

# Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project



2016 aerial photograph by kind permission of Mike Farley.

## ASCOTT OLD HOUSE & WING PARK

January 2022

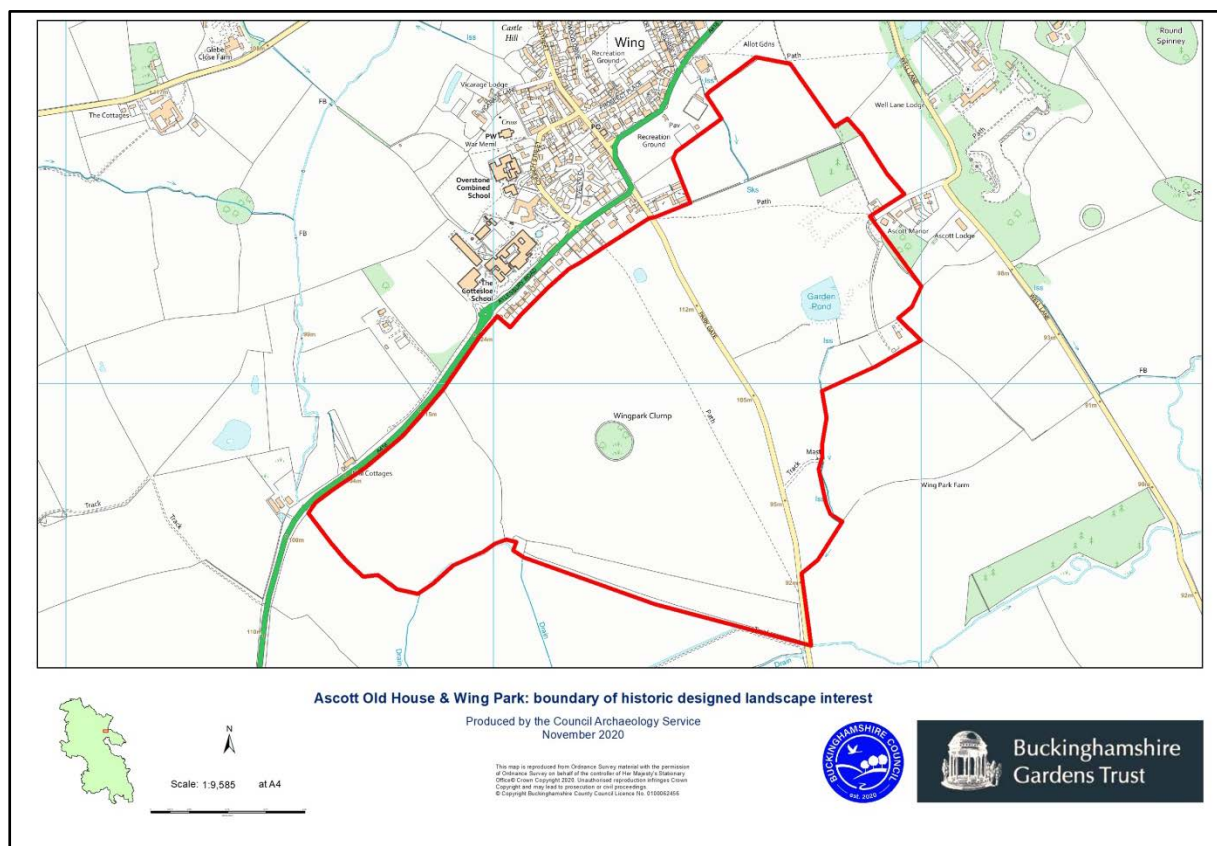


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# HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY



## 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 by BGT in appraising designed landscapes.

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 Planning Policy Framework and including an overview.
- A description, derived from documentary research and site visits, based on the format of Historic England's *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 funded by BGT, with significant grants from the Finnis Scott Foundation, the Roland Callingham Foundation, BCC (since April 2020 part of Buckinghamshire Council) and various private donors. Buckinghamshire Council also provided significant funding, and help in kind including current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record. The project is supported by The Gardens Trust.

The Trust thanks 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](http://www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk)

<b>SITE NAME: ASCOTT OLD HOUSE &amp; WING PARK</b>	<b>HER NO: 0110102000</b>
<b>COUNTY: BUCKINGHAMSHIRE</b>	<b>GRID REF: SP887 224</b>
<b>PARISH: WING</b>	

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

### Overview

The nationally significant earthwork remains of the extensive gardens and park of a lost mid-C16 manor house. These include large-scale terraces, water features, pond, extensive and possibly unique broderie pattern beds, and an adjacent warren, now within pasture. These are set within former parkland, now ploughland which retains a large clump, Wingpark Clump. The site was abandoned following the destruction of the house in the 1640s and has been little disturbed since. The designed landscape is comparable locally with Quarrendon House near Aylesbury, and further afield with great C16 and early C17 gardens including Theobalds, Herts and Holdenby, Northants.

### Archaeological interest

High potential exists for evidence of the mid-C16 former mansion and gardens developed into the mid-C17, the adjacent warren, for the 1860 farmstead, and for former agricultural, village settlement and other uses of the park. Lost ornamental features may relate to watercourses, paths, walls, beds, other structures such as garden buildings including on the terraces, sculpture bases, heraldic beasts on post, and other features evident on the ground. The state of preservation of the garden and warren earthworks, with little disturbance since the mid-C17 abandonment, is reflected in the Scheduled Monument (SM) status and they are a good candidate for non-invasive electronic survey.

### Architectural interest

Sir Robert Dormer's early-mid-C16 house has gone along with all other structures established by 1643, and their appearance is unclear. The house was set back to the north of the great terraces on a plateau near to the village. The garden is likely to have had walls, one or more summer or banqueting houses (a likely site at the west end of the top bank) and many other structures.

### Artistic interest

The earthwork remains of an early, extensive and formerly magnificent country house garden comprising mid-C16-early C17 features for a wealthy owner and royal courtier at the forefront of taste, which was never further developed after abandonment. The adjacent warren was typical of an ensemble for a group of wealthy recusant owners, comparable with those at Rushden and, tentatively, at Quarrendon, and redolent with covert Catholic symbolism. The park survives as agricultural land with the prominent Wingpark Clump towards the centre. The rural setting alongside the village of Wing survives largely intact although some adjacent expansion of Wing has caused minor damage. The extensive southerly views to Mentmore ridge, Mentmore Towers (1850s) and beyond to the Chiltern scarp are spectacular from Park Gate and from the site of the mansion and garden.

## Historic interest

While it was still occupied the site had strong links with Sir Robert Dormer, the influential Tudor courtier who built the house, and received a royal visit from Princess Elizabeth in 1544. It was in the 1642 the focus of an early episode of Civil War destruction when the house was badly damaged, and some time after, Charles I and his force spent the night in the park. Very few documents survive to chart the history of the house or landscape.

## HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of Ascott is first recorded in 1317. A manor house may have stood on the site of the later Old House site. The Dormers of Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire were prosperous wool merchants.

Wing Park was inclosed in the first half of the C16 by Sir Robert Dormer (1485/6-1552). Dormer was MP for Chepping Wycombe, had perhaps been born in West Wycombe, and in 1512 married Jane, daughter of John Newdigate of Harefield, Middlesex. In 1515 Dormer increased his grazing by purchasing the manor of Wing from Sir Maurice Berkeley, but he continued to dwell at West Wycombe. He had settled at Wing by 1524 when he was assessed for the subsidy there on goods worth £233. He was styled 'the King's servant' in 1544 when he bought from the crown the rights of a second manor in Wing called Ascott for £346 (History of Parliament web site). Site evidence indicates that the margins of the site included much medieval occupation suggesting that Dormer's emparkment enclosed part of the village of Wing (Carstairs).

Dormer built Ascott House as his family seat, perhaps on the site of the shadowy Wing Priory or on the site of a former manor house. Princess Elizabeth slept here, presumably in the new house, in 1544 on her journey from Woodstock to Hampton Court (*VCH*). Sir Robert died at Ascott and was buried in the nearby Wing parish church; his tomb has been described as 'the finest monument of its date (1552) in England' (Pevsner). He left his Wing estate to his son William. The family remained Catholic during challenging times following the Dissolution but retained their faith with minimal persecution.

In the reign of Charles I (1625-49) the house contained a 'noble apartment' by Inigo Jones, designed for the Royalist Robert Lord Dormer (1610-43, cr. Earl of Carnarvon and Viscount Ascott, 1628) who kept great hospitality here. The Coke MSS of Melbourne Hall, Derbyshire, contain references to visits at Wing at this time (MSS of Earl Cowper [Hist. MSS Com.] ii, 403; iii, 2, 45, 59, 73, 77, 167, in n.6, *VCH*). The house was ransacked by Parliamentarian forces in 1642 during the first phase of the Civil War. The Earl was killed at the Battle of Newbury in 1643 and the house was not reinhabited (SM entry). Charles I slept here in 1645 when his army found shelter in the adjoining close (*VCH*). The house and gardens were abandoned including extensive and spectacular formal gardens stepping down the hillside, beds, terraces, a large pond and water courses.

The titles became extinct on the death of Charles, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl, in 1709. Control of the manor Wing and Ascott House passed to Charles's eldest grandson via his daughter Elizabeth who had married Philip Stanhope, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Chesterfield.

By 1720 the house was ruinous and towards the end of the C18 the remains were cleared away. No illustrations survive and the building does not appear on any historical map. Sir William Stanhope (1702-72) acquired the manor from his father in 1720. In 1727 he sold the deer and cut down the



timber in the park (*VCH*; [wing-ops.org.uk](http://wing-ops.org.uk)). By 1768 (Jefferys) the park enclosure survived to some degree, bisected by the road from Wing to Mentmore, with a Lodge (for a Warrener?) towards the centre, west of the road. The north-west boundary of the park was against the Wing to Aylesbury road and the south boundary was formed by a brook feeding Wing Mill to the west. The site of the house and gardens was east of the Mentmore road, adjacent to the hamlet of Ascott beyond. By 1847 the site of Ascott House had been sold by Stanhope's descendants to JB Harcourt ([wing-ops.org.uk](http://wing-ops.org.uk)).

A red brick farm house was built in 1860 on the east side of Wing Park (*VCH*). Beyond this Ascott House was built by Leopold de Rothschild in the 1870s with a view over the site of the Old House and garden to Wingpark Clump in the former park. A farmstead was built to the south-east, now reduced to a single building formerly at the heart of the lost cattle yard ranges.

The site remains open agricultural land in private ownership.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

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

The site of Ascott Old House, and Wing Park to the south-west and south, lie adjacent to the south of the village of Wing, south-east of the A418 Aylesbury to Leighton Buzzard Road.

The c.97 ha. site overlies a hillside sloping gently from the village plateau south and south-east down to a brook in the valley bottom, rising again beyond this to the south-east to the village of Mentmore and the mid-C19 Mentmore Towers on the opposite ridge some 2 miles distant. The late C19 Rothschild Ascott House stands in elaborate grounds and a park, 430m north-east of the site of the Old House. The parish church with the dormer monuments stands in the village c.600m north-west of the Old House site.

The site is enclosed to the south-west, south and south-east by agricultural land, to the north-west largely by the A418, and by a strip of C19 and C20 houses along the edge at the entrance to Wing from Aylesbury, and to the north by a recreation ground, formerly agricultural land, and a paddock adjacent. Adjacent to the east is Ascott Manor and the associated small hamlet of Lower Ascott.

The immediate setting is largely agricultural, with the large village of Wing to the north-west. The site affords extensive views of the Chiltern scarp several miles away beyond Mentmore, as well as views of the trees of Mentmore village, park and the tops of the towers of the mansion on the village ridge. Ascott House has a long view south-west over the site of the Old House, terrace gardens and Wing Park including Wingpark Clump.

### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The site is bisected from north to south by the Mentmore Road linking Wing with Mentmore. The road is open to either side and enjoys views over the terrace gardens to the east and the park to the west as well as south towards the distant Chiltern scarp. The main approach is from Wing off the A418, entering at the north end of the Mentmore Road at Park Gate, 350m west of the site of the Old House. This elevated entrance enjoys a spectacular view of the distant Chiltern scarp beyond Mentmore ridge. The approach from the south along this lane is from the Wing Crossroads in the valley, with views upwards of the Old House site, terraces and park.

The site of the Old House in the north corner of the historic site is also approached from the east via a lane off Well Lane through Lower Ascott to Ascott Manor which stands 275m south-east of the Old House site. The lane turns south as a track to give access to the site of the C19 Wing Park Farm, c.500m south-south-east of the site of the Old House.

