

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



## Bentham Hill House, Southborough



March 2009



# Bentham Hill House

Southborough, Kent

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

With many thanks to the residents of Bentham Hill House for allowing me to visit the gardens and for sharing their archives and memories and 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  
TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
SOUTHBOROUGH  
TQ 5717 4222

BENTHAM HILL HOUSE

## SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST

Formal lawns and walks laid out on the south, east and north sides of a house designed by the architect Decimus Burton (1800-81) in 1830-33 and set in extensive parkland with mature trees.

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The site of the current Bentham Hill House estate was once within the Manor of Southborough (Borough of South), one of four boroughs forming the Manor of Tunbridge that was given to Richard de Fitzgilbert in the C11 in recognition of his part in the Norman Conquest (Hasted). Prior to this, although there is evidence of prehistoric activity around Southborough and use of the land as pasture for pigs, the area was sparsely populated (CAA). By the mid-C14, however, several settlements existed there and taxation records dated 1334 cite the names of Holden, Bentham and Bounds.

Until the middle of the 16th century, the valley to the east of Southborough was part of the royal forest of Southfrith, when its timber was cut for fuel for local iron smelting. To the forest's west, Bentham Brooke, a tributary of the River Medway, is recorded on maps from the C16 (Saxton, Symonson, Parker) and by the mid-C18 its water was used first in the iron smelting industry and then in gunpowder manufacture, possibly based at Barden Furnace (Andrews, Dury and Herbert; Hasted). Further east along the Brooke's course was C17 Bentham Farm, whose two mills were also used for this purpose (CAA; Mudge).

Fields directly south of Bentham Farm were in agricultural use until the early C19 when the vinegar manufacturer, Arthur Pott, later High Sheriff and Deputy-Lieutenant of Kent (*London Gazette*), bought approximately 30ha of land on which to build a house (Tithe Map). In 1830, he commissioned Decimus Burton, who was already working locally on the development of the Calverley Estate, Tunbridge Wells. The Tithe Map records a house and other buildings (Bentham Hill), pleasure gardens of 16a (6.5ha), a kitchen garden and farm buildings together with extensive woods, arable and pasture lands. In 1862, a stable block and three lodge houses are shown on the 1st edn OS map. After Pott's death in 1877, his widow Frances remained at Bentham Hill and the estate continued in the family until the 1920s when it was sold to a William Harold Fleming.

During Fleming's ownership the house was extended eastwards and changes were made to the garden on the east front (architect's plans; 4th edn OS map). Bentham Hill House was used as a convalescent home during World War Two, following which it reverted to single private ownership until 1951. It was then

bought by Farringdon Reliance Mutual Insurance Society Ltd for re-development as eight flats and much of the surrounding lands and buildings was sold. Residents of Bentham Hill House bought the freehold from the developer in 1998 and the property remains in communal private ownership.

## SITE DESCRIPTION

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

Bentham Hill is set among the small farmsteads and narrow, winding, hilly, lanes of the High Weald. The land of the site is undulating and well-timbered and descends steeply on the northern boundary providing fine views north-west to Birchett's and Brookhurst Woods and north-east to the trees of Southborough Common. The 17ha site adjoins residential areas on the western outskirts of Southborough and is approximately 2km north-west of Royal Tunbridge Wells and 5km south-west of Tonbridge. The A26 (London to Royal Tunbridge Wells road) is 1km due east. The site is bordered to the north and west by the steep roads of Bentham Hill, and, to the south, by Etherington Hill. The houses and gardens of the Holden House development form the eastern boundary.

### ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Bentham Hill House estate is entered from the east side of Bentham Hill, some 50m from its junction with Etherington Hill, along a narrow gravelled drive. On the east side of the drive's entrance is a C19, two-storey Tudor-Gothic lodge (South Lodge) with a tiled roof. The narrow, gravelled drive, lined in sections by post-and-wire fencing, runs northwards for approximately 250m through tree-studded parkland (largely mature oaks and beeches) by post-and-wire fencing. Fifty metres south-west of the house, the drive descends sharply to the north-east, passing between a pair of 1.5m high stone piers with caps to arrive at an oval-shaped gravelled forecourt (c.30m x 25m) on the west, entrance front. This is enclosed on its west side by 0.5m high stone walls and by similar walls and mature shrubs on its south and east sides. On the west side of the drive immediately south of the forecourt entrance is a terrace of six C21 brick garages.

