The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



Bishopscourt, Rochester

January 2015

Bishopscourt

Rochester, 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 Medway Council in 2013 -14, covers sites within the Medway 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 Medway local authority area along with others identified by Medway Council. The review has been undertaken using English Heritage'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 Medway should the Council wish to progress this in future[1]. 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.

Medway Council
Greenspace, Heritage
& Library Services
Gun Wharf
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Chatham
ME4 4TR
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Kent County Council
Heritage Conservation
Invicta House
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ME14 1XX
01622 696918
www.kent.gov.uk

Kent Gardens Trust
www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk

English Heritage
www.english-heritage.org.uk

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

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT **BISHOPSCOURT**
MEDWAY
ROCHESTER

Centred on 574089 168349

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The unbroken occupation of the house and gardens of Bishopscourt since the C17, despite many changes, give the garden area some archaeological potential to reveal new evidence of its historic function and appearance.

Historical value is demonstrated through a significant level of surviving fabric from the garden's early form incorporated into its enclosing walls, some of which dates from the C16 and C17. The close association of the garden and house with both the bishops and the cathedral since the Dissolution, and the subsequent ownership by the see from the mid C17 (apart from a brief period 1845-1919), continues to the present day.

The situation of the garden, built on raised ground with extensive views to the River Medway and Rochester Castle, and as the immediate setting for Bishopscourt house, offers moderate aesthetic and landmark value.

Bishopscourt garden forms part of a network of designed and historic green spaces to the south of the centre of Rochester which provide relaxing places for the local community and a social, spiritual and symbolic communal connection with the City's long ecclesiastical history.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Before the Reformation, the see of Rochester owned houses at Rochester, Halling, Trottiscliffe and Bromley but as revenues were insufficient to maintain more than one house, the Bishops had left Rochester for Bromley Palace (Fisher) leaving the other three houses leased to tenants. Hasted states that, following the Dissolution, the precincts of the cathedral had been left in 'devastation and confusion' and that, 100 years later, as a result of the civil wars they were in a 'ruinous and woeful condition'. The cathedral itself had been extensively damaged and, following the Restoration, money had to be raised by the dean and chapter for repairs. In order to help this process, Francis Head (c.1641-78), a leading barrister and head of the Middle Temple, bequeathed his house in St Margaret's Street, some 200 yards from the Old Palace, to the Bishops of Rochester for 'the maintenance of hospitality nearer the Cathedral Church of Rochester and for an invitation to his lordship and his successors to reside therein' (Francis Head's will). However the house was probably never used for this purpose but tenanted from 1678 to 1845. Despite this, it came to be known as the Old Palace. It is known that, on returning to England from the continent, Charles II stayed the night in Rochester the night before his coronation

in London. It is generally thought to have been in the house of Mr Clerke, now known as Restoration House, but some historians claim it was in fact Francis Head's House, now Bishopscourt (Wheatley 12/23).

Little is known about most of the tenants but, in 1772, Fisher notes that the house 'is pleasantly situated, the gardens are kept in good order, and command a most delightful view of the river Medway and the adjacent hills. The house, out-buildings, and gardens were much improved by the late Mr. Frederick Hill, lessee to the bishop'.

The 1842 tithe map shows the plot of house and garden (number 1473) and the apportionment names the owner as the Bishop of Rochester and the tenants as Martha Winthrop and her two children. Martha, the widow of the Rev Edward Winthrop, vicar of Darenth, died two years later. A portrait of her daughter, also Martha, taken in 1849 is in the museum at Dover and commemorates her role as an early diarist and wide-ranging reader.

Although nothing is known about the layout of the earlier garden, the tithe map shows it as an unencumbered space to the west of the house, bounded by Love Lane to the west and the gardens of Love Lane houses to the north. At that time the house was in two separate halves. The area of ground to the south, which later became the kitchen garden, has a different plot number and there is no record of its owner at that time.

In 1842 Robert Whiston was appointed headmaster of Rochester Cathedral Grammar School (also known as The King's School) which at this time had hardly any pupils. Whiston quickly raised the complement of scholars and refurbished the Old Palace which was uninhabited at the time, at a personal cost of £4000, to be used both as his home and as a boarding house for the students. In 1845 Whiston purchased the house from the Ecclesiastic Commissioners and continued as headmaster of the school until 1877, living in the Old Palace until his death in 1895 (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). The house remained in Whiston's family until 1919; the only known tenants in this period were HS Bridgewater (1900) and AO Trenchman (1906-1919) (ECE.7.1.824142 part 1).

In 1845, the city of St Albans had been transferred from the diocese of Lincoln to the diocese of Rochester resulting in the need to sell Bromley Palace in order to purchase Danbury Place in Essex for the bishop's new residence. However, in 1877, further change took place when the new see of St Albans was created and Danbury Park was required for the bishop of the new diocese. As a result, the bishops of Rochester were left homeless and forced to lead a rather peripatetic existence until 1906, finally settling in Kippington House in Sevenoaks until a permanent residence was obtained. Surveys were carried out on Restoration House, Church House in Bromley and Kippington but none were satisfactory. Finally, in 1919, the Old Palace in Rochester, to be renamed Bishopscourt, was chosen despite being under offer to another buyer who was eventually persuaded to give way and the house sold back to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for £2500 (ECE.7.1.824142 part 3).

