

The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway



The Great Lines Field of Fire Chatham & Gillingham



January 2015

The Great Lines

Field of Fire

Chatham & Gillingham, 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 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'

SITE DESCRIPTION

THE GREAT LINES FIELD OF FIRE

CHATHAM & GILLINGHAM

MEDWAY

Centred on 576707 168555

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Field of Fire is an integral part of the Great Lines fortifications, a locally-designated Heritage Park and potential World Heritage site. Its vast expanse of open ground is unique of its kind. It demonstrates an aspect of defensive warfare in Britain from the C17 to the mid C19, which is comprehensively recorded in both national archives and the local Royal Engineers Museum. It is valued as an open space with public access and its use for sports activities represents a continuum of historic association with that use by the military and civilians from the late C18. It has architectural interest as the site of a nationally important maritime war memorial (listed grade II) and historical association with four significant British architects and sculptors. It is a focus for both local and national commemorative occasions. The wide views it offers over Fort Amherst, Chatham town and the River Medway are of great landmark and scenic value.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The area of the Great Lines fortifications, of which the Field of Fire forms part, was the site of the medieval town of Chatham. Together with surrounding farmland and common grazing, it was destroyed when displaced by the defence fortifications. Opposition by local people to the loss of ancient rights of way and cricket pitches were ineffective as the town became dominated by the military.

The need for some kind of linear bastioned artillery fortifications was realised after the Dutch Raid of 1667 when the Dutch navy was able to sail unimpeded up the River Medway into the heart of our naval anchorage. This resulted in heavy fortifications being installed along and at the mouth of the river. However, the landward approach to the dockyard had been left entirely unprotected. An Act of Parliament passed in 1708/09 recognised this fact and led to the compulsory purchase of the necessary land to provide defences. The Field of Fire is so named for its role or providing a clear view of (and opportunity for shooting) potential enemy approaching from the river Medway and landward side of the fortifications.

A map by Royal Engineer Talbot Edwards from 1708 entitled 'A Plan for Fortifying Chatham Docks and Storehouses from any Suddaine Attempt by Land without Great Artillery but not against a seige' illustrates the first proposal for land defences but shows the Field of Fire as open fields. (Kendall, p.13, The Royal Engineers at Chatham 1750-2012). A plan of Chatham drawn up in 1719 for the Ordnance Board by Clement Lempriere shows the Field of Fire again still as

fields with the area to the west, soon to be developed as a system of ramparts, ditches and bastions, as covered by a substantial area of woodland and a planted orchard. Two roads lead from the dockyard inland. (Kendall, p.15, The Royal Engineers at Chatham 1750-2012)

Construction work for what became the Great Lines fortifications started in 1755 when there was a threat of French invasion during the Seven Years War. Temporary fortifications designed by Colonel Hugh Debbeig enclosed the dockyard and Ordnance Wharf taking advantage of the high ground above Chatham. The construction consisted of unrevetted dry ditches and earthen ramparts, supported and protected by wooden palisades. Encampments of troops were placed behind the lines to defend and counter invasion force.

The extent of the Chatham Lines and Field of Fire is shown on a survey from 1756 conducted by engineer Hugh Debbeig called 'Plan of the Intrenchment (Kendall, p.23, The Royal Engineers at Chatham 1750-2012). At this time the boundary of the open Field of Fire area was the road between Gillingham and Chatham with farmland beyond to the east.

A period of expansion involving rebuilding and extending the Lines started in 1779 under the threat of invasion during the America War of Independence followed by the Napoleonic Wars from about 1803. The ground originally established to provide accommodation for encampments of troops where they could live and have room to parade and practice manoeuvres had been neglected and damaged by grazing animals. In 1804 the last tranche of land was obtained by the military to extend the fortifications to the north to create The Lower Lines (q.v.) and consolidate the Field of Fire. Until 1815 when the wars against the French came to an end there was almost continuous improvement of the defences.

The 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey map dated about 1885 shows the extent of the Field of Fire, which is largely unchanged today (2014). The whole system of defences became known as The Great Lines. They are recognised as being the best-preserved defences for an C18 dockyard in Britain, providing an almost complete series of linear bastioned artillery fortifications including a field of fire.