The south and east garden fronts open onto lawns reached by flights of stone steps set within them; a further, steeper flight from the main, west front descends to a service area on the north front. The south lawn is framed by two mature cedars and a Wellingtonia and borders the north side of a second drive that leads some 150m eastwards to a stable block screened by mature trees. This drive continues 500m in a north-easterly direction to East Lodge (listed grade II), also an early C19 Tudor-Gothic lodge, standing on Kibbles Lane (MacFarlane). A third lodge, West Lodge (listed grade II) stands on Bentham Hill, c150m north-west of South Lodge. From this lodge a 50m long grassed path runs due east to meet the main drive.

These approach drives and lodges were probably added between 1840 and 1860 and the lodges were possibly also designed by Decimus Burton after the main phase of building was complete (Tithe Map; 1st edn OS map). In 1999 East and West Lodges were sold to Mariner's Farm Ltd (Court Group of Companies) and in 2002 South Lodge was sold to a private owner.

## PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

Bentham Hill House was completed by 1833, the date shown on the central gable of the east elevation (Whitbourn). Designed by Decimus Burton (1800-81), it was described in 1838 by Greenwood as 'an elegant modern structure, partly Elizabethan, with a mixture of cottage style'. It is an irregular, L-shaped, two-storey house constructed of local sandstone ashlar with hipped and gabled tiled roofs and decorated bargeboards (listed building description). As the ground drops sharply on the north side, the north front has three storeys with a basement and a terrace above at ground level. A large canted porch forming three sides of an octagon is set in the angle of the building's south-west elevation. The south-east end was extended in the 1920s in similar materials and style.

One hundred metres to the south-east of the house is a C19 single-storey ashlar stable block and coach house with tiled roofs, arranged around a courtyard, possibly also to Burton's designs. The buildings (now Stable Cottage and Garage Cottage) are in private ownership (since 1994) and have been converted to bed-and-breakfast accommodation.

## GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The ornamental gardens lie on the south, east and north sides of the house and comprise formally laid out lawns and walks enclosed by shrubberies and woodland, laid out in the C19. The south garden front opens onto a C20 flagstone terrace enclosed by the east forecourt wall on its west side and a steeply rising grass bank on its south side. A flight of five, stone steps, set in the bank's south side and aligned centrally on the house front, ascends to a lawn enclosed by a mature rhododendron shrubbery which screens the east drive running to the stable block. A curving, narrow, brick path ascends from the east drive to run eastwards along the edge of the shrubbery to reach the stable block. On the lawn's western side a few metres south of the house is a stone and wrought iron C20 medieval-style well.

The lawn on the eastern front drops steeply northwards along the east front of the house levelling out to form a grassed terrace (c.15m x 30m) enclosed on its east and north sides by low stone walls. Set in this steep slope are four shallow stone steps with 0.5m grass treads. These were probably constructed in the late 1920s when a path (now, 2009, grassed over) that divided the grassed terrace into two sections was extended southwards (4th edn OS map). The path, its edges still visible in the grass, terminated at the end of the terrace, where the land drops away steeply with views northwards to the surrounding countryside (1st edn OS map). A steep flight of steps descends from the west side of the grassed terrace to the north front. A similar flight descends from its north end alongside a C19 stone building, once partly roofed in glass (function unknown), now (2009) converted to a studio.

Some two metres east from the house and aligned on the main garden doors is a rectangular herb garden set in paving with rounded coping edges and scalloped corners. It was planted as a rose bed until 1997 and a feature in this position is shown on maps from the 1860s and was probably a lily pool with a



fountain (3rd edn OS map). A mature tree to the south of this feature, and a narrow paved terrace or path immediately adjacent to the house, both shown on C19 maps, had been removed by 1909 (3rd edn OS map). A sun dial on the grassed terrace remained until the 1950s (4th edn OS map).

Three stone steps descend eastwards from the terrace to a second, lower, grassed terrace (c. 80m x 100m) that slopes from south to north. A sunken level area on its far east side is the site of a former, C20 croquet or tennis lawn (3rd edn OS map). This lower terrace is sheltered on its eastern boundary by a stand of birch trees, on its south by rhododendron shrubberies and on its north by woodland (many trees in poor condition). OS maps indicate that until the early C20, the site of the lower terrace was part of the parkland, while the woodland to the north was a lightly treed area threaded by circuit walks.

From the north front of the house, a steep flight of steps descends from a stone portico on its west end to a further garden area comprising a north-sloping lawn. A low stone wall encloses it on its north side from the adjoining, hanging woodland within the site boundary on Bentham Hill. At its west end, adjoining parkland opposite the entrance to the forecourt, the lawn is planted with mixed tree species. From the 1860s a raised walk (now, 2009, grassed over) ran in a westerly direction along the foot of the north front and descended between the trees on the west before returning eastwards by the stone wall on the lawn's north side (1st edn OS map). This path led to woodland walks with 'picturesque' views (now, 2009, obscured by tree growth) on the north and north-east boundaries of the site and to a ravine 100m north-east of the house crossed by a stone bridge (replaced in 2003 by a wooden bridge). A few metres north-east of the bridge was a second glass house, demolished by 1909 (3rd edn OS map).

#### PARKLAND

The undulating parkland to the south and south-east of the house is managed as rough grass with mature oaks and beeches and some exotic trees. Early twentieth-century photographs and OS maps show that it had preserved the well-timbered and ornamental nature created in the C19.

#### KITCHEN GARDEN

A mid-C19 kitchen garden (c.50m x 70m), formerly part of the estate, is sited 150m south-west of Bentham Hill House on the west side of Bentham Hill. Now in separate private ownership, its 2m high brick walls contain a late C20 house and garden. The kitchen garden is shown on the Tithe Map with a small building against the exterior of the north wall. Maps from the 1860s show it as divided into quarters with perimeter paths and with rows of trees along the outside of the two longer sides, possibly enclosing slip gardens. A glasshouse is shown in the north-east corner within the garden walls and two further glasshouses are in a detached, enclosed frameyard immediately to the west of the garden.

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 Philip Whitbourn, *Decimus Burton 1800-81: architect and gentleman* (2003), pp. 36-37  
 A. M. McFarlane, *Southborough and High Brooms in Old Picture Postcards* (European Library, 1997)

### Maps

Christopher Saxton, *Sussex, Surry and Kent* 1575.  
 Philip Symonson, *Map of Kent* 1596.  
 Samuel Parker, *A Map of the County of Kent* 1719.  
 J. Andrews, W. Dury and W. Herbert, *A Topographical Map of the County of Kent ...* 1769.  
 Edward Hasted map of Bidborough 1778.  
 OS surveyor's draft 1800.  
 William Mudge, *A New and Accurate Survey of Kent* 1801.  
 Charles Greenwood, *Map of the County of Kent* 1821.  
 Tithe map and award (Tonbridge Parish) 1840.

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

OS maps      1st edn 25" OS map 1866 Sheets 60/ 3 and 6  
                   2nd edn 25" OS map 1898 Sheets 60/ 3 and 6  
                   3rd edn 25" OS map 1909 Sheets 60/ 3 and 6  
                   4th edn 25" OS map 1936 Sheets 60/ 3 and 6

*Proposed Alterations Bentham Hill, Speldhurst for W. H. Fleming Esq* 1920s in Whitbourn, *Decimus Burton*.  
 Modern Mastermap 1:2,500 2007  
 Map showing listed buildings within Bentham Hill House boundaries 1:5,000

### Illustrations

2 b/w images of Bentham Hill House 1909/10 reproduced in MacFarlane, figs 61 and 62.  
 b/w image of East Lodge 1909/10 reproduced in MacFarlane, fig. 60.  
 b/w image of Bentham Hill House bedecked with bunting to welcome home Robert Pott from Boer War 1901 from Chris McCooey, *Images of England: Southborough and High Brooks* (1998).

Aerial photograph 2003.  
Aerial photograph 2007 (private collection).

**Archival items**

Appointment of Sheriffs (Arthur Pott of Bentham-Hill, Kent) in *The London Gazette* (31 Jan 1840).

English Heritage Listed Buildings entries: undated.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, *Southborough Conservation Area Appraisal* (August 2003).

Extract from Sales Particulars 2003.

Research by Liz Walker

Description written by Barbara Simms

Edited by Virginia Hinze

March 2009



Fig. 1 Boundary map

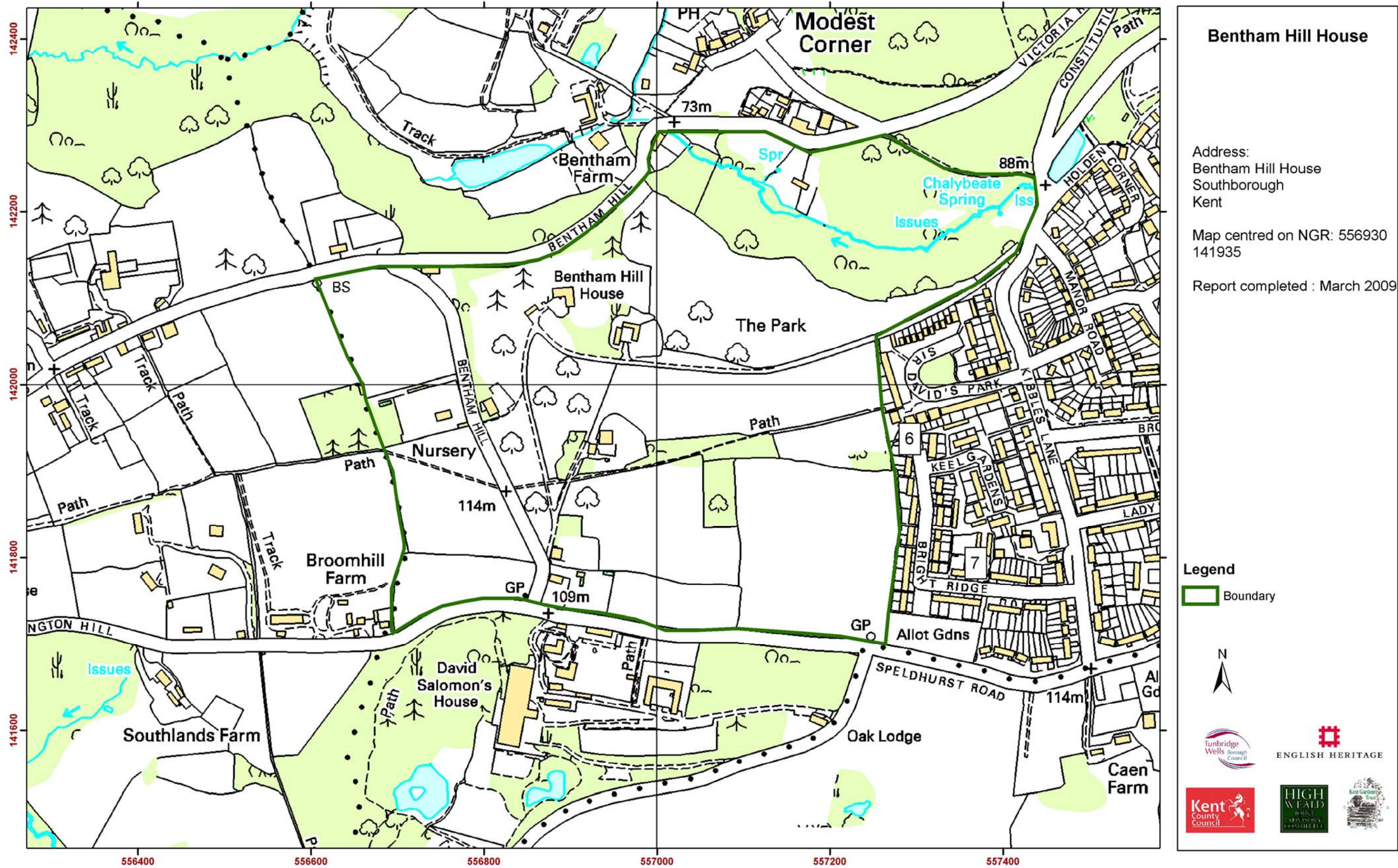
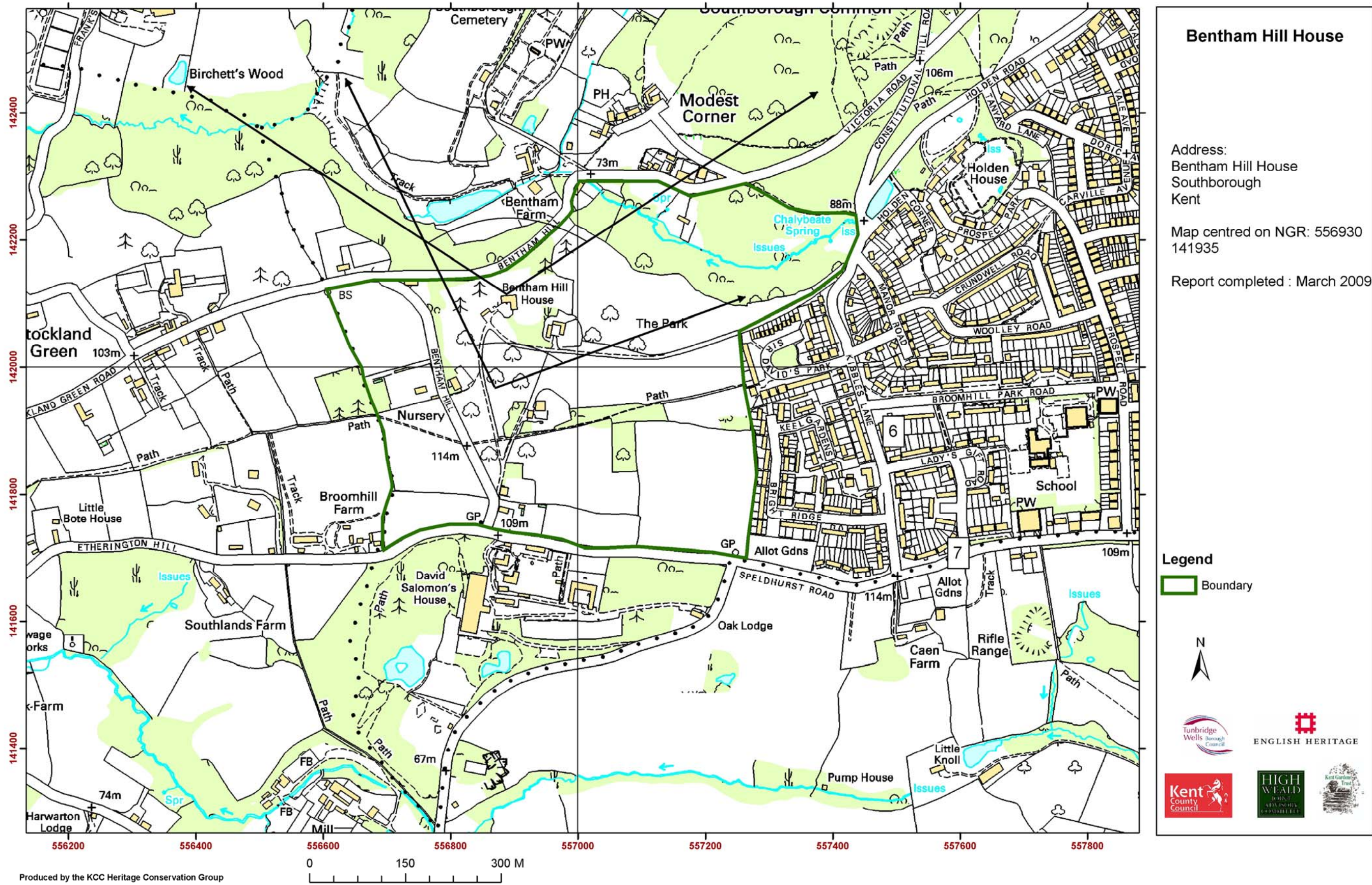




