

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



Sissinghurst Place, Cranbrook



February 2009

Sissinghurst Place

Cranbrook, Kent

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With many thanks to the owners of Sissinghurst Place for their enthusiasm for the project, for sharing their garden archives and memories, and for commenting on the text.

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 www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk	Kent County Council Heritage Conservation Invicta House County Hall Maidstone ME14 1XX 01622 696918 www.kent.gov.uk
Kent Gardens Trust www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk	High Weald AONB Unit Woodland Enterprise Centre Hastings Road Flimwell East Sussex TN5 7PR 01580 879500 www.highweald.org/

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT

SISSINGHURST PLACE

TUNBRIDGE WELLS
CRANBROOK
TQ 7985 3760

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST

Formal compartmentalised gardens laid out from the early C20 to the south and south-east sides of a C19 house (partly demolished in 1948).

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Sissinghurst Place is located on land which was once a woodland clearing in the Dene of Karckeregge. In 843 the woodland was bought by the Archbishop of Canterbury, but by 1180 the charter of Cumbwell Priory, Goudhurst, records it as the property of Stephen de Saxenhurst (Hasted). The land became the manor of Saxenhurst, which remained in the family's occupation until 1490. The manor was then purchased by Thomas Baker, whose descendants, by the mid-C16, had 'built a most magnificent seat [and] inclosed a large park around it' (Hasted). This was known as Sissinghurst Manor (and renamed Sissinghurst Castle in the 1700s).

It is possible that the present Sissinghurst Place is on land attached to a C15 mill or farmhouse on the Saxenhurst estate (1925 Sales Particulars). In 1451 and 1472, a Peter Courthope was recorded as the owner of a fulling mill on the site and his descendants probably built the original house. This was one of 'a hamlet of houses' that from the early C15 was called Milkhouse Street (Hasted). In 1620, the Courthopes sold the house with 20ha of land to a William Plumer, a High Sheriff of Kent from 1660 (Allen). After Plumer's death a year later, a 1622 survey documented his son Thomas's inheritance. This included 57ha described as 'one capital messuage ... at a Place called Milkhouse'. The property remained in the Plumer family until a later descendant, also Thomas, died without issue in 1769. He bequeathed Milkhouse Place, as it was then known, to a Charles Nairn, whose wife Philadelphia continued to live there after his death in the late 1790s (Hearn). The substantial C16 house was painted by Paul Sandby in the late 1700s and an 1810 plan of the property documents it as an estate of 47ha with extensive orchards and woodland.

Philadelphia Nairn was still in occupation at the time of the Tithe Survey (Pigot 1840), but died in 1842 after which the estate was acquired by a Mrs Cleaver. She demolished the house and built the current one, Sissinghurst Place, set back from the road with stables and a lodge house. About the same time, her mother, Lady Louisa de Spaen, renamed Milkhouse Street as Sissinghurst. The Cleavers developed ornamental gardens with woodland walks around the new house and built a walled kitchen garden (1st edn OS map). Mrs Cleaver and her widowed mother lived at Sissinghurst Place until the mid-1860s (Census). The

1871 Census records 'head of family absent servants in charge', but in 1875 an Admiral Wallace Houston was in residence (Kelly's Directory). Following the Admiral's death in 1891, Sissinghurst Place was advertised as a 14-bedroomed 'gentleman's residence' set in 8.5ha 'grounds of great beauty' (*The Times*, 1892). The new owner was a Mr Wilson Noble, MP for Hastings, who in 1894 instructed the architects Ernest George and Harold Peto to make alterations to the house and to add a single-storey wing on its east side (*Builders' Review*, drawings in private collection).

By 1898, the house, renamed Sissinghurst Grange, was set in open lawns and parkland (2nd edn OS map). It was bought by a Captain Sharp in 1899. The Sharps were in occupation until 1925, during which time a conservatory was added to the south side of the house and by 1908 the gardens had been redesigned on a cruciform plan enclosed with yew-hedges (3rd edn OS map).. A Major General and Mrs Drummond bought the property in 1925 and by 1927 had restored the name of the house to Sissinghurst Place. Their son Lindsey and his wife inherited in the mid-1940s, but in 1948 a fire destroyed the main house (photograph), leaving intact only the servant's quarters and stables on the west side and a loggia on the south front, which had been added by 1929 (4th edn OS map).