The original approach to the mansion is unclear but it probably led from Park Gate east to the north front of the Old House. A public footpath follows this approximate route.

## **PRINCIPAL BUILDING**

The site of the Old House is unclear but appears to lie c.350m east of Park Gate, close the village, on a plateau at c. 120m AOD. It is apparently marked by a large hollow created when the foundations were removed in the late C18. Nothing is known of its appearance and it survived for only around 100 years, from when Sir Robert Dormer built it probably between the 1520s-40s, until its Civil War destruction in 1642. It is likely that the entrance front was to the north-west, facing Wing, possibly with a view of the church tower, and visible from the Aylesbury road through the village. The garden front would have been to the south-east, overlooking the great terraced garden and pond with views of the distant Chiltern scarp. There may have been another important elevation facing south-west overlooking the warren and park beyond. The position of service buildings is unclear. It is possible that it occupied the site of an earlier manor house or the shadowy priory. In any case its position at the edge of the village plateau commanded the valley to the south and approaches from the Mentmore direction and it would also have been prominent from the nearby roads to the north.

## **GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS**

### **Gardens**

The 13ha. gardens descend south-east for c.150m over the hillside below the Old House site on the plateau. The ornamental layout survives exceptionally well in earthwork form in pasture, having been abandoned in the mid-C17 after only a century in existence, without disturbance since all the masonry structures were removed. The lost structures probably included retaining walls for the terraces, steps, balustrades and one or more summerhouses. The elevated site of the house and gardens takes advantage of views of the surrounding countryside.

A c.1ha. level area south of the Old House site leads to the terraces below. This was probably laid out as a garden at the same time as Sir Robert built the house, perhaps with a geometric pattern of beds and lawns fashionable for such C16 showpieces. A slight terraced platform west of the plantation could represent either the site of the Tudor mansion or perhaps the site of the bowling green constructed by the Earl shortly before the Civil War. Other comparable C16 examples of extensive garden parterres and bowling greens include Henry VIII's Hampton Court (1529-38); the elaborate garden created for Robert Dudley at Kenilworth Castle in the mid-1570s to celebrate the visit of Queen Elizabeth; Theobalds for William Cecil Lord Burghley, the queen's favoured adviser in the late C16, and those in du Cerceau's views of French gardens (*Les Plus Excellents Bastiments de France*, 1576-79).

The 100-150m long terraces begin c.85m south of the Old House site. They descend in two level steps from the mansion, and would have provided the setting for an elaborate pattern of paths and parterres. Except to the south, the c.0.5ha. upper terrace is bordered by substantial banks rising to 4m above the platform, of which those to the north and west are best preserved. These would have

had walks offering views over the gardens and warren below and park beyond to the west. The only feature is the circular depression of a former central pond. A conical mount at the west end of the upper, north bank may have had a prospect pavilion on it, to view the house, terraced gardens, imparked landscape and other garden features and warren to the west. The north bank is broken by a central gap which may have had steps leading from the house.

A 3.5m high scarp descends in two narrow stages to the second terrace, of similar size originally, 0.5ha. This lower terrace is also flanked by a raised walk to the west and remnants of a matching bank to the east (partly truncated by the road to Wing Park Farm). A protrusion from the dividing scarp probably contained a second flight of steps on the same central axis as the one above. The earthwork features to the south are less pronounced, but an embanked terrace beyond the farm road continues the central axis south-east to a distance of c.500m from the Old House, and may have been framed by an avenue of trees.

The 0.75ha. ornamental Garden Pond lies c.250m south of the Old House site, south of the terraces. It was probably polygonal in plan, perhaps pentagonal. Now largely dry, it was impounded by a dam around the south half and fed by a stream channel from the north-west, the lower section of which (parallel to the garden terraces), forms a canal, c.15m wide and c.160m long, lying c.70 west of the terraces. The top end of the feeder stream arises on the spring line at a pair of ponds (now dry) and linking channels c.175m north-west of the Old House site. The ponds may have originated as fish ponds and been adapted for the garden design.

The west side of the Garden Pond is lined by the remains of two ornate flower beds which are probably unique in their form, evoking a sinuous broderie pattern. The north bed (100m x 25m) is divided longitudinally, and the east half is divided by four shallow ditches in alternating arcs from either side in a geometric yet sinuous effect. The south bed is similar in width and design but less well defined as it approaches the pond.

