

# The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Tunbridge Wells Borough



## Oak Hill Manor, Cranbrook



June 2009



# Oak Hill Manor

Cranbrook, 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 Tunbridge Wells Borough 2009**, and should be read in conjunction with the full project report which can be found at <http://www2.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/>. This site is one of many sites that have been researched, visited and written about across the Borough and as a consequence has been included in the revised list of Historic Parks and Gardens covered by the Borough Councils Planning Policies. The list is not conclusive and further gardens may be added over time as research continues or information comes to light

The review for Tunbridge Wells Borough was a pilot project to establish a partnership and methodology for the review of the compendium across Kent and provide an example of good practice across the County and the region. The research was largely carried out by volunteers of the Kent Gardens Trust with support and training from the project consultants Virginia Hinze and Dr Barbara Simms.

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.

Planning Services Tunbridge Wells Borough Council Town Hall Royal Tunbridge Wells Kent TN1 1RS 01892 526121 <a href="http://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk">www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk</a>	Kent County Council Heritage Conservation Invicta House County Hall Maidstone ME14 1XX 01622 696918 <a href="http://www.kent.gov.uk">www.kent.gov.uk</a>
Kent Gardens Trust <a href="http://www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk">www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk</a>	High Weald AONB Unit Woodland Enterprise Centre Hastings Road Flimwell East Sussex TN5 7PR 01580 879500 <a href="http://www.highweald.org/">www.highweald.org/</a>

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

KENT  
TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
CRANBROOK  
TQ 7840 3680

OAK HILL MANOR

## **SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST**

Ornamental gardens and grounds laid out around a neo-Georgian mansion designed by Charles Geddes Clarkson Hyslop (1899-1988) in 1938 and set within extensive C18 parkland and woods.

## **CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

The site of the present Oak Hill Manor estate was known variously as Swifts, Great Swift, Great Swifts, Swifts Place and Swifts Park until the house was renamed by the present owner in 1995. The name probably originated with a Stephen Swift, who is mentioned in an early C15 dwelling transfer which in 1447 was sold on to Peter Courthope (Allen). By the C16 the Courthopes had become one of the wealthiest clothier families in the area and from the C17 onwards owned other local properties including Sprivers and Brenchley Manor. Swifts was tenanted from 1525 and it is not known when the Courthopes sold the property although John Cooke, Chief Pronotary in the Court of Common Pleas, is recorded as owning 'Great Swifts' in 1678 (Singleton).

The property remained in the Cooke family for several generations and the mansion is shown on a 1769 map as an L-shaped building (Great Swift) set in ornamental gardens and parkland (Andrews, Dury and Herbert); it also features on Hasted's 1779 map as Great Swifts. In 1784 it was purchased by a Thomas Adams who had made money in the East India Company and who, according to Hasted, 'made great alterations to it' in a late Georgian, architectural style. It was later described as 'modern' and 'command[ing] attention for [its] style of architecture' (Bagshaw). Adams also purchased some adjoining land before, in 1789, selling to Major John Austen, a local magistrate and of the same family as the writer Jane (Allen). Major Austen died in 1807 and the property passed to his son, also John. The 1807 Andrews map shows a formal garden lying on the south side of the mansion surrounded by a paddock and fields which in 1810 was recorded as covering some 55.5ha in total (Estate map 1810). In 1814 Dearn stated that 'the grounds have nothing in them remarkable, but are kept in good order, this being one of the best cultivated estates in the neighbourhood' (Betts).

John Austen lived at Great Swifts until he died in 1820 and his trustees, a William and George Byng Paget, let it to tenants until 1847 when it was bought by the brewer Robert Tooth, the third son of William Tooth, the latter (Bagshaw; CKS file). Dearn's pencil drawing of 1834 depicted 'Swifts Place' as a classically styled, symmetrical mansion flanked by trees and enclosed within a ha-ha. The Tithe Map records an estate of 74.5ha which in 1857 Robert Tooth extended by purchasing the adjoining Wilsley Estate. He died ten years later, in

the wake of the Overend and Gurney Bank crash of 1866, and his family was forced to sell the properties in 1871 (Allen).

