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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BENTLEY PRIORY

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Name:	BENTLEY PRIORY
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Harrow (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.622925 Longitude: -0.33175533 National Grid Reference: TQ 15582 92885 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001440 Date first listed: 09-Dec-1999

Details

A C16 estate enlarged and improved in the late C18 by James Hamilton, ninth Earl and first Marquess of Abercorn who corresponded with Sir Uvedale Price. Price, along with William Sawrey Gilpin influenced the design of the park in the early part of the C19.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The estate of Bentley Priory most probably originated in the early C13 as an Augustinian house attached to the Priory of St Gregory, Canterbury. Its ecclesiastical role ended in the early C16 and it was little more than farmland when it was acquired by Archbishop Cranmer who handed it over to King Henry VIII. The lands then passed into private ownership and maintained a relatively modest status until the beginning of the C18 when the estate is first noted on some maps of the period, including John Rocque's map of 1754 on which it is marked as Bentley House. In 1775 the estate was bought by James Duberly, an army contractor who demolished the old buildings and had a new house built on a higher point. In 1788 Duberly sold the estate to the Hon John James Hamilton, later ninth Earl and first Marquess of Abercorn (d 1818), who enlarged the grounds and the mansion, by then known as The Priory. In 1816, J N Brewer remarked in his *Beauties of England and Wales...* that the grounds of The Priory comprised more than 200ha. During the first Marquess' time the mansion became a celebrated social centre for the Tory party and was visited by many celebrities including William Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, Richard Payne Knight, and Sir Uvedale Price. Correspondence between Price and Abercorn in the years 1796 to 1801 suggests that the two men were good friends and many of the letters discuss landscape improvements.

The first Marquess of Abercorn died in 1818 and the estate passed to his grandson, James Hamilton, aged seven years. His guardian was Lord Aberdeen, a prominent Tory politician, who continued the correspondence with Sir Uvedale Price. Price's letters to Aberdeen covered a wide range of scholarly subjects and in August 1821 the subject of landscape improvement was raised when he recommended William Sawrey Gilpin (1762-1843) as 'a person who would be very useful to you at The Priory'. By May of the following year Aberdeen had written to Price to say that he had called in Mr Gilpin. Once James Hamilton, the second Marquess of Abercorn came of age he only occasionally resided at The Priory and from 1846 until her death in

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1849 it was leased to the Dowager Queen Adelaide. By 1848 the property had reverted to the name Bentley Priory (Illustrated London News).

In 1852 the estate was sold to the building contractor Sir John Kelk Bt. Kelk served as Treasurer to the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) in 1865-6, and also acted as a general contractor for the RHS garden in South Kensington and for the Albert Memorial. At Bentley Priory, Kelk, with the aid of his gardener Mr Rutland, concentrated his efforts on the glasshouses and bedding schemes for the terrace to the south of the house. These are described in detail in a series of three articles by J Willis published in the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* in 1868. Kelk continued to improve the property but in 1880 the estate was again put up for sale and Driver & Co's Sale catalogue includes a detailed map and two pages describing the main features of the park and pleasure grounds. The property was sold for £75,000 to Frederick Gordon of the Holborn restaurant. Gordon's intention was to convert the house and grounds into 'a first class residential hotel' and his plans for the house and grounds were published in the *Harrow Gazette* in 1884. The hotel opened in 1885 but despite the magnificent setting and Gordon's construction of a railway line from Harrow to Stanmore for the convenience of his guests, the enterprise was not a success.

After Gordon's death in 1908, Bentley Priory was sold and was used as a girls' school until 1924. The subsequent sale, in 1926, finally broke up the estate into three (OS 1934). The largest part (some 100ha) was bought by a syndicate, largely for building land. The syndicate divided their land into lots and allowed Middlesex County Council to buy c 36ha. The Air Ministry bought the mansion and some 16ha which included the formal gardens around it. In 1936 Royal Air Force Fighter Command moved to Bentley Priory and during the Second World War it was used by Inland Area (Training Command), which formed the centre of the country's air defence system. After the war the Royal Air Force remained and in 1968 several other operational defence command units were transferred to Bentley Priory. The land bought by Middlesex County Council was transferred first to the Greater London Council and subsequently to London County Council, and finally in 1968 to Harrow Borough Council. This ownership pattern remains today (1999).

