

Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire



The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project

Hillesden House

January 2017



The Finnis Scott
Foundation

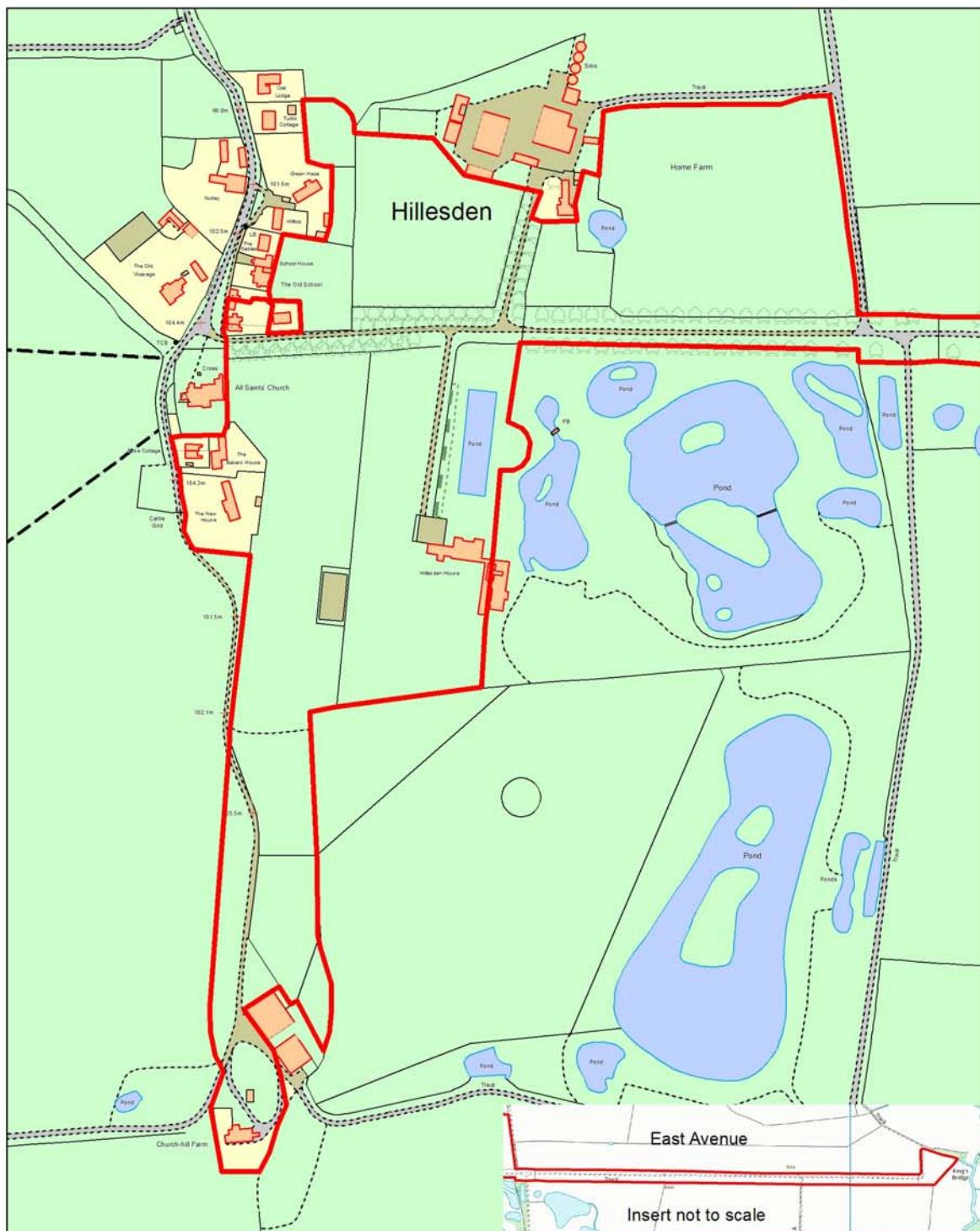


Bucks Gardens Trust



The Stanley Smith (UK)
Horticultural Trust

HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY



Hillesden House: boundary of historic designed landscape interest

Produced by the County Archaeological Service
December 2016



Scale: 1:3,563 at A4



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Hillesden House: 2006 aerial photograph

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Bucks Gardens Trust

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Project

This site dossier has been prepared as part of The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust (BGT) Research and Recording Project, begun in 2014. This site is one of several hundred designed landscapes county-wide identified by Bucks County Council (BCC) in 1998 (including Milton Keynes District) as potentially retaining evidence of historic interest, as part of the Historic Parks and Gardens Register Review project carried out for English Heritage (now Historic England) (BCC Report No. 508). The list is not definitive and further parks and gardens may be identified as research continues or further information comes to light.

Content

BGT has taken the Register Review list as a sound basis from which to select sites for appraisal as part of its Research and Recording Project for designed landscapes in the historic county of Bucks (pre-1974 boundaries). For each site a dossier is prepared by volunteers trained on behalf of BGT by experts in appraising designed landscapes who have worked extensively for English Heritage/Historic England on its Register Upgrade Project.

Each dossier includes the following for the site:

- A site boundary mapped on the current Ordnance Survey to indicate the extent of the main part of the surviving designed landscape, also a current aerial photograph.
- A statement of historic significance based on the four Interests outlined in the National Policy Planning Framework and including an overview.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a site visit, based on the format of the Historic England *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd edn.
- A map showing principal views and features.

The area within the site boundary represents the significant coherent remains of the designed landscape. It does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.

NOTE: Sites are not open to the public unless advertised elsewhere.

Supporters and Acknowledgements

The project was supported by The Gardens Trust (formerly the Association of Gardens Trusts and the Garden History Society) and funded by BGT with significant grants from the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust and the Finnis Scott Foundation. BCC generously provided current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record.

The Trust would like to thank the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much time and effort to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Further information is available from: www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk

COUNTY:	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	HILLESDEN HOUSE BCC HER 0017603000
DISTRICT:	AYLESBURY VALE	
PARISH:	HILLESDEN	
OS REF.:	SP 686 286	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

The remains of the formal gardens of a former mid-C17 manor house, including garden terraces and wilderness, a rectangular pond and extensive avenues, set within former parkland, now agricultural land. It incorporates the likely site of gardens associated with a previous house built in the 1490s for Sir Hugh Conway, a close aide to Henry VII. The site declined following the demolition of the house in the 1820s, until the late C20 when a new house was built in the south-east corner with associated gardens, and some restoration works were undertaken. A further house was built in the walled kitchen garden.

Archaeological interest

The site of demolished ranges, outbuildings and garden features of the former 1490s and mid-C17 manor houses built successively on the same site, initially for Sir Hugh Conway and rebuilt for Sir Edmund Denton. The site has considerable potential for evidence of these lost features both at ground level and below.

Architectural interest

While the C17 house has gone, several notable garden features survive within the earthwork framework. These include the C17 walled garden wall (Grade II), the churchyard wall that formerly enclosed part of the forecourt, the garden ha-ha wall and bastion, the pond structure, and C18 gate piers (Grade II) marking the entrance to the approach avenue. The brick lodge was apparently rebuilt in the C19 or early C20. The ambitious and highly decorated church (Grade I) is a striking piece of early Tudor architecture, much admired, standing adjacent to the site as a key element of the setting. It is significant in views on the approaches and within the former forecourt and garden, particularly its east end.

Artistic interest

The remains of a formal garden at its zenith by the late C18, associated with a 1490s manor house rebuilt in the mid-C17. By the late C18 the layout incorporated outer and inner forecourts, garden terraces, a wilderness, approach avenues, boundary bastions and a kitchen garden, mostly apparently initiated in the mid-C17, but perhaps with later alterations. The framework survives upstanding or in relict form, including a considerable number of mature wilderness and occasional avenue trees, canal-type pond, terracing, ha-ha and two avenues; lost features include the house, orchards and a northern avenue (1763 map). The garden commands views across the Vale of Aylesbury: east and south-east towards Steeple Claydon, and south, and is overlooked by the east end of the fine church. The extensive rural setting including nearby former parkland is of high significance.

Historic interest

The site has strong connections with Sir Hugh Conway, a close aide of Henry VII who profited from this link and thereby built the 1490s house and fine church. The site was strategically important during the Civil War when the 1490s house was demolished. It was famous as the house of Mr Justice Denton (Alexander Denton, 1679-1740), contemporary and friend of the renowned Bucks antiquarian Browne Willis. The historic interest is furthered by the survival of key mapping indicating the former layout by the mid-C18 (1763 estate map)).

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

A manor existed in the mid-C10 (*VCH*). The existence of a house in the C13 is implied by the ‘Feet of Fines’ of 1207 which mentions a capital messuage and refers to a garden and fishpond (HER). There is no record of an associated park until one is recorded in 1547 which was probably laid out in the 1490s (Orme, 2016).

A manor house was built soon after 1493 by Sir Hugh Conway, lord of the manor from c.1487 until his death in 1518. He was a household servant of Henry VII, lord treasurer of Ireland and treasurer of Calais. At the same time he rebuilt the church and lavishly decorated it as a fine example of the Perpendicular style. The two buildings were intended as a linked pair to demonstrate Conway’s status as a royal servant and official (Orme). It is likely that he laid out fashionable gardens around his new house to enhance its setting.

In 1547 the manor was granted by Edward VI to Thomas Denton, remaining in Denton ownership until the early C19. The Dentons were related to the local landowning families of Hampden, Verney and Lowndes, and the family produced numerous MPs for Buckingham/Buckinghamshire and many held court positions.

Famously, the house was occupied in 1633/4 first by a Parliamentarian troop then a royal garrison (nearby Kingsbridge is said to commemorate this); it was besieged and captured by parliamentary forces who destroyed the house despite the hasty construction of a defensive earthwork encircling the house and church (no trace of this is now apparent).

The house was rebuilt from 1648 on same site (*VCH*), c.25m south-east of Conway’s church (1763 estate map; where OS maps from the 1870s onwards site the house). Enclosure in the early 1650s, when Sir Edmund Denton finally regained his lands from Civil War sequestration, and consolidation of the demesne led to the creation of an enlarged and impaled park (incorporating the previous one); ‘new park’ is recorded in the estate accounts for 1662/3 (Curthoys 2013, Eland 1921). There was no arable land within the park in the 1660s. It became famous as the house of Mr Justice Denton (Alexander Denton, 1679-1740), contemporary and friend of the renowned Bucks antiquarian Browne Willis.

Around 1694 the diarist Celia Fiennes recorded a notable garden in a formal style typical of this period: ‘[Hillesden] stands in the middle of a fine Parke; the house stands on a riseing in the middle and looks very well, its [sic] not large, a good hall with 2 parlours and has a glide through the house into the gardens which are neatly kept, the grass and gravel walkes with dwarfs and flower trees and much fruit; the prospect is fine all over the gardens and parkes and the river and woods beyond them’ (Morris 1947).

The extensive ornamental landscape was well looked after into the C18: Cole, the Antiquary, in his tour through England in 1735, described the house as ‘a good old one, on a beautiful hill, commanding a delightful prospect. Before it a large parterre; below, a lake; still lower, a very bold terrace; and through the gardens, several charming vistas, agreeably terminated by the knots of trees and wind-mills.’ (Lipscomb (1847).

The 1763 estate map, commissioned by the owner Elizabeth Coke, provides a detailed picture of the layout. A kitchen garden formed a small westward extension to the garden, close to the house, separated from it by outbuildings, with a narrow range along its north side. A large square lawn or parterre east of the house terminated at the far, east side in a terrace (which can still be traced along the west side of the drive to the present house), with a substantial rectangular pond below this, possibly originating as the medieval fishpond (HER) (and retained as an ornamental pond north of the present Hillesden House). Below the main parterre a wilderness, laid out with a formal arrangement of paths and allees, and an orchard, led down to the south boundary marked by a ha-ha, enclosing the garden to the east and south. The south ha-ha had semi-circular bastions at the corners, overlooking the park. A double avenue approached from the east for 1.5km. Another led c.250m south to a building on a site now Church-hill Farm. A network of hedged fields occupied the park. The house and avenues were still present by 1770 (Jefferys)

in similar form. No attempt was made it seems to 'modernise' the garden in the naturalistic English landscape style that was fashionable by this time.

The estate remained with the Denton family until inherited c.1810 by politician and agriculturalist Thomas Coke ('Coke of Norfolk'), 1st Earl of Leicester, from his mother Elizabeth Coke (the daughter of George Chamberlayne, nephew of the last Denton direct descendant). Around this time (OSD, 1812) buildings stood north of the kitchen garden on the site of the present 'Rose Cottage' and 'Baker's House'. The northern third of the garden including the pond was open and the southern half, the wilderness, was a wooded grove.

Coke sold the property c.1822-24 to Mr Farquhar, a millionaire gunpowder dealer who also bought the spectacular Fonthill Abbey (Wilts) in the same year. The 1st Duke of Buckingham acquired Hillesden soon after Farquhar's death in 1826 (VCH) as part of the extensive Stowe estate. The house was demolished between 1824 and 1833 (HER). Bryant in 1825 marked the house immediately beforehand. By 1833 the house had gone (OS).

In 1854 the property went to Mr James Morrison from whom it passed to Hugh Morrison of Fonthill. By 1862 survivals and losses included, 'Eastward from the church a portion of the stone walls and gateway of the park The house was approached by a noble avenue of trees which have been cut down.' (Sheahan). Even by the 1870s (OS) considerable remains of the garden survived, despite the 50 year or more absence of the house. The kitchen garden was bisected by paths and apparently still cultivated. Adjacent to the east the former wilderness to the south contained a grove of scattered trees; adjacent to the north of this the rectangular parterre had been reduced to an earthwork, its southern side against the wilderness undefined, with the pond below to the east and the bastion beyond this. The avenues remained.

Hugh Morrison sold the estate in 1910 and Christ Church College Oxford acquired a small part of it at that time. By then (1910 sale particulars) a 'kitchen garden' was noted, implying it was still under cultivation; reference to a 'lake' suggests that the pond had been maintained as an ornamental water feature.

Little change occurred in the early-mid-C20 (OS 1900s, 1920s, 1950s). By 1947 (aerial photo) the line of the east terrace remained and the northern edge was obscured by trees. Between the 1950s and 1984 (OS) a detached house, 'The New House', was built in the kitchen garden. A further house, Hillesden House, was built in 1985 c. 150m south of the pond, and gardens and a tennis court were laid out around it within the former orchard and wilderness (1763).

The site remains in private and divided ownership.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

The 17.5 ha. site is in Hillesden parish in north-west Buckinghamshire, close to the Oxfordshire border, in a rural setting in the Vale of Aylesbury. Buckingham lies 4km to the north, Gawcott 2 km to the north, Steeple Claydon 4km to the south, Aylesbury 16km to the south-east. By the early C20 the Hillesden estate (c.1100ha) owned the majority of the parish, with parts of Buckingham and Preston Bissett parishes (1910 sale particulars). The site occupies the southern end of an undulating clay plateau with ground sloping gently down to the east, south and west, and rising gently to the north, in an elevated position surrounded by fertile agricultural land with some woodland.

The northern end of the west side of the site is bounded by the C16/17 brick churchyard wall separating it from All Saints church; this continues south as the east wall of the former kitchen garden. The former house stood east of this wall, adjacent to the east of the church. The east boundary of the garden, c.200m east of the churchyard wall, is marked by a c.1-3m high ha-ha of limestone blocks with a broad semi-circular bastion on the east side below the pond, on axis with the site of the former house. This section has been restored. The present Hillesden House covers

part of the south section of this ha-ha which at the far south end declines and gradually peters out. Formerly two semi-circular bastions (gone) projected from either end of the 55m long western section of the south boundary, flanking the line of the lime avenue which ran south to Church-hill Farm. The west bastion enjoyed vistas towards Bicester, the east bastion overlooked Steeple Claydon (1763 map). The other boundaries are agricultural fencing. The north boundary is marked by the west end of the east avenue from Kingsbridge, and beyond this to the north is Home Farm set in paddocks, in an area by 1763 called The Lodge Park.

The garden enjoys distant views east and south, and south-west from the south avenue towards Twyford. A view south-east over the former south ha-ha and lost bastion extends towards Steeple Claydon. Views west are largely obscured by the church, and those to the north by the hamlet of Hillesden Church End and Home Farm.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The two main approaches to the site of the former C17 Hillesden House are joined by the 1.6km-long east avenue which connects the Kingsbridge across Padbury Brook in a straight line westwards with the village street, Church End. At its west end it runs along the north boundary of the garden. This route is first shown in 1763 but is probably related to the construction of the C17 house.

The main east approach begins 1.6km east at the former London/ Aylesbury/ Buckingham/ Banbury road just to the north of Kingsbridge (above the flood plain) after the road crosses Padbury Brook. From here an unmetalled track ran south for c.80m before a 90 degree westward bend. From here the drive rises gently in a straight line westwards between a broad avenue of trees set in fields. The avenue passes through agricultural land and former parkland, before passing between the north boundary of the garden to the south and Home Farm to the north. A late C20 drive turns south off it to pass through the garden, giving access to the current Hillesden House, some 150m to the south. Beyond this junction the east drive continues for 170m to emerge at its west end into the village street. In 1910 the avenue comprised elm, oak and chestnut (sale particulars). The elm was destroyed by Dutch Elm disease in the 1960s; it was replanted with horse chestnut in the late 1980s which is currently being replaced with oak.

Although reduced in importance the route of the east avenue remains much as in the C18. By the 1800s (Lysons, 1806; OSD 1813) the access west to Hillesden village from Kingsbridge had moved c.0.5km north to a track running west and entering Hillesden Church End to the north along what is now a private road off the Gawcott to Hillesden road to Home Farm.

The main west entrance (terminating the east avenue) gave access from the direction of Gawcott/Buckingham to the north. That northerly approach is a narrow winding route through arable land, with the occasional house or cluster of dwellings, and in Church End past a dozen or so mainly C19 brick cottages, school and vicarage and trees with finally the north elevation and tower of the church being visible standing on raised ground. The main entrance to the site is only visible at the final point.

The public road terminates at the southern end of Church End, by the church, continuing south as a track west of the churchyard to Church-hill Farm. The west entrance to the site is on the east side of Church End immediately north of the churchyard, 50m north-west of the site of the house. It is marked by a pair of square brick gate piers with ball finials (listed Grade II) rebuilt in the C18, flanking a pair of wrought iron gates, probably C19, set into a C16-17 garden wall. To the north of the entrance is a brick, slate-roofed lodge (described in the 1910 sale catalogue as two cottages and gardens), separated from the drive by a conifer hedge which continues east as an avenue of semi-mature deciduous trees.

By 1763 (estate map) the main approach to the former house was via a c.40m x 80m quadrangle off the west end of the avenue; this opened into the c.20m x 30m rectangular forecourt on the north front of the house. The quadrangle had a semi-circular east side enclosing a wide gateway as the entrance from the avenue. It is likely that this

enclosure was walled or fenced. It was overlooked by a lodge at the north-west corner roughly where the present lodge stands. A gateway in the south side of the quadrangle led into the forecourt below the north front of the house, bounded to the west by the churchyard wall and overlooked by the east wall of the church, to the east by the garden and to the south by the house.

Formerly a southern approach led from Church-hill Farm (Dugger's Farm on Lysons' 1806 map) via the south avenue to Hillesden House. The avenue was of limes (late C19/early C20 photo), and a few mature trees remain. This track gave access beyond Church-hill Farm as a footpath via the site of Claydon Planks Farm from Steeple Claydon (4km).

A former private entrance from Hillesden House to the churchyard is indicated by a now bricked up gateway with brick pillars and stone capping, in the surviving stone-coped brick churchyard wall west of the site of the house. The previous, C15, house and the church were possibly linked by a (probably wooden) bridge at the north-east corner of the church, which still contains the closet and private chapel of the manor house (RCHM; Orme 2016).

Multiple footpaths/tracks approach the church and estate main entrance. From the south a track links Steeple Claydon (4km) via Church-hill Farm and the site of Claydon Planks Farm, both of which formed part of the Hillesden estate and demesne. A footpath extends west to Preston Bissett, and a former track, now overgrown, joins the footpath beyond Hillesden brook.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The mid-C17 Hillesden House which was demolished in 1824/33 stood close to the west boundary, adjacent to the churchyard. Its appearance is unknown but the 1763 estate map indicates that it measured c.22 x 32m. The entrance front was to the north, enclosed by the forecourt. The long garden front to the east overlooked terraced lawns, the pond and park beyond. The south front overlooked a service court and buildings, with the kitchen garden adjacent to the south. The east front was aligned on the centre of the garden terrace, the pond and the bastion. The east-facing range would have enjoyed long views across the terrace and lake to the distant hills and upstairs rooms would have had good views south across the kitchen garden to the avenue leading to Church-hill Farm.

There is little trace on the ground of the house. Verney (1892) believed it was destroyed without trace. However, in 1863 (Roundell) the site of the house remained visible in irregularities in the ground, and also in 1911 (RCHM), and a house platform was noted in 1972 (HER). A brick tunnel (passage or drain) was constructed between the house and the church sometime in the post-medieval period (HER).

The late C15 house destroyed during the Civil War in 1643 is not shown on any maps but is assumed to have been on the same site as the 1648 house.

Adjacent to the west is the ambitious and highly decorated parish church (beyond the historic site boundary), rebuilt by Sir Hugh Conway, c.1490s-1500s. It is known as 'the cathedral in the fields' for its unusual size and richness of Perpendicular decoration, and the now isolated position (Pevsner). Its east end is prominent in views across the north half of the site.

An L-shaped building at the south-west corner of the site of the house, was possibly part of brick cottage noted in 1910 (Lot 16 of the sale particulars), which corresponds with the present Baker's House.

The current Hillesden House (1985) stands 150m south-east of the former house site, in an area of former orchard/grove and ornamental gardens, overlying part of the line of the ha-ha in 1763. It is aligned on the pond to the north.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The 5ha. garden of the former house, with the house to the west, is bordered along the north edge by the east avenue and drive, the line of the ha-ha to the east and south, and the kitchen garden wall to the south-west. The boundary with the forecourt to the west has gone. The surviving features of the roughly rectangular core (c.190m x 260m) reflect the 1763 map. They comprise the ha-ha (partly restored c.1985-present), the pond (restored 1984/85), sections of the kitchen garden wall, mature lime trees in the wilderness, and terracing. The remains of other features may survive as archaeological evidence below ground level.

The garden slopes eastwards away from the site of the house, aligned on the former long unbroken east front. The northern third is divided into two terraces. The west, upper terrace (80 x 76m) was probably lawned or a parterre. The east, lower terrace contains a rectangular pond or canal (80 x 23m) bordered against the park by the limestone ha-ha shaped into a semi-circular bastion as an elevated, eastwards viewing platform. The drive to the present Hillesden House runs south along the bank between the two terraces and has cut into it.

The southern two-thirds of the garden was the site of a wilderness to the west and an orchard to the east. Now it contains to the east the recent Hillesden House and garden; to the west is a paddock with mature trees originating in the wilderness layout. The paddock is apparently still referred to by locals as ‘the wilderness’. A wilderness in the C17/18 was a formal ornamental grove of considerable complexity. It was usually planted with mixed woody species with paths cut through it, an attractive area in which to wander or pause and to take in designed views. In the C18 (1763 estate map) this wilderness was laid out in a number of compartments containing ornamental woody planting, defined by straight paths fanning out from the south-east corner of the house and providing vistas into the surrounding countryside. The westernmost path was aligned on the south avenue to Church-hill Farm. A long, open rectangular area (140 x 20–25m) on a north-south axis south of the house and kitchen garden was perhaps a bowling green or other lawn. East of the wilderness and south of the pond a rectangular area (150 x 52m) was an orchard.

The origin of the layout detailed in 1763 (estate map), which partially survives, is unclear. It is typical of the late C17/early C18 but may also have incorporated features from Conway’s 1490s house. The most notable features recorded were the three bastions and the oblique vistas/paths cut through the wilderness.

PARK

An extended park is recorded in the 1650s/60s (Curthoys 2013, Eland 1921) and various ‘park’ names appear on the 1763 map to the east and south of the garden. Today the area is largely agricultural with recent ponds east of the garden. The site of a north avenue (1763 estate map, gone) formerly continued the axis of the pond/lower terrace beyond the east avenue across land which is part of Home Farm, formerly called The Lodge Park.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The 0.2ha. kitchen garden lies c.20m south of the site of the C17 house, partly enclosed by the C17 wall, c.3m high and in similar style to the east churchyard wall, with some repair/replacement/buttressing. The wall encloses a c.60 x 60m square plot. The south-west corner is truncated where the wall follows a bend in the track to Church-hill Farm. It contains a house, ‘The New House’. In the late C20 a house called ‘The Cottage’ appeared, which was extended or replaced with the present house.

By 1763 (estate map) the square garden was enclosed by boundary walls on three sides, with on the fourth, north side a narrow range of buildings across nearly the whole width. It was laid out in four equal quadrants. The entrance was possibly on the north-east corner, where the buildings stopped, with access from the service yard.

By the 1870s (OS) the garden continued to be cultivated in four quadrants. By 1910 (sales particulars), it formed part of Lot 1 Home Farm as a 'capital Kitchen Garden', area 2R 20P, (0.25 ha).

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Ordnance Survey:

Ordnance Surveyor's Drawing 1813 (British Library)