The Sales Particulars for the 1871 auction of the c.158ha Swifts Park Estate describe pleasure grounds, a 'well-stocked kitchen garden', shrubberies, park and plantations. Wilsley House, Buckhurst Farm (the home farm with 'brick built model farmery') and Moat Farm were also included in the sale. The property was bought by a retired Scottish colonel, Boyd Alexander, who lived with his family at Swifts (by then Swifts Place); Wilsley House was let. When the tenancy at Wilsley ended in 1886 he carried out improvements and in 1899 moved there and let Swifts Place to a Colonel Rashley.

In 1911 Colonel Boyd's son Robert was given Swifts Place (his brother Herbert was given Wilsley) where he lived until his death in 1928. Swifts Place was then put up for sale and bought in 1936 by Major Victor Cazalet, Conservative MP for Chippenham. He immediately demolished the mansion and by 1937 had built a new one, 'a pleasant adaptation of Georgian vernacular', to the designs of the architect Charles Geddes Clarkson Hyslop (1899-1988 and known as Paul Hyslop) and renamed it Great Swifts (Oswald). In 1943 following Cazalet's death in an air crash, the mansion was let to the exiled Queen Marie of Yugoslavia and her sons who in 1946 bought the estate of 182ha.

The royal family appears to have lived at Moat Farm for at least part of their ownership (*Daily Graphic*) and it is not clear when they sold the estate. One later owner was a Lady Stacey who, when the Great Swifts estate was divided and sold off in 1975, retained many of the farm buildings. The mansion with its 'outstanding gardens and grounds' of some 20ha was bought by a Mr Head (sales advertisement). Over the next twenty years, Mr Head and his son, Michael, felled many mature trees and laid out a golf course in the park. During this period the farm buildings still owned by Lady Stacey were also converted to private residential use and sold separately. In 1994 the Heads sold the mansion and grounds to the present owner who renamed it Oak Hill Manor. He also bought back some of the farmland sold off in 1975, built a new wing and replaced the stable block with a 'tower' building, which now houses stables, a garage, a staff room and an office (personal communication). The gardens were also redesigned the gardens before offering the property with 152ha for sale in 2008 (Sales Particulars). The property is still on the market and remains in single private ownership.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

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

Oak Hill Manor lies on south-sloping land surrounded by the fields and small farmsteads that characterize the High Weald landscape. The south and south-easterly views extend to pasture, Coronation Wood and The Ponds in the wider estate. The c.70ha site adjoins residential areas on the north-eastern outskirts of Cranbrook and is approximately 1.4km from its town centre. The site is bordered to the north-west by Angley Road (A229), to the west by the grounds of Old Wilsley (formerly Wilsley House) and Waterloo Road and to the south by playing fields and woodland. Hilly and Coronation Woods enclose the northern

boundary and the wooded course of the Crane Brook and the grounds of Little Swallows (formerly Moat Farm) form the eastern boundary.

#### ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Oak Hill Manor estate is entered from the east side of Waterloo Road at a point some 200m south-west of its junction with Angley Road, through a pair of 1.5m high wrought iron gates hung on brick piers surmounted by stone urns. Immediately inside the gates, on the south side, is a two-storey, red-brick lodge with a tiled roof; the Cazalet monogram and the date 1936 are inscribed on its west front. A consolidated-gravel, tree-lined drive runs in a south-easterly direction (skirting the south boundary of Old Wilsley) for 400m through undulating lawns with mature oak and beech trees (some, 2009, still in poor condition, despite the present owner's attempts to save them). The lawns are enclosed on their north side by a tall stand of conifers, these forming the boundary with the grounds of Old Wilsley. Two-hundred and fifty metres south-west of the mansion, the drive descends gently towards the south-west principal entrance front of the mansion, arriving on a forecourt with a central, raised, circular flower bed. From the forecourt there are views southwards over an ornamental lake and parkland.

In the C18, the main entrance drive to the mansion was from the north, at the crossroads of Sissinghurst Road and Staplehurst Road at Wisley Pound and along a partly tree-lined route (Andrews, Dury and Herbert; Hasted). On the 1769 map a lodge is shown at the crossroads at Wilsley Pound but by 1863 North Lodge (now Island Cottages) had been built at the entrance to the main drive. The 1863 OS map shows a second lodge at the entrance to the drive approaching from the west, but by 1897 this appears to have fallen into disuse. The present drive, which runs in a south-easterly direction immediately south of Wilsley House, is first shown on the 1897 OS map and was probably upgraded from a former track between Swifts and Wilsley soon after Colonel Alexander bought Swifts Park estate in 1871. The drive from the north appears to have been abandoned from that time and the drive from the west was probably discontinued in the 1930s when the original mansion was demolished.