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Bentley Priory estate is situated in the western suburbs of London. Stanmore lies c 1km to the south-east, Harrow Weald c 1km to the south-west, and Elstree c 2km to the north. Harrow Park (qv) lies c 6km to the south-east, and Grim's Dyke (qv) c 0.75km to the west. The former boundaries of Common Road and Stanmore Hill (A4140) to the north, east, and south-east, and part of Uxbridge Road (A410) to the south are separated from the site by C20 developments which encroach into the former parkland to leave an area of c 130ha. The southern boundary is marked by a footpath which separates Bentley Wood High School from the site. On the north side of the footpath, and running parallel to it, are the remains of a linear earthwork consisting of a bank and ditch, possibly part of a medieval deer park boundary (Watkins 1985). The northern end of Common Road and residential properties along the east side of Clamp Hill provide the boundary to the west. The site slopes to the south with the mansion and pleasure grounds on the high point at the northern end.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance to the mansion and pleasure grounds from the north-west end of Common Road is first recorded as a carriage drive on Greenwood's county map of 1819, and is the only surviving approach to the mansion (1999). The occupation of the mansion and pleasure grounds by the Royal Air Force is proclaimed by a Second World War plane rising out of the grass by a fine cedar tree at the entrance. The drive continues past concentrations of C20 administrative buildings to the porte-cochere on the north front of the mansion.

The wooded carriage drives which approached the mansion from Clamp Hill and Common Road to the west have lost their character and in part have become separated from the main estate.

The parkland, now known as Bentley Priory Open Space, is crossed by a number of footpaths which can be accessed from the surrounding roads. The former approach from Great Stanmore to the south across the centre of the park (visible as a raised feature to the east of Boot Pond) is thought to have been part of William Sawrey Gilpin's improvements, plantings having screened the view southwards to Harrow on the Hill in order to increase its impact when eventually seen from the mansion.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING The mansion (listed grade II*) lies towards the northern end of the site, on the highest point, with views south to Harrow on the Hill. Originally a nine-bay, three-storey, Italianate building with cement rendering, rusticated quoins,

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and a balustraded parapet, there are a number of later additions. The house built by James Duberly after 1755 was acquired by the first Marquess of Abercorn in 1788. Almost immediately Lord Abercorn commissioned Sir John Soane (1753-1837) to enlarge the house, which he had renamed The Priory. Between 1788 and 1798 Soane prepared numerous schemes (drawings of which survive in the Soane Museum) for the new owner and eventually remodelled and extended the existing house providing a lavish new reception wing and a porte-cochere (Stroud 1961). Between 1810 and 1818 the house was further enlarged by Sir Robert Smirke (1780-1867). Sir John Kelk made a number of additions including the Tuscan Portico to the south front, an Italianate clock tower, and a large conservatory on the west side. The conservatory was demolished in 1939 and later replaced with utilitarian office blocks. The mansion, which was severely damaged by fire in 1979, presents a largely Victorian exterior but much of Soane's C18 house survives, including the porte-cochere on the north front.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The mansion has lost much of its surrounding pleasure grounds. To the west the shrubberies, paddock, carriage drives, and bowling green have been subsumed under modern (C20) RAF buildings.

The area to the north of the house was largely developed for private housing in the late 1920s and only an occasional cedar survives as a reminder that this was once the much admired Cedar Garden developed after 1818, possibly by William Sawrey Gilpin (Potter 1994). In 1850 Keane described it as a beautiful flower garden adorned with all that art and good taste could supply. The many features included ancient cedars, a rose garden, an orangery, a large artificial rockery, and two summerhouses. One of the summerhouses, the favourite tea room of Queen Adelaide, survives in the grounds of the neighbouring C20 house, 'Ad Astra'. The main elements are depicted on the 1st edition OS map of 1865 which shows an enclosed area crossed by wide walks. Many of the trees planted to the south of the Cedar Garden area and around the mansion were cut back during the Second World War as part of the defence of the property.