In 1922 Chatham Naval Memorial, commemorating the sailors of the two World Wars, was unveiled by the future King Edward VIII, the First World War section designed by Sir Robert Lorimer with sculptures by Henry Poole (The historical landscape - Great Lines City Park' report, p 29 and photograph c.1960 Medway Archives). An extension commemorating sailors of the Second World War, designed by Sir Edward Maufe and with sculptures by Sir Charles Wheeler, was unveiled in 1952 by The Duke of Edinburgh.

Use as a public amenity space has continued since it ceased to be an open military area with football pitches created at the north end. However, since WWII part of the land has been built on by army housing at Sally Port and a school at King's Bastion. A training College at the eastern boundary has also been constructed.

The Chatham dockyards closed in 1984 and in 1989 were acquired by the former Gillingham Borough Council. The combined elements, including the Field of Fire, were developed into a park in March 2011 with the aid of Government and EU funding. Known (2014) as the Great Lines Heritage Park it is currently owned by Medway Council and managed through a comprehensive management and maintenance plan drawn up in 2012. The Park is likely to play a major part in Chatham's bid for World Heritage Status for the historic dockyard and its associated defences.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

The Field of Fire, comprising c70 hectares, extends across an escarpment approximately 56m (185ft) above sea level overlooking the River Medway to the west and north. It is roughly triangular in shape and c1.68km in length. It lies between Brompton Road in the north and a ridge overlooking Chatham Town in the south. The western boundary follows the revetments of the Brompton Lines (part of the defensive earthworks and a scheduled ancient monument) and the eastern boundary abuts the residential edge of Gillingham. The ground rises gradually from the northern end until it falls away into the river valley below to the southwest from where it overlooks the town of Chatham along the banks of the Medway river.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

There is open access around most of the perimeter apart from fenced boundaries where residential housing at Sally Port Gardens and Brompton West Primary School encroach into the centre of the Field of Fire, south of Sally Port Gardens Road, there is open access around most of the perimeter. Numerous wide, tarmac paths radiate from a central north to south axial path.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Chatham Naval Memorial (listed grade II) commemorating the sailors of the two World Wars stands at the southern end of the Field of Fire overlooking Chatham town. The First World War obelisk memorial, designed by Sir Robert Lorimer with sculptures by Henry Poole (and completed in 1922), has steps up to a plinth with inscription plaques, and projecting corners with reclining lions, beneath a stepped base to the obelisk, which has a stepped top to an elaborate finial with corner ships prows and bronze supports to a ball. It is enclosed on three sides by curved Portland stone walls displaying memorial plaques commemorating the fallen seamen of the Second World War. This extension to the memorial is by the architect Sir Edward Maufe with the additional sculpture by Charles Wheeler and William McMillan. On the south side is a paved terrace, which overlooks Chatham town.

PARK

The Field of Fire is predominantly open, mown grassland creating open vistas. There are occasional lines of mixed native, predominantly deciduous trees, largely dating from the late C20 and trees acting as buffers at boundaries with roads. There are also occasional short lengths of hedging. The division of the area from its original open character and function as a Field of Fire dates from its use for sporting activities, which began in the late C18 and C19 with cricket and horse-riding. At the north end are football pitches, some hard-surfaced in tarmac with floodlighting. At the south end, surrounding the Naval Memorial is a managed wildlife grassland area. This part of the park has been designated a Site of Nature Conservation Interest, for its chalk grassland flora and it has also been designated as a Local Wildlife Site.

REFERENCES

Books and Articles

The Great Lines Heritage Park Draft Management and Maintenance Plan 2012-2016 Medway Council

'The Historical Landscape - Great Lines City Park' report prepared by EDA on behalf of Medway Council and Chatham World Heritage steering group, 2008

Kendall, Peter, *The Royal Engineers at Chatham 1750-2012*, English Heritage, 2012