The north and west lodges were converted to private houses in the 1970s and remain in separate ownership.

#### PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

Oak Hill Manor was built in 1938 on the footprint of the earlier C16 building to the designs Geddes Hyslop. It is a red-brick, two-storey house with 'hipped roofs, moulded cornice and well defined chimney stacks' (Oswald). Oswald also commented that 'the flattened pitch of the roofs and pediments, the French windows and the twin bows on the west end have a late Georgian flavour about them'. Designed with 'common sense and a restrained good taste' as a rectangular, symmetrical building with a service wing forming an L-shape, in the late 1990s, adjoining its north-east end, a new wing was added as an entertaining space, staff and guest accommodation (Sales Particulars 2008). At the same time, some 40m to its north-west, a new building in a similar style to the mansion was constructed to replace the C18 stable block and to provide 'excellent equestrian facilities'.

## GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The ornamental gardens lie on the north-east and south-east sides of the house and comprise formal gardens with box edging, clipped shrubs, statuary and pools set within lawns and in part enclosed by hedges. The 2008 Sales Particulars also describe, on the south front, 'flower beds and an evergreen canopy ... including rhododendrons, azaleas, euonymus and a Portuguese laurel hedge' and, on the east front, a rose garden, temple garden and woodland garden. On the north front, there is a 'Perennial Walk', 'a grass path with flowering shrubs and tall, mature yew hedges either side' that leads to a former orchard and the 'pretty walled garden with gravel paths and a central brick and stone circle'.

Some 20m south-west of the mansion's entrance front is an informally shaped, ornamental lake constructed in the 1990s and a second, smaller lake which was constructed as a water reservoir in the 1940s lies c.200m to the mansion's north-west (personal communication). A tennis court, first laid out in the early C20 (4th edn OS map), remains some 40m north-east of the main house and abuts the north-east end of the new wing.

Little is known about the C17 and C18 ornamental gardens at Swifts and the earliest depiction is Andrews 1807 map which shows a formal garden divided into quarters by paths and lying on the south side of the mansion. Dearn's 1834 drawing shows mature trees and grounds in keeping with Bagshaw's later description of the 'site, scenery, grounds, park and rich domain' that formed 'a delightful seat'. In 1871 the pleasure grounds were 'an area of considerable beauty and intersected by gravelled walks and embellished with a profusion of shrubs' (Sales Particulars) and the walks are clearly shown north of the mansion on the 1870 OS map. Also described are flower beds 'designed in good taste and adorned with parterres of choice flowering plants', a ha-ha, and lawns and croquet grounds, 'ornamental ... with fine specimens of conifers, auracaria, Austrian pines etc', which 'command beautiful views over the Park and picturesque surrounding country'. The view and many of these trees survive (2009), although the C19 ornamental flower gardens and winding walks appear to have been lost.

The present Perennial Walk and walled garden are probably on the site of the former mid-C19 kitchen gardens. A walled kitchen garden (c.25m x 50m) is first shown on the 1862 OS map some 5m north of the mansion and was described in the 1871 Sales Particulars as being 'surrounded by lofty walls well clothed with choice fruit trees'; they also contained a range of vineries, as well as 'a mushroom house, potting house, stoke hole etc'. A second kitchen garden with 'pyramid espalier & orchard trees' is also mentioned. These kitchen gardens are shown on OS maps until 1946.

## PARKLAND

The undulating parkland to the west of the mansion is maintained as lawn with mature oaks and beeches and some exotic trees. In the 1980s it was laid out as a nine-hole golf course (1994 Sales Particulars), but has now been restored to the 'undulatory and beautifully timbered parklands' described in 1871 (Sales

Particulars). The wider parkland to the mansion's north and south sides is managed as pasture and remains enclosed by 'thriving plantations', within which survives a replica Lake Chad as a memorial to Claude Alexander who died in Africa in 1904 (Woodcock).

Public footpaths (High Weald Way) cross the parkland west to east from Cranbrook to Sissinghurst and south to north from Cranbrook to Wilsley Green.

