path of this newest section, runs an avenue of cherries, planted around 1990. This part of the grounds also has high clipped hedge boundaries and has permitted siting of privately bought memorial benches of various designs, which provide seating both within and around the edges of this part of the site.

Bell Road Cemetery has within it a section of official War Graves maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, arranged in a neat, hedged enclosure west of the chapels against the south-eastern boundary of the second, southern extension.

## **REFERENCES**

### **Books, articles, webpages:**

Cordell, Alan, Lee, Bill and Lee, Margaret, *Sittingbourne and District. A Pictorial History* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co, 1989)

Loudon, J. C., *On the laying out, planting, and managing of cemeteries; and on the improvement of churchyards* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1843)

Loudon, J. C., *The Gardeners' chronicle and agricultural gazette* (London: 1855)

[www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/15-16/85/enacted](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/15-16/85/enacted)

Commonwealth War Graves Commission - <https://www.cwgc.org>

Historic England List entry numbers 1055793, 1366597 and 1061079.

### **Maps:**

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

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

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

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1929-1952

### **Illustrations:**

Historic aerial views Google Earth

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/16206>

### **Archival Items:**

East Kent Gazette from 1859

Maidstone Journal and Kentish Advertiser 1856

South Eastern Gazette, 1856

Land Registry Deed Packets 892 (K915156), DP803 (K936460) and DP957 (K956808).

