

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

WITLEY COURT

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

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
WITLEY COURT

Name: WITLEY COURT

County: Worcestershire

District: Malvern Hills (District Authority)

Parish: Great Witley

County: Worcestershire

District: Malvern Hills (District Authority)

Parish: Hillhampton

County: Worcestershire

District: Malvern Hills (District Authority)

Parish: Little Witley

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.281817
Longitude: -2.3396331
National Grid Reference: SO 76927 64907
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1000901
Date first listed: 28-Feb-1986

Details

A landscape park, including improvements in the early C19 by John Nash and G S Repton, and formal mid C19 gardens by W A Nesfield, associated with a country house which in the mid C19 was among the most magnificent in England.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Witley was purchased by Thomas Foley, the son of a Stourbridge nail manufacturer, from the Russells of Strensham in 1655. The Foleys retained ownership until 1835 when Witley was bought by the trustees of the eleventh Lord Ward (cr first Earl of Dudley 1860), under whom, when he came of age, Witley was transformed into a 'Victorian palace'. His descendant sold the property in 1920, after the death of his wife in a bathing accident, to Sir Herbert Smith (d 1943), a Kidderminster carpet manufacturer, who put Witley up for sale in 1938, the year after the house was consumed in a great fire. It was purchased by a firm of demolition contractors who by 1945 had removed much of the non-structural fabric from the house and felled many of the mature trees in the park. The post-war years also saw the piecemeal sale of the parkland and farms from the estate. In 1972 the house and surrounding grounds were taken into state Guardianship, and a large-scale programme of restoration works instigated in the later 1990s was in progress in 1997.

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
WITLEY COURT

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Witley Court lies south-east of the village of Great Witley and the A443 which runs through it, from Ludlow c 35km to the north-west to Droitwich c 15km to the east. The high ground of Abberley Hill rises to the north, and that of Woobury Hill to the west. The watercourses crossing and ponded within the park drain south-east to the River Severn, 5km to the east. The registered area comprises c 350ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Witley Court is approached along very rough kilometre-long drives from the north-west and from the east. At the end of each is an elaborate ashlar lodge (both listed grade II) in the French Second Empire style, built in 1884 to designs by Henry Rowe and Son of Worcester.

In the mid C18 a causeway was constructed to carry a drive southward from the public road to the house across the Front Pool. This arrangement was superseded by the present one in the early C19.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING A great fire swept Witley in 1937, and what remains today (listed grade I) is a consolidated shell. Of the C17 house of the Russells there remains the twin towers to the north between the long wings added 1683 by Thomas Foley. In 1790 it was transformed into a vaguely Palladian-style mansion with a three-storey central block and two projecting wings on the north side. In the early C19 porticos were added on both sides of the building, that on the south, garden front being by John Nash (1752-1835). In 1860 Samuel Whitfield Daukes (1811-80) transformed the house into a virtual palace, retaining the porticos but adding four-storey towers and two-and-a-half-storey wings with canted bays at their ends. A curving seven-bay wing was added on the left side of the garden front with a thirteen-bay Orangery (wing and Orangery separately listed grade II*) at its end. The whole building (and the adjacent church) was clad in Bath stone and surmounted by a balustrade.

On the west side of the house is a service court and the remarkable baroque parish church of Great Witley (listed grade I), consecrated in 1735 and attributed to Gibbs (1682-1754).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS In the later C18 the surroundings of Witley Court were laid out as a landscape park with deer. George Stanley Repton (1786-1858) installed terracing and balustrading around the house in the early C19. In 1854 William Andrews Nesfield (1794-1881), then the country's most prestigious garden designer, came to Witley, and between that date and 1860 the setting of the house was transformed by the creation of extensive and intricate gardens in the French and Italian styles south and east of the house, with great fountains as centrepieces.

The main gardens lie south and east of the house, defined by stone balustrading with ha-ha beyond. All is now rough lawn, with some specimen and some self-seeded invasive trees, especially around the exterior. Restoration works are currently in progress (1997). To the south of the house the ground falls away before rising again, the end of the garden (overall c 180m long from north to south and c 140m wide) lying within a massive apsidal projection. Monumental iron gates ('The Golden Gates') originally terminated the projection, while to either side of the start of the projection are stone pavilions (listed grade II) of c 1860, designed in a slightly Hindu style by Samuel Daukes. In the centre of the garden is the spectacular Perseus and Andromeda Fountain (listed grade I) of c 1860. Nearer the house, and to either side of the central path, are circular features, the remains of infilled flower beds.

The gardens east of the house, c 110m east/west by c 80m north/south, also terminate in an apsidal projection. In their centre is the Flora, or Triton, Fountain (listed grade II*) of c 1860. Both of Witley's great fountains were sculpted by James Forsyth. The stone edgings of parterre beds protrude through the grass.

PARK Witley Court lies to the north-east of an extensive park, although now (the late C20) the parkland character has largely been lost and much of the land is arable. Decay and tree felling had begun by the end of the C19.

Running along the east/west valley which drops steeply away below the north forecourt is Front Pool, a linear lake with a weir at its west end and a boathouse (ruinous 1997) below the house. North-east of Front Pool is woodland called The Wilderness. West of Front Pool is Hundred Pool; between the two pieces of water is the former Engine House. About 150m west of Hundred Pