

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

SOMERHILL

Auteur(s) : Historic England <https://historicengland.org.uk/>

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**SOMERHILL**

Name: SOMERHILL

County: Kent

District: Tonbridge and Malling (District Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

County: Kent

District: Tunbridge Wells (District Authority)

Parish: Capel

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.179711  
Longitude: 0.29802778  
National Grid Reference: TQ 60720 44785  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II  
List Entry Number: 1000381  
Date first listed: 01-May-1986

## Details

An early C19 formal, terraced garden probably laid out by William Sawrey Gilpin and further developed in the later C19, with surrounding early to mid C20 formal and informal ornamental gardens, and set within a late C18 to early C19 park.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The land occupied by Somerhill lay within the South Frith, which formed part of the Lowy or domain of Tonbridge in possession of the earls of Gloucester. It was given by Queen Elizabeth in 1601 to Frances, widow of the Earl of Essex, and her husband Richard de Burgh, fourth Earl Clanricarde, who built the present house in 1611. His son, Ulick, later created Marquess of Clanricarde, inherited in 1636 but due to his Catholic and Royalist sympathies, had his estates sequestered in 1645 by Parliament which voted them to John Bradshaw. After the Restoration, Somerhill was returned to Ulick's daughter Margaret, Lady Muskerry, who in the late C17 sold off much of the estate leaving little more than the house and park. These were purchased in 1712 by John Woodgate of Penshurst for whose family J M W Turner painted a view of the west front in 1810-11 (reproduced in CL 1922). Somerhill was sold in 1816 to James Alexander who altered the house, laid out the terrace gardens, and remodelled the park, after which, in 1849, it was purchased by Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid. His grandson, Julian, having inherited in 1866, restored the house, added the north wing, and further developed the formal gardens. The estate passed in 1896 to Mr Osmond D'Avigdor Goldsmid, remaining in his family until the house, gardens, and park were sold by Sir Henry D'Avigdor's daughter in 1981. Three owners followed in quick succession until in 1988 the house and gardens and c 61ha of parkland were bought by Yardley Court School. The site remains (1998) in the combined hands of The Schools at Somerhill, the Hadlow estate, and several smaller private owners.

### DESCRIPTION

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**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Somerhill is situated immediately east of Tonbridge, on the north-east side of the A21, Tonbridge to Tunbridge Wells trunk road. The 159ha site, which comprises c 6ha of formal and ornamental gardens and 153ha of parkland, farmland, and woodland, lies on undulating ground which rises south-eastwards from the floor of a stream valley running across the north-west corner to the crest of a high ridge. There are extensive views from the upper slopes across the Medway valley 2km to the north and to farmed and wooded ridges beyond Tunbridge Wells to the west and south-west. Park paling encloses the north-west and south-west boundaries from adjacent major roads (A21 and A26), beyond which lies the developed edge of Tonbridge (to the north-west) and wooded farmland (to the south-west). Five Oak Green Road (a minor road) runs along the northern boundary, with farmland and orchards beyond, while to the south-east, the estate's farmland and woodland merge into a similar landscape.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The site is approached on the north side, a drive entering from Five Oak Green Road on the west side of White Lodge (built 1871) and ascends via a series of sharp bends, past a school car park, to a gravelled forecourt on the principal, west front. Although established as a drive by the late 1860s (OS 1872) it functioned as a service route until the opening of Yardley School in 1990. The principal approach in the late C18 (Mudge, 1801) was along a northward-running drive (now a track) which entered beside the present Top Lodge (listed grade II), situated at the southernmost point of the site. By 1819-20 (Greenwood), a further drive had been built from the west corner, 1.1km south-west of the house, which followed a course to the house similar to that of the present drive from the west. The western entrance was moved to North Lodge in the late C19 and ceased to be used to access the house in 1990.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS** Somerhill (listed grade I) stands to the north of the centre of the site, on a level platform high up the slope of the ridge and commands extensive views to the north, west, and south-west. The complex of buildings, which are all constructed in coursed blocks of Calverly stone ashlar with pitched red-tiled roofs, comprises a main H-shaped, two-storey house with four symmetrically gabled facades and largely stone mullion and transom windows with leaded panes, built 1611-13 to a plan by John Thorpe. Anthony Salvin (1799-1881) was involved with building alterations from 1828 to 1833 (Piebenga 1994). Adjoining on the north side is the Old Stable Court, its three ranges, partly of C17 origin but refurbished to form offices and servants' rooms in 1897, enclosing a grassed courtyard (formerly with a stone well-head removed in the 1990s). On its west front is a further courtyard enclosed by low walls and planted as a rose garden. To the north again is the Stable Block, built in 1897 to include servant and guest accommodation and featuring a tall clock tower on its south side. The main house was refurbished internally several times in the C18 and C19 and is still (1998) undergoing the major refurbishment and conversion to school use begun in 1988.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The formal gardens lie to the east and south of the house. Both fronts open onto a broad level terrace, shown on the Tithe map of c 1840 and probably laid out, by 1832, by William Sawrey Gilpin (1762-1843) for James Alexander (Piebenga 1994). The terrace is enclosed on its outer edge by a low wall of dressed sandstone (listed grade II) and is divided into four rectangles of open lawn (two on the east front and two on the south front) by axial paths. A broad walk, terminating at each end in a niche with seating, runs north to south along the inner side of the terrace wall on the east front, from the north end of which is a view north across the Medway valley. Northwards along the east front, beyond the north wall of the terrace but still contained within its eastern wall, lawns with mature oak and cedar slope gently down to the northern boundary of the gardens which is formed by a deep sunken lane, lined with stone ashlar walls (listed grade II) built between 1866-9 and 1898 (OS), which carries a public footpath, thus hidden from view of the house, for a distance of 190m eastwards from its entrance point 35m north of the Stable Block.

From the eastern terrace wall, the path axial on the east front of the main house descends a long flight of stone steps, from the foot of which a further, grassed, walk extends 60m to north and south, lined with pleached limes trees (planted 1967) and enclosed along the east side by tall, clipped yew hedging planted by Lady Goldsmid in 1960 (Kent Gardens Compendium, 1992). The path, established between 1898 and 1909 (OS), continues its axial route eastwards for 45m down across gently eastward-sloping lawns dotted with one or two island beds of shrubbery, occasional mature trees (including cedars) and, 100m south-east of the house, a shrubbery-enclosed tennis court. At its eastern end, the path encompasses a circular lawn ringed with cherry trees. Further stone steps descend from the east side of the circle to the fenced rim of a dell, the entrance at the foot

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of the steps framed by a timber and tile-roofed lych-gate (the Garden of Memory) installed in 1990 from the former Yardley School site. The dell is occupied by two informal pools (shown on Andrews, Dury and Herbert's map of Kent of 1769), the surrounding slopes of which are planted with mixed native and ornamental trees and shrubs.

South of the terrace on the south front, lawns divided into compartments by intermittent sections of clipped yew hedge extend 60m to a fenced and shrub-planted enclosure containing a swimming pool with a white, timber, chinoiserie loggia designed by Sir Hugh Casson and erected since 1955 (Kent Gardens Compendium, 1992).

**PARK** The park lies to the west, south, and east of the house. Both westwards, on ground falling steeply then levelling out towards the site boundary, and southwards on rising ground bounded by The Brakes wood, the land is under permanent pasture and planted as parkland with an extensive cover of small clumps and individual trees, largely comprising mature oak but with some dating from the mid and late C20. Celia Fiennes in 1697 (Morris 1982) describes the park as 'A fine with vists of walks cut through and Ashady with lofty trees', but the present area of planted parkland is first clearly shown on Greenwood's map of 1819-20. It is named as Somerhill Park on OS maps from 1898. Towards the western boundary, some 700m from the house and sited on the axis of the west front, is a tree-fringed lake with two islands, fed by the stream and constructed between 1795-9 (Mudge, 1801) and 1810 (Turner painting). The outflow of the lake at the southern end is crossed by the western drive over Lake Bridge, a sandstone ashlar bridge with parapet walls curving into terminal piers (probably late C19, listed grade II). On the south side of the lake and drive is Lake Cottage (listed grade II), a Tudor-style cottage orné of sandstone ashlar with gabled dormers which is shown as a lodge on the 1st edition OS map.

South-east of the lake, the land rises as open pasture, with tree cover confined to the fringes of two small streams; with Somerhill Park, this area (shown without parkland trees in 1898, OS) was laid to a private golf course up to 1939. The wood known as The Brakes, planted largely with conifers, is shown as woodland in 1801 (Mudge) and was replanted as a plantation in the mid C20. The south-east corner of the park, eastwards from The Brakes to the boundary at Park Farm is, with the exception of a mature, mixed clump of trees around a reservoir (400m south of the house) and the beech wood known as The Toll, under arable cultivation, the parkland trees shown in 1872 having been cleared in 1940. North-east of the house, on the north side of a public footpath, the land surrounding Boxes Farm (late C19) is under arable and hop cultivation, with a small area of pasture and parkland trees in the extreme north-east corner.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden lies some 40m to the north of the Stable Block, from which it is reached by a bridge with stone parapets which crosses the sunken lane. The high red-brick walls in the form of a parallelogram, shown established on the OS map of 1872, enclose an area of c 0.3ha which is laid to rough grass. To the immediate north of the garden is a range of cottages (Bothy Cottages), converted after 1938 from former kitchen garden outbuildings while to the east of the garden, playing fields, levelled in 1988-9, occupy the site of former early C20 orchards.

#### REFERENCES

Country Life, 52 (9 September 1922), pp 310-17 J Newman, The Buildings of England: West Kent and the Weald (1969), pp 514-15 J Harris, The Artist and the Country House (1979), p 352 C Morris (ed), The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes (1982), pp 128-9 Kent Gardens Compendium, (1992), pp 140-1 S Piebenga, William Sawrey Gilpin (1762-1843), (English Heritage Designer Theme Study 1994) Somerhill, guide leaflet, (The Schools at Somerhill 1997)

Maps J Andrews, A Dury and W Herbert, A Topographical Map of the County of Kent, 2" to 1 mile, 1769 W Mudge, Map of Kent, 1" to 1 mile, 1801 C Greenwood, Map of the County of Kent from an actual survey made in the years 1819 and 1820, c 1" to 1 mile, 1821 Tithe map for Capel parish, 1840 (R30/17/37/B2), (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1866-9, published 1872 2nd edition published 1898 3rd edition published 1909 1938 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 3rd edition published 1909 1938 edition

Illustrations J M W Turner, View of the west front, 1810-11 (reproduced in CL 1922)

Description written: February 1998 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: November 2003

## Legal

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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.