Bishopscourt was too small and in poor repair but the commissioners approved £12,725 for adaptation and improvement, £15,000 having been set aside from the sale of Addington Park (in the see of Canterbury) for this purpose. It was not just the house which was in disrepair but there were coach houses, stables and potting sheds which needed re-roofing and many of the boundary walls, which were thought to be ancient, needed rebuilding, especially the retaining walls in Love Lane. The garden itself was judged to be in a poor state; although there were two glasshouses only one was in good condition. The bishop proposed to keep on Dadson, the gardener, to improve matters and prevent the garden deteriorating further while the building works proceeded. His wages were 30 shillings weekly together with a rent free cottage (worth 7s per week) near the 'back of the Old Palace Garden' and, in addition, he was given 2s 6d for extra help with mowing the lawn which was considered heavy work. The bishop wished to pay the out-going lessee £20 in respect of unused manure, fruit trees and shrubs recently planted and seeds sown of which he would have the benefit (ECE.7.1.824142 part1). These arrangements were clearly satisfactory because, a year later, the commissioners were asked for money to buy vegetable seeds from Messrs Carters for the kitchen garden which was now productive (ECE.7.1.824142 part2).

The extensive building works were finally completed in 1921 when the bishop was able to take up residence but not before an additional £2545 had been spent. The separate stable block was converted to make kitchen offices and a chaplain's room and was joined on to the main house. It remains the home of the bishop of Rochester today (2014).

But expenses were ongoing and, in 1933, garden walls had to be repaired for an estimated £200, to include replacing 100 feet of coping. By 1947 the garden was in need of work to catch up with the war years. Both walls and paths needed attention and many of the trees required 'lopping'. In fact, the extensive archive of garden accounts which extends to 1980 show the frequent visits of tree surgeons to attend to the trees.

In 1961, the bishopric's officer noted that the expenses for the garden were £618 10s for the year and included the gardener's wages, rent and rates for his cottage, seeds, plants, equipment, repairs and greenhouse heating. In the same year, it was decided that approximately one fifth of an acre (out of a total of 1½ acres, i.e. 0.6 ha) of the southern end of the kitchen garden was to be sold for building three houses and planning permission was obtained despite objection by the then bishop's wife. However plans to build a ring road which would have cut across the site (but which never materialised) delayed matters together with other plans to build diocesan offices and it was not until 1968 that the land was finally sold for £1400 (B/H31G part 1). The rest of the kitchen garden area fell out of use and became overgrown and was eventually sold in 2011 to construct five houses despite much objection from residents.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM AND SETTING

Bishopscourt house and garden are located at 24, St Margaret's Street, c250m to the south-west of Rochester Cathedral and c250 metres east of the river Medway, at an altitude of 50m aod. The whole of St Margaret's Street lies outside the line of the mediaeval city wall and was once known as South Gate Street since it led out from the south gate of the city. Bishopscourt house and garden occupy a plot of c0.4 ha, the garden's land rising gently to the west from the house before falling more steeply towards the western boundary, affording views to the river across the roofs of houses in Love Lane.

The plot is approximately rectangular, some 50m x 100m. The eastern wall of the house forms the northern half of the eastern boundary separating the site from St Margaret's Street; the southern half of this boundary is formed by a 2.5m high brick wall and entry gates. This wall has flint panes with brick surrounds, on a ragstone rubble plinth with triangular coping.

The south boundary comprises a 100m long wall (grade II listed) which is slightly higher and of various dates and possibly incorporates C16 and C17 work; it is built of flint and ragstone rubble with triangular coping and has much brick dressing and patching. On the south side of the boundary wall are both Old St Margaret's, which was formerly a school, and the site of the Bishopscourt kitchen garden, which is now housing.

The 40m long west boundary is a 2-2.3m high brick wall, divided into two sections by a gate and separating the garden from Love Lane which is set some 1.5m below the garden level. The north boundary is a c100m long, 2.5m high brick wall, also separating the garden from the gardens in Love Lane which here lie some 1-2m lower. The western end of this latter wall is brick on a flint base, while the eastern end is brick with buttresses.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance to Bishopscourt is from St Margaret's Street, through a pair of close- boarded wooden gates, c.2m wide, which open onto a parking area. 10m north of the wooden entrance gates a small iron gate, adorned with the Rochester Cathedral and King's School emblem of the pilgrims' scallop shell on a red cross, opens from St Margaret's Street onto the front garden; further north along St Margaret's Street is a covered archway leading to garages and giving access to a separate first-floor flat within the house. On the north boundary of the garden there is also a small wooden gate leading to steps down to Love Lane. Another gate, leads through the south wall to the now-built on site of the former kitchen garden (excluded from the area of designed historic interest).

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The present house (listed grade II*) was probably built c1500 but has been frequently modified during the last 500 years. It is a Z-shaped building, mainly of

brick, with three storeys for the main part and two storeys for the northern wing. The main part of the building is faced with knapped flint and red brick, whilst the northern end which was reconstructed c.1800 is all brick. Two deep brick and timber window bays have been added to the west front and the east front pebble-dashed, probably c.1920. A porch, also with the scallop shell and cross emblem, was added to the east front in 1961. The last major interior alterations were made in 1919-1921 to enable the building to fulfil its new purpose as the bishop's residence. The 3rd edition OS map (1907-1923) shows the building in two parts, but the 4th edition (1929-1952) shows the building as it is in 2014, as one single house. The northern part of the building now has a separate self-contained flat on the first floor.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

Immediately inside the wooden gates to the property is a tarmacked parking area (20m x 10m) for about six cars, planted peripherally with shrubs and herbaceous material and enclosed on its western side by wall (1.8m high x 10m in length) running between the house and the southern site boundary wall and comprising lower courses of brick with railings above. A path from the parking area leads north to the main door of the house across the small front garden (10m x 5m) largely laid to lawn with a copper-beech tree which is shown in a photograph of Bishopscourt dating from the early C20 (Kent photo archive).