**Research Karen Emery**

**Editor Harriet Jordan**

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Fig. 1 Boundary map

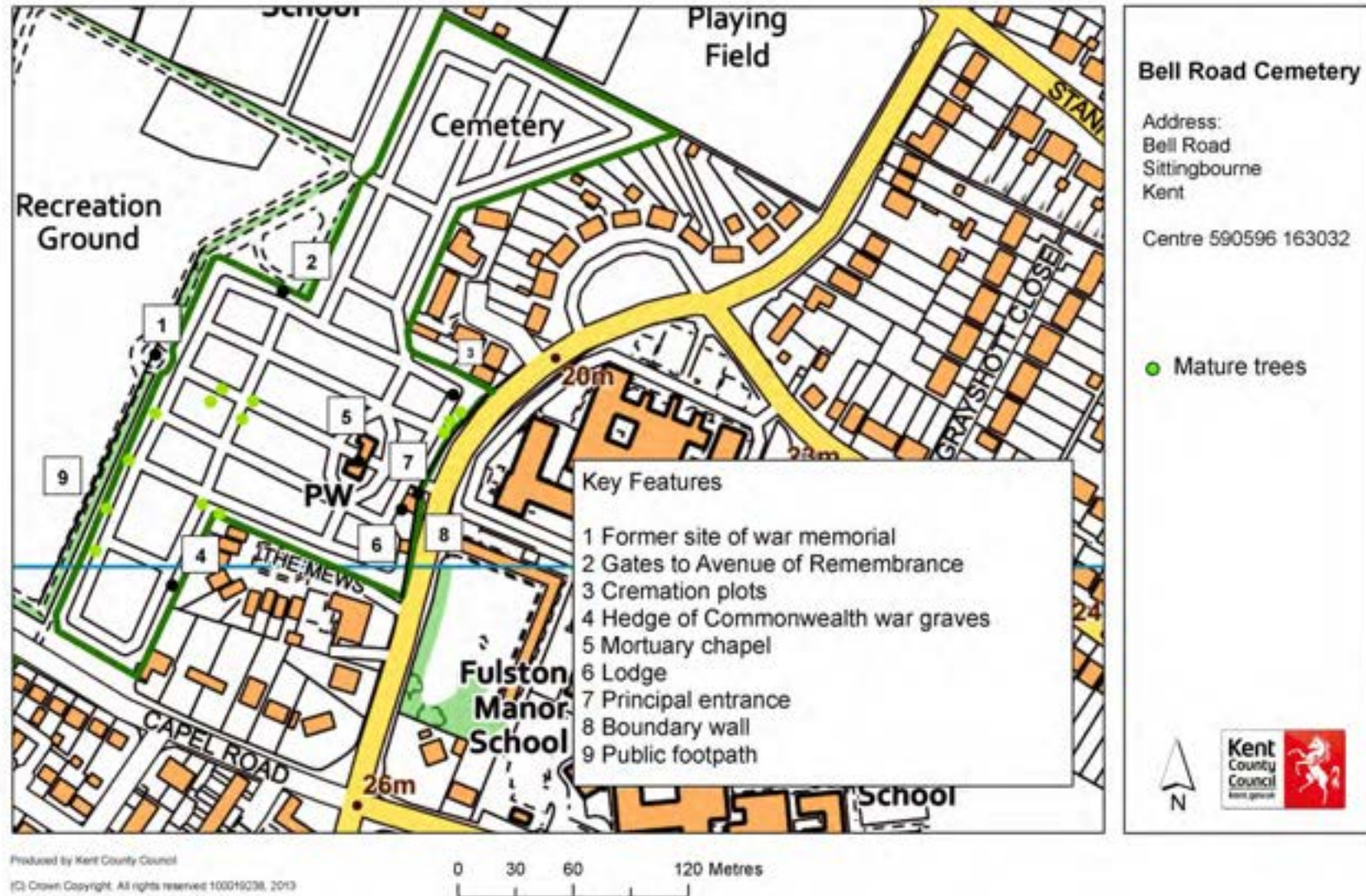


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Fig. 2 Aerial photograph (2016)



Fig. 3 Map of key features





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Fig. 4 Ordnance Survey 1<sup>st</sup> Edition 25” map (1862-1875)



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## Fig. 5 Ordnance Survey 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 25” map (1897-1900)

