

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Swale District



Johnson House Gardens, Sittingbourne



August 2022

Johnson House Gardens

Sittingbourne, Kent

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE & ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

SUMMARY OF HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

SITE DESCRIPTION

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Boundary Map

Figure 2: Aerial Photograph 2016

Figure 3: Tithe Map (1840)

Figure 4: Ordnance Survey 1st edition 25" Map (1862-1875)

Figure 5: Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 25" Map (1897-1900)

Figure 6: Photograph of Johnson House Gardens (1949)

Figure 7: Photographs of gardens

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 future¹. 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
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East Street
Sittingbourne
ME10 3HT
www.swale.gov.uk

Kent County Council
Heritage Conservation
Invicta House
County Hall
Maidstone
ME14 1XX
www.kent.gov.uk

Kent Gardens Trust
www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk

Historic England
www.historicengland.org.uk/

¹ English Heritage (2012) 'Good Practice Guide to Local Listing'

KENT

JOHNSON HOUSE GARDENS

SITTINGBOURNE

Centred on 589900 163639

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

EVIDENTIAL

Johnson House Gardens date from the late C19 when they were laid out as the setting for a private residence.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Johnson House Gardens are located c. 150m south Roman Watling Street and it is possible that archaeological remains related to roadside activities could be discovered within the site. However, the western half of the site was formerly a chalk pit, and it is likely that this will have removed any earlier archaeological potential in this area. The first edition Ordnance Survey map (1825-1875) shows structures associated with the chalk pit, probably including a limekiln, and it is possible the traces of these will survive as industrial archaeology. The outline of the chalk pit itself is also of historical interest. The garden itself is not of great antiquity but the paths, retaining walls and boundaries are of interest as examples of the period and contributing to the character of the Gardens.

HISTORICAL

The private house, 'Tynewydd' (now known as Old Johnson House), was built in the late C19 for local lawyer, Frederick George Gibson. The site was gifted to the town of Sittingbourne in memory of Eveline Johnson, wife of Alfred Johnson who was part of the earthenware and construction firm, Johnson Brothers.

AESTHETIC

The site chosen for the late C19 residence, 'Tynewydd', was, in part, a former chalk pit. The resultant interesting topography influenced the choice of an informal style for the layout of the grounds, with meandering paths through deciduous flowering trees and shrubs.

COMMUNAL

Following donation of the house and surrounding land in 1941, the site was adapted by Swale Borough Council, for use by the public. Johnson House Gardens were officially opened to the public in 1950, and the site remains a well-used public open space.

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

A public garden, opened in 1950, adapted from the grounds of a private residence. Johnson House Gardens were donated by the Johnson family to the town of Sittingbourne, in 1941, as a gift in memory of Eveline Johnson. The gardens were originally laid out as the setting for a private house, 'Tynewydd', built in the late C19 for local lawyer, Frederick George Gibson. The Gardens were modified by Swale Borough Council to suit their new purpose, but the overall layout was little changed.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The site lies within the town of Sittingbourne, to the south-east of its town centre and south of the main A2 road. The immediate environs were undeveloped until the late 1800s, when Sittingbourne saw expansion following arrival of the railway combined with increased demand for products such as bricks and paper. Terraced housing dating from this period is noted to the south, along Bassett Road, and to the east, along Burley Road.

Prior to its development as a private house and grounds, the western half of the site was one of several chalk pits in the area, while the eastern half was planted as orchard (Tithe Map 1840 and 1st Ed map, 1862 to 1875) (Figs. 3 and 4). The landscape opportunities presented by this interesting topography resulting from this earlier use, presumably determined the choice of this site for the new house.

The exact date at which the house, originally known as Tynewydd, was built is not known, but it appears on the 2nd Ed OS (1897 to 1900) (Fig. 5) and, in 1896, Tynewydd was given as an address for the daughter of the owner's marriage announcement.