To the south of the mansion is the Terrace Garden which, although much simplified, retains elements of the C19 design. Wide gravel paths, the Upper and Lower Terrace Walks, run for 122m east/west to the south of the mansion. The terraces, laid largely to grass, have circular bedding areas around three raised vases (C19), flat marble seats, and smaller gravel walks. Flights of stone steps at either end of the main walks link the two terraces. The dominant feature of the Lower Terrace is the centrally placed, semicircular balustraded platform ornamented with a circular basin and fountain. The C19 fountain, still in working order, is set in grass with strip beds containing heathers. Stone steps lead from either side of the fountain on the Lower Terrace down to the lawn, with a second pair at either end of the Lower Terrace (matching those linking the Upper and Lower Terraces). The roughly oval lawn slopes quite steeply to the south, creating a bowl-like effect, to the metal security fence that separates the land occupied by the RAF from the parkland. The fence is screened by C20 plantings of rhododendrons and conifers which also serve to block the view across the parkland to the lake. Developed in the early C19, at the same time as the Cedar Garden, the Terrace Garden was described in the c 1848 Sale catalogue (Brooks and Green) as having a French flower garden descending to the lower pleasure grounds and park, in which there was an ornamental fountain. According to Willis' detailed description (J Horticulture and Cottage Gardener 1868), Sir John Kelk and his gardener, Mr Rutland, concentrated much of their horticultural efforts on the bedding schemes of the Terrace Garden. The Upper Terrace garden was at that time known as the Grand Italian Garden. Their work is well illustrated in the late C19 Sale particulars (Driver & Co 1880) and by illustrations from Gordon's hotel prospectus (1885). The Grand Italian Garden was decorated with cut beds, urns, seats, yews, and laurels. The platform on which the fountain and basin stood was decorated with beds and gravel paths.

PARK Set on sloping ground to the south of the mansion the c 70ha park is managed (1999) as rough grazing and for nature conservation and is known locally as Bentley Priory Open Space.

From Old Lodge Way in the south-east corner of the site one of the many footpaths which cross the site leads north-west across open parkland (Old Lodge Way was until the early C20 an entrance into the estate from Stanmore Park). To the south is Boot Pond, 0.25ha of water so named because of its shape, which resembles a boot with the sole pointing to the north. After c 400m the path divides, the northern branch continuing north through Heriot's Wood, some 12ha of ancient woodland which retains vestiges of ornamental planting, occasional cedars, yew, and patches of laurel. That part of Heriot's Wood to the east of the footpath is fenced and used as a deer park. The area bordering Heriot's Wood to the east is shown on C19 and early C20 maps as open parkland and it is uncertain when deer were first contained in the area. Some 230m to the south of the deer park however

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are the remains of linear earthworks thought to have formed the boundary of a medieval deer park (Borrill c 1985). The path continues north to Priory Drive, a C20 residential road to the east of the mansion, passing to the west the security fence which divides the pleasure grounds from the park.

The western branch of the footpath continues to the south of Summerhouse Lake. After c 400m the path divides, the western branch continuing for 200m to the boundary with Priory House before turning sharply to the south towards the buildings of Lower Priory Farm. The northern branch continues for c 100m to the Lake. The irregularly shaped c 2ha lake, measuring c 300m north/south and with a maximum width of c 100m is situated c 500m south of the mansion at the bottom of a slope. Summerhouse Lake was created by Lord Abercorn in 1797 at the same time as Sir Uvedale Price was writing his essay on artificial water (Price 1798). Letters from Price to Lord Abercorn suggest that he developed his theory of picturesque lake-making with little practical experience and frequently asked Abercorn for hints and advice. In 1832, fourteen years after Abercorn's death, William Sawrey Gilpin restated the picturesque principle that one should never be able to walk all around a piece of water, but rather be able to come upon it occasionally. He went on to describe 'The small but beautiful artificial lake at The Priory' as an example (Potter 1994). Paths encircle the Lake and views across the water are occasionally screened by clumps and bands of trees. The area around the Lake is designated a nature reserve. The summerhouse from which the Lake takes its name and the C19 boathouses shown on the 1862 OS map, one on the north shore and one to the east, have gone; trees now (1999) screen the view back to the mansion. On the south-west bank stood a summerhouse (OS 1864) where reputedly Sir Walter Scott, a friend of the first Marquess, stayed while he wrote *Marmion* (published 1808). A view looking north across the Lake, published in Gordon's hotel prospectus in 1885, shows the Lake with a small 'boathouse' and the mansion set on high land in the background.

To the west of the Lake, between it and the western boundary, is an area of parkland currently (1999) grazed by cattle. The area is shown on the 2nd edition OS map as the Deer Park and is described in 1895 (Sale catalogue) as being encircled by long shady walks which were famous for their timber and banks of rhododendrons. The shady walks were lost to development when the estate was split up after the sale in 1926

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Description written: July 1999 Amended: May 2001 Register Inspector: LCH Edited: June 2001

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.