

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



## The Owl House, Lamberhurst



April 2009

# The Owl House

Lamberhurst, Kent

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

With many thanks to the owners of The Owl House for allowing access to the garden 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 <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

THE OWL HOUSE

TUNBRIDGE WELLS

LAMBERHURST

TQ 6638 3728

## **SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST**

A formal garden around a C16 house set in extensive, informal water and woodland gardens, which were laid out from 1954 to the designs of James Russell of Sunningdale Nurseries.

## **CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

Lamberhurst probably originated in the late Saxon period as a clearing in the Wealden Forest for swine pasture (CAA). There is little evidence of permanent settlement until a Chrism List (church accounts of fees for consecrated oil) of 1115 reference to 'Lamberhurste' (meaning 'a wooded hill for lambs, or lambing, near a stream'). The raising of sheep for wool flourished along the water meadows of the Teise Valley from the C13 and by the C15 the hamlet of Lamberhurst had become a village with cloth and cattle (and leather) industries. From the C16 to the C18 it was also an important centre for iron working and much of the area's woodland was felled to provide fuel for furnaces and clearings for hammer ponds (Hasted).

By 1522, a new house was built in a wooded area in the northern outskirts of Lamberhurst on land belonging to Bayham Abbey in nearby Sussex. Abbey accounts record that it was leased to a Thomas Wyliard for a yearly rental of one white cockerel (Young). Subsequent tenants were thought to have been night smugglers (owlers) involved in the illegal export of wool. In 1770 the property probably belonged to Elizabeth Wilson and her sisters, who owned the surrounding woodlands (1770 plan). By 1796 a drive to the house had been laid out, two ponds dug out and an orchard planted (Austen, Saxby and Playfoot). It is recorded as Owl House on the 1821 Greenwood map.

At the time of the 1841 Census a farmer, Stephen Whibley James Playfoot, and his family, occupied the property, then called Great Owley House. They were probably tenant farmers, as the Tithe Map of 1843 records an oast house to the immediate west of the house and its owner as a Richard Curteis Pomfret, a lessee of the Dean and Chapter of Rochester. Various members of the Playfoot or Whibley families lived there until at least 1861 (Census data), during which time gardens around the house were laid out and the property was known as Owl House (1st edn map). From then until World War One, there were three changes of ownership (Census data; Electoral Register), but no alterations are recorded to either the house or gardens (2nd and 3rd edn OS maps). A 1907 photograph shows a ramshackle cottage with fruit trees and a vegetable garden.

After World War One the house was sold to a Mr and Mrs Horace Haiselden followed by three subsequent owners before 1952. Owl House, together with the nearby farm of Little Owl House (about 23ha in total) were bought by Maureen, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava as her weekend estate. She renamed it The Owl House and described it at that time as having 'no garden to speak of and only a ploughed field surrounded by woodland' (Brochure), and in 1954 she commissioned James Russell of Sunningdale Nurseries, Windlesham, to design the garden. The resulting partly walled, formal garden south of the house and the extensive, ornamental, woodland garden were completed by 1960 and were regularly opened to the public until 2005. It was also used as a wedding and party venue. The estate was inherited in 1998 by her granddaughter Eugenia and her husband, the actor Julian Sands but in 2006 was offered for sale. The Owl House and the gardens immediately adjoining it were bought by the present owners and the coach house and two estate cottages were sold as separate private houses. The Sands retained the site of the (by then neglected) informal water and woodland gardens and a swimming pool complex around the C19 oast house. The property remains in multiple, private ownership.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

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

The Owl House site lies on a south-facing ridge some 100m above sea-level with fine views across the wooded Weald to the west and south-west. The surrounding landscape is one of undulating ridges and gentle valleys with orchards, hop gardens and woodland. The c.18.5ha site is 1km north-west of Lamberhurst, 6.5km south-west of Goudhurst and 8.5km south-east of Royal Tunbridge Wells, with the A21 (London to Hastings road) 1km to its north. The site is bordered to its south-west by Owl House Fruit Farm (in separate ownership), while the fields, pastures and woods of the surrounding farms form the setting to its remaining boundaries.

### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The Owl House is approached from the north side of Mount Pleasant road along a narrow tarmac-surfaced drive and curves gently for some 350m in a south-westerly direction passing the orchards and C20 buildings of Owl House Fruit Farm to arrive at a five-bar wooden gate flanked on each side by a c.0.6m high, brown-painted, concrete, owl. The drive, from this point on with a consolidated gravel surface, continues for a further 100m before running alongside a 100m long red brick wall (on its east side) which forms the west wall of The Owl House garden. A gap in the wall at its northern end leads into a small courtyard and the west, entrance front of the house.

Eighteenth-century maps show the approach to The Owl House from the south along the drive, but continuing across the site of the present formal garden, to a roughly oval-shaped forecourt (Austen, Saxby and Playfoot). By 1843 the garden was enclosed on its south and west sides by a hedge and the former entrance is recorded as 'Old Lane' (Tithe Map). It is unclear whether subsequent owners used the present entrance on the west front, but in 1955 reference is made to a main entrance on the south side and additional planting to an existing island bed, possibly forming a turning circle (Borthwick Institute).

## PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The Owl House is a C16, timber-framed house of two-storeys standing on a sandstone plinth (listed grade II). It is constructed of red brick with tile hanging to the first floor and a tiled, hipped and pitched roof. There is a late C20, single-storey extension on its north end. A few metres to the west of the house is a C19 oast house which in 1960 was converted to a pool house and a rendered, white-painted extension built on its west side. It has brick elevations and a tiled roof. Steps descend from it to a terrace on which there is an informally shaped swimming pool.

## GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

On the south front of the house is a formal garden (c.20m x 40m) enclosed by 2m high brick walls on its south and west sides but open to informal lawns and shrub beds to its east. The south front opens onto a broad, York stone, paved terrace enclosed by 0.5m high stone walling. At the south-west and south-east corners of the terrace three stone steps ascend to a paved walk that extends southwards for some 60m to terminate at a pair of 1m high wrought iron gates attached to brick piers set in the south garden wall. The walk which has a circular pool and a stone fountain approximately halfway along its length, is flanked by narrow herbaceous borders and wrought iron rose arches and trelliswork, the whole layout set within formal lawns. James Russell's 1950s plans for the formal garden were largely implemented, although he specified a set of central steps ascending from the terrace to the walk (Borthwick Institute). His recommendations also indicated that a gate, path and pool in the formal garden already existed but that the path should be aligned on the [south] front door, there should be a 'slightly more important' gate and the 'small' pool 'would need to be enlarged considerably'. The brick walls on the west and south sides of the formal garden were constructed in 1960 to replace hedges, which at that time enclosed the garden on three sides. Russell's layout for the formal garden remains (2009), although rose arches have replaced his white, 'square trelliswork pillars'.

Forty-five metres to the south-east of the house, set at the eastern end of the formal garden's south wall is a C16 single-storey brick coach house with an attic. It has partly weather-boarded elevations under a slate and tiled roof. By 1938, a greenhouse had been built on its west wall. This was still in place in the 1950s when Russell made suggestions to screen it 'by a bold group of evergreens consisting of many sorts of roses and sweet-scented plants'. The greenhouse was demolished by the early 1960s and the coach house converted to guest accommodation and named Butterfly Cottage (Borthwick Institute). It is now in separate private ownership. One hundred metres further south, are two late C20 semi-detached cottages (Daffodil and Primrose Cottages) in the same architectural style. These are now also in separate private ownership.

The gardens to the north of the house are laid out as informal lawns some mature trees, island shrub beds and old fruit trees, probably remnants of Russell's planting of shrubberies and 'cherries underplanted with all sorts of azaleas' (Borthwick Institute). Approximately 20m to the east of the house, and at the foot of a grass bank, is a white, wooden summerhouse with trellised side



panels and a tiled roof. It stands on a York stone base and sheltered by a stand of beech and conifer trees. Some 30m north-east of the house a rectangular grassed area (possibly the site of a former 1950s tennis lawn) is separated from the lawns by a white wooden fence and has regularly spaced, wrought iron, lamp standards along both sides of its length. A York stone paved pathway leads from it to the summerhouse. From 1955 to the early 1960s correspondence between Lady Dufferin and James Russell included the plans and plant lists containing his proposals for these informal lawns on the north and east of the house, which in addition showed heather and rose gardens, a swimming pool and a tennis court (Borthwick Institute). Also proposed was a second summerhouse, octagonal in shape and sited on a high point some 250m to the north-east of the house. There is no surviving evidence of any of these built features having been implemented.