The origin of the large-scale stepped terracing, broderie pattern beds and water features is unclear but is likely to post-date Sir Robert Dormer's building of the house c.1520s-40s, as such terraces are characteristic of the late C16 and early C17. It is a rare, large-scale and elaborate Renaissance design based on a central axis aligned on the house. It is comparable with Holdenby, Northants, which was laid out c.1570s-80s for Ralph Treswell, and with Harrington, Northants, of the late C17, both of which include great terraces stepping down a hillside. This style persisted into the early C18 with such magnificent schemes as the hillside terraces at Powis Castle.

## **Warren**

West of the canal, leading to the Mentmore Road, a 6ha. rectangular area of the hillside is covered by many low earthworks. Six have been identified as pillow mounds, or artificial mounds for rabbit breeding in warrens, between 0.3m and 0.5m high, surrounded by shallow drainage ditches. Two are circular and c.10m in diameter, the other 4 being sub-rectangular, and averaging 17m x 8m. They lie in the north half of the field above the more severe south slope and overlies medieval cultivation, and thus post-date the agricultural use. A square enclosure at the foot of the slope could be the site of a warrener's house. North of the warren are further remains of the medieval field system and a lost area of Wing village.



The warren formed a feature in views from the Old House and garden terraces, as well as the approaches along the Mentmore Road. It is perhaps C16 or early 17 in origin. In this respect it is comparable locally with Quarrendon House garden near Aylesbury in which a warren and pillow mounds have been interpreted as a key element of another extensive C16 layout with a great terraced garden with waterworks. Sir Robert Dormer and his family remained devoted to Catholicism after the Reformation and this warren may be more ornamental and symbolic than functional, specifically to portray this subversive metaphor. This was also the case with the warren at the Triangular Lodge at Rushden, Northants.

The combination of extensive and elaborate gardens and a symbolic warren is comparable with Quarrendon, north-west of Aylesbury for Sir Henry Lee in the later C16. The garden differed from Ascott as it was on a relatively flat and waterlogged site and used great canals and terrace walks to enclose what were probably flower gardens, rather than stepped terraces. Rising above the other side of the mansion was a warren on a slope in which the pillow mounds are clearly visible.

The family link with the Newdigates of Harefield Place, Middlesex via Sir Robert Dormer's wife, may be significant. The house, park and gardens there were visited by Queen Elizabeth in 1602 and by the late C17/early C18 had an elaborate early-C17 walled garden with terraces, a watercourse and an arcade, ponds, a geometric pattern of avenues in the parkland and a distinctive octagonal enclosure at the top of the park above the house (London Metropolitan Archives, Acc 1085 EM15).

## **PARK**

The former deer park encloses the garden west of the Mentmore Road to the Aylesbury Road as far as Wing Mill, and south as far as the brook (its course straightened since the C18, Jefferys). There is evidence of Romano-British occupation. The extent by the mid-C18 is indicated on Jefferys' map. It is largely arable farmland, dominated to the west by the large circular Wingpark clump (0.65 ha. in area) which is prominent in the approaches from Aylesbury and Mentmore. 470m south-east of the Old House are the remains of Park Farm (1860), a model farmstead now reduced to a single building formerly at the heart of the lost cattle yard ranges. A pond lies west of the road c.135m south of Park Gate, now enclosed by trees. This may have been a feeder pond for the garden waterworks.

The park was enclosed by Sir Robert Dormer in the early C16 as the ornamental setting for his new mansion and gardens. It survived into the early C18 when in 1727 the deer were removed and trees were cut down (Sheahan). Some timber went to build Fenny Stratford church. By 1768 the area was still noted as Wing Park and shaded as parkland (Jefferys). Farm names beyond the park reflect its likely greater C16 extent including Oldpark Farm west of the village and Westpark Farm to the south-west along the A418 with associated clumps, e.g. Oldpark Spinney (OS 1879) and Westpark Clump.

