# Sussex Gardens Trust

## Parks and gardens of local importance in Sussex

***Parks and Gardens of the Sussex Coast***
**Research and Recording project**

# WEST MARINA GARDENS HASTINGS



Statue of Edith (Charles Wilke) 2014



Shelter in 2014

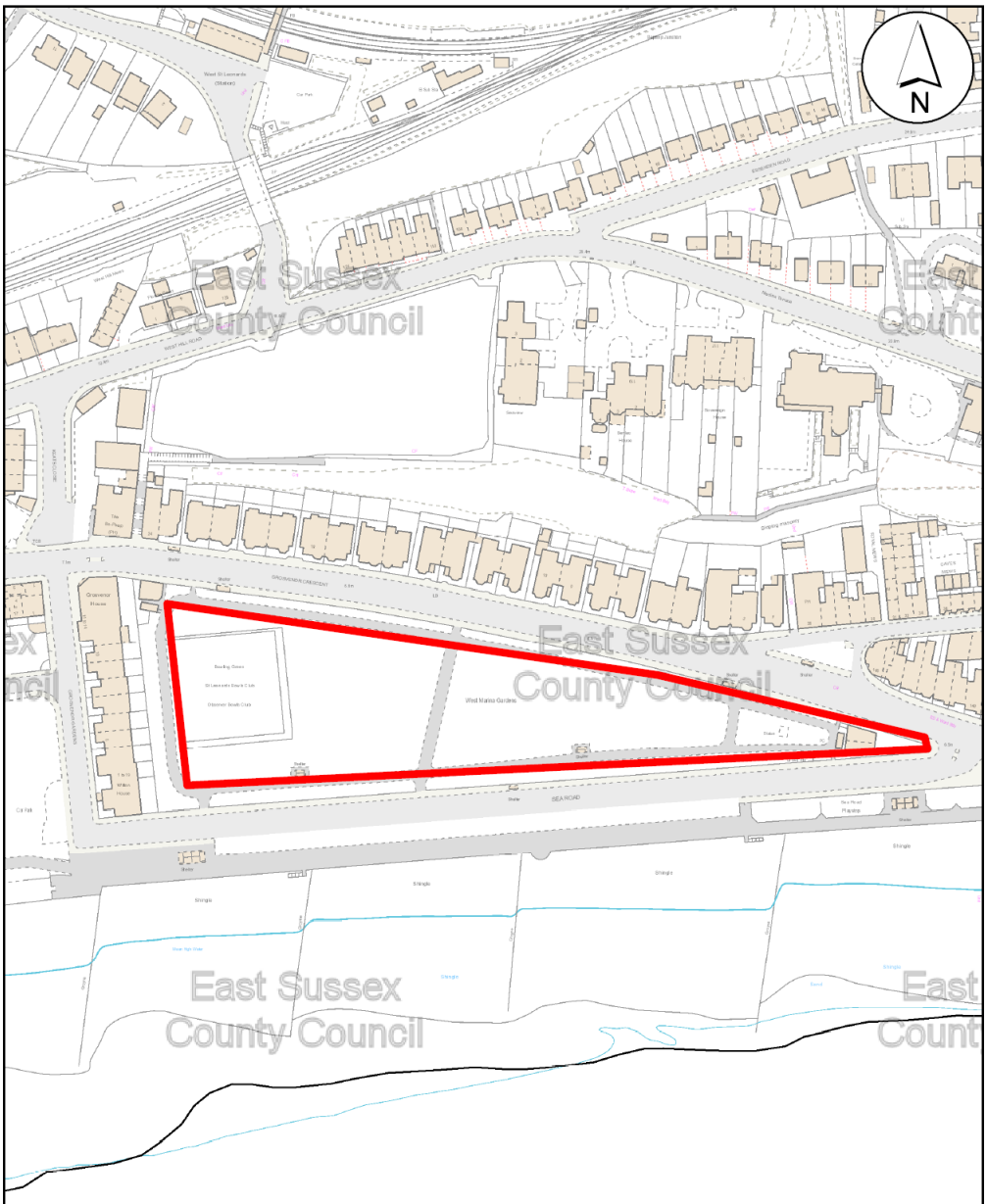
SUSSEX GARDENS TRUST

East Sussex County Council

west sussex county council

THE GARDENS TRUST

# SITE BOUNDARY (1)




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| West Marina Gardens, Hastings representing the boundary of designed historic interest | Scale: 1:2,000 | East Sussex County Council |
| East Sussex Historic Environment Record (ESHER) and Sussex Garden Trust working in partnership | Date: 24/01/2023 | |

# SITE BOUNDARY (2)




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## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the 'Parks and Gardens of the Sussex Coast' Project

Our project aim, to research and record the parks and gardens of the Sussex coast, began in 2013 and is nearing completion. Most of the sites recorded are now in public i.e. local authority ownership where their special historic development is not necessarily recognised and therefore conserved. We hope our reports will help improve knowledge and guide their future management.

The variety and period of sites is huge, from C19 and early C20 town squares, 'Old English' and Italianate-style gardens with ponds, pergolas and seating, gardens with salt-resistant traditional bedding and C21 ecological planting, to large parks which began life as farmland owned by influential local families and aristocracy and provided the recreation and leisure space for new urban development.

The administrative areas covered are: Worthing and Adur jointly-run DC, Arun DC, Brighton and Hove City Council, Eastbourne and Lewes jointly-run DC, Rother DC and Hastings Borough. Only Brighton and Hove and Hastings hold a list of local heritage assets (see Historic England's guidance for a definition of local heritage assets and how to identify and protect them . https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/local-heritage-listing-advice-note-7/)

Brighton and Hove City Council's list is the most comprehensive (https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/planning/heritage/local-list-heritage-assets) so our project has not addressed their sites although we may select a few of the more major ones for a deeper level of research in the future.

### Content

All research – in local and national archives and on site – is undertaken by a team of volunteers who have received training from professionals expert in appraising designed landscapes who have worked extensively for English Heritage (now Historic England) on sites on its National Heritage List for England. All reports are peer-reviewed.

Each report comprises the following:

- A site boundary map drawn on the current Ordnance Survey map.

- The area within the boundary represents the area of designed historic interest; it does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.
- A current aerial photograph with the boundary shown.
- An overview and statement of significance based on the guidance set out in the *National Policy Planning Framework* – the government's guidance for local planning authorities in discharging their planning responsibilities.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a visual site survey, the format following that used by Historic England for sites on the national *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd edn.

**Supporters and Acknowledgements:**

The Trust would like to thank the volunteers, owners, local authority staff (especially the East and West Sussex Historic Environment Records) and the many Friends groups who have participated in this project and given time and effort to completing this challenging task.
Further information is available from: www.sussexgardenstrust.org.uk

# WEST MARINA GARDENS

**COUNTY** East Sussex

**ESCC HER REF** MES37837

**DISTRICT** Hastings

**OS REF** TQ 789 088

## OVERVIEW

The Gardens are a late C19 creation by Hastings Corporation for public leisure and recreation for the residents of the westernmost end of St Leonards new town. Making use of land newly-raised for coastal defence by spoil from railway tunneling and a new sea wall the construction provided essential work for unemployed labour. Surviving largely as laid out (though with some post war re-instatement) the initial layout at the opening in May 1891 comprised mainly open lawns with serpentine beds and a perimeter path, the shelters being installed a few years later and, by 1906 formal games (cricket and croquet and a bowls club) had been introduced and the Gardens enclosed by railings (removed in 1940). The marble sculpture of Harold and Edith by the German sculptor Charles Wilke and donated by the Brassey family was installed in 1953.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

**Architectural/Artistic**: The Gardens' construction makes use of the engineered solutions to coastal defences and contributes to the overall scenic quality of the main Bulverhythe coastal road.

**Historic:** The initiative, part of a wider programme to include the new sea wall, reinforced sea defences and the new Bulverhythe Road demonstrates Hastings' Corporation key role in driving major improvements to the town. The land purchase from the Eversfield family is a further example of their role in providing a source of land for Hastings developments.

The Gardens have demonstrated constant social significance from providing work for unemployed labour, hosting military parades in WWI, converting to allotments in WWII and providing family recreation throughout their life.

Since 1953, the Gardens have provided the setting for Charles Wilke's 1895 marble sculpture of Harold and Edith after the battle of Hastings and a link with the Brasseys, an influential family in Hastings in the second half of the C19 and early C20.

# HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In the second half of the C19 the area west of Burton's St Leonards new town, known as Bo-Peep, was developed in a haphazard fashion. South of the West Hill cliffs, between the Bo Peep Hotel (established as a public house by 1815) and the Fountain Hotel (shown with that name in 1873; now, 2016, the Marina Fountain pub), coastal erosion had created a patch of waste ground marked as shingle on the first edition OS map surveyed in 1873 (Manwaring Baines, *Burton's St Leonards*, p 34). With the opening of the London, Brighton and South-Coast railway in 1846 (the line runs some 300m further north) some of the spoil from the tunneling was used to raise the coastal road level westwards from the Fountain Hotel, at that time the westernmost extent of coastal urban development, to improve the land for building (Manwaring Baines p 35). The only building on this waste ground in 1873 (1st edition OS map) is a coastguard station on the shore immediately south of the Bo-Peep hotel.

To secure the area, work on a sea wall progressed through the 1840s and 1850s and 1878 saw the opening of the new West Marina esplanade. This construction, 2000' in length and 50' wide was protected by a sea wall 15' thick at its foundation (www.hastingschronicle.com/1878/06/14/esplanade-opens/).

On 12th June 1885, the Hastings Corporation proposed improvement works at West Marina which would entail the purchase of the land and the creation of Public Pleasure Grounds. During the course of 1886 land was purchased from Isabella Eversfield and Stephen Putland (East Sussex Records Office, DH/B83/623, DH/B83/161; Hastings Borough Council, Urban Parks Strategy, 1994 p12). This initiative was part of a wider programme of improvement which included reinforcing the sea defences and laying out Bulverhythe Road (Hastings Borough Council, p12; Clive Read, HBC, personal communication, lists from the Borough engineer's file on West Marina Gdns). At the same time (1886) the existing coastguard station was demolished and replaced with a terrace of houses known as Grosvenor Gardens. This would form the western boundary of the Pleasure Grounds (http://www.hastingschronicle.net/1850-1899.html). Much of the work was carried out by 'bone fide unemployed' men, who were paid 4d an hour to collect barrows of earth from the cliff and move it across the road to the new Pleasure Ground.

West Marina Gardens were officially opened by Mayor Bradnam on 20th May 1891 (Hastings News, pp 4-5). They were described two years later as "the pretty ornamental gardens at West Marina [Grosvenor Gardens]" (http://www.hastingschronicle.com/1893/03/03/progress-at-west-marina, quoting Hastings News, May 1893). For some years, West Marina Gardens were referred to in the press as 'Grosvenor Gardens' although this was more properly the name of the terrace of houses running north/south at the west end of the site. Plans were drawn up for further house building in 'Grosvenor Crescent' (the name given to the section of coast road running along the north side of the Gardens; five pairs of semis had been built by 1897, 2nd edition OS map). The tram line which ran along Grosvenor Crescent was extended west to Grosvenor Gardens and the Bo-Peep Hotel; the line is shown on

the 3rd edition OS map revised 1908. The Borough's weather recording instruments, sited in the Gardens from 1897, were removed to Gensing Gardens in 1909 (Alan Buckle, pp37-45*).*

In 1901 the Gardens are described as having "extensive public lawns" (Saunders and Prescott Row, 1901) which is confirmed by the 2nd edition OS map revised 1897/98. This source also mentions tennis courts and ground "prettily ornamented with carpet bedding and shrubs."

An early photograph (pre-dating the OS Map 2nd edition) by G W Bradshaw *(*T B Brett, *Scrapbook*, *Volume 1* p 130a) shows that work to the esplanade was continuing after the Gardens were completed. The Gardens' layout shows serpentine borders with most of the site otherwise laid to grass. No shelters are shown; these appear first on the 2nd edition OS (surveyed 1897/8) located, but unnamed, on the southernmost perimeter path.

In 1904 Borough byelaws (ESRO, DHC/29/9) were made to allow charging for playing specific games in Hastings parks, including in West Marina Gardens. By 1905 photographs show the Gardens well-established; they are enclosed by iron railings with symmetrical shrub and ground-cover planting between the rails and the perimeter path, wooden benches placed irregularly along the path and serpentine beds within the body of the area. The Gardens are well used; games are in full swing with both cricket and croquet being played and one photo shows children and prams in the foreground*.*

In 1906 the West Marina Bowls Club (now, 2016, the St Leonards Bowls Club) was established by the Hastings Corporation (http://www.hastingsobserver.co.uk/sport/bowls-club-celebrates-centenary-1-1440564) and West Marina Gardens provided the venue for the 1914 championship match in the St Leonards and Hastings Bowling League. In 1968 the Observer Bowls Club moved from the sports ground in Downs Road to share the Corporation ground with the St Leonards club (both clubs now, 2016, use the facilities at the Gardens).

During WWI military parades took place and on 22nd April 1915, the South Wales Borderers (billeted in the town) were presented with a Drum Major's staff by the Mayor and Mayoress. In 1918 King George V was photographed in the Gardens inspecting the (newly named) RAF Brigade.

By 1918 shrubs have grown level with the top of the railings (photograph of that date) and an aerial photograph of 1920 shows a clearly demarcated square at the west end of the Gardens, probably indicating a bowling green. In 1922 a bowls pavilion was built (Borough Engineer's file) and in 1934 new public conveniences (and possibly a ladies' rest room) were added.

Harold Clunn's book *Famous South Coast Pleasure Resorts Past and Present* of 1929 describes the Gardens as "overlooked on the north side by a row of modern detached red-brick houses built under the cliff and crowned on the west side by a terrace of

houses known as Grosvenor Gardens which marks the western limit of St Leonards seafront." Hastings Corporation is still engaged with developing its leisure facilities which in 1931 included the building of a huge and famous (330' x 90') bathing pool (demolished in the 1980s), by the Borough Engineer Sydney Little (the 'concrete king'), to the immediate west of Grosvenor Gardens (www.seasidehistory.co.uk), (Gray, p 183).

In 1940 the Borough Council removed the Gardens' iron railings (estimated value, £38) and in 1946 (aerial photograph) they appear to have been turned over to allotments (perhaps confirmed by a Mrs. Hicks, an allotment owner from 1940-44, having her ashes sprinkled on the Gardens).

Photographs from the 1950's and 1960's suggest that the Gardens had declined into scrub although there is evidence of mini golf being played (aerial photographs show a set of marks in the grass consistent with a mini golf course). A hedge separated the bowling green and tennis courts at the western end, the latter being enclosed by high wire fences.

In 1953 the marble sculpture of Harold and Edith, now, 2016, with its surface severely weathered and eroded, was installed in its present place at the eastern end of the Gardens. Created by the German sculptor Charles Wilke in 1875, it was formerly housed in the Brassey Institute when the Brassey family donated the sculpture to the town. There was a proposal to build "rollcurling" rinks on the site (Hastings and St Leonards Observer 18/04/1964), but there is no evidence of this having been implemented. In 2006 the public conveniences were closed after being vandalized but were reinstated in 2008.

## SITE DESCRIPTION

### Location, Area, Boundaries, Landform, Setting

The 1.5 ha of West Marina Gardens are located at the western end of St Leonards, adjacent on the west side to Bulverhythe, in a triangle formed by the Sea Road esplanade to the south, Grosvenor Gardens to the west and Grosvenor Crescent along the north eastern side. The western side of the triangle is c100m in length, the southern side c290 m and the 'hypotenuse' of the north side c330m.
The Gardens are open in character, bounded only by a low 0.5m concrete wall on the northern side and by a slightly higher 0.7m, rendered brick wall on the southern side. The west boundary is formed by the fenced, rear, private gardens of the houses in Grosvenor Gardens (their main frontages face west), some of which have gates opening directly into the Gardens. The public conveniences and electricity substation at the eastern end of the triangle are partially fenced. The immediate setting consists of the sea to the south and late nineteenth century housing to the west and north-east, the latter backing onto the high, almost vertical West Cliff. The wider setting includes dense housing above the Cliffs to the north and, west beyond the terraced houses of Grosvenor Gardens, a large open space formerly occupied by the St Leonards bathing pool and holiday camp.

### Entrances and Approaches

There are three entrances in gaps in the low wall (from Grosvenor Crescent on the north-east boundary and two from Sea Road to the south. All the entrances lead directly onto the perimeter path and are located at the points where the paths cross the gardens from north to south.

### Gardens

The Gardens are little changed from their initial layout in 1891, those changes which have occurred being mainly between 1909 and 1927 (OS editions). The circulation framework of the Gardens comprises a perimeter tarmac path linked to two further straight paths running from north to south and dividing the garden area into three sections. Between 1909 and 1927 the central path lost its central widened-out circular shape shown in 1897/8, adopting its present straight route, while the westernmost path lost its little loop of path and bed shown in the far north west corner, this replaced by a bowls pavilion.
Within the perimeter path the site is mainly laid to mown grass with a random scatter of shrubs and small trees. There is a planted border all around the perimeter between the path and the outer walls except at the eastern end which is occupied by the public conveniences. The border along the whole northern side contains a mixture of regularly-spaced pines and under-planted shrubs while along the southern boundary it consists of mixed shrubs including tamarisk, hydrangea and *Garrya*.