Tynewydd was first owned by Frederick George Gibson. Born in 1838 at Danbury in Essex, Gibson became a successful Sittingbourne lawyer and County Magistrate, as well as a Councillor (Liberal) and member of the local Hospital and Burials Boards. Gibson's address in the 1881 census showed him living with his family at 75 High St, Sittingbourne, with his wife Ellen, four children and two servants. (Ref: article from Quarterly Journal of Sittingbourne Heritage Museum, No 84 published March 2019; pages 7 & 8 'The Origins of Johnson House Gardens' by John and Sheila Hepburn). He had connections with Wales, hence the choice of name for the new house.

In 1923, Tynewydd was sold to Eveline Johnson, following the death of her husband, Alfred, in Faversham in 1921. (Ref: extract from book provided by Sittingbourne Heritage Museum). Alfred Johnson was part of the earthenware firm Johnson Brothers, of Hanley, Stoke on Trent. He married Eveline Elizabeth Adams (b. 1861) and they had two sons, Stanley (b. 1889) and Alfred (b. 1890).

During the early part of the 1900s, Johnson Brothers had industrial premises in Queensborough, on the Isle of Sheppey, 8 miles north of Sittingbourne. The firm expanded into building housing and had a short-lived roofing tile factory as well.

The firm was one of the larger employers in the locality as late as the 1970s, but is no longer in business.

In 1941, two years after the death of Eveline Johnson, her sons donated the 3 acre site including the house and gardens in her memory to the town of Sittingbourne in 1941, expressing the desire that future use should perpetuate the wish of their mother. The house was used by the Council for civil defence, health offices and a clinic. After the end of the Second World War, the Council modified the gardens for public use and renamed them to keep the family association. Johnson House Gardens were officially opened on 3 May 1950, by Mrs Easton, Chair of the Council; they were Sittingbourne's first gardens to be opened to the public (Ref: East Kent Gazette, published 5 May 1950).

The original house still exists, now called 'Old Johnson House', with a modern extension added, and is divided into flats. (Fig. 2) where once the House's formal lawn was, a children's nursery now lies; the was constructed in 1995, replacing an earlier nursery.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Johnson House Gardens lie to the south-west of Sittingbourne town centre, at Grid Ref TQ899636; Latitude 51.34066; longitude 0.72507131. (Fig. 1)

The gardens comprise a roughly rectangular area of approximately 1.2ha (3 acres). They are bounded directly by Bassett Road, Barrow Grove and Johnson Road to the south and south-west, Burley Road to the east and housing/London Road Industrial Estate to the north. In the north-eastern corner stands Old Johnson House and, to the west of this, a children's nursery, both of which are excluded from this study. To the east of the gardens lies a block of flats (excluded from this study) and terraced housing fronting Burley Road. To the south lies housing fronting Bassett Road.

The western boundary is open to the public highway, with a pedestrian gate at the north-west corner. The northern boundary is a mixture of fencing (wooden panels; high-security palisade fencing). The eastern boundary has fencing alongside the children's nursery. There is a wide tarmac path leading into the Gardens from Burley Road, which also forms pedestrian access to the nursery. To the south the boundary backs onto the gardens of terraced housing in Bassett Road.

The site slopes from all boundaries into the centre, more steeply from the north, west and south. The north side being terraced with stone retaining walls either side of a tarmac path running east/west and then dropping down to rejoin the main route through the gardens. The topography is reflective of the site's historic use as a chalk pit and would have provided views back to the House from the higher land to the west (Fig. 7).

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The site is accessible from the east and the west on foot: a pedestrian gate leads off Johnson Road at the north-west corner of the site, while a wide tarmac path gives access to the Gardens from Burley Road. These entrances perpetuate those of the late C19 layout. The north-west entrance made use of the existing access into the chalk pit in which the landscape was developed (OS 1871-1890, 1897-1900).

A cul-de-sac leads off Burley Road, into a parking area belonging to the housing which edges the eastern end of the site; this also gives vehicular access for maintenance purposes to the gardens (Fig. 7).