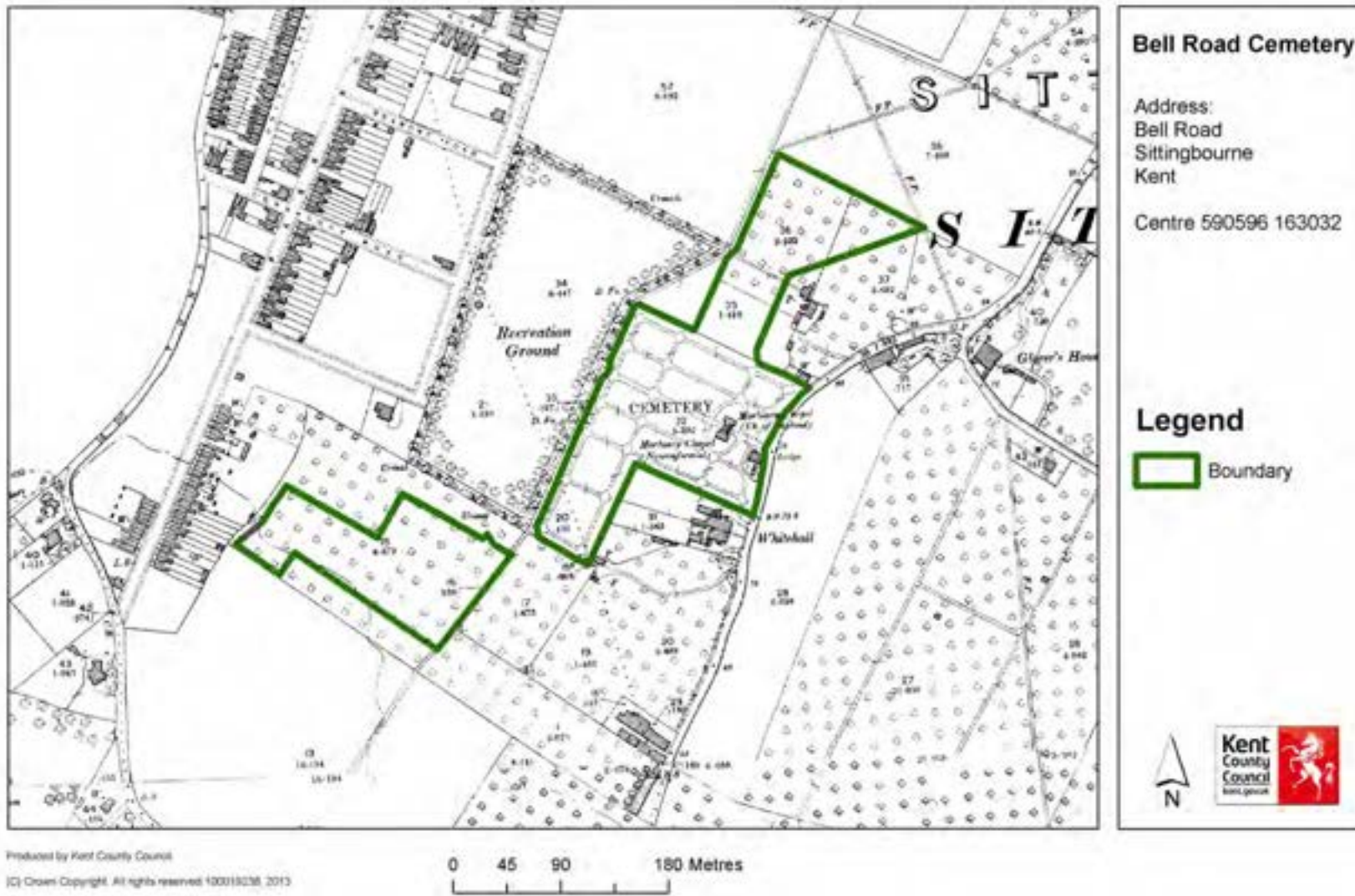
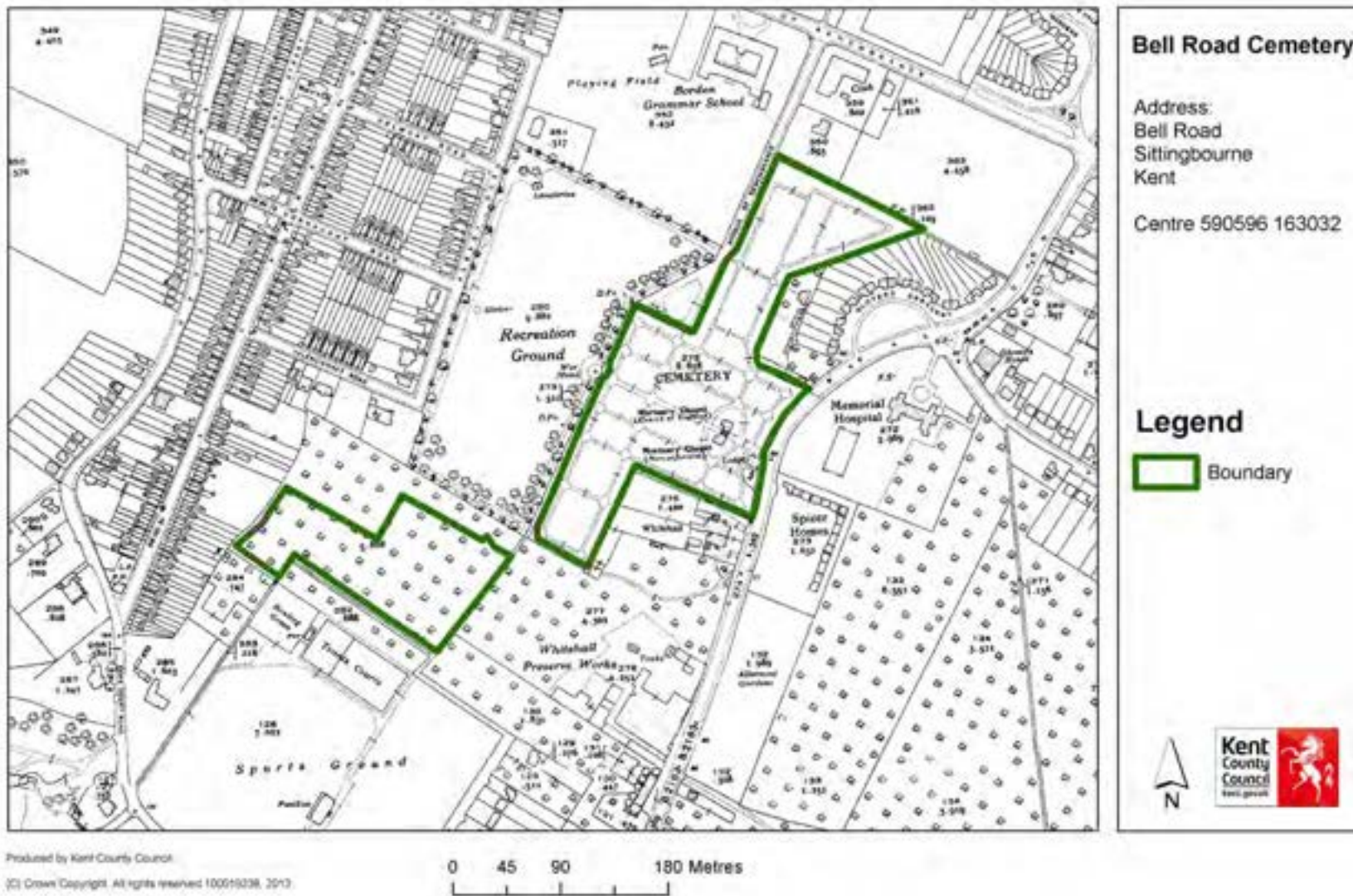


Fig. 6 Ordnance Survey 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition 25” map (1907-1923)



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Fig. 7 Ordnance Survey 4<sup>th</sup> Edition 25” map (1929-1952)



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Fig. 8 Postcard of Bell Road Cemetery in early 1900s





**Fig. 9** The path running along the east side of Sittingbourne Recreation Ground looking north, 1905. Source: Alan Cordell, Bill Lee and Margaret Lee, *Sittingbourne and District. A Pictorial History* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co, 1989), Image 74.