Of the three sections created by the straight cross paths the easternmost is laid to grass with the sculpture of Harold and Edith statue at its centre. The central section has, on the northern side, three rectangular island beds and shrubs at either end; the southern side has a late C19 shelter (shown on the 2nd edition OS map of 1897/8) centrally placed on the perimeter path. The western section is laid to mown grass with two island beds on the northern side and a second shelter (of the same date) centrally placed on the southern perimeter path. There are mature shrubs adjacent *to* the straight path which forms the eastern boundary of this section. To the south of these beds is a putting green and to their west a bowling green (added between 1909 and 1927) forming a raised, approximately 45 m square, hedged on its south side with a screen of Griselinia littoralis and with mixed shrubs screening the eastern side. In the far north west corner there is a painted timber bowling pavilion also added between 1908 and 1927 (OS 3rd and 4th edition maps).

## REFERENCES

### Books, articles and publications

Baines, J. Manwaring, *Burton's St* Leonards (Hastings Museum, 1956).

Buckle, Alan and Hastings Local History Group, *Bygone Weather in Hastings and Victorian weather instruments* (2005).

Clunn, Harold, *Famous South Coast Pleasure Resorts Past and Present* (1929).

Gray Fred, *Designing the Seaside* (2006).

Hastings and Saint Leonards History Group, *Hastings Bygones* (2001).

Hastings Borough Council, *Urban Parks Strategy* (1994), p. 12.

Sanders and Prescott Row, *Homeland Handbooks Vol 16, Hastings and St Leonards*, 1901.

**Maps**

Ordnance Survey maps 25" to 1 mile: (dates taken from NLS website):

1st edition surveyed 1872.
2nd edition surveyed 1897/8.
3rd edition revised 1908.
4th edition revised 1927.
5th edition revised 1938.
Edition of 1955.
Edition of 1999.

**Archive materials**

East Sussex Records Office (ESRO), DH/B/83/623, *Land fronting the foreshore near West Marina Gardens*, 25 October 1886.

ESRO, DH/B/83/161, *West Marina Gardens*, 20 July 1886.

Brett, T. B., *Scrapbook*, *Volume 1,* unpublished, Hastings Library.

**Images**

Hastings Library holds a collection of cards and photographs, including:

A) A view (undated) from inside the Gardens, looking towards the Fountain Hotel. The gardens were railed and had symmetrical shrub and ground-cover planting between the railings and the perimeter path. There are children and prams in the foreground.
B) View (undated) apparently from an upper floor in Grosvenor Gardens, looking across the western end of the Gardens towards Grosvenor Crescent and West Hill. It shows similar panting to A, and has a semicircular path in the north west corner and serpentine beds on the western side. Wooden benches are placed irregularly along the path.
C) View (undated)from the esplanade, showing the back gardens of Grosvenor Gardens forming the western boundary of the West Marina Gardens. An entrance gate is shown in the south west corner of the railings and the planting

appears significantly denser on the southern (seaward) side compared to the northern boundary.

D) A view from the east (dated 13th April 1905) shows two shelters, with a cricket match in progress.
E) A view (undated)from the eastern end of the gardens, showing one shelter and the weather station (enclosed by a low fence) on the central path. People are playing croquet in a roped-off area.
F) King George inspecting troops in August 1918.

Private collections:

A) A postcard postmarked 1915 showing children playing by a shelter in the gardens.
B) A postcard postmarked 1960 showing bowls and tennis grounds.

**Websites**

Britain from Above image www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw000108?name=ST%20LEONARDS&gazetteer=ST%20LEONARDS&POPULATED_PLACE=ST%20LEONARDS&ADMIN_AREA=Hastings&ref=0

Google maps www.google.co.uk/maps/place/St+Leonards

Hastings Chronicle www.hastingschronicle.com/1878/06/14/esplanade-opens

www.hastingschronicle.net/1850-1899

www.hastingschronicle.com/1893/03/03/progress-at-west-marina

Hastings Observer www.hastingsobserver.co.uk/sport/bowls-club-celebrates-centenary-1-1440564

www.publicsculpturesofsussex.co.uk/object?id=43

Seaside History www.seasidehistory.co.uk

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