Following the fire, the servants' quarters were rebuilt as the main residence and a garden laid out in the ruins of the old house (open days' publicity; 1970s aerial photograph). Lindsey Drummond died in 1951 and his widow continued to live there until 1974, when the house with 3ha of land was bought by a General Sir Napier Crookenden. He sold the lodge, the walled kitchen garden and the parkland. The present owners acquired the property in 1985 and now retain the house with ornamental gardens and have bought back the northern part of the parkland and woods. These are regularly open to the public for charity events. The lodge and stables have been converted to residential accommodation, and, together with the walled kitchen garden, are in separate private ownership.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Sissinghurst Place is set back from the road and stands on a slight eminence with views south to undulating pasture, orchards and woods. The site is approximately 2km north-east of Cranbrook, 6.5km east of Goudhurst and 24km east of Royal Tunbridge Wells. The c.7h site is south of the A262 (The Street) leading east from Goudhurst towards Biddenden, with the A229 Staplehurst-to-Cranbrook road about 1.5km to the west. It is bordered to the north by the A262, to the south-west by Chapel Lane and to the south by Crane Brook. The site is enclosed to the north-west and east by the gardens and pastureland of the adjoining properties.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Sissinghurst Place is approached from the A262 via a narrow tarmac drive that leads due south for 25m, lined on both sides by wooden ranch-style fencing backed on the east side by a 2m high beech hedge and on the west side by shrubbery. The drive (from here onwards with a consolidated gravelled surface)

runs in an easterly direction for a further 75m between tall evergreen shrubberies to arrive at a gravelled forecourt. The forecourt is enclosed on its north side by mature rhododendrons and beech trees and on its south side by the entrance front of the present house from which a 4m high brick wall extends eastwards from its east side. This is a surviving wall from the former main house demolished following the fire in 1948. Leading eastwards from the east side of the forecourt a gravelled path traces the route of a further drive which in the mid-C19 served as the principal approach to the former main house (1st edn OS map). This drive entered at the lodge house on the south side of the A262 (c.80m north-west of the house) and followed a curving course for 100m in a south-westerly direction through informal lawns to arrive at a turning circle at the north, entrance front of the house. The present drive is a former service drive that in the C19 led from the A262 to the stable block 20m west of the main house. Both drives were used by Sissinghurst Place until the lodge house was sold in 1975.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

The present house at Sissinghurst Place comprises the servant's wing to the main brick-and-stone house of the early 1840s which was altered in the late C19 by George and Peto and demolished following the fire of 1948. The wing, which stands to the west of the site of the main house, was not part of George and Peto's commission and retains its mid-C19 form. It is a two-storey house seven window bays wide with a tiled roof and tall brick chimneys. A small conservatory was added to the east side in the late C20.

Twenty metres west of the house is the C19 stable block, converted in 1986 to residential accommodation and in separate private ownership. In 1892, the stable block comprised 'capital stabling for six horses, coach-houses, and groom's room' with cottages for the coachman and gardener (*The Times* 1892). By 1925 'three good garages, one of which takes three cars' had been added (Sales Particulars).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The main formal gardens lie on a gentle south-facing slope to the south and south-east of the house, below grass banks which slope down from the terrace; their southern extent is terminated by a ha-ha. They retain the cruciform plan and yew-hedges of the early C20 garden associated with the now-demolished house and are laid out as compartments set within a rectangular lawn (c.100m x 90m) with perimeter paths and cross paths. Almost the whole area is enclosed by 2m high yew hedges with 3m clipped yew piers topped by yew balls at gate entrances and with viewing points in the hedge. These allow southerly views across the parkland. The main north-south axis is formed by a broad gravelled path which runs from a pair of 1.5m wide wrought iron gates standing on the south side of the entrance forecourt. Until the principal house was demolished in 1948, the gates stood a few metres from its east end, but are now approximately 50m to the east of the present Sissinghurst Place. A pool garden has been created on the footprint of the demolished house.

The south garden front of the present house faces onto a York stone terrace with informal planting and with an early C20 loggia with a white classical column

façade at its south-east end. From the western end of the terrace, steps descend southwards to a gravel path lined with clipped shrubs.

