

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



Gillingham Park, Gillingham



March 2015

Gillingham Park

Gillingham, Kent

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

LOCATION

INITIAL ASSESSMENT

HISTORY

DESCRIPTION

CONCLUSION

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Boundary map, 2015

FIGURE 2: Photograph looking north over central green, 2015

FIGURE 3: Photograph of plaque commemorating firemen's fete tragedy, 2015

FIGURE 4: Photograph of central axis looking south-west towards main gate, 2015

FIGURE 5: Photograph of former council offices to south-east, 2015

FIGURE 6: Photograph of lodge and modern main gate, 2015

FIGURE 7: Photograph of modern entrance with toilet block, 2015

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 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.

Medway Council
Greenspace, Heritage
& Library Services
Gun Wharf
Dock Road
Chatham
ME4 4TR
www.medway.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

English Heritage
www.english-heritage.org.uk

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

KENT

GILLINGHAM PARK

MEDWAY

LOCATION

TQ 779673

District: Medway Parish: Gillingham

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Gillingham Park is an example of an intact, surviving Edwardian park layout, the design and construction typically undertaken by the Borough Engineer in a style promoted by the influential C19 writer and horticulturalist, JC Loudon and typical of the period. The extensive photographic record of former structures and plantings has evidential value. Communal value stems from its long period of use as a public park and an attractive landscape, and specifically as a site of remembrance of an important historical event, that of the 15 people including firemen and children killed in the 1929 fete tragedy.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The ground now occupied by Gillingham Park was until 1901 pastureland owned by Brasenose College, Oxford and leased for sheep grazing to a Councillor Sheepwash. In December 1901 the land was purchased by Gillingham Borough Council who wished to create a public park for the expanding population. A design was drawn up by Mr J Redfern the Borough Council Surveyor using the model for laying out public spaces developed by J C Loudon in the early C19. His design featured a circular walk surrounding a large grass field for recreation purposes; the field's boundary was planted with deciduous trees and serpentine paths led to a formal 'bedded' area adjacent to the 'mock Tudor' Keepers Lodge on Canterbury Street ".....the intention being to furnish the field sufficiently, and yet not encumber it with planting". The layout also included a nursery for growing the park's plants, plus a two storey bandstand, features typical of an early Edwardian public park. The total cost for laying out the park and building the lodge and bandstand came to £9200. Gillingham Park was formally opened to the public by the Mayor of Gillingham in a grand ceremony on July 25th 1906.

There was a tragic accident in 1929 when 15 people including a number of firemen and children were burned to death in a wooden tower when a fire fighting display which was to be the climax of a summer fete went horribly wrong. This event is commemorated by a memorial at the site of the tragedy.

The park deteriorated sadly during and after WWII. The grand Edwardian-style bedding which had persisted until the war was discontinued. The bandstand became derelict and was removed in 1951. The grand main gates were removed to Fort Amherst in 1983 and the railings and other gates were vandalised and

partially demolished. Municipal buildings were erected adjacent to the southern boundary in 1936 (MALSC LDA MMP photograph of laying of foundation stone) and a public toilet block constructed at the main Canterbury Street entrance. In October 1987, 160 mature trees were blown down in the hurricane. In 2013 an ambitious '5 year Management and Maintenance Plan 2014 – 2018' (MMP) was commissioned by Medway Council from LDA Design but to date (2014) little work has taken place to implement it.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Gillingham Park lies approximately 1.3 km south of Gillingham railway station and 300m north-east from the junction of the A2 (Rainham Road) and Canterbury Street.

It occupies an area of 6.47 hectares (16 acres). Its original rhomboid form has been slightly altered by the incursion of later buildings on the north-west and southern boundaries. The orientation of the main axis runs from south-west to north-east.

Along Park Avenue to the east and Oxford Road to the north the boundaries are defined by park railings through which there are views into the park. To the south the boundary consists of fences along the back gardens of houses in Stuart Road and, at its the western end, a block of former municipal buildings (the current, 2014, status of which is unclear) which form a sizeable incursion into the park's land. A short stretch of the extreme southern end of the western boundary abuts Canterbury road, off which the main park entrance and lodge is located. The remainder of the western boundary follows a curving line behind, at the southernmost end, the yards of commercial buildings on Nelson Street and northwards along back gardens of housing on Napier Road.

The topography of the park is largely flat. It is situated at the highest point in the Medway towns, approximately 250m above the level of the river Medway. When it was first constructed there were extensive views to the north east over the river, which was one of the features influencing the choice of this site for a public park. However, the view is now (2014) almost entirely blocked by housing and trees. Surrounding the park, particularly in Park Avenue and Oxford Road, are attractive houses from the first half of the C20.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

There are six entrances into the park: the two principal ones which date from the original layout comprise a main one at the southern end of the western boundary on Canterbury Street and a secondary one off Oxford Road at the north-eastern corner of the park. Their original, formal wrought-iron gates hung on (surviving) brick pillars are now gone, the gates at the Canterbury Street entrance having been removed, renovated and re-erected at Fort Amherst in 1983 (Chatham News 28 October 1983 and 4 November 1983).

The main entrance is flanked on its west side by Keeper's Lodge, built in 1906 in a 'mock Tudor' style of white Aylesford brick with half-timbered gables (now 2014 in private ownership and with alterations and extensions). To the east of the main entrance and partially obscuring the view into the park is a late C20 public lavatory block. There are four additional pedestrian entrances off Park Avenue.