Approximately 100m south-east from the house, two urns mark the entrance to a 300m long woodland walk (Lady Dufferin's Temple Avenue) which runs through Cooksbroom Wood, its mature trees including beech, oak and horse chestnut, underplanted with rhododendrons. The walk is intercepted two-thirds of the way along by a circular glade (the Rhododendron Circle), in which stone seats and a central owl statue was placed during Lady Dufferin's ownership (Brochure), but which were removed in the late 1990s. At the end of the walk a wisteria-covered, C20, circular, six-columned, stone temple forms a focal point (the Temple Garden). It stands within a triangular-shaped, grassed area surrounded by Lombardy poplars which also mark the garden's boundary with the surrounding pasture.

Running through Crooksbrook Wood is a spring-fed stream crossed by simple wooden bridges (mostly in poor condition). Some 200m from the house, the path across one of the bridges continues as a York stone path with its entrance flanked by statues of a brown owl to reach an informally-shaped pool (Willow Pond). The pool is crossed by two wooden bridges and is surrounded by banks with overgrown planting that contains remnants of Russell's rhododendrons, azaleas, acers and a weeping willow (Borthwick Institute). The path, from this point forward as a narrow track, winds along the pond banks through multi-stemmed beeches to a cascade and a fountain, now lost under plant growth. There is a second pond 90m east of Butterfly Cottage, in which Lady Dufferin kept ornamental breeds of ducks. Both ponds (shown on 1796 map) are thought to have been C18 hammer ponds. Descriptions of these woodland and water gardens provide evidence of the lush planting they contained (Brochure; Young) and that they were well maintained after Lady Dufferin's death in 1998 (Bradley-Hole).

## REFERENCES

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'The Estate Market', *The Times* (18 October 1924).

Kelly's Directory for Lamberhurst 1934



Tom Wright, *The Gardens of Britain. Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey* (1978).

Michael Young, 'Garden to visit. Smugglers' blossom', *The Times* (12 May 1984).

Kathryn Bradley-Hole, 'Woodlands with the Wit To Woo', *Country Life* (11 April 2002), pp. 118-121.

### **Maps**

*A plan and description of the situation and content of several pieces of woodland in Lamberhurst, the property of Elizabeth Wilson gentlewoman and sisters 1770.* CKS reference U200P2.

Austen, Saxby & Playfoot *Map of Kent* (1796). CKS ref U200P3.

Charles Greenwood, *Map of the County of Kent* 1821.

Tithe map 1843 and apportionment.

OS maps      1st edn 6" 1862  
                  2nd edn 6" 1897  
                  3rd edn 6" 1907  
                  4th edn 6" 1929

OS maps      1st edn 25" 1867 Sheet 69/3  
                  2nd edn 25" 1898 Sheet 69/3  
                  3rd edn 25 1906 Sheet 69/3  
                  Revised edn 25" 1938 Sheet 69/3

Modern Mastermap 2007 1:10,000.

Map showing listed buildings within Owl House boundaries.

### **Illustrations**

Photograph of the Owl House 1907 reproduced in Owl House Brochure (private collection).

Aerial photograph 2003.

### **Archival items**

Census data 1841 -1891.

Electoral Registers 1902-1915.

*Plans and correspondence relating to the garden at the Owl House, Lamberhurst, Kent 1954-1968.* Borthwick Institute Ref JR 1/126 (1file, 1 roll)

English Heritage Listed Buildings entries: undated.

Kent Compendium entry and notes 1996.

The Owl House Gardens Brochure (private collection).

*Conservation Areas Appraisal. Lamberhurst and the Down.* Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in partnership with Lamberhurst Parish Council, Lamberhurst Society, Lamberhurst Local History Society and other local representatives (July 2002)

Sales Particulars, Knight Frank 2005.