Lane, Anthony, *Kent Ports and Harbours*, The History Press, 2010

Maps

2nd Edition Ordnance Survey map c1885

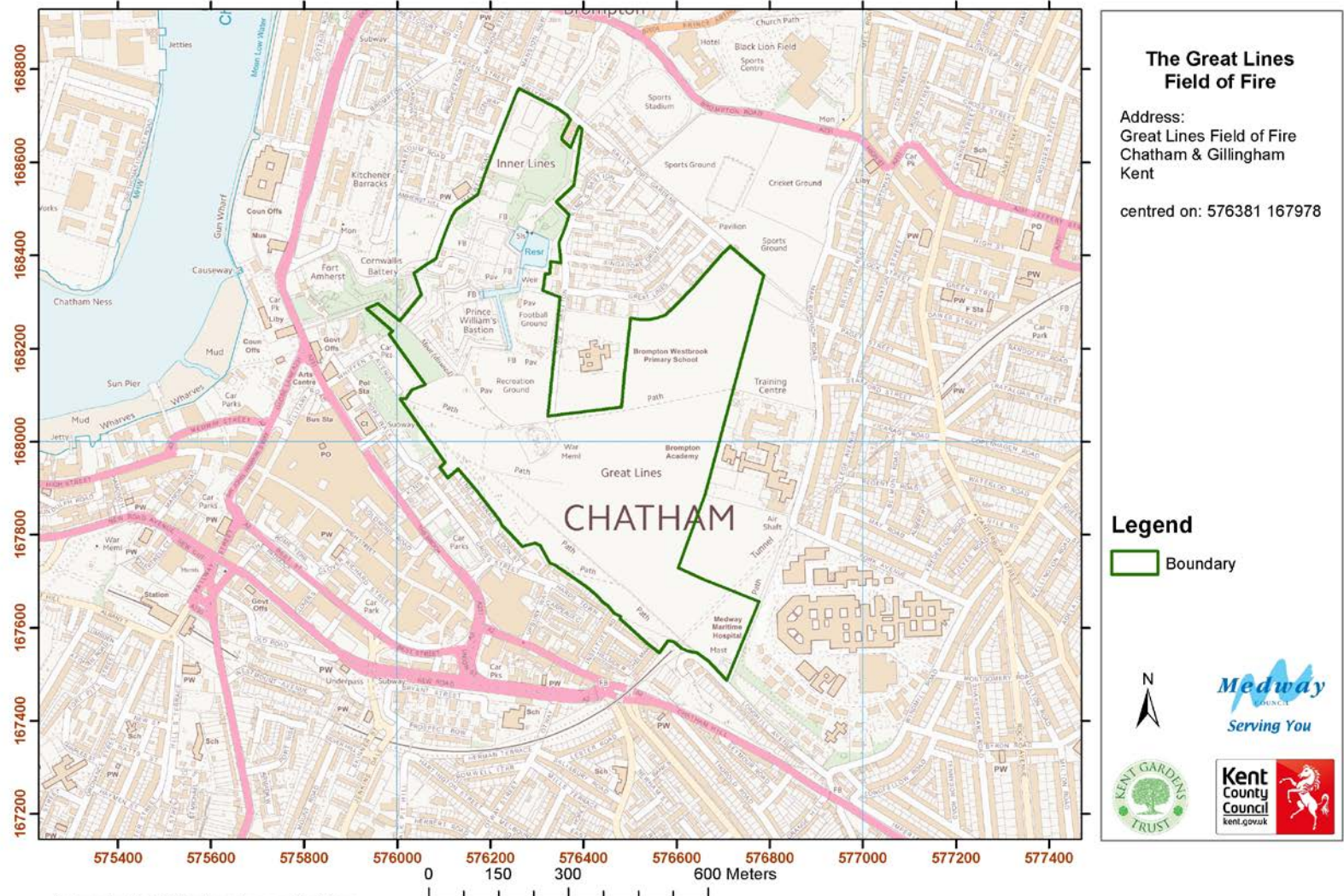
Miscellaneous

Explanatory Boards at the Park