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Old Johnson House, dating from the late C19 and originally known as Tynewydd, is built of brick construction, with stone window surrounds and a slate roof. Its aspect would have provided a south-western view into the grounds and a lawn where the children's nursery now stands: neither house nor nursery form part of this study.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The main pedestrian access through the Gardens is a tarmac path running east/west across the site. It follows the line of the late Victorian approach routes that provided access to Tynewydd (now named Old Johnson House). Two paths branch off the main walk, one looping round to the north, the other to the south.

To the north, the ground is terraced with stone retaining walls either side of a tarmac path running east/west and then dropping down to rejoin the main route through the gardens.

The gardens are predominantly laid out as grass, with mature trees and areas of shrubs. This reflects their original late C19 layout in a simple, informal style (OS map series). Pictorial evidence dating back to 1949/50 (Fig. 7: photo/postcard from book extract provided by Sittingbourne Heritage Museum) shows planted beds throughout the central area, but these have all been removed except for one display bed lying in the centre of the eastern part of the site adjacent to the residential accommodation and children's nursery.

Throughout the central area, the mature tree specimens are deciduous (mainly horse chestnut, also silver birch and sycamore). Bands of mixed evergreen shrubs (Mahonia and Choisya) are planted in the raised beds to the northern boundary; in the north-eastern corner stands a large Holm oak.

To the north and south sides to the central area are mature trees and shrubs.

In the eastern part of the gardens, nearest the children's nursery, trees are planted along the entrance path edge, possibly planted as part of the Council's works undertaken for the public opening in 1950. To the south-eastern corner are more large trees adjacent to the boundary, mainly deciduous specimens (including oak and ash); some of these appear to have been pruned to lower their height & spread.

The steeply rising southern part of the site supports a mixture of mature trees (mainly deciduous) and shrubs, including self-seeded sycamore saplings. At the foot of the slope to the south-western corner there is a further area of dense shrubs and trees, comprising a mixture of species mainly evergreen. Historic maps show this band of mixed planting that forms a screen along the eastern and southern boundaries (OS series).

A Victorian drinking trough has been installed by the side of the path overlooking the central grassed area, bearing the inscription "Everyone of us must give account of himself to God". It is noted as having been made between 1837 and 1901, and possibly relocated by the Council to here as part of refurb(?). (Ref: heritagegateway.org.uk ref TQ86 SE243; Record Type: Landscape - A historic garden (pre 1939) in a suburban town, style of specialist interest only).

Wooden benches are provided alongside the paths for people to sit and enjoy their surroundings (Fig. 7).

REFERENCES

Extract from book provided by Sittingbourne Heritage Museum

East Kent Gazette, published 5 May 1950

heritagegateway.org.uk ref TQ 86 SE 243

Hepburn, John & Sheila (2019) '*The Origins of Johnson House Gardens*'. Quarterly Journal of Sittingbourne Heritage Museum, No 84, pp7-8

Photo/postcard from book extract provided by Sittingbourne Heritage Museum

Maps:

Tithe Map of 1840 (Kent History and Library Centre)