Research by Jane Davidson

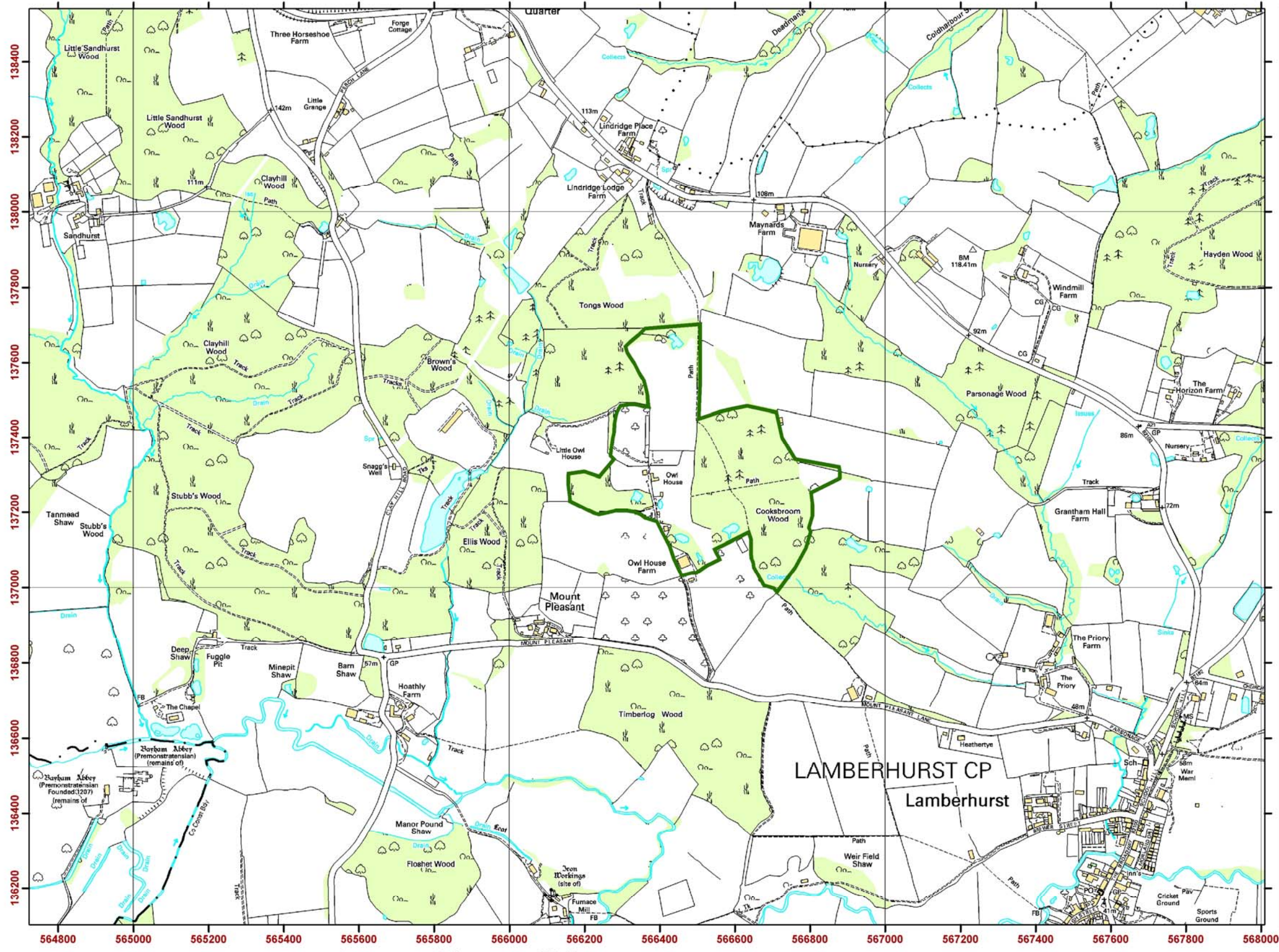
Description written by Barbara Simms

Edited by Virginia Hinze, April 2009





Fig. 1 Boundary map



**The Owl House**

Address:  
The Owl House  
Lamberhurst  
Kent

Map centred on NGR: 566454  
137328

Report completed : April 2009

**Legend**

 Boundary



Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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Fig. 2 Key views map