**Fig. 10** Ceremony for Cenotaph unveiling, viewed from the Recreation Ground, 1921



Fig. 11 Avenue of Remembrance c.1923 looking south towards the western Cemetery entrance <http://www.pigstrough.co.uk/ww1/Images/Large/RememThenLarge.jpg>



Fig. 12 Bell Road principal entrance to cemetery, wall and gatehouse



**Fig. 13 Burial plots in rectangular sections with rounded corners, hard edging and paths**



**Fig. 14 Paired trees from original plantings sited at junction of crossing paths on the central east-west path**



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**Fig. 15 Sequoia in centre of oblong plot west of central path, planted after 1875**





**Fig. 16 Former site of the Cenotaph with central path and cemetery chapel belltower beyond the fence and gate. The same C19 boundary trees (Cedar left and Sequoia on right) as 1921**



**Fig.17 Avenue of Remembrance looking north away from the cemetery**

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**Fig. 18 MP Gordon Henderson with Bernie Doran, the South East representative for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission at the Sittingbourne War Graves in Bell Road Cemetery**

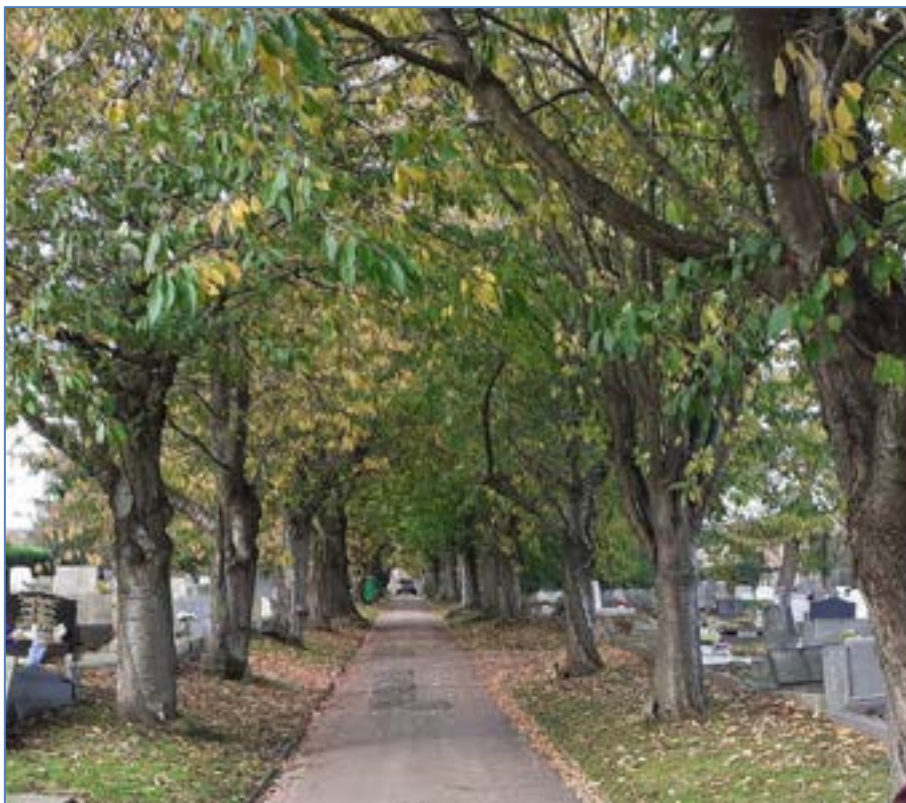


**Fig.19 NW Pedestrian exit towards the Recreation Ground with Victorian gate posts**

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**Fig. 20 Historic wooden bier (hand-drawn hearse).**



**Fig.21 Cherry tree avenue in the new south-western section of the cemetery**

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**Fig. 22 Hedge boundary and memorial benches in new section**