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st Edition 1862-1875

OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd Edition 1897-1900

OS Modern Mapping

Research and written by Caroline Vincent
Edited by Harriet Jordan

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Fig. 1 Boundary map



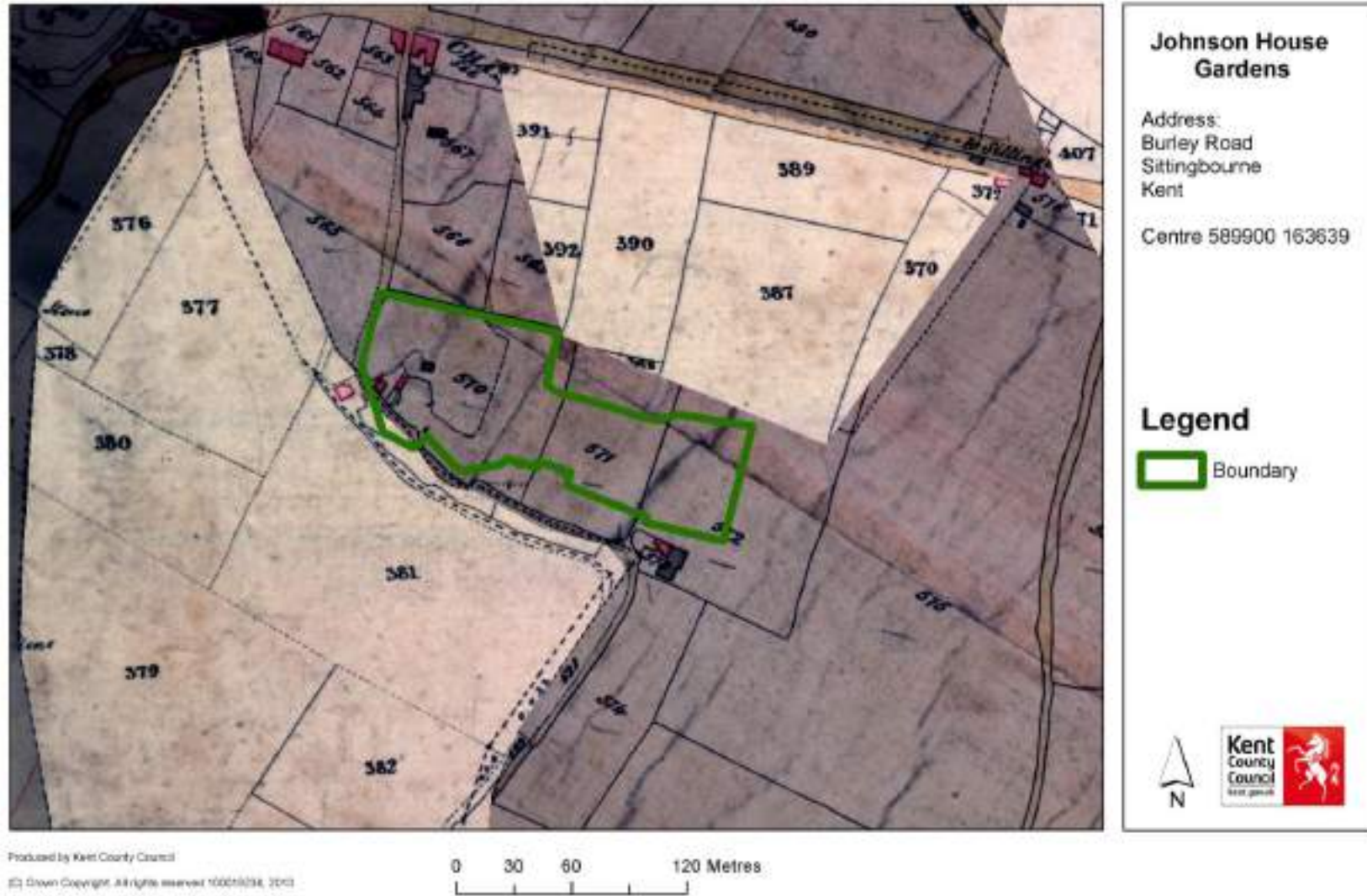
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Fig. 2 2016 aerial photograph



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Fig. 3 Tithe Map (1840)