The main garden is entered through a decorative iron gate, surmounted by a brick arch, set in the middle of the western wall of the parking area. The first view the garden from this point is of a large central lawn dominated by a large tulip tree and cherry tree and a tarmac path on three sides with planting around the outer edge.

The 1st to 4th editions of the OS maps show that the boundaries and structure of the main garden with perimeter paths and a central space were established by approximately 1870 with no subsequent change. The 1st edition map of 1862-1875 shows a large number of trees planted near the northern (Love Lane) and southern boundaries, furthest away from the house.

Immediately inside the garden entrance, against the southern, C16, patterned brick and flint boundary wall, are an old lime and an old sycamore tree, both pollarded and of approximately 1m girth and the remains of a felled, second sycamore. West of these old trees, C21 fruit trees (crab apple, plum and cherry) are planted near the edge of the lawn. The lawn slopes gently westwards to a hedge dividing this upper garden from a lower, western, section. This hedge (1.8m) is formed of a double line of yew trees, separated by a brick-surfaced path, planted c.1923 following the purchase of the property by the Church Commissioners.

Immediately to the east of the hedge is a tarmac path providing a north-south route, which is shown established by 1862 (1st edition OS map), at the edge of the lawn. A mature cherry tree which also appears to be marked on the same map is growing in the lawn nearby. At this point there is a disused gate in the

southern boundary wall beyond which is the site of the former kitchen garden which is now built over.

The north-south route's path turns west and enters the lower garden at the southern end of the yew hedge. In the south-west corner of this lower garden, c.30m x 20m in area, is a small (c.10m square) group of mixed coniferous and deciduous trees which is planted on ground raised above the main level of the lower garden. Two flights of six steps descend from here to two paths running northwards, parallel to the Love Lane boundary wall. The westernmost one is the continuation of the north-south tarmac path while the eastern, brick-surfaced path, separates the two lines of the yew hedging, of which only a few plants of the western half remain. The whole area of the lower garden, between the yew hedges and the western boundary wall, is laid to mixed herbaceous planting through which the two paths run.

At the north-western corner of these borders, where the Love Lane boundary makes a right-angled turn to run eastwards, there is a garden store which replaced a late C19 glasshouse, deemed beyond repair by the Church Commissioners. Steps up to its flat roof enable it to be used as a lookout with views westwards over the river Medway. From this corner of the garden a tarmac path leads eastwards for 30m past the surviving C19 glasshouse, a small vegetable garden, further shrubs, ornamental fruit trees and two Irish yews, to reach a small circular C21 rose garden with a fountain in the middle (20m north-west of the house). The fountain was purchased by Bishop Christopher Chavasse in 1947 (ref H31G-pt1).

To the east of the rose garden is a small, walled, domestic garden area (c.20m x 15m) reached by a path sloping downwards to the north from the main perimeter path; the garden is entered through two wooden doors set in the surrounding wall and down two steps, The southern half has a central lawn and peripheral planting while the northern half is paved and contains workshops along the western wall and an entrance from St Margaret's Street to the east.

The perimeter path continues southwards from the rose garden, passing along the garden front of the house, against which a large magnolia is growing to the height of the eves. The path then passes a small paved patio surrounded by raised ornamental beds (C21) to complete its circuit and return to the main garden entrance.

During the late C20 the bishops appear to have taken little interest in the garden and it became very overgrown with a proliferation of *Cupressus Leylandii* trees (32 in all). In the early C21 Bishop James Langstaff was translated to Rochester; he and his wife decided to revive the garden and a long-term plan to re-design it was started as a major project.

The Leylandii trees were felled and the yew trees drastically cut back to make the lower garden area less oppressive. It was then replanted with flowers along the Love Lane wall and a parterre of herbaceous perennials and ornamental grasses, while the greatly-reduced yews provided a parallel avenue. A patio had been laid in the 1970's immediately behind the house and raised flower beds were added

in 2011 providing a seating area with a view of the garden. The lawn is used for parties and games including croquet. The garden has been open to the public on certain days of the year since 2012 as a fund-raising venture. The house and garden remain in the ownership of the Church Commissioners.

REFERENCES

Books and Articles:

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Canon Wheatley, Historical Notes, (Vicar of St Margaret's 1915-1947), published 1992 by City of Rochester Society

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, entry on Robert Whiston

Newman J, *The Buildings of England, Kent: West and the Weald,* 2012

Hasted W, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: vol. 4, Rochester*

Maps

OS Map 1st Edition 25" (1862-1875)
OS Map 2nd Edition 25" (1897-1900)
OS Map 3rd Edition 25" (1907-1923)
OS Map 4th Edition 25" (1929-1952)

Tithe map 1842

Illustrations

Photograph of Bishopscourt C19 – "The Old Palace", undated, Medway Archive and Local Studies Centre (MALSC) – presented by Mr E Marshall

Archival Material

Church of England Record Office, files ECE-7-1-82414 parts 1, 2, 3 (Bermondsey, London)

Church of England Record Office, files H31G-pt1 (Bermondsey, London)