1" scale 1833

25" scale

1st edn s. 1880, p. 1880

2nd edn, s. 1898, p. 1899

3rd edn, s. 1920, p. 1923

6" scale

1st edn s. 1878-80, p. 1885

2nd edn, s. 1898, p. 1900

3rd edn, s. 1920, p. 1923

Provisional edition s. 1950, p. 1952

Images

1896/1920 photo (Newton), Historic England Archive BB98/05527

1947 RAF aerial photo

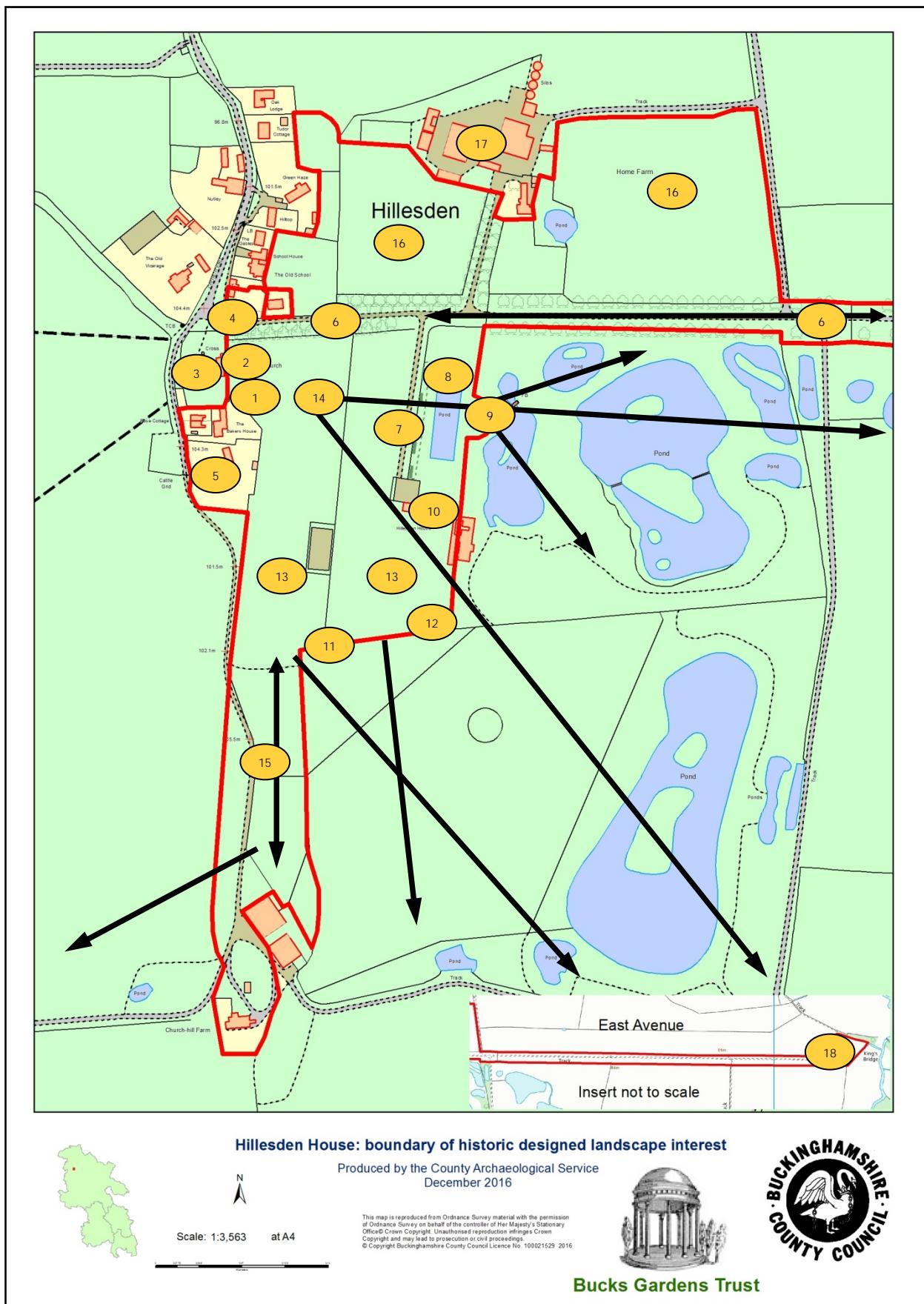
Archive material

Hillesden estate sales particulars 1910, Historic England Archive SC00077

Clare Butler & Adrian Jackson, 18 October 2016

Edited SR December 2016 SR

KEY HISTORIC VIEWS & FEATURES



Key to numbered features relating to the lost Hillesden House

1. Site of former Hillesden House	2. Former forecourt & northern approach
3. Church	4. Main, north entrance
5. Walled garden	6. East Avenue
7. Former terrace lawn in paddock & C20 drive to new Hillesden House	8. Pond
9. Bastion set in ha-ha	10. Present Hillesden House in former orchard
11. Site of former bastion	12. Relict ha-ha
13. Paddock, former Wilderness	14. Paddock, formerly upper lawn
15. South Avenue over ridge & furrow	16. Home Farm paddocks
17. Home Farm	18. East avenue entrance by Padbury Brook

IMAGES OF KEY FEATURES

Adrian Jackson



Main entrance (left); View NW to Church over house platform area (right).



East Avenue looking east from entrance to current house towards Addington and the Greensand Ridge (left);
East Avenue looking west from Kingsbridge (right).



View NW from former Wilderness/gardens to Church over site of lost house and forecourt (left); Forecourt of lost house, west boundary wall with bricked up access to churchyard/church (right).



Kitchen Garden west wall, south-west corner (left); pond, view west to new Hillesden House (right).



Bastion in east garden boundary (left); ha-ha in east garden boundary (right).



Ha-ha in south garden boundary (left); South Avenue view north towards kitchen garden.



South Avenue, view south towards Church-hill Farm from garden: 2016 (left); postcard view c.1890-1920 (right).