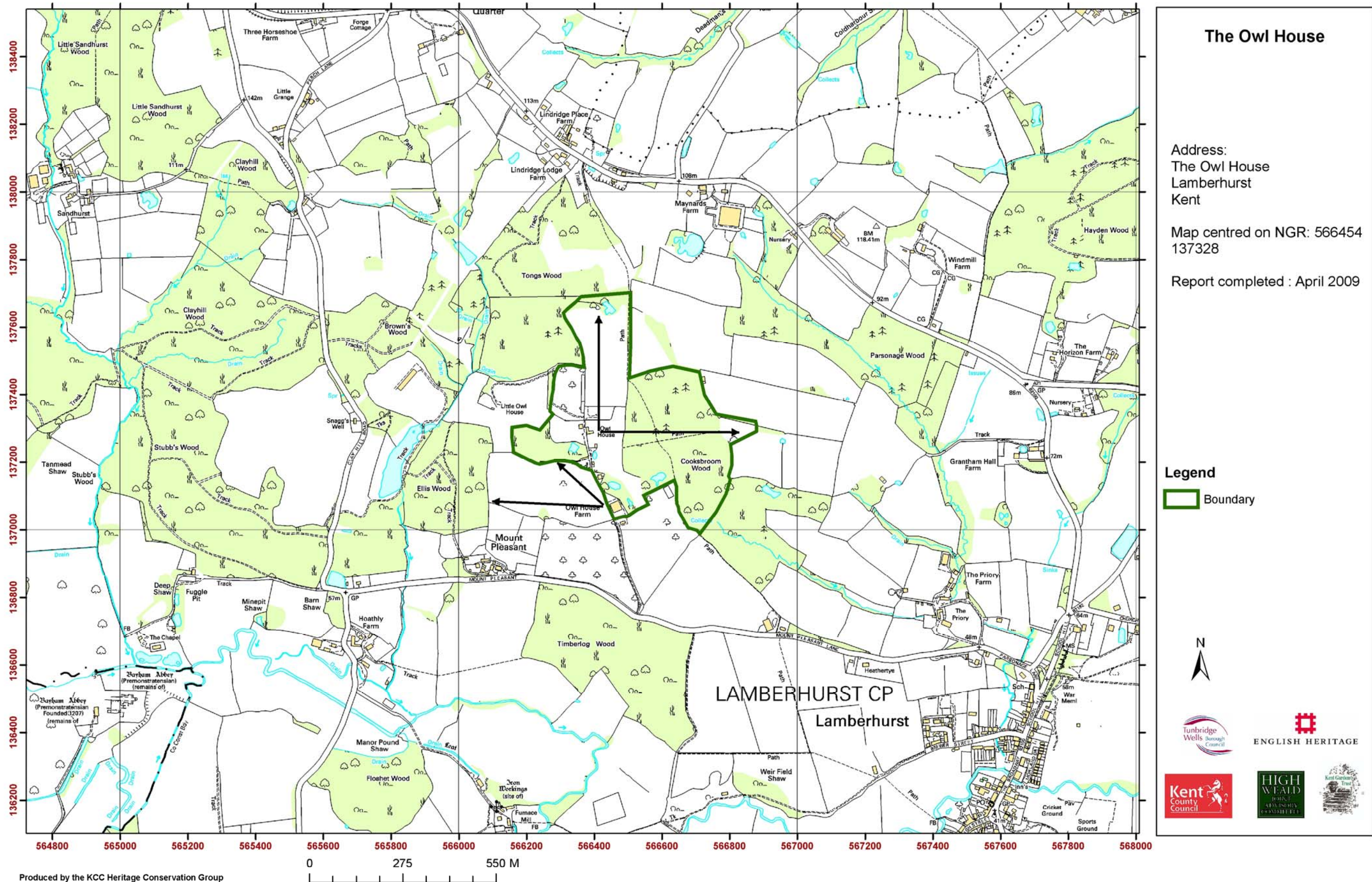