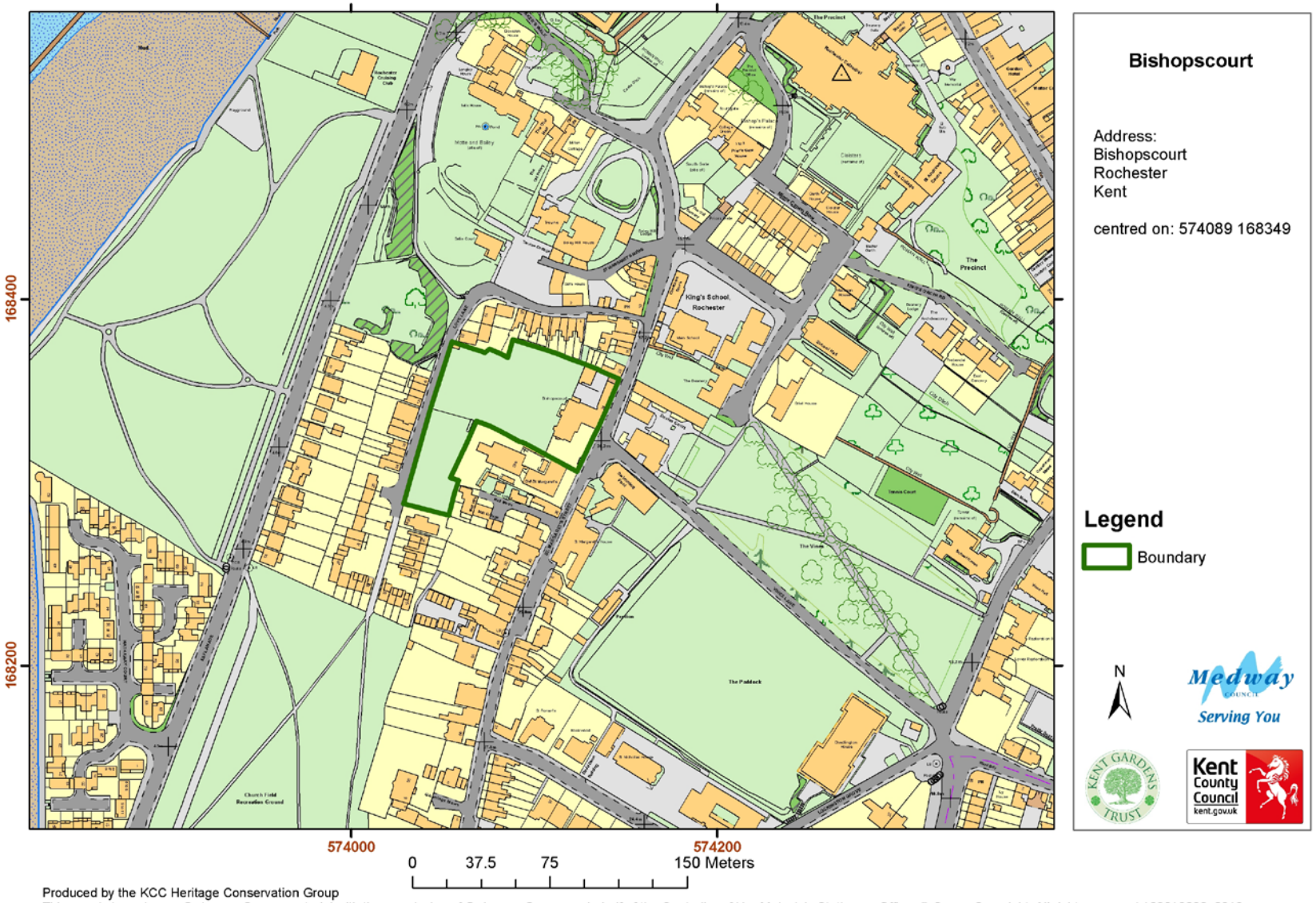
Francis Head will, 1st April 1679 PROB 11/359/425 (The National Archives)

Terri Zbyszewska and Hugh Vaux

Virginia Hinze (editor)

