

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



Grosvenor & Hilbert Recreation Ground, Royal Tunbridge Wells



March 2009

Grosvenor & Hilbert Recreation Ground

Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

SITE DESCRIPTION

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Boundary map.

FIGURE 2: Key views map.

FIGURE 3: Key features map.

FIGURE 4: Aerial photograph.

FIGURES ONLY ON CD

FIGURE 5: Tithe map 1838.

FIGURE 6: Plan of Calverley Waterworks. Undated. CKS Ward collection.

FIGURE 7: Plan from Conveyance of land 1887. TWBC Museum archives.

FIGURE 8: Ordnance Survey 1st edn 25" map (1870).

FIGURE 9: Ordnance Survey 2nd edn 25" map (1897).

FIGURE 10: Ordnance Survey 3rd edn 25" OS map (1907).

FIGURE 11: Special Edn 1909 OS at 50" to 1ml. National Archives.

FIGURE 12: Inquiry poster 1875 published by TW local board. TWBC Museum archives.

FIGURE 13: Photographs of Grosvenor & Hilbert Recreation Ground January 2009.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With many thanks to Geoff Copus and Ian Beavis for their helpful comments 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

GROSVENOR AND HILBERT RECREATION GROUND

TUNBRIDGE WELLS

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS

TQ 8335 3260

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST

Tunbridge Wells' first municipal park, laid out in 1889 as Grosvenor Recreation Ground, was designed by the Scottish landscape gardener Robert Marnock with lakes, grottoes and winding walks. It was extended to its north and east by the addition of Hilbert Recreation Ground in 1931 and 1937. King George's Playing Field was created within the latter between 1938 and 1948.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Much of the western part of Tunbridge Wells, including the extensive Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons, lay in the Manor of Rusthall, which originated as a 'den' or swine pasture granted to the bishop of Rochester in AD 765. However, the main area of the present town lay within the Manors of South Frith and Speldhurst (Historical Atlas of Tunbridge Wells). The town takes its name from the neighbouring and much earlier Tonbridge (which was known as Tunbridge until the late C19), with 'Wells' denoting its status as a spa. The development of Tunbridge Wells as a spa town and resort began in 1606 when it is said that Dudley, Lord North, discovered a chalybeate spring there (400 years of the Wells). It continued to be popular throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and many new houses and lodgings were built to accommodate both visitors and residents.

In the 1830s residential development expanded northwards and eastwards up the hill of Mount Pleasant, with artisans' dwellings being erected in the Camden Road, St Peter's (Windmill Fields) and Hervey Town areas. At the same time, to the east of Mount Pleasant, the Calverley Estate was laid out for the wealthy and professional classes. After the coming of the railway (at Jackwood Spring Station) in September 1845, residential development intensified (Gisborne) to accommodate an increase in the town's population (Census data). The Tunbridge Wells Improvement Act of 1835 contributed to the provision of facilities such as street lighting and water for the new houses, but the main source of water for the Calverley Estate was a spring-fed waterworks at the bottom of Quarry Road (Calverley Waterworks; Gisborne). These waterworks were run privately until 1865 when they were taken over by the town's Local Board, which then built a new reservoir at nearby Pembury. The redundant Calverley reservoirs, 'two fine pieces of water ... formerly used for storing the water of Jack Wood Spring', were opened as open-air swimming baths in 1873 (Pelton).

In 1889 the town of Tunbridge Wells was incorporated and John Stone Wigg, who became the first mayor, offered to present to the town four acres (1.6ha) of

land adjacent to the old waterworks on condition that the whole area be made into a public recreation ground (Conveyance of Land). This would provide a recreational area for the northern part of the town which did not have the benefit of the Commons as open space (Petition). The commission for the plan of the development was given to Robert Marnock, who a little earlier had lived in Rusthall, where he was a neighbour of Mr Stone Wigg. Marnock had also laid out Alexandra Park in Hastings in 1878. He first presented his plans in 1887 (Town Hall letter). The works for the Grosvenor Recreation Ground, as it became known, were carried out in 1888 and 1889 and included an Upper Lake with grottoes, a pair of Lower Lakes linked by a bridge (in 1934 the lakes were filled in), winding walks, a park keeper's cottage and tree and shrub planting (Waterer's letter). It opened in July 1889 (2nd edn OS map) and the Calverley swimming baths became part of the site the following year (baths closed in 1948). Other facilities added in subsequent years (TWBC) included a children's playground (1893), a bandstand (1899, demolished 1935), tennis courts (1904-05) and a bowling green (1913).

In 1931 Councillor Edward Strange presented the Council with a portion of the adjoining Charity Farm as an extension to Grosvenor Recreation Ground. It was to be named after his mother, Lydia Hilbert. The Charity Farm lands, called Lipscombe Farm on the Tithe Map of 1838, included two small woods (Folly Shaw and Roundabout Wood) with streams running through them (4th edn OS map). By 1937, two football pitches had been added (partly paid for by Tunbridge Wells Council of Service) and Strange had donated a further three acres including an oast house. The following year the King George National Memorial Fund subsidised the construction of a playing field (not completed until 1948).

During World War 2 the Grosvenor Recreation Ground was used by the Council's Emergency Committee to construct a British Restaurant, a building that survived, latterly as the Satellite Youth Club, until 2003. The Grosvenor and Hilbert Recreation Ground has remained free from development and supports a wide range of flora and fauna with the two woods being designated as a local nature reserve. The site remains the property of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Grosvenor and Hilbert Recreation Ground lies within an area of urban residential development on the north side of Tunbridge Wells. The 24ha site is undulating and incorporates natural springs and pools and ancient woodland. It is situated approximately 3km north-east of the centre of Royal Tunbridge Wells and 3km south-east of Southborough, with the A26 (Tonbridge to Uckfield road) 700m to its west.

The irregularly shaped site is bounded to its west by the main London to Hastings railway line and to its north by new (2009) housing development in the grounds of a late C19 gasworks (2nd edn OS map). The east and south boundaries are formed by the C19 and C20 properties in Rochdale and Dorking

Roads and C20 properties in Ravenswood Avenue, Lipscombe Road and Sandhurst Close. In St James Road on the south-west boundary are mid-C19 houses, and also some C19 warehouses, previously the site of the Medway Coal Wharf (1st edn OS map), and latterly used as a storage depot. This was demolished in 2009 to make way for a new housing development.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance to Grosvenor and Hilbert Recreation Ground is from the south, from the north end of Hilbert Road, through a pair of 1.5m high wrought iron gates hung on 2m high brick piers with stone capping and inset matching heraldic reliefs. A 1m high curved brick wall surmounted by wrought iron railings extends from each pier to a second set of brick piers. Hilbert Road was constructed around 1938 when the playing field was added; the reliefs were financed by the King George National Memorial Fund in 1939/40. The road roughly follows the route of a C19 track leading to Charity Farm (Tithe Map; 3rd edn OS map). Within the site and a few metres west of the entrance gate is the oast house donated by Councillor Strange, now (2009) unused.

There is a second entrance some 300m to the west of the Hilbert Road gates is at the point where Auckland Road meets Dorking Road, at the foot of their steep northerly descent. This entrance comprises 1.5m high wrought iron pedestrian gates (late C20) set in railings that enclose the site along Dorking Road. Immediately inside the gate on its west side is a C19 two-storey red brick lodge house, once the park keeper's lodge but now in separate private ownership. This is the original late C19 entrance shown on OS maps from 1897.

There are several further pedestrian entrances: one from Upper Grosvenor Road on the site's north-west boundary, reached via a late C20 footbridge (Hilbert Bridge) across the railway line; one from Park Wood Close on the north-east boundary; a narrow passage off Rochdale Road; and one from the junction of St James's Road and Grosvenor Bridge. There are also entrances at either end of a public footpath which runs through allotments off Dorking Road and across the park to the former gas works site.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

Grosvenor and Hilbert Recreation Ground comprises two main areas linked by winding walks:- Grosvenor Recreation Ground to the south-west of the site, and Hilbert Recreation Ground (King George's Field) to the north and east.