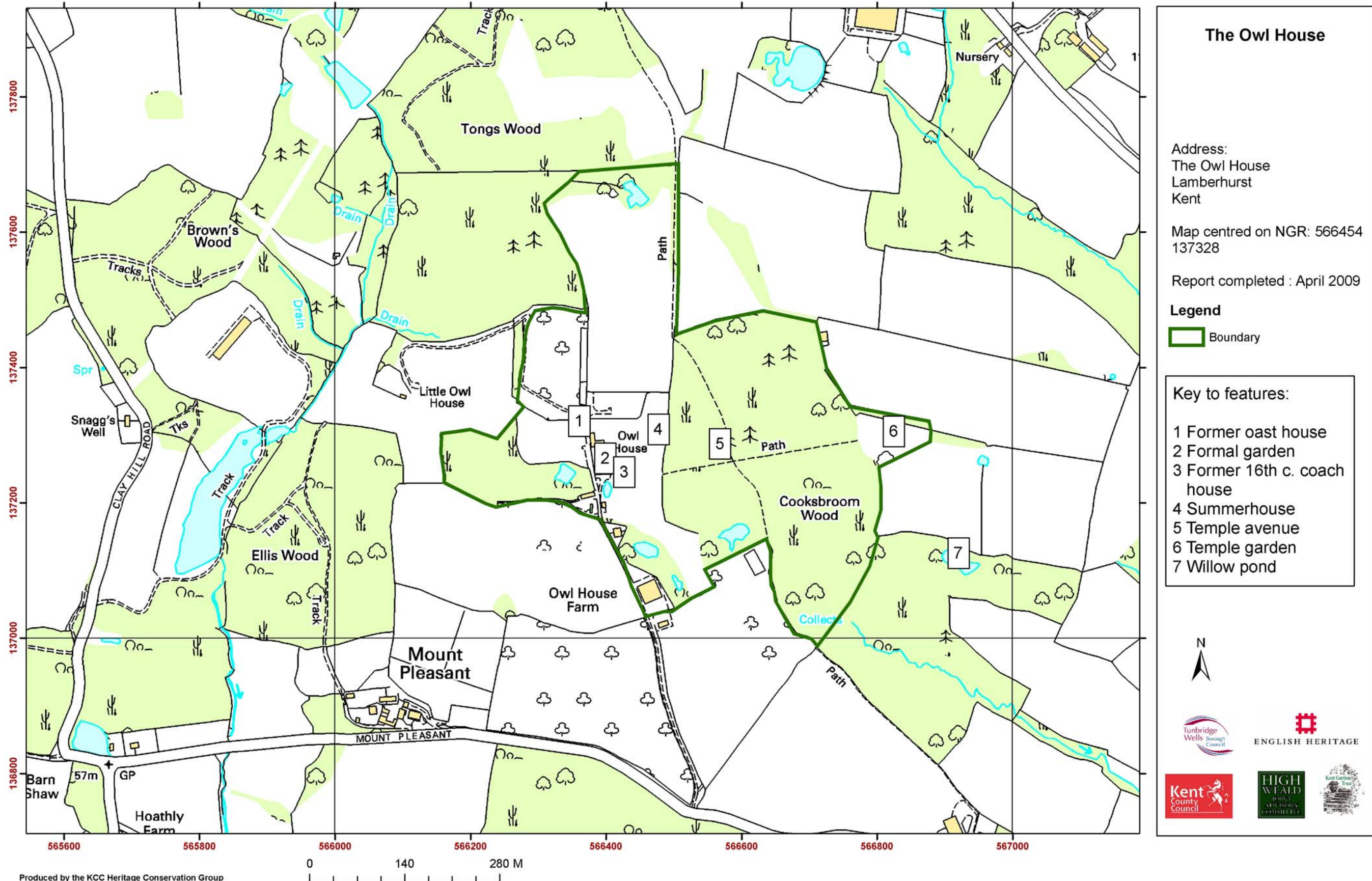