Fig. 2 Key views map



**Bentham Hill House**

Address:  
Bentham Hill House  
Southborough  
Kent

Map centred on NGR: 556930  
141935

Report completed : March 2009

**Legend**

Boundary

Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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## Fig. 3 Aerial photograph



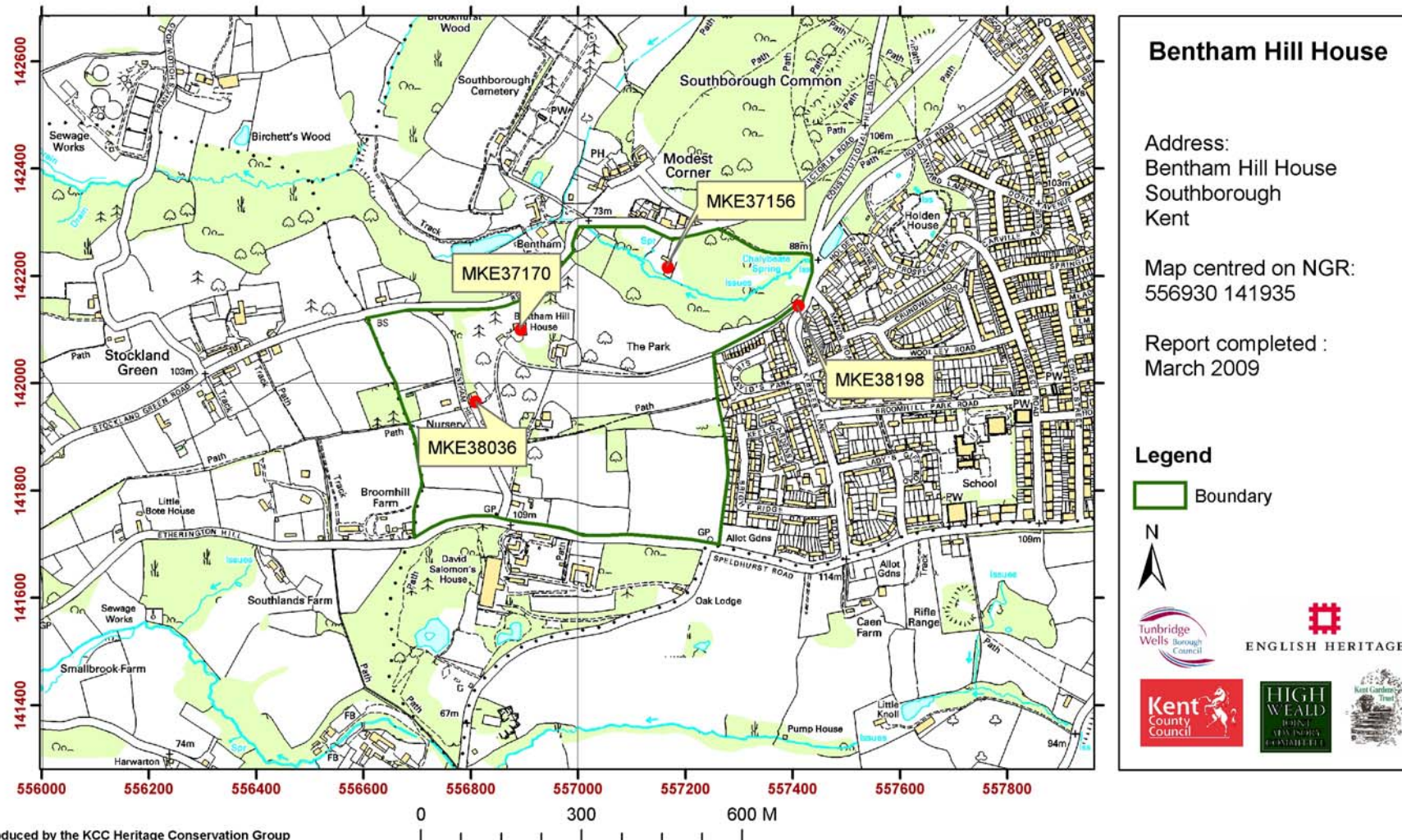
Produced by the KCC Heritage Conservation Group