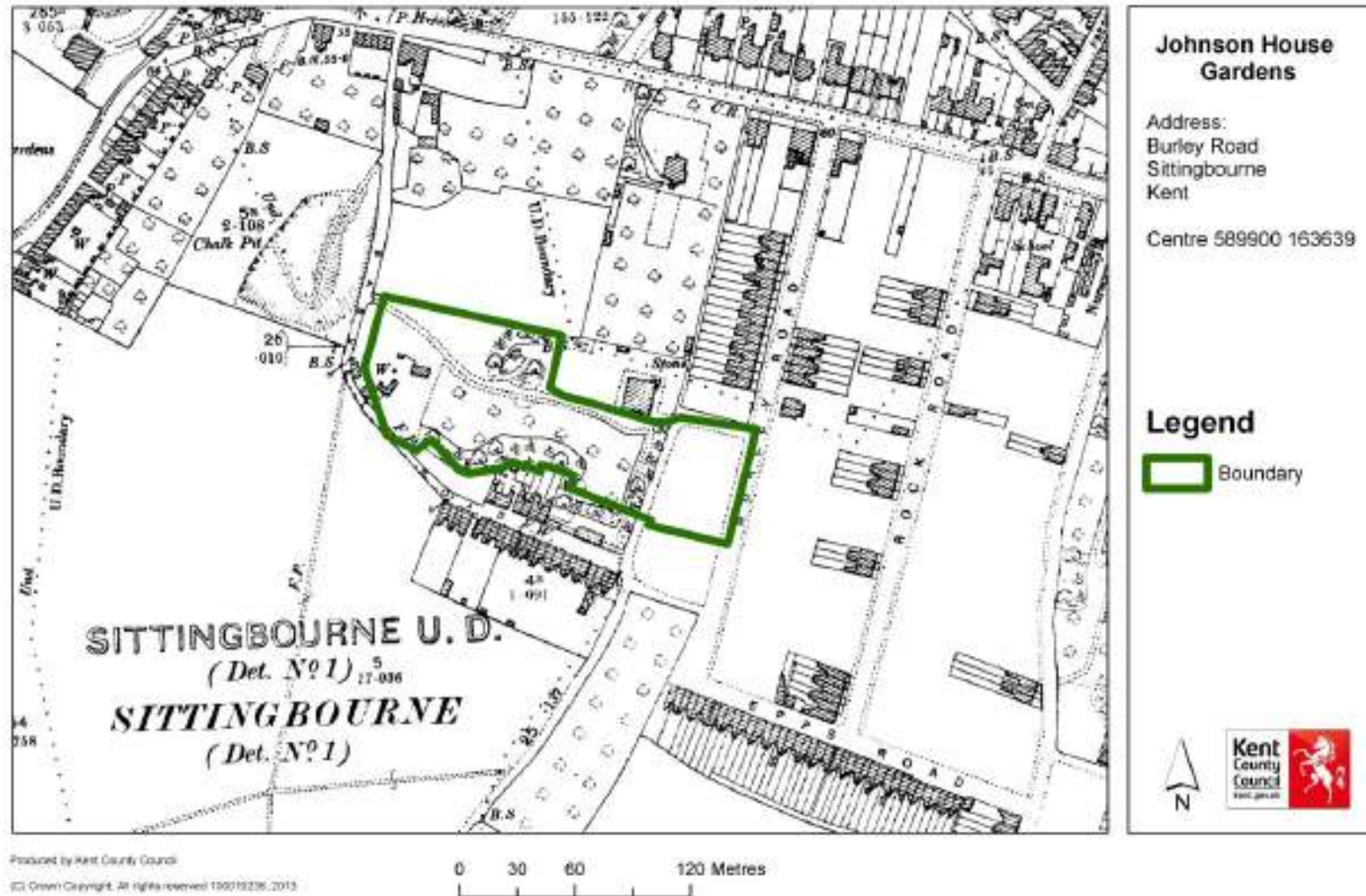
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Fig. 4 Ordnance Survey 1st edition 25" Map (1862-1875)



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Fig. 5 Ordnance Survey 2nd edition 25” Map (1897-1900)



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Fig. 6 Photograph of Johnson House Gardens (1949)



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Fig. 7 Photographs of Johnson House Gardens (2021)



View looking eastwards from Barrow Grove



View looking north from Bassett Road boundary



North-western boundary



Main entrance from Burley Road showing Old Johnson house



View eastwards from west to central area



Entrance to garden from Johnson Road



View westwards from entrance to Barrow Grove



Planted central area to south of children's nursery



Southern boundary



Water trough bearing inscription



View looking east from central area towards children's nursery



Path leading eastwards along northern boundary



Path leading to water trough from south



North-east corner of garden



View through to central area looking westwards