Fig. 3 Key features map



**The Owl House**

Address:  
The Owl House  
Lamberhurst  
Kent

Map centred on NGR: 566454  
137328

Report completed : April 2009

**Legend**

Boundary

**Key to features:**

- 1 Former oast house
- 2 Formal garden
- 3 Former 16th c. coach house
- 4 Summerhouse
- 5 Temple avenue
- 6 Temple garden
- 7 Willow pond

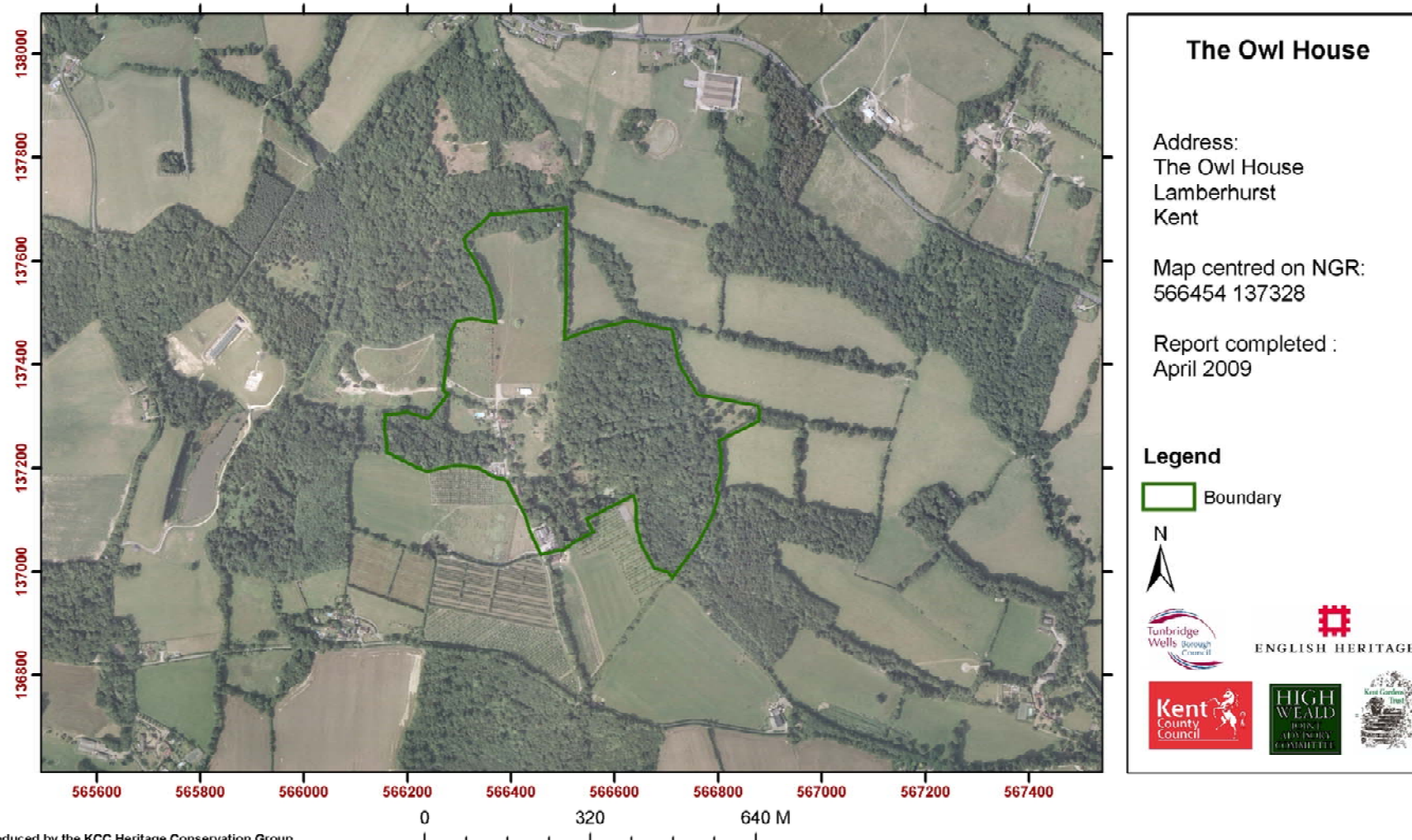
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## Fig. 4 Aerial photograph

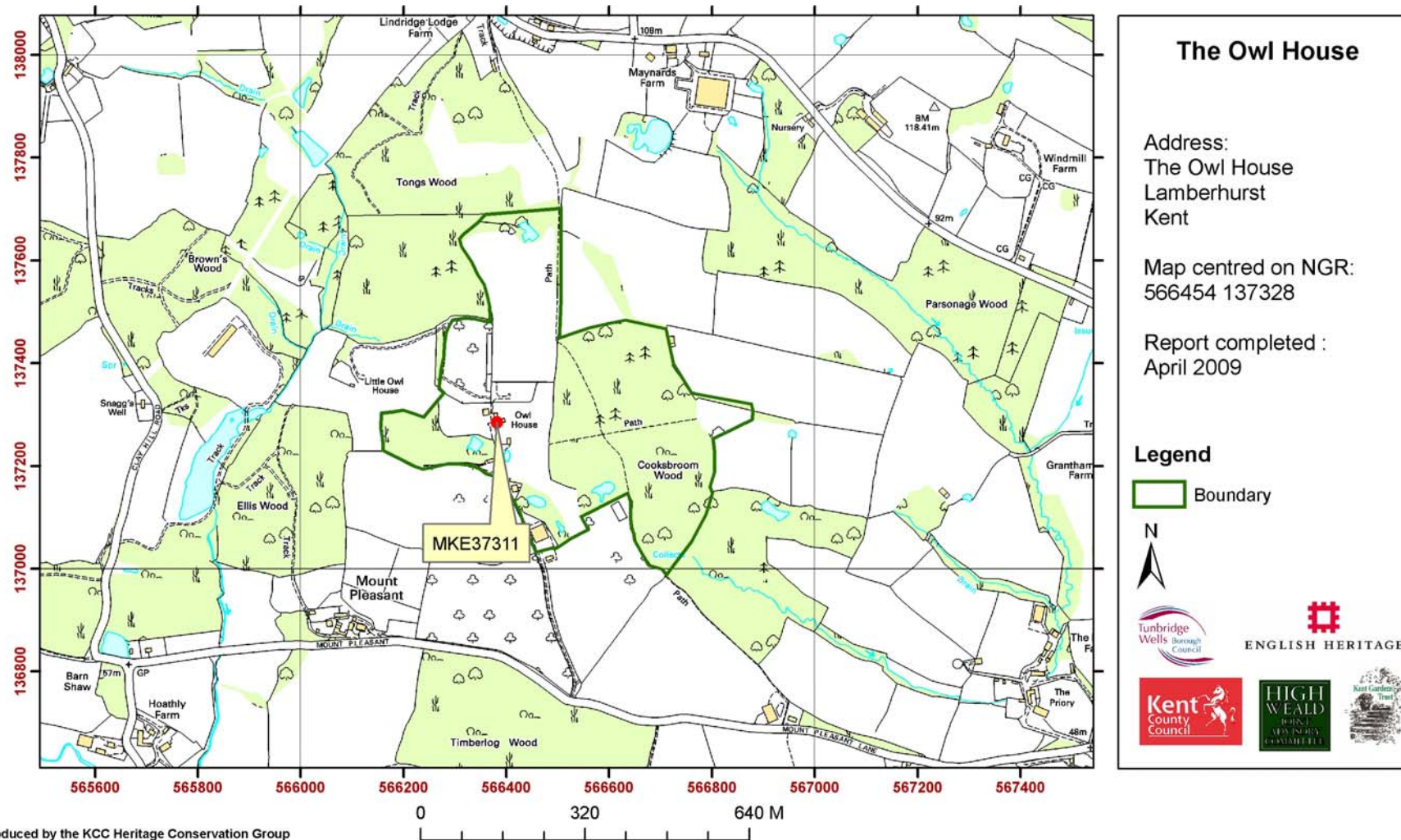


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## Fig. 5 Map of listed buildings





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**Fig. 6 Listed buildings at The Owl House**

### **Kent Historic Environment Record reference: MKE37311**

LAMBERHURST                      MOUNT PLEASANT TQ 63 NE  
(north side) 3/197

The Owl House

II

House. C16. Timber framed and clad with red and blue chequered brick on ground floor with tile hung first floor and plain tiled roof. Two storeys on sandstone plinth with bellcast to first floor and with roof half-hipped to left with stacks to rear and projecting cluster at end right. Wooden casements of 3, 2, 2 and 3 lights on first floor and of 4, 2 and 4 lights on ground floor with half-glazed door to centre left with sidelights. Lean-to outshot at right and catslide outshot to rear with C20 single storey service wing. Interior: full frame visible with large stone inglenook to projecting stack, and unusual revolving circular hanger set into main beam of end left bay said to be for hanging skeins of wool from. Archival material records the house in 1522; named for the 'Owlers' or smugglers who used the property C16-C18.