**Research and Description by Jane Davidson
Virginia Hinze (editor)**

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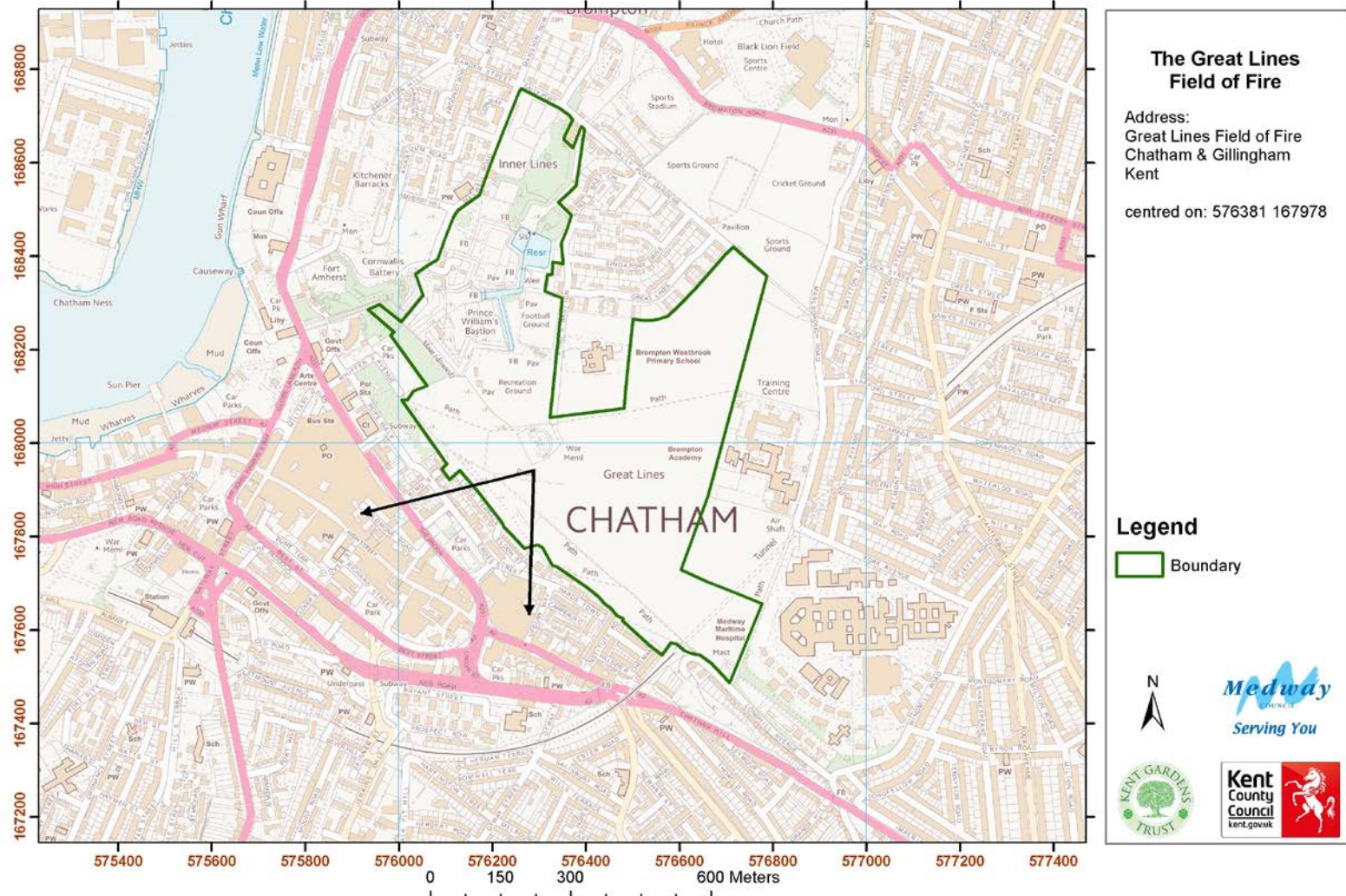
Fig. 1 Boundary map