North-east of the gravel path forming the north-south axis is a wire-enclosed tennis court screened by briar roses (built on the site of an early C20 rose garden) with a newly planted orchard and a mature oak to its east. To the south-east are the remains of an early C17 sessile oak, a 24m high Durmast Oak that fell in 2000 (Tree Register letter), specimen trees, a nuttery and cedars in rough grass. The gravel path terminates at its southern end at a yew exedra with an urn as its focal point. The main east-west cross axis begins at a second yew exedra on its eastern end and continues westwards as a lime walk. The western section of the east-west axis is formed by a grass walk lined by a shrub border with two Irish yews. To the north of the shrub border stretching to the foot of the terrace in front of the house is a grassed area with a large incense cedar, a mature catalpa tree and three circular beds, one of which was created by the present owners for herbaceous plants. To the west of these is a summer house with conical thatched roof.

On its south side of the shrub border is a sunken lawn, the site of a late C19 tennis lawn (1st edn OS Map) with a rectangular herbaceous border to its east added by the present owners. The west side of this lawn is formed by a third yew exedra enclosing a headless C19 Coade stone Minerva, shown intact on a mid-C20 postcard. On the lawn's south-west corner is a small triangular garden enclosed by 2m high yew hedges.

The yew-hedged formal gardens are described in 1925 as 'fine old clipped yew hedges' (Sales Particulars), but they were probably planted around the turn of the century, as they are first shown on the 3rd edn OS map. They were developed from more informal gardens with walks through 'wide spreading lawns' studded with trees (2nd edn OS map; *The Times* 1892). By 1925, mention is also made of a 'small rock garden and lily pond, two tennis lawns, small garden with dovecot, rose garden [and] herbaceous borders'. The rock garden and lily pond remain in the garden of the lodge house (in separate private ownership). Walks through woodland on the western boundary are shown on OS maps from 1870, but were probably developed by Mrs Cleaver in the 1840s. Most of these garden areas remained until the 1970s (photographs), but some have either been lost as land was sold or have been simplified to reduce maintenance requirements, although the lawns remain

PARKLAND

The parkland lies to the south of the ha-ha and is maintained as grazed pasture with a few young trees and some mature oaks. It is enclosed on its west and east sides by narrow strips of woodland with mature trees. Extending south from the wood on the eastern boundary (now a woodland spring garden) is a string of pools. These are first shown on the 1870 OS map, but are probably fish ponds of earlier origin. The land immediately south of the ha-ha was cultivated as orchards until the late 1880s (Tithe Map; 1st edn OS map). By 1892, this had been made into ornamental parkland, being described as 'grandly-timbered grounds and park lands' (*The Times*).

KITCHEN GARDEN

A brick-walled kitchen garden lies 70m to the south-west of the house set amongst mature trees. The 3m high walls enclose an area c.40m x 50m with a wrought iron entrance gate set in a doorway in the northern end of its east wall. Inside, the former beds are laid to grass. Brick housing at either end of the exterior of the east wall is probably the remains of furnace rooms behind a heated fruit wall. Although the date 1781-87 is cut into a brick on the south side of the entrance, a kitchen garden is not listed on the Tithe Apportionment and its construction was probably in the mid-C19 (1st edn OS map).

In 1870 the kitchen garden was shown divided into four quarters with perimeter paths and a glass house in the south-west corner. Fruit trees lined each side of the north-south path (1st edn OS map). By 1925, the layout was of brick paths and dwarf box hedges with 'a pergola walk of pear trees with a fine selection of other fruit trees and small fruit' (Sales Particulars). 'The small amount of useful glass' described in 1925 is probably that listed in 1892 as a 'two-division vinery, peach and nectarine house, green and hot houses' (*The Times*). These, though, were located in a separate area immediately south of the stable block (2nd edn OS map). Slip gardens had been developed on the north, south and east exterior walls by 1908 (3rd edn OS map) with that to the north still (2009) containing the remains of a mid-C20 camellia walk. The walled kitchen garden was productive until at least 1948, when the house burnt down. It is now in separate private ownership.