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Fig. 1 Boundary map

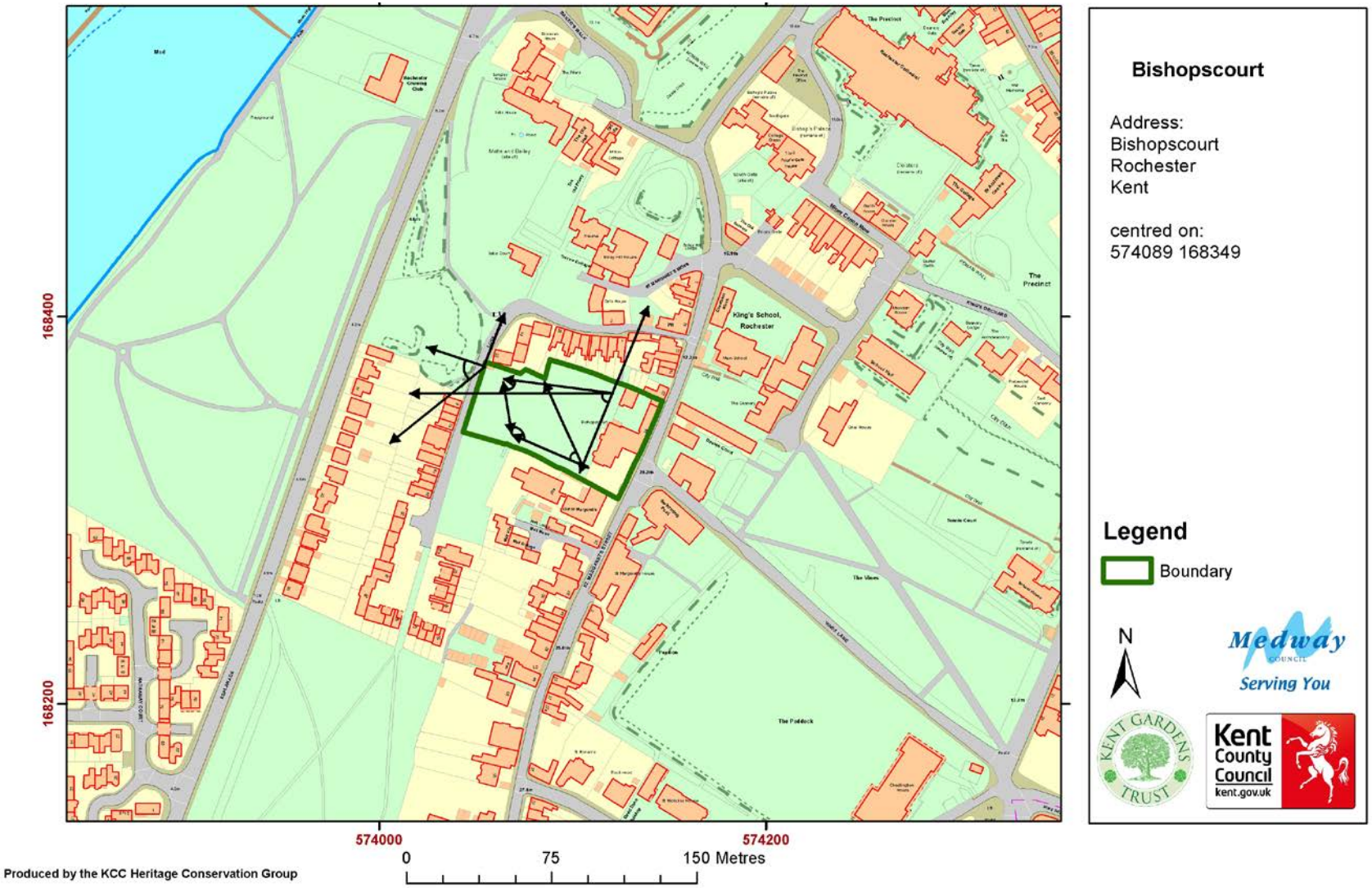


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Fig. 2 Key views map

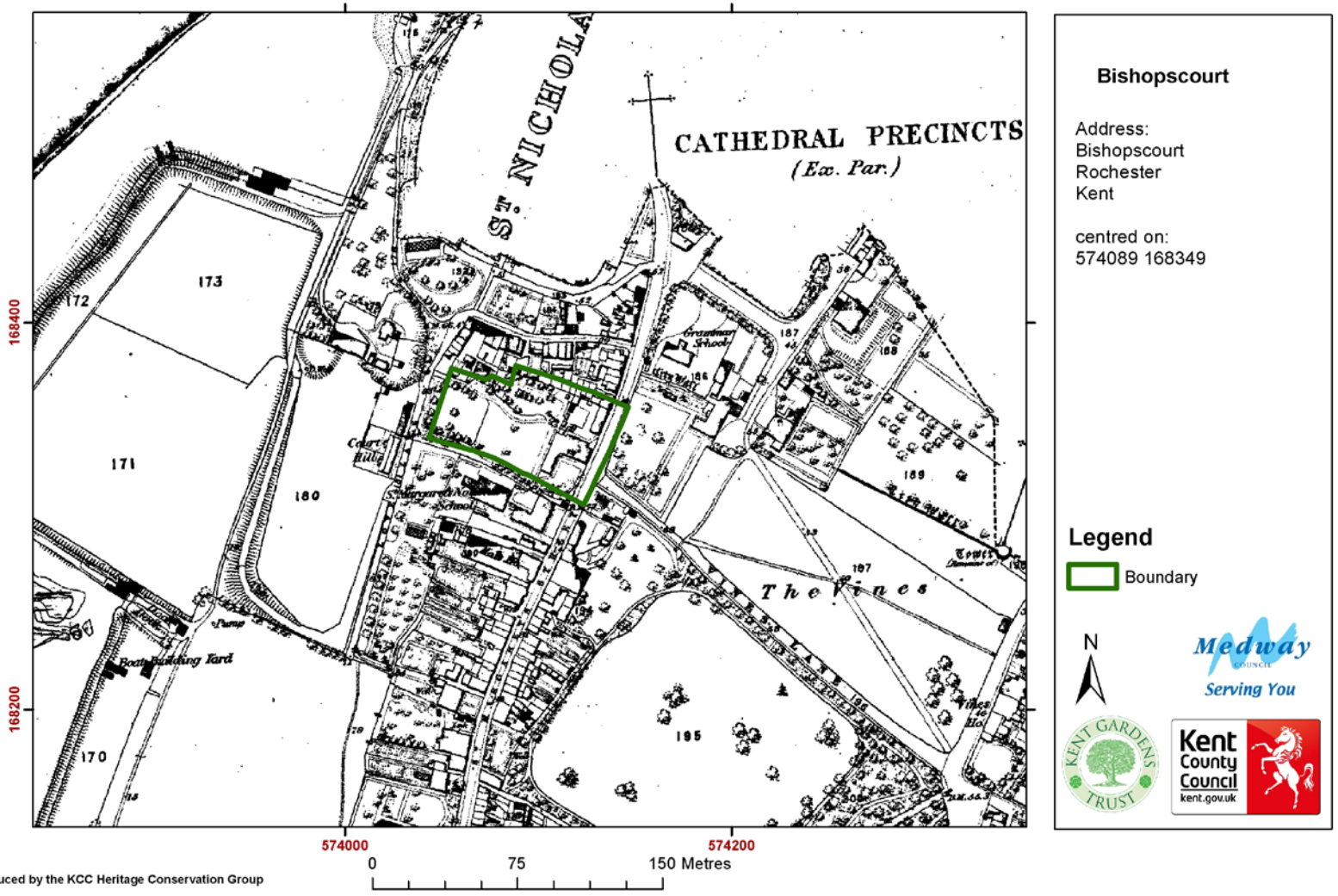


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Fig. 3 OS 1st Edition 25” map (1862-1875)

