

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

**GODMERSHAM PARK**

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**GODMERSHAM PARK**

Name: GODMERSHAM PARK

County: Kent

District: Ashford (District Authority)

Parish: Chilham

County: Kent

District: Ashford (District Authority)

Parish: Godmersham

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.223271  
Longitude: 0.94406609  
National Grid Reference: TR 05674 51238  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II\*  
List Entry Number: 1000290  
Date first listed: 01-May-1986

## Details

An C18 walled garden, redeveloped in the mid C20 with advice from Norah Lindsay, and an ornamental wilderness of C18 or possibly earlier origin, set in a largely intact C18 park.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Godmersham belonged to the Benedictines of Canterbury until transferred at the Dissolution to the Dean and Chapter. During the late C18, most of the parish land belonged to Thomas Brodnax-May-Knight, whose ancestors, the Brodnax family, first acquired sub-manors of Ford and Yalland in c 1590. The fortunes of the Brodnax family changed in 1727 when a relative, Sir Thomas May, left them his fortune on condition that Thomas Brodnax changed his name to May. His wealth enabled him to rebuild the house and to begin laying out the gardens. In 1738 he benefited from a further inheritance which gave him Chawton, an estate in Hampshire, again on condition of his assuming the additional name of Knight. Thomas Brodnax-May-Knight died in 1781 and the estate passed to his son, another Thomas, who continued improvements before his own death. In 1794, the estate passed from his widow to Edward Austen (brother of the novelist Jane), who took the name of Knight. He also 'greatly improved' Godmersham 'inside and out' (CL 1945) and his sisters were regular visitors between 1798 and 1813. Edward's son succeeded him in 1852, carrying out further alterations to the house before selling it to Mr John Cunliffe Lister Kay. His nephew, the third Baron Masham of Swinton, inherited in 1917 but sold the estate to the sixth Earl of Dartmouth. It was resold in 1935 to Mr and Mrs Robert Tritton who restored and further remodelled the house and engaged the designer Norah Lindsay to advise on the formal walled gardens. After Mrs Tritton's death in 1983 the estate was bought by the Sunley family, the house being let in 1992 as the headquarters of an international company. The estate remains (1997) in private ownership.

### DESCRIPTION

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**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Godmersham Park lies on the north-west side of the village of Godmersham, just west of the A28 and between Ashford, c 9km to the south-west and Canterbury, c 14km to the north-east. The registered site comprises just under 1ha of formal, walled gardens and c 8ha of enclosed ornamental gardens, set within c 247ha of parkland.

The eastern third of the site including the house and walled gardens lies on the valley floor of the Great Stour river which flows north-eastwards, partly through the parkland, on its eastern side. West of the house and gardens, the parkland occupies a broad, dry valley running parallel to the river, which is enclosed at the north end and along the entire western side by the high ridge of the North Downs and at the south end by the steep-sided crest of the Godmersham Downs.

The site is bounded along its west and north sides by the North Downs or Pilgrim's Way, which follows the park pale along the crest of the ridge. The landscape beyond to the west is heavily wooded while to the north, a narrow band of farmland separates Godmersham from the deer park of Chilham Castle (qv). To the south, the park landscape, enclosed by agricultural fencing, merges into the lightly wooded slopes and open, grazed summit of Godmersham Downs. To the east, the high brick wall encloses the gardens from the church and village street; the river forms a short stretch of boundary to the north-east, Temple Hill enclosing the park from the A28.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The park is approached from the east along a short stretch of the village street from the A28 which crosses the Great Stour by a C17 stone bridge. From the lodge, which is flanked by two sets of entrance gate piers and wrought-iron gates, a drive, formerly an extension of the street and lined with houses until 1839 (Tithe map), leads westwards through the northern set of gates, past a C20 car park on its south side, to the principal, north front of the house. This north front was approached in the C18 from the north: the main highway from Canterbury to Ashford followed the east side of Chilham Park, entering Godmersham Park from the north (and forming its eastern boundary) before continuing southwards along the present village street. Although the Map of Kent by Andrews, Dury and Herbert of 1769 shows this road as a formal avenue focused on the house, Watt's view of the north front of 1784 (in Bannister 1995), Henry Hogben's map of 1789, and an estate plan of 1815 all show the road following a route closer to the west side of the river and the house approached by a short westward spur of drive. The present route appears established by 1839 (Tithe map), some nine years after the diversion in 1830 of the Ashford to Canterbury road to its present route.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS** Godmersham Park (listed grade II\*) stands on level ground with views from its unaltered late C18 front northwards over parkland and eastwards to Temple Hill. The nucleus of the present house, which is of two storeys and built of red brick with ashlar dressings, was constructed in 1732 by Thomas Brodnax on the site of the Brodnax family's Elizabethan house which was known as Ford Place (Bannister 1995). The east and west wings were added in c 1780, probably also by the same owner (CL 1945). Improvements in the late C18 included the portico to the south front in c 1785 and the stable block to the east; further alterations were made in 1852-3 by William Burn for Edward Austen Knight. By 1902, the south front had been recast and the whole exterior painted to resemble stone (ibid). In 1935 the architect Walter Sarel restored the north front to its original, late C18 appearance and completely rebuilt the south front to its present form with the orangery in the west wing and the removal of the south front portico.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The formal and ornamental gardens lie to the south of the house. The south front opens onto a broad, slightly raised paved terrace, developed after 1935, and to the great sweep of lawn beyond, now (1997) laid out as a cricket field. At the west end, beyond the orangery, a balustraded stone staircase with four flights of steps rises off the terrace up the steep bank from the lawn to a further balustraded grass terrace, which overlooks a small paved courtyard garden extending from the west end of the house and containing a rectangular pool, statuary, and a fountain in the west wall. These features were an addition, with the terrace, of 1935. Southwards beyond the lawn, the rising slopes of Godmersham Downs are laid to rough grass and informal groups of trees of mixed ages, fenced from the park on the west side. On the axis of the house, a broad mown path leads 300m up to a garden temple, a brick structure with a slate roof fronted by the portico removed here from the south front of the house in 1935, and enclosing a polygonal room. The enclosure and layout of this part of the garden, with a building shown on the site of the temple, appears to date from between 1815 and 1839 (Plan of the parish, 1815; Tithe

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map, 1839). Although Andrews, Dury and Herbert's map of 1769 shows an elaborate formal garden extending south from the house, this, if it existed, had gone by 1789 when Hogben's map shows the area south of the lawn as part of the park.

From the east end of the house terrace, three formal gardens, laid out from 1935 with advice from Norah Lindsay (1866-1948) within C18 walls, are entered through a gateway in the west wall, c 65m from the house and screened from it by a line of early C18 yew trees (LUC 1989). The swimming pool garden contains a central rectangular pool set in a paved surround and flanked with wide mixed borders enclosed on the west side by yew hedging (part replanted in the 1990s) and by a high brick wall on the east side. At the north end a loggia opens onto a paved terrace while at the south end there is a late C17 statue of Neptune (listed grade II) backed by yew hedging, on the south side of which (and formerly inside the garden) is an C18 sundial (listed grade II). A door in the east wall of the pool garden leads into the tennis court garden which contains a central fenced court surrounded by a gravelled walk and borders of roses and lavender (restored 1986). A door in the centre of the north wall leads into the kitchen garden, laid to vegetables and flowers, while in the south wall a door opens into the Topiary Garden. This is laid to open lawn with four sinuous corner herbaceous beds backed by yew hedging and surrounded by a gravelled walk and perimeter wall shrubs. An C18 circular stone basin and fountain (listed grade II) forms the centrepiece of the garden.

The Wilderness lies to the south of the walled gardens. Its principal formal feature is an avenue of limes, replanted in the 1990s following storm damage, which extends for c 330m south-south-westwards from the garden wall to wrought-iron gates in the boundary wall of the park. The slopes either side of the avenue, also restored in the 1990s, are planted with informal groups, clumps, and individual evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs, set in grass with mown paths. Although the elaborate garden layout on Andrews, Dury and Herbert's map of 1769 is shown extending over the Wilderness area, Hogben's estate map of 1789 shows only trees, including an avenue on a line similar to that of the present restoration. By 1872 (OS), the Wilderness had an almost complete tree cover until its destruction in the 1987 storm.

**PARK** The park lies to the north, west, and south-west of the house and gardens. To the north, the house opens onto a broad crescent of open lawn separated from the park by a ha-ha, shown in its present location on Hogben's map of 1789. Northwards beyond the ha-ha and west of the river, meadow and grazing land, divided into enclosed fields, contains a scatter of parkland trees of varying ages which increases in density towards the northern boundary of the park. The pattern of planting reflects that shown established on the OS 1st edition (1872). The route of the northern approach to the house until the building of the turnpike road in the early C19, can be traced in the pastureland to the west of the river. The new road enabled the meadowland east of the river, below the steep, west-facing slope of Temple Hill, to be brought into the park. The temple (listed grade II), which crowns the wooded hill and affords extensive views across the whole park, is of C18 origin and is first recorded on an estate plan drawn for Edward Knight in 1815 (Plan of the parish).

The main body of the park occupies the broad, dry valley running south-westwards away from the house which, with the lower slopes of its south-west side, is largely under arable cultivation although with a number of tree clumps and belts on the valley floor. The upper south-west slopes of the valley and the north-west-facing slopes of Godmersham Downs have a more dense scatter of trees which, interspersed with fingers of pasture, develop into stands of woodland on the ridge-tops. The present pattern of tree planting still reflects that shown on Hogben's map of 1789, although the density of trees is considerably greater and closer to that shown on the OS 1st edition (1872). The replanting carried out in the 1990s following the storm of 1987 has largely followed this later pattern.

The present area and shape of the park was established when it was first enclosed in 1742 by Thomas Brodnax-May-Knight and its boundaries can still be traced. Along the west side the pale follows the North Downs or Pilgrim's Way, and is visible as a low, lynchet-type bank on the north face of Godmersham Down (Bannister 1995). The present brick wall forming the eastern boundary of the garden replaced the former sunken fence of the deer park, probably in the C19 (Hasted 1790). Deer were still recorded in the park in 1867 (Bannister 1995) and the present Deer Lodge and Game Larder (listed grade II), 460m north-west of the house, were built at the beginning of the C19. A brick deer leap on the north-west boundary is recorded on Hogben's map of 1789.

#### REFERENCES

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1871-2, published 1876 2nd edition published 1898 3rd edition published 1908 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1872 3rd edition published 1907  
Description written: June 1997 Amended: January 1999 Register Inspector: VCH 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.