## **REFERENCES**

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## Maps

Jeffreys, Map of Bucks, 1768

Wing Enclosure Map, 1798 (CBS)

Bryant, Map of Bucks, 1825

Tithe map and apportionment, 1851 (CBS)

Ordnance Surveyor's 6" & 25" : 1 mile scales, surveyed 1877/79

Ordnance Surveyor's 6" & 25" : 1 mile scales, revised 1898

Ordnance Surveyor's 6" & 25" : 1 mile scales, revised 1923

The Royal Commission on Historic Monuments is believed to have completed much of an extensive ground survey similar to that for Quarrendon House and environs (q.v., pers. comm. M Farley 07 Dec. 2021) but it was not possible to locate it during the research for this report.

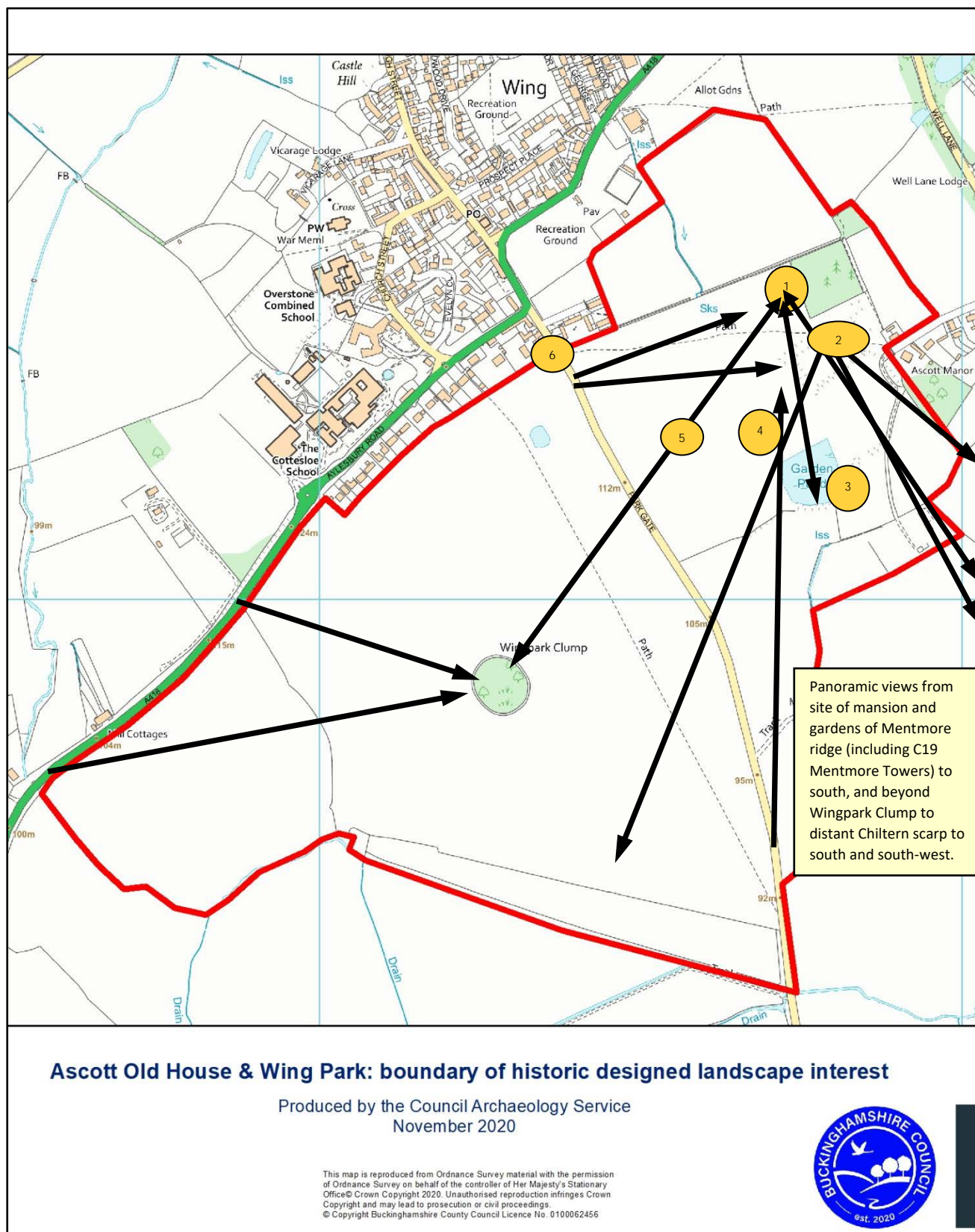
## Acknowledgements

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Sarah Rutherford

June 2020, ed. December 2021;

## KEY HISTORIC FEATURES & VIEWS



1. Site of former mansion (approx)	2. Garden terraces	3. Pond and walk
4. Broderie beds	5. Warren	6. Park Gate entrance

# CURRENT IMAGES



Key to numbered features (above and below)

1. Site of former Ascott Old House (approx.) at top of green field	2. Garden terraces
3. Park Gate at top of hill; warren below	4. Park pond; church behind
5. Wingpark Clump in park	6. West half of park



Detail of gardens and warren (pale green).

Mentmore Road entering at Park Gate divides them from the park to the left (brown).



Aerial view west over terraces and Garden Pond, the warren immediately beyond.  
Wingpark Clump (centre near top) in park.





View north along main axis of house and garden as it rises across the terraces.

Pond bottom left, canal above.

Site of Old House believed to be left of the plantation.

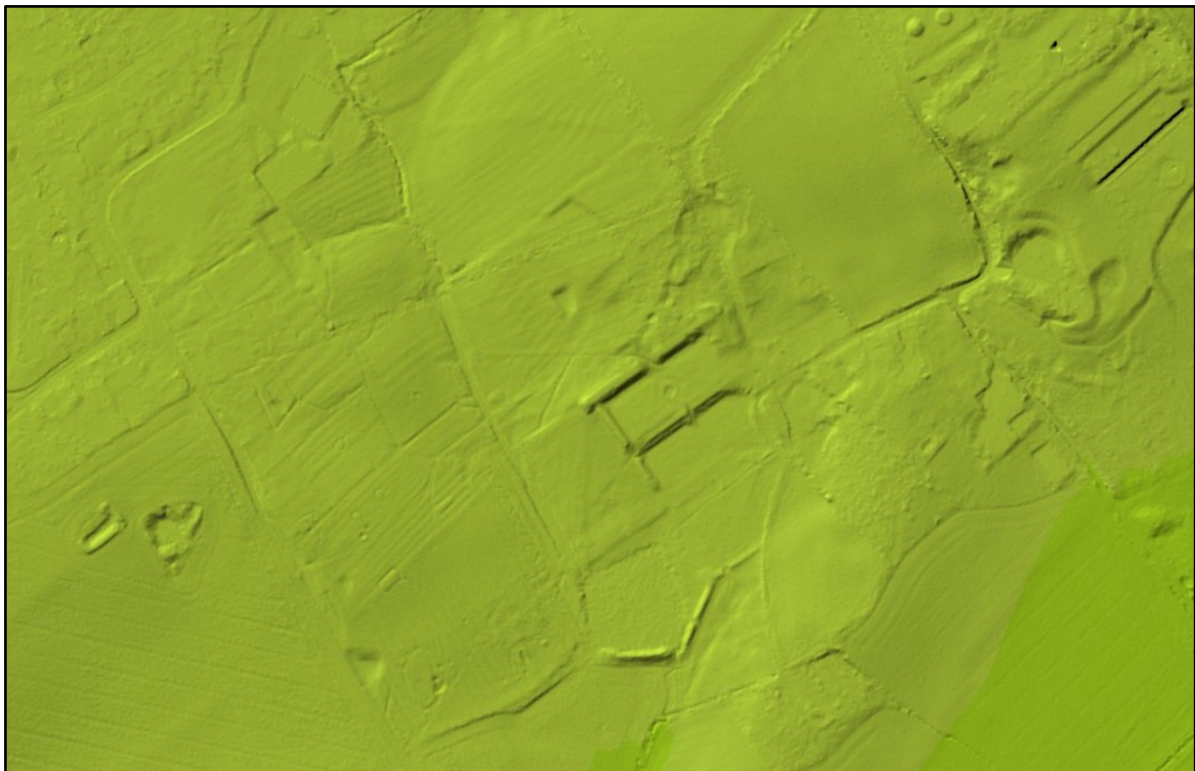


View north-west, terraces at bottom, Garden Pond on LH edge, warren above, then Mentmore Road, Park Gate and park pond above.



View north-west of terraces, broderie beds, remains of pond and warren, with site of house at top.

2007 aerial photograph by kind permission of Mike Farley.



LiDAR image of the site by kind permission of the Environment Agency (north at top)

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