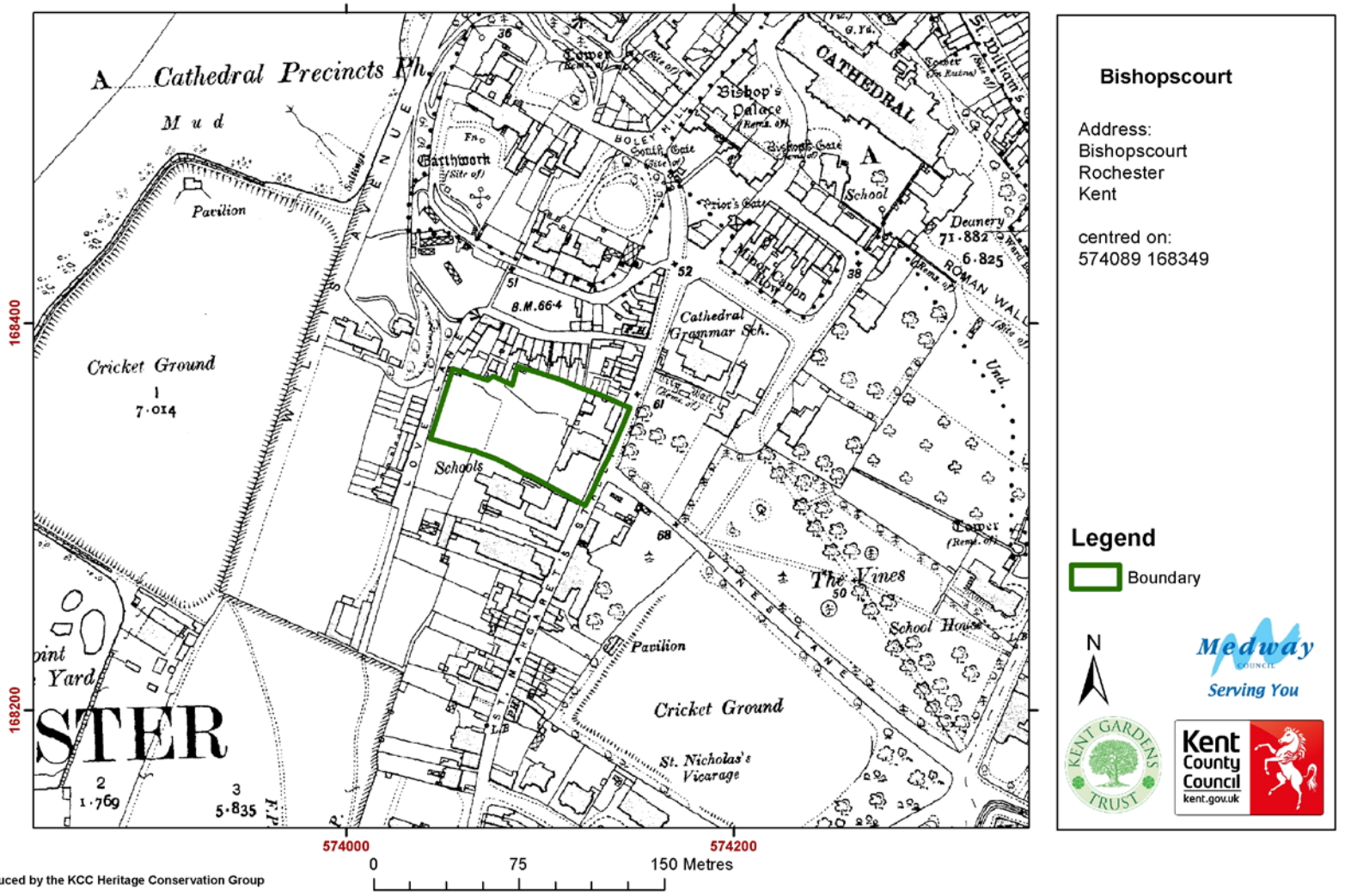


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Fig. 4 OS 2nd Edition 25” map (1897 - 1900)