Grosvenor Recreation Ground is a long, narrow site with gravel paths providing access to its sports facilities and walks around its perimeter. From the Auckland Road entrance, a gravel path, enclosed on its east side by hedges and mature pleached limes, leads in a south-westerly direction to reach a bowling green, shown as an open lawn with trees on its perimeter in 1898 (2nd edn OS map). To its west is a café, a children's play area and a basket ball and fives court, all laid out on the site of the 1873 swimming pool.

One hundred and fifty metres south-west of the lodge is an informally shaped lake with a central island planted with birch trees. This is the Upper Lake that Marnock developed from an earlier reservoir and it remains encircled by high

banks and undulating and winding gravel paths now set within late C20 planting of evergreen shrubs (mahonia, laurel, rhododendron) (3rd edn OS map). A few mature trees, including an oak and a plane, might also survive from Marnock's period. From an ascending path on its south-east side there are fine northerly and westerly views across the lake, which is edged by engineering bricks and a consolidated gravel perimeter path enclosed by a low brick retaining wall (some parts in need of repair). At the south-west end of the lake are four C19 dripping pools set within rocky grottoes, once fed with piped water. An early C20 photograph shows the island and the 3rd edn OS map (1909) show the island and shrubberies with mature trees and paths winding through them.

To the north-east of the lodge is a grassy valley with mixed native tree species, including young oaks and Scots pine, and with serpentine paths designed by Marnock (3rd edn OS map). The standing water forming a pool in the valley bottom occupies the low-lying land that was the site of Marnock's Lower Lakes (2nd edn OS map). These were surrounded by wrought iron fences and linked by a weir, with a bridge above (photographs). Some 30m south-east of the site of these lakes and on higher ground, now rough grass, is the site of the former band stand, erected in 1893 and demolished in 1935.

This valley is bounded on its northern side by the ancient woodland of Folly Shaw and 50m to its east, by Roundabout Wood, which together form Hilbert Recreation Ground. Spring-fed streams and winding paths run through and around the woods. Immediately north of Folly Shaw is an area of sapling beech and oak trees planted in the early C21. To its immediate south, on low-lying level ground some 150m to the north-west of Hilbert Road entrance, is King George's Playing Field. Immediately to the east of this entrance, set on an area of raised and levelled ground are two football pitches

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Maps

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 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 1870 Sheets 60/8 and 60/12
 2nd edn 25" OS map 1897 Sheets 60/8 and 60/12
 3rd edn 25" OS map 1907 Sheets 60/8 and 60/12
 4th edn 25" OS map 1936 Sheets 60/8 and 60/12

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Modern Mastermap 1:10,000

Illustrations

H. P. Robinson, Photograph of J. S. Wigg late C19 in Roger Farthing, *A Practical History of Tunbridge Wells* (Phillimore, 1990)
5 postcards. Undated probably early 1900s
View from Grosvenor Park early C20
Aerial photograph 2003
Colour photograph 2006

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Letter from J. S. Wigg re Marnock Plan
Plaque to Grosvenor Park benefactor 1887
Letter of objection from David Salomons 1888
Planting list and letter from John Waterer 1888
English Heritage listed buildings entry
TWBC website extracts

Research by Carole Leith
Description written by Barbara Simms
Edited by Virginia Hinze
March 2009

Fig. 1 Boundary map

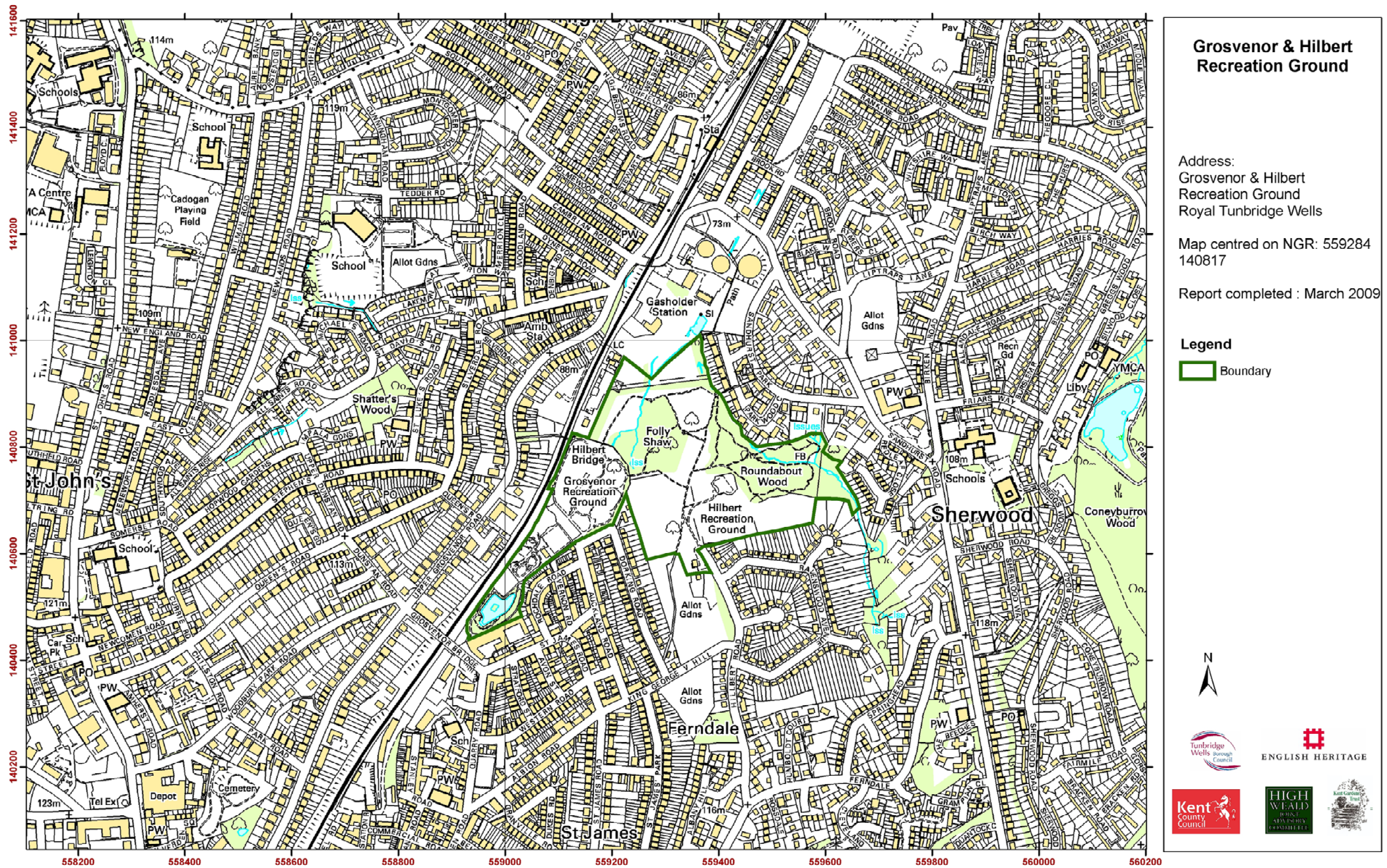


Fig. 2 Key views map

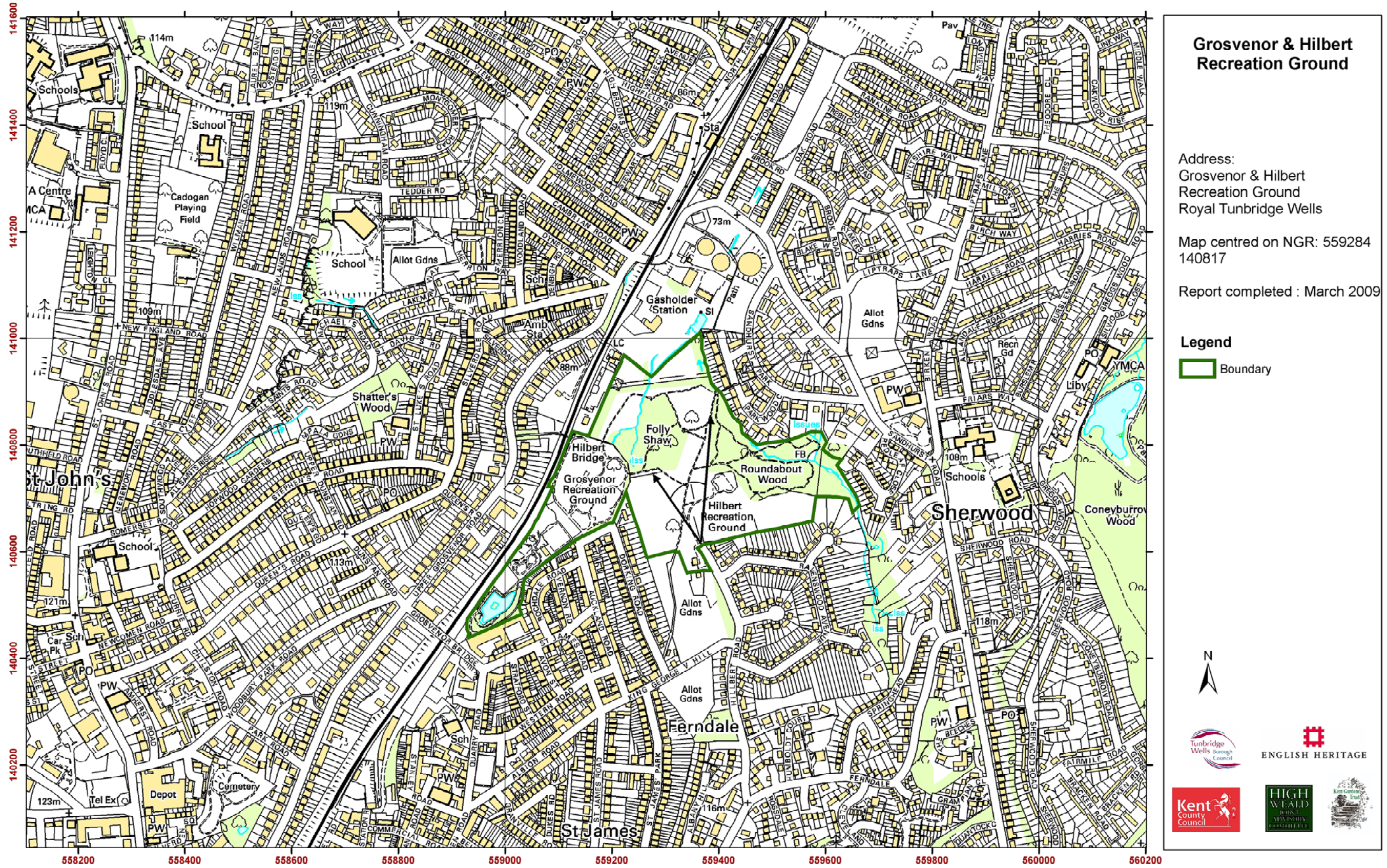
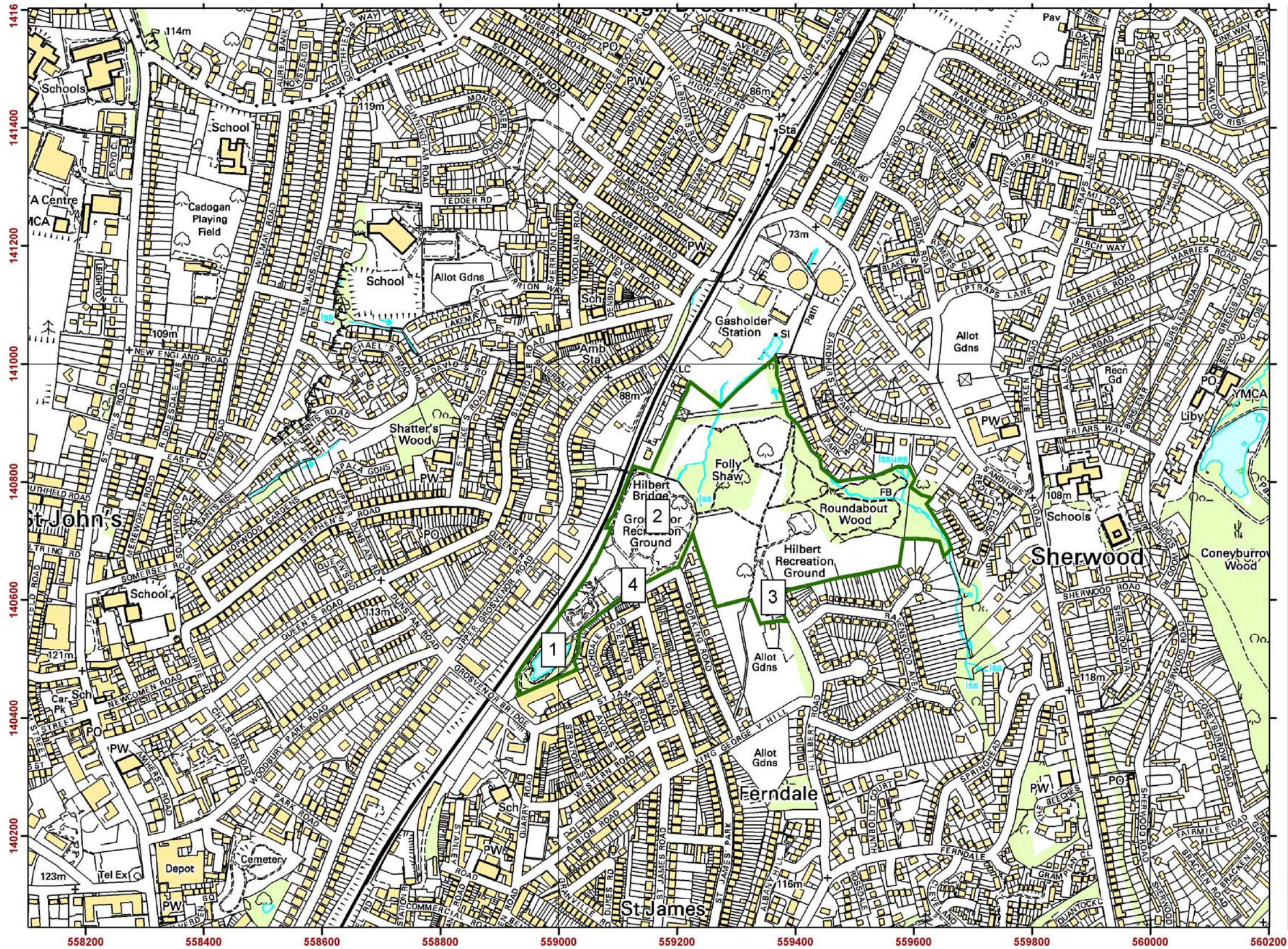


Fig. 3 Key features map



**Grosvenor & Hilbert
Recreation Ground**

Address:
Grosvenor & Hilbert
Recreation Ground
Royal Tunbridge Wells

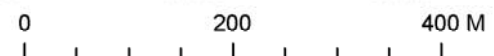
Map centred on NGR: 559284
140817

Report completed : March 2009

Legend

Boundary

- 1 Lake with grottoes
- 2 Site of 19th century lower lakes
- 3 19th century oast house
- 4 Park keeper's lodge



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Fig. 4 Aerial photograph



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