How does Susan Hill use setting in the early part of this chapter to release tension and reassure the reader?

Extract to focus on:

“Outside, all was quiet, so that all I heard was the sound of my own footsteps as I began to walk briskly over the gravel, and even this sound was softened the moment I struck out over the grass towards the causeway path. Across the sky, a few last gulls went flying home. Once or twice, I glanced over my shoulder, half expecting to catch sight of the black figure of the woman following me. But I had almost persuaded myself now that there must have been some slope or dip in the ground upon the other side of that graveyard and beyond it, perhaps a lonely dwelling, tucked down out of sight, for the changes of light in such a place can play all manner of tricks and, after all, I had not actually gone out there to search for her hiding place. I had only glanced around and seen nothing. Well, then. For the time being I allowed myself to remain forgetful of the extreme reaction of Mr Jerome to my mentioning of the woman that morning.”
At the beginning of the extract the reader is reassured by the sounds that can be heard – only the sound of Kipps’ footsteps as he walks away from the house – nothing scary or untoward is occurring. The air of tranquillity is added to by the gulls flying overhead – everything is made to seem as normal as possible. The detail of the description calms the reader and distracts attention away from the appearance of the woman in black towards much more prosaic – ordinary – details such as this.

The reader is reminded that Kipps is still a little apprehensive about his recent encounter. The fact that he is “half-expecting” suggests that he doesn’t really think that she will be there – it also emphasises his uncertainty over the existence of the woman as a ghost – something he has earlier ruled out his belief in. these things combined reassure the reader at this point that even if the woman is following him she is real flesh and blood and not a ghost so there is very little to worry about.

Hill goes on in this part of the description to add further logic to the situations and rationalises what Kipps has seen: “I persuaded myself now.” The reader is already aware that Kipps is a cynic as far as ghosts are concerned, and as such can apply logic quite easily to what he has just seen: “there must have been some slope or dip in the ground upon the other side of that graveyard and beyond it, perhaps a lonely dwelling, tucked down out of sight.” The tension of the previous scene is released as Kipps comes up with the only logical explanation for the
woman’s sudden disappearance – that she has just gone somewhere out of sight. The reader already knows enough about how strange this place is to think this easily believable. Kipps further legitimises what he now thinks he saw by stating that he hadn’t actually go to see where the woman had disappeared to so any mystery as to her whereabouts was in fact his own fault for not investigating further. Hill’s inclusion of Kipps’ own voice in this scene adds to the sense that all is well and there is little tension here. He admonishes himself with the words “Well, then.” As if to say what did you expect? He is telling himself off for being afraid. At the end of this scene the reader is completely reassured by Kipps about what has been seen and feels certain that this is not the thing to be afraid of – he even manages to dismiss Jerome’s obvious discomfort when he mentioned seeing the woman at the funeral.