Bishopscourt

Address:
Bishopscourt
Rochester
Kent

centred on:
574089 168349

Legend

Boundary

N

Medway Council
Serving You

Kent Gardens Trust

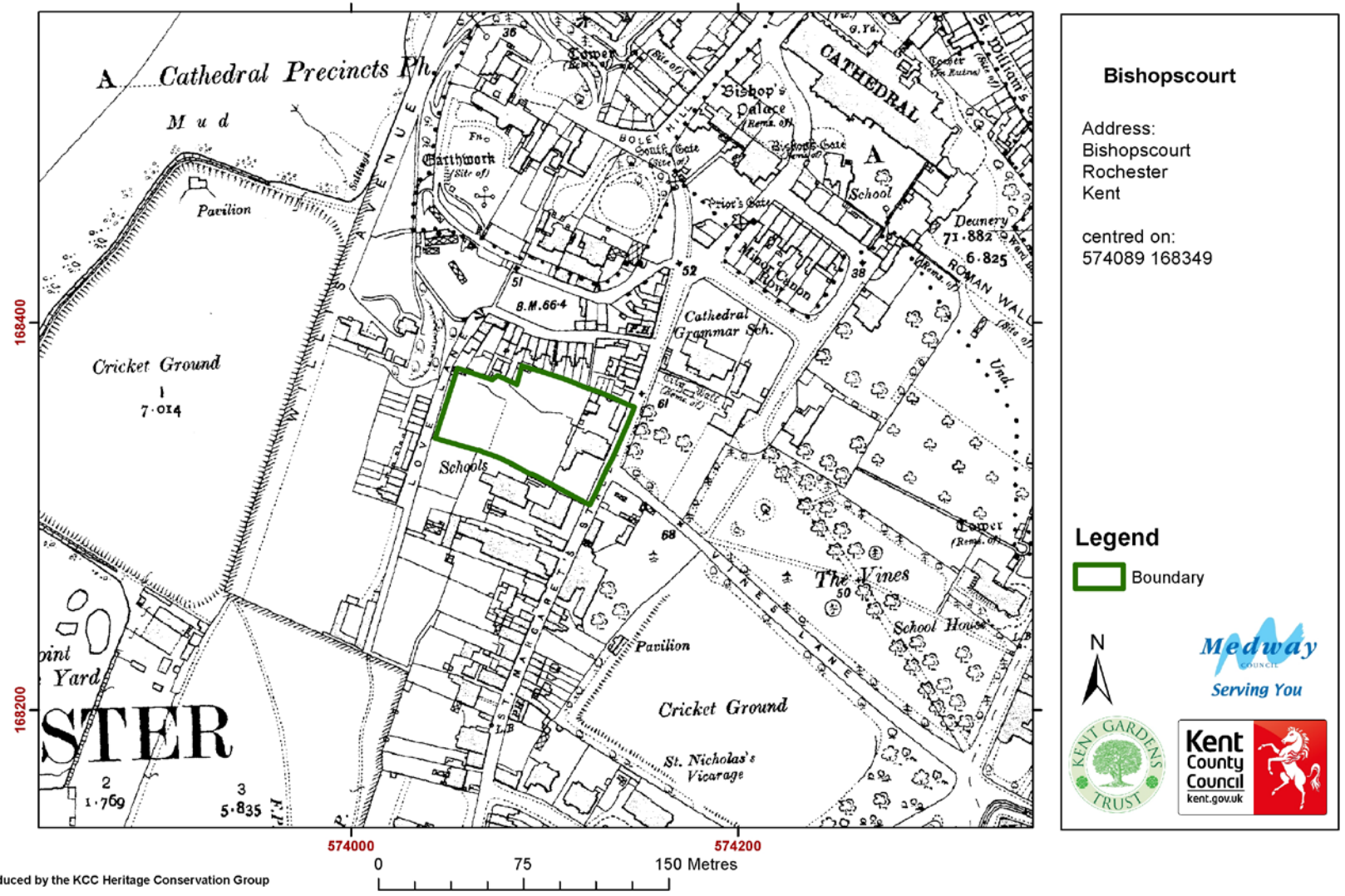
Kent County Council
kent.gov.uk

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Fig. 5 OS 3rd Edition 25” map (1907 - 1923)

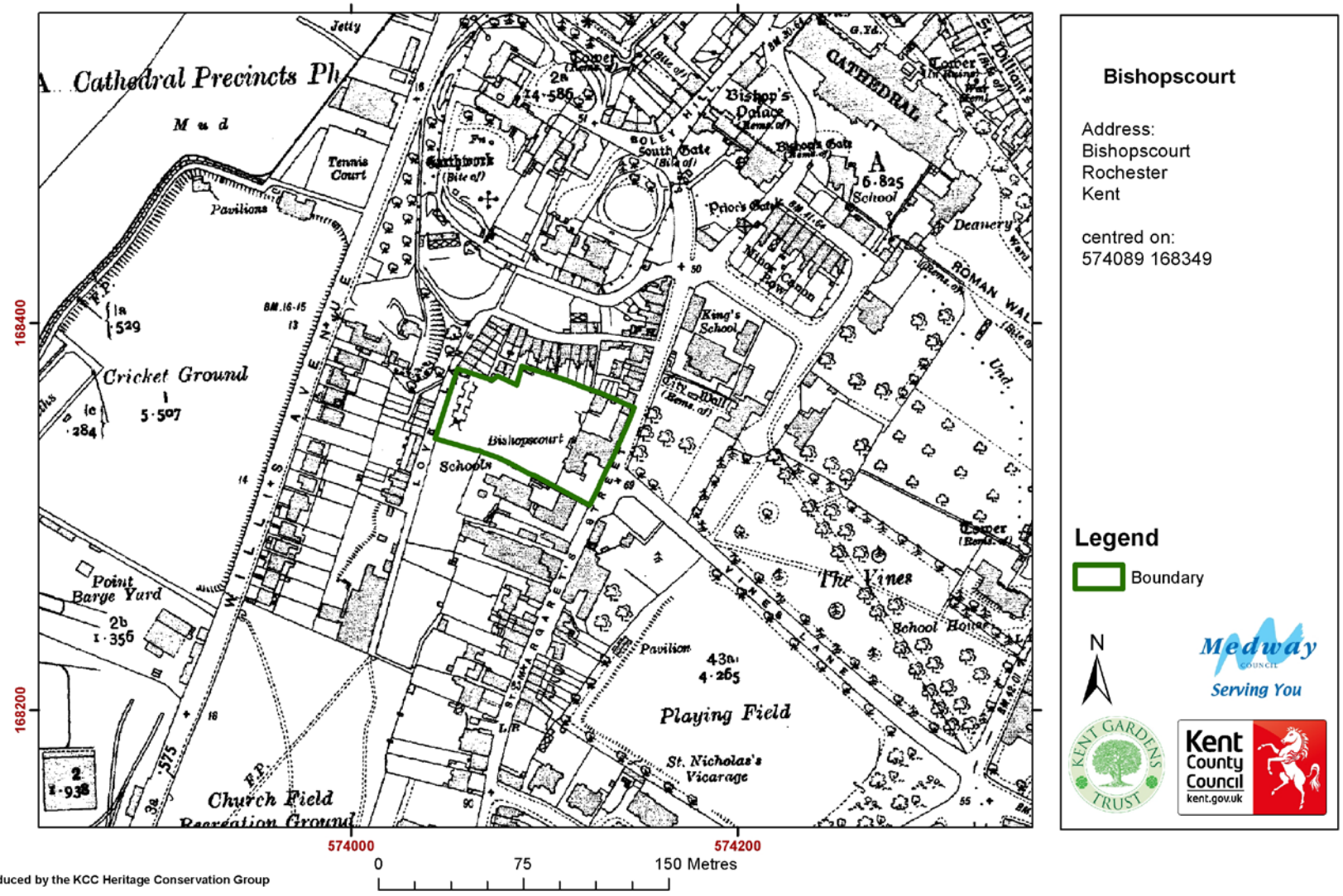


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Fig. 6 OS 4th Edition 25” map (1929 – 1952)

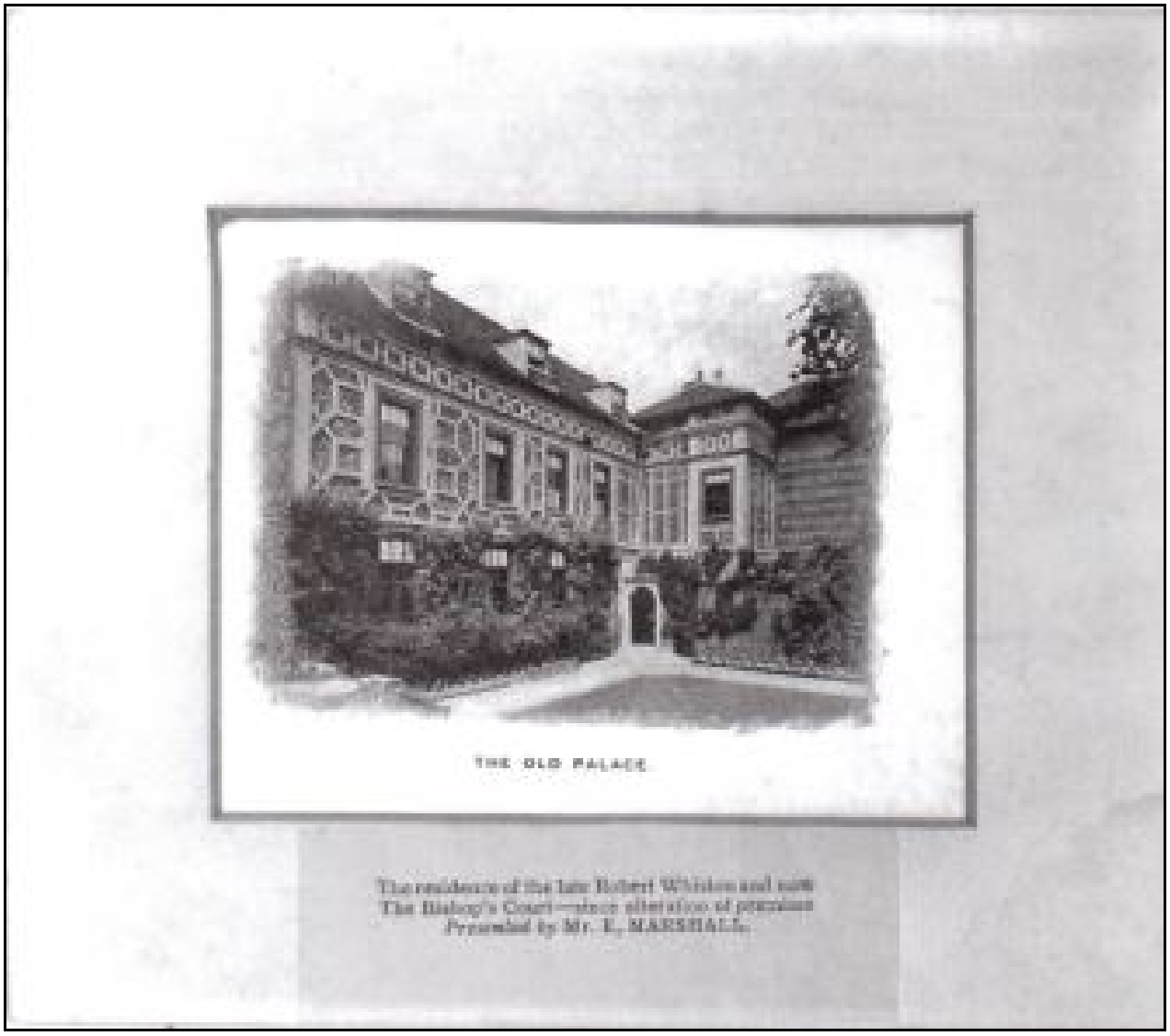


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Fig. 7 Photograph of 'The Old Palace' (MALSC)



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Fig. 8 View of Bishopscourt house from the garden



Fig. 9 View of the Bishopscourt lawn with tulip tree



Fig. 10 Section of south boundary wall

