

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

BENENDEN

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**BENENDEN**

Name: BENENDEN

County: Kent

District: Tunbridge Wells (District Authority)

Parish: Benenden

County: Kent

District: Tunbridge Wells (District Authority)

Parish: Cranbrook & Sissinghurst

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.076267  
Longitude: 0.57248230  
National Grid Reference: TQ 80303 33919  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II  
List Entry Number: 1000195  
Date first listed: 01-Jul-1988

## Details

A country house with gardens and pleasure grounds designed by William Broderick Thomas in the mid C19, set in a late C18 park.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

A house was first recorded on this site in 1216. In 1780 however the descendants of Sir John Norris sold the Elizabethan house which was purchased and largely rebuilt by Thomas Hallett Hodges, who also filled in the moat and carried out improvements in the grounds including the digging of the lake. Thomas Law Hodges inherited Hemsted Park, as it was then known, in 1801 and was responsible for extensive plantings. Gathorne Hardy, later Earl of Cranbrook, acquired the property in 1857. Following demolition of the existing house in 1860-2, he commissioned David Brandon to design a new mansion on a new site a little to the east. Traces of the old house and its moat remain. To accompany the new house Hardy called in William Broderick Thomas to redesign the grounds and the approaches (Sell, Wade Postins 1989). The estate was purchased by Sir Vere Harmsworth, later Viscount Rothermere in 1910; in 1912 he called in Herbert Cescinsky to remodel the house. In 1924 the Hemsted estate was divided up and sold, the house and immediate grounds being purchased by Benenden School, from which the house thereafter took its name. The site remains (2001) in divided ownership.

### DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Benenden lies in the heart of rural Kent, c 16km to the east of Tunbridge Wells, on the north-west side of the village of Benenden. The c 119ha site is bounded to the south by Mounts Hill (B2086), to the east by New Pond Road, and to the north and west by farmland and woodland. The mansion stands in the

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centre of the site, its elevated position offering extensive views to the south, west, and east over the gently undulating land on which the park is laid out.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main approach to the house is from Mounts Hill, c 550m to the south of the house at the late C19, Picturesque-style South Lodge (listed grade II) located to the west of Benenden village. From here the drive runs north through the park to the north front of the house. In the north-east corner of the site, c 650m north-east of the house, stands Staplehurst Lodge (listed grade II), built in c 1868 in the Vernacular Revival style. The entrance to the park here is marked by low, curved brick walls with stone copings beside gate piers surmounted by pyramids (c 1868, all listed grade II). The drive from here is now (2001) disused but in the mid C19 it ran south-west through Park Wood to arrive at the north front. Both lodges were designed by the architect George Devey.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Benenden School (listed grade II) was formerly a large country house built of red brick with some black diaper work under a tiled roof in the Elizabethan style. The present roughly rectangular main house has a projecting entrance porch and tower of three storeys and attics, with attached rectangular service wings of two storeys. It was built between 1859 and 1862 by David Brandon for Gathorne Hardy, later Earl of Cranbrook and was substantially altered by the addition of crenellated battlements, oriel windows, and a rear loggia by Herbert Cescinsky for Lord Rothermere in c 1912.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The gardens lie mainly to the south and east, with a number of school buildings and tennis courts occupying the land to the north and west of the house. Formal terraces (listed grade II), which date from the Victorian rebuilding of the house, separate it from the park on the south and east sides. At the beginning of the C20 a Dutch garden was laid out on the east terrace. The terrace walk along the south front leads to pleasure grounds which project south-west into the park, from which they are divided by a ha-ha. This area, which had received its basic outline by the mid C19, is laid out with a pattern of paths through ornamental shrubberies beneath a canopy of deciduous and coniferous trees.

The central walk extends southwards to an oval, semi-sunken flower garden set in turf, which in the 1860s was the site of a complex bedding out scheme including a ribbon border (J Horticulture 1862). The centrepiece was a pool but this was replaced in the 1870s by the existing basin. The conservatory upon which the garden was originally aligned has been replaced by a school hall (mid C20).

From the walk around the perimeter of the pleasure grounds there are extensive views over the surrounding countryside. The walk along the western edge continues northwards through woodland gardens where rhododendrons and azaleas were planted in the mid C19, past the restored icehouse (early C19, listed grade II) standing c 300m north of the house, to the lake.

**PARK** The park surrounds the house on all sides and is mainly retained under grass, with a scattering of mature parkland trees. Park Wood covers the north-east quarter, in the south-west corner of which is a large lake, situated c 320m to the north of the house. It occupies the site of the lowest of a chain of earlier fishponds and was dug in the late C19.

The east park is known as the Pinetum, a name it was given in Hardy's time (mid C19) although the first recorded plantings of conifers were made under Admiral Sir John Norris in the first years of the C18. In the south-east corner stands New Pond, enclosed on all sides by woodland.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The walled kitchen garden (listed grade II) lies c 260m to the north-east of the house at the south end of Park Wood. It pre-dates the present house and had certainly been built by the middle of the C18 (Hodgkinson, 1777). The Garden Cottage (listed grade II) to the north of the walls was designed by George Devey in the late C19, as was Parkwood House, situated towards the northern end of Park Wood, which was formerly the gamekeeper's cottage.

#### REFERENCES

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Maps R Allin, *Map of Hemsted* made for Sir Henry Guildeforde, 1599 (Suffolk Record Office) J Andrews, A Dury and W Herbert, *A Topographical Map of the County of Kent, 2" to 1 mile, 1769* J Hodgkinson, *Map of Hemsted House and Park, 1777* (P20/27/1), (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone) J Hodgkinson, *Survey of the Hempsted Estate, 1779* (U78 P27), (Centre

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for Kentish Studies, Maidstone) Tithe map for Cranbrook parish, 1840 (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone) Map of the Hemsted Estate, c 1860 (U1772 P106), (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1899 3rd edition published 1908 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1869

Illustrations Late C17/early C18 view of the south front of Hemsted House (in Haslewood 1889)

Description rewritten: March 2001 Amended: November 2001 Register Inspector: EMP Edited: November 2003

## Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.