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group
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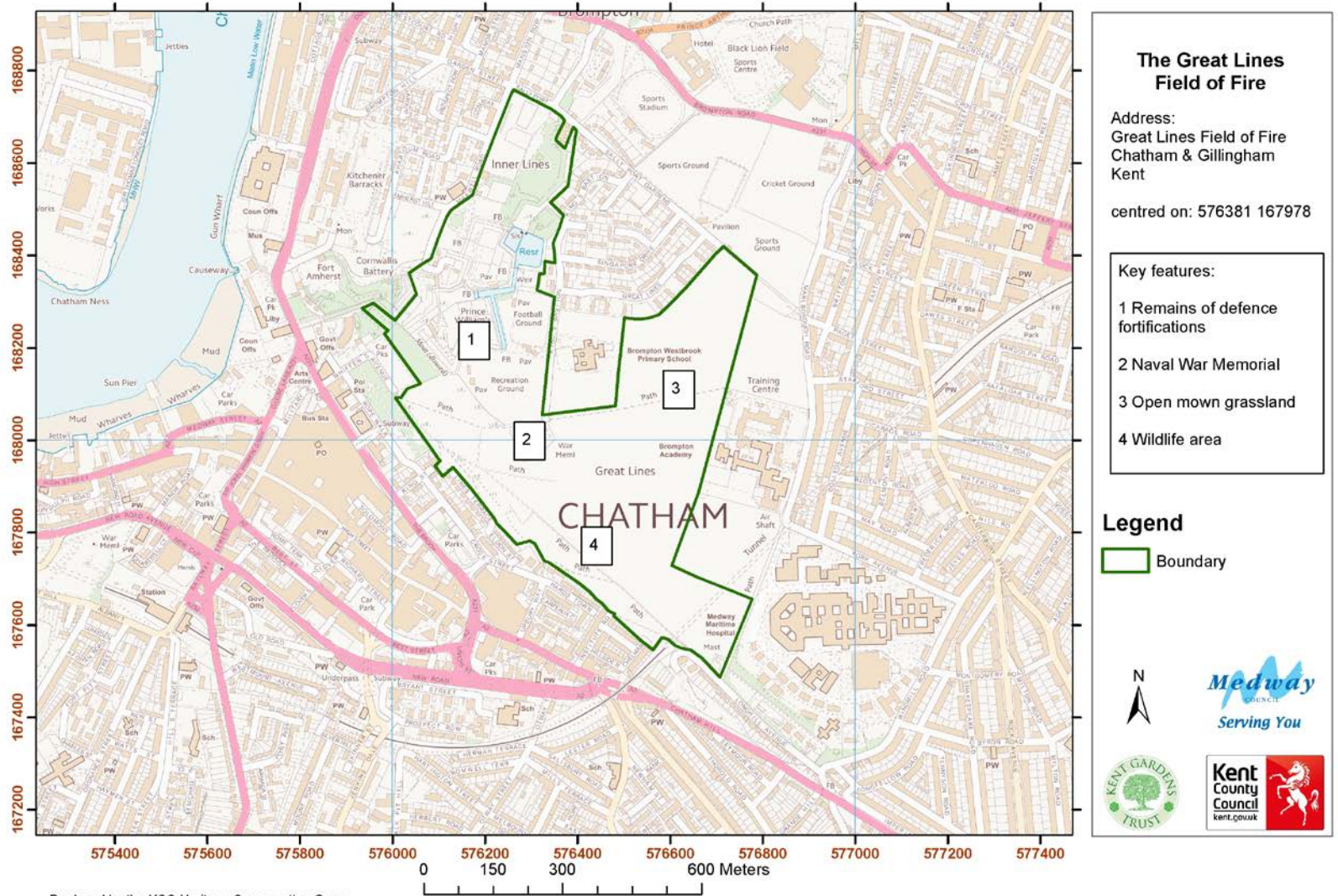
Fig. 2 Key views map



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Fig. 3 Key features map



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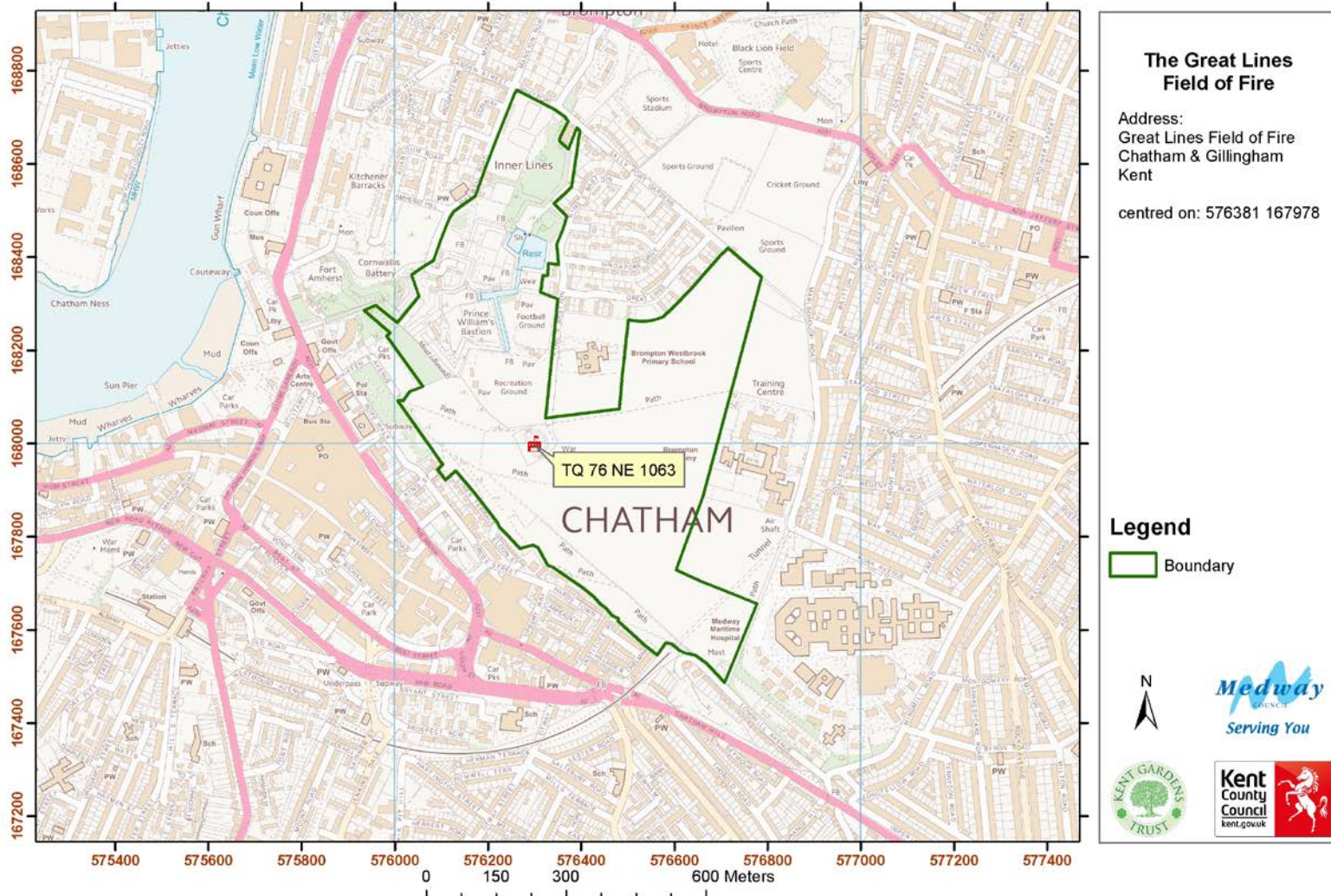
Fig. 4 Aerial photograph (2014)



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Fig. 5 Map of Listed Buildings



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Fig. 6 Listed Buildings at the Great Lines Field of Fire

Kent Historic Environment Record Reference: TQ 76 NE 1063

The following text is from the original listed building designation:

GILLINGHAM

TQ76NE GREAT LINES, Brompton 686-1/7/5

First World War Memorial

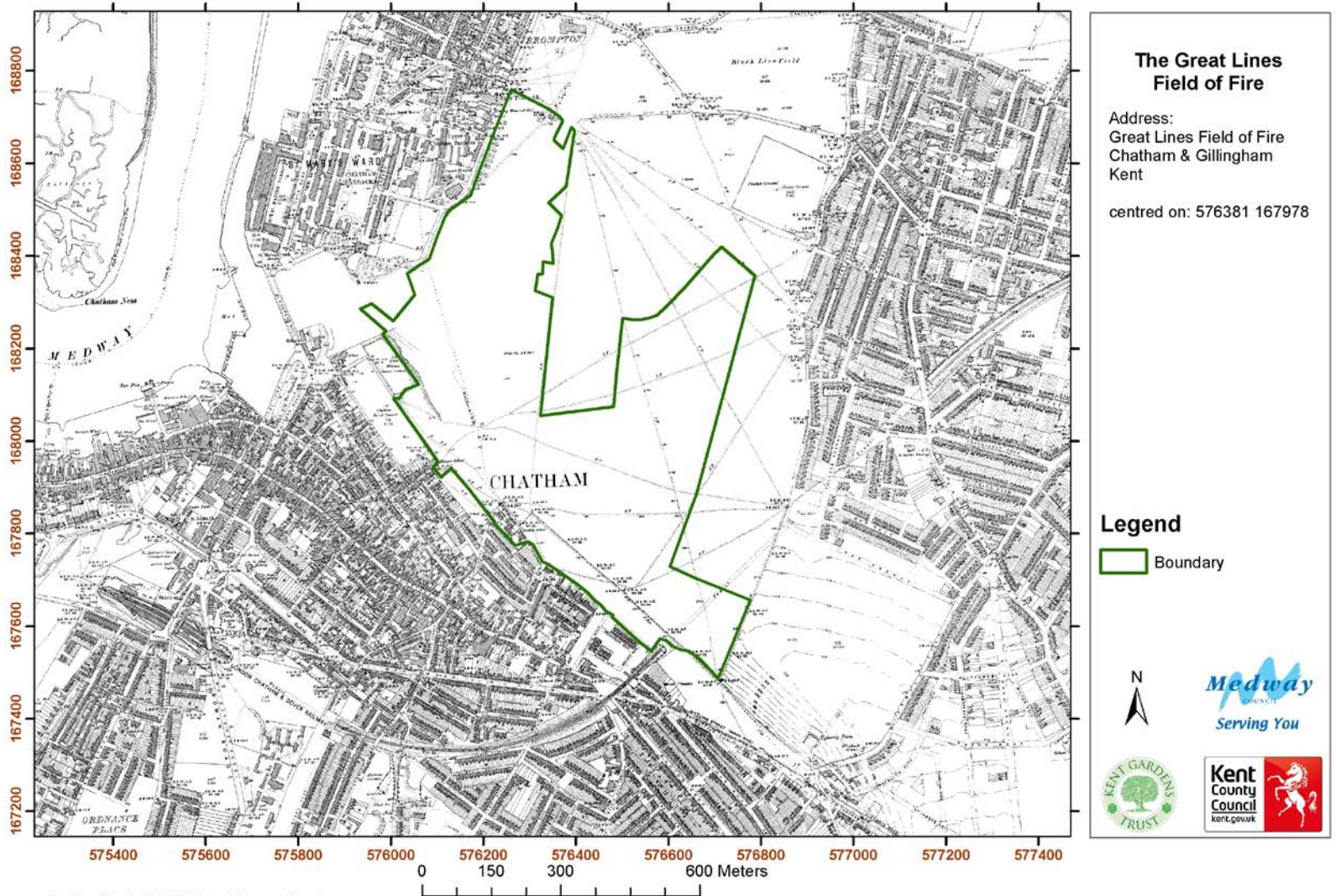
II

Naval war memorial. c1920. By Sir Robert Lorimer. Portland stone with bronze plaques. First World War obelisk memorial has steps up to a plinth with inscription plaques, and projecting corners with reclining lions, beneath a stepped base to the obelisk, which has a stepped top to an elaborate finial with corner ships prows and bronze supports to a ball. Part of a fine memorial to the Royal Navy's dead with that of the Second World War (qv), which encloses it, and forming a notable landmark above Chatham. A striking design very similar to the naval memorials at Portsmouth and Plymouth by Sir Robert Lorimer.

Listing NGR: TQ7666068404

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Fig. 7 2nd edition OS 25" map (1897-1900)



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Fig. 8 View from the north entrance



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Fig. 9 Naval War Memorial



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Fig. 10 Wildlife area



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Fig. 11 View towards Chatham