PARK

The park can be divided into three distinct areas:

The south-west area, immediately inside the main entrance, comprises formal gardens either side of a central, south-west/ north-east axial path, subsidiary paths and flower beds now (2014) much degraded and simplified from their original Edwardian design. Planting now includes herbaceous beds and a winter garden, laid out either side of the main axial path and covered by a simple iron-framed pergola. All the Edwardian structures in this formal area, as shown on a variety of contemporary photographs (MALSC Couchman Collection, reproduced in LDA MMP) including a 2 storey bandstand (DE402/21/32(L) demolished in the 1950s, and pergolas, a dove cote/aviary and formal rockery, all similarly recorded in photographs, have since disappeared.

The central, axial path leads in a north-easterly direction from this formal area and onto the most extensive area which comprises a central open grassed space occupying approximately two thirds of the park's total area. This circular grassed area, ringed by a perimeter path and mixed mature deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs, survives intact from its original layout. A flag pole surrounded by cannons was a notable feature installed in the south west corner of this green sometime after WWI but removed at the start of the second. In the north-west corner between the path and the park boundary the Parklands Resource Centre occupies the site of the original park nursery, its cold frames and lights shown in a contemporary photograph (MALSC, reproduced in LDA MMP). To the east of the green is an extensive children's playground, installed some time before 1971. Just south of this is a small memorial to the firefighting display disaster of 1929.

A secondary path off the main perimeter path leads into an oval loop around, the south-eastern corner which is largely given over to trees and shrubs. The paths are now (2014) tarmac, the original gravel surfaces paths having been covered with several layers of tarmac.

REFERENCES

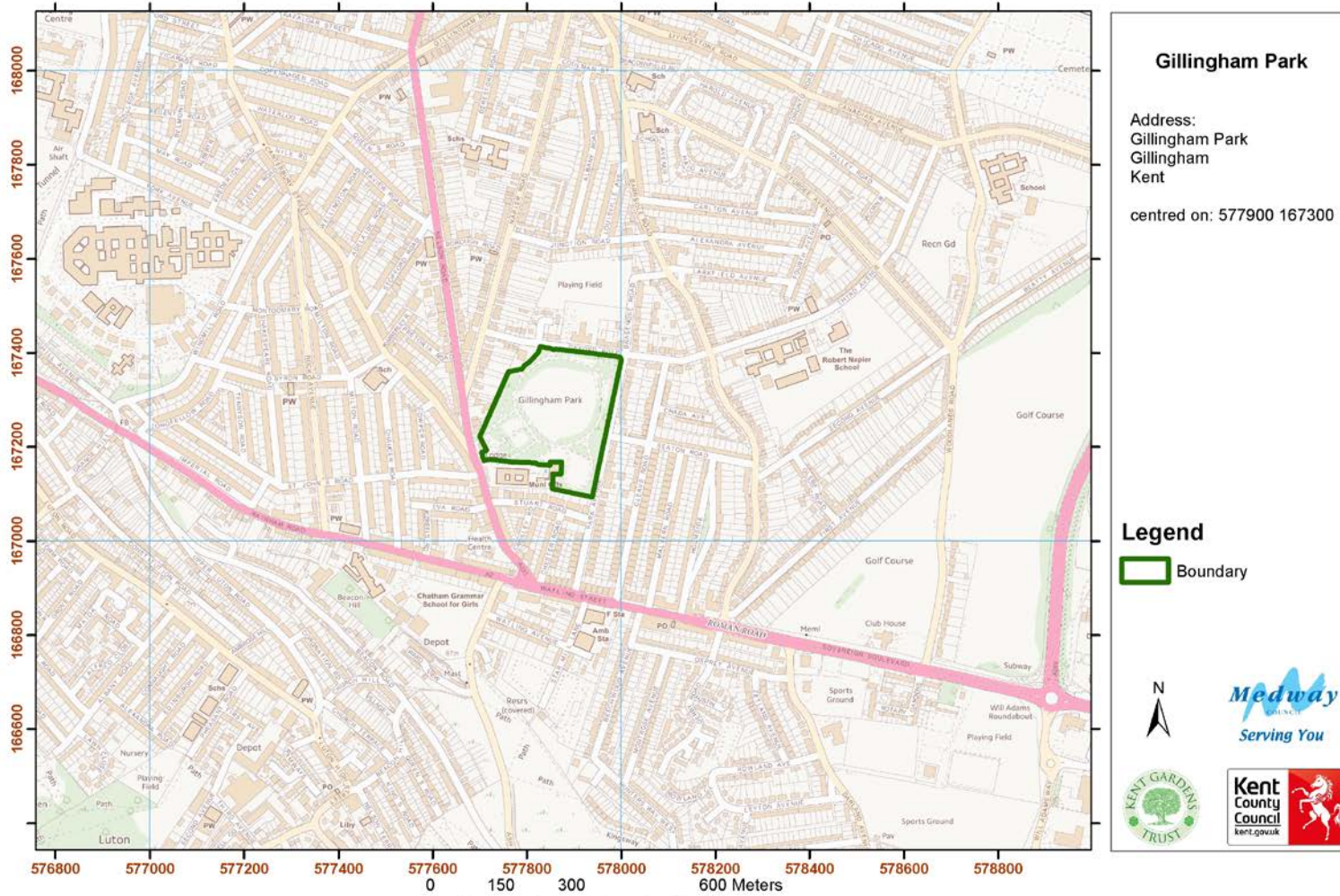
5 year Management and Maintenance Plan 2014 – 2018' commissioned by Medway Council from LDA Design, 2013

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Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig. 1 Boundary map



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group
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Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig 2 Photograph looking north over central green, 2015



Kent Compendium of Historic Parks & Gardens – 2013 review of Medway

Fig 3 Photograph of plaque commemorating firemen's fete tragedy, 2015



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