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Fig. 4 Aerial photograph



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### Fig. 5 Listed buildings at Bentham Hill House

#### Kent Historic Environment Record reference: MKE37156

SOUTHBOROUGH                      VICTORIA ROAD    (south  
side) 3/5                                      Nos 1 and 2, Woods Cottage 27-10-50 -  
II

C16 timber-framed farmhouse, now 2 cottages. Brick infilling of timber frame on ground floor of both cottages, remainder plaster infilling. Diagonal braces on 1st floor. Hipped tiled roof with 2 small dormers and central ridge stack. 2 storeys and attic, 3-window facade, fenestrated irregularly. Casement windows, some horizontally sliding. A nurse of Queen Victoria is said to have lived here in her retirement and the Queen is reputed to have visited her here.

#### Kent Historic Environment Record reference: MKE37170

SOUTHBOROUGH                      THE COMMON    (west  
side) 1/5 -                                      Bentham Hill -    II

1830-32. Small country house in Deveyesque mode by Decimus Burton for Alexandre Pott. Now flats. Sandstone ashlar with tiled roof. Irregular L-shaped house of 2 storeys. ENTRANCE (EAST) FRONT. Staggered 'L' in shape. Low left-hand wing with tall pitched roof, gable containing pointed window. Main block of house L-shaped with canted re-entrant entrance angle, the porch projecting with- in the angle as 3 sides of an octagon made up of 3 four-centred arches. SOUTH FRONT. 3 windows. Gable to right with decorated barge-boards, pendant and finial. Pointed 2nd storey window in gable with uncarved shield above. EAST FRONT. Chimney breast projecting to left with window on each side on ground- floor, each with tiled weatherhood above. Segment-headed windows set directly into breast on 1st floor. Paired stacks. Gable to right. Decorated barge- boards with pendant and finial. Entrance to left of gable. NORTH FRONT. 3 storeys, as ground drops sharply on this side. Basement built out with terrace above. 3 small gables with large gable to left. No interiors survive. In the history of late C19 domestic architecture this little known house has a very important place as a progenitor, possibly as THE progenitor of the Olde English style. Philip Miller, Decimus Burton, 1800-81. Exhib Cat, Building Centre, London, 1981.28.

#### Kent Historic Environment Record reference: MKE38036

SOUTHBOROUGH                      THE COMMON    (west  
side) 1/8 -                                      Bentham Hill, West Lodge -    II

Circa 1830 lodge, probably by Decimus Burton. Ashlar in Tudor Gothic cottage mode with tiled roof, 1 storey plan in shape of cross. East front 2 windows, rest one each. Casements. Each front with scalloped barge-board to gable, pendant and finial. 1 storey bay windows on east and west sides.

#### Kent Historic Environment Record reference: MKE38198



SOUTHBOROUGH  
side) 3/4 -

KIBBLES LANE  
Bentham Hill East Lodge -

(west

II

Circa 1830, probably by Decimus Burton. Ashlar lodge in Tudor Gothic cottage mode. Tiled roof with 2 octagonal stone chimneys and oversailing eaves. Scalloped bargeboards with pendants and finials. 1 storey and attic; 1 window gable ends, with small pointed arch in gable; 3 window main north front. Casement windows. Entrance with projecting gable to right of north front.