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 1st edn 25" OS map 1870 Sheet 70/4
 1st edn 6" map 1860 Sheet LXX
 2nd edn 6" OS map 1897 Sheet LXX
 2nd edn 25" OS map 1898 Sheet 70/4
 3rd edn 6" OS map 1907 Sheet LXX
 3rd edn 25" OS map 1908 Sheet 70/4
 4th edn 6" OS map 1929 Sheet LXX
 Revd edn 25" OS map 1938 Sheet LXX
 Modern Mastermap 1:10,000

Illustrations

Watercolour of Milkhouse Place by Paul Sandby. Late C18. Location unknown
 1927 architect's view of the house (private collection)
 Aerial photograph 1938
 1938 Photograph of the house
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 1985 Sales Particulars (private collection)
 Letters re Coade stone figure (1991) and Durmast Oak (2000) (private
 collection)
 Ownership map 2008

Research by Simon MacLachlan
Description written by Barbara Simms
Edited by Virginia Hinze
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Fig.1 Boundary map

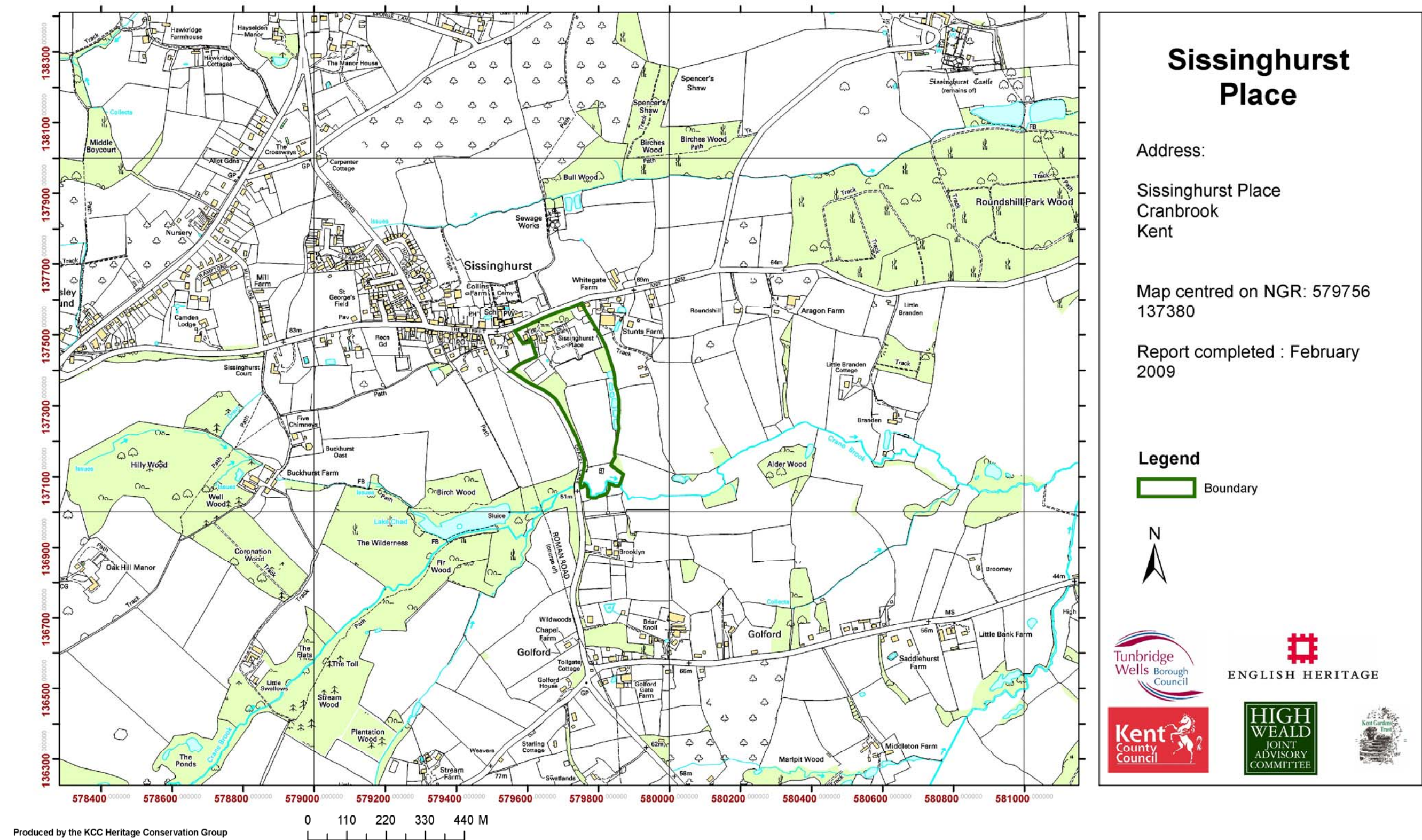
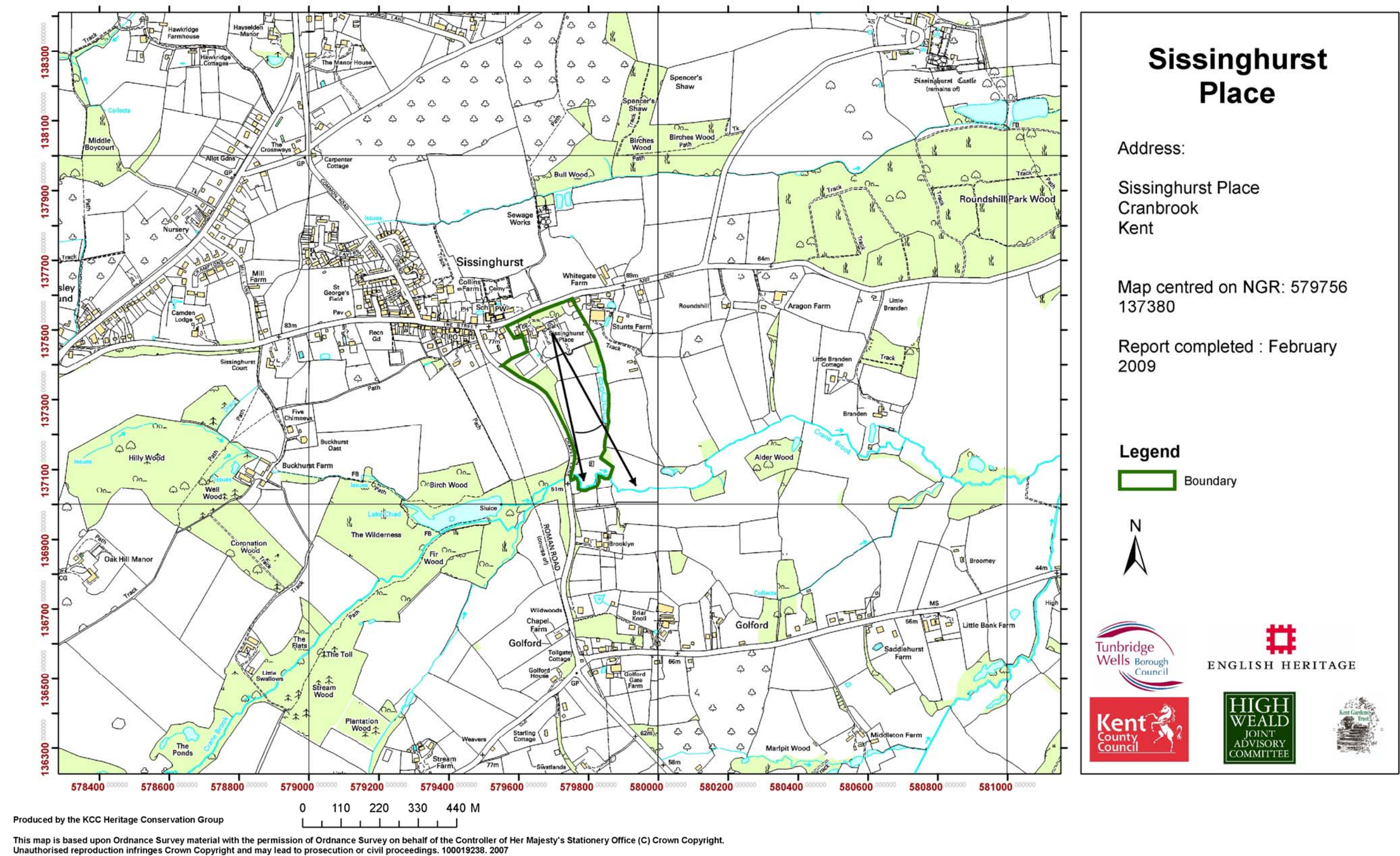


Fig.2 Key views map



Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2009 review of Tunbridge Wells Borough

Fig. 3 Aerial photograph



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