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                  2nd edn 6" 1897  
                  3rd edn 6" 1907  
                  4th edn 6" 1929

OS maps      1st edn 25" 1870. Sheet 70/3 and 70/4  
                  2nd edn 25" 1896. Sheet 70/3 and 70/4  
                  3rd edn 25" 1908. Sheet 70/3 and 70/4  
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### **Illustrations**

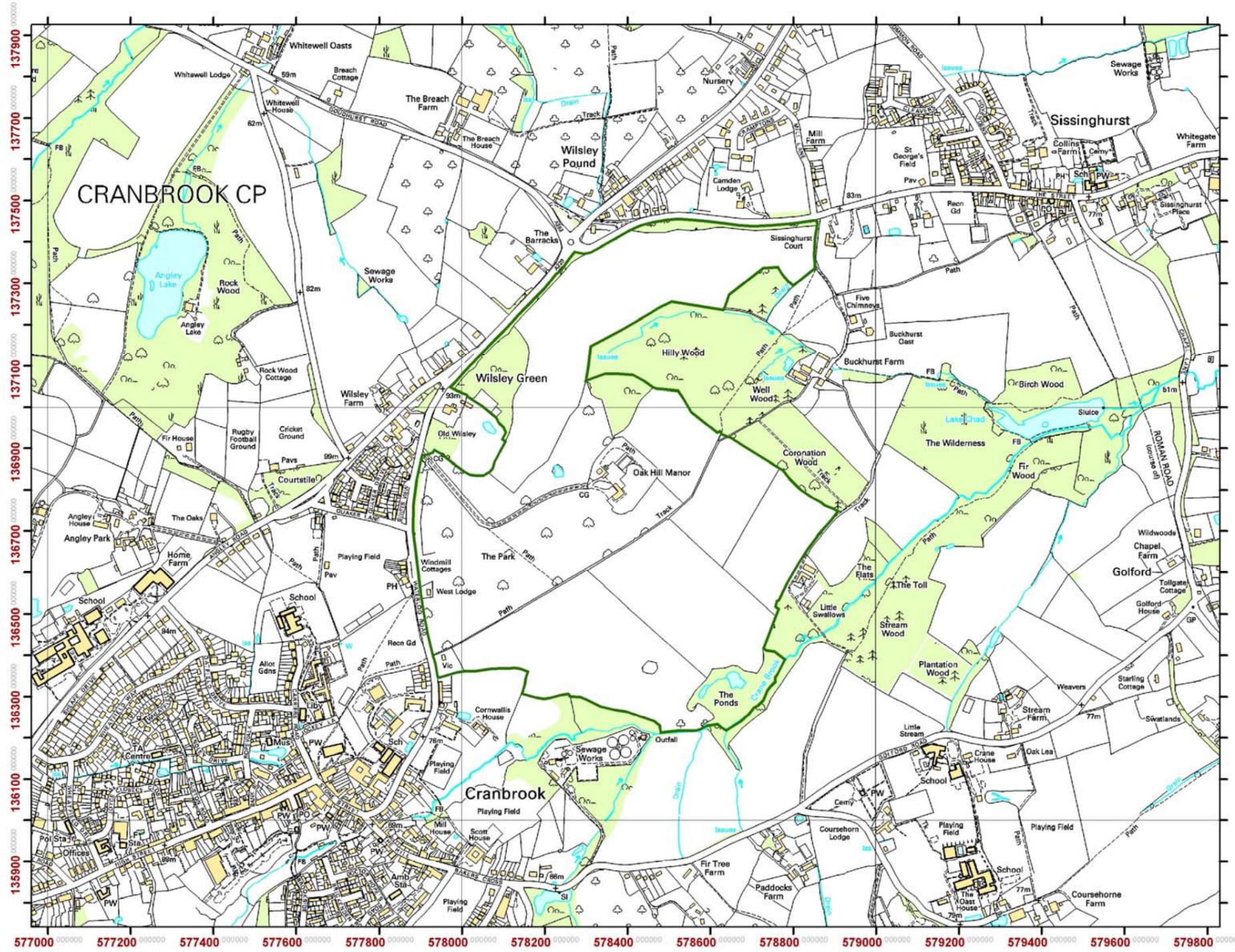
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Research by Anne Evans  
Description written by Barbara Simms  
Edited by Virginia Hinze  
June 2009

Fig. 1 Boundary map



# Oak Hill Manor

Address:  
Oak Hill Manor  
Cranbrook  
Kent

Map centred on NGR:578363  
136838

Report completed : June 2009

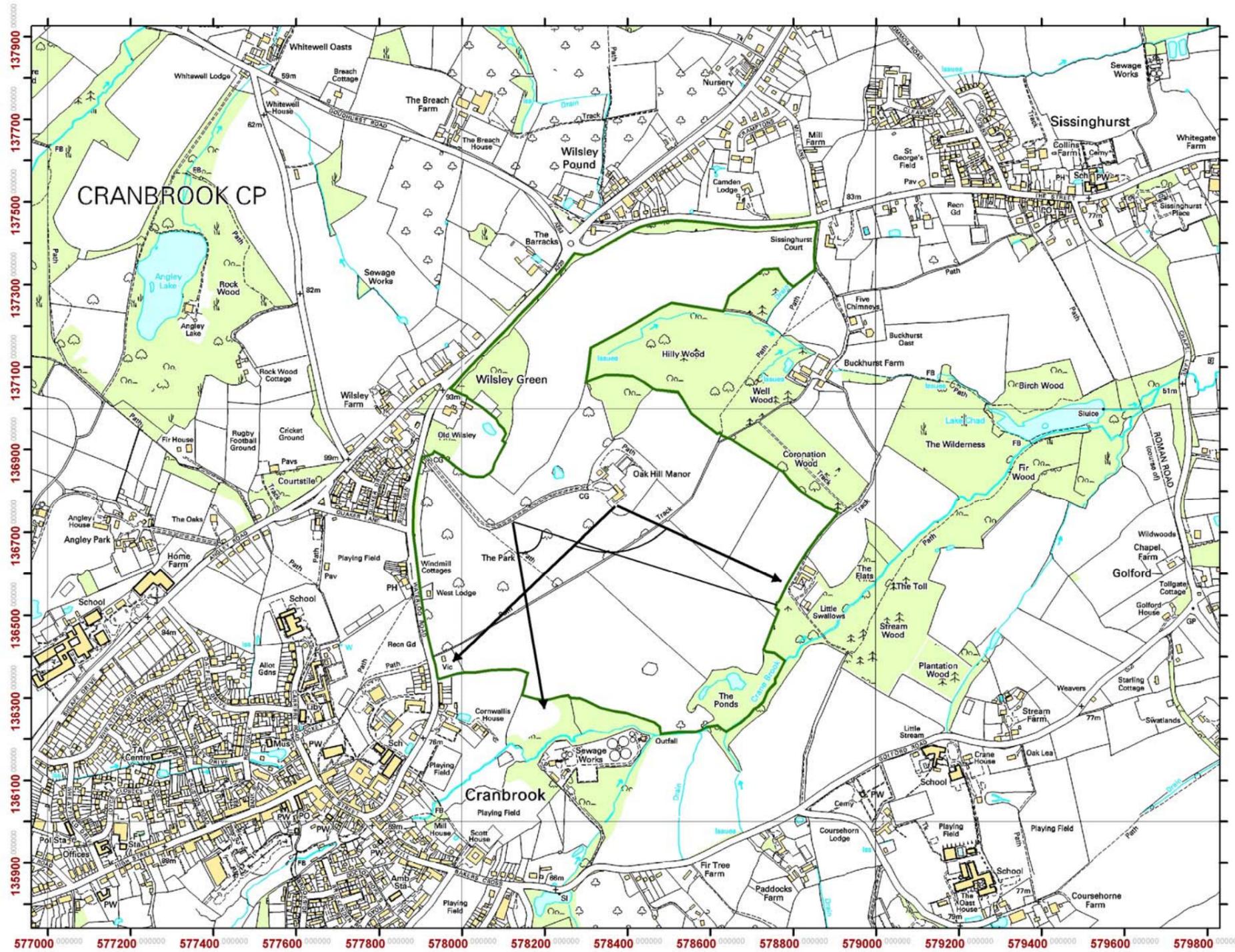
**Legend**  
Boundary



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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Fig. 2 Key views map



## Oak Hill Manor

Address:  
Oak Hill Manor  
Cranbrook  
Kent

Map centred on NGR:578363  
136838

Report completed : June 2009

**Legend**  
Boundary



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## Fig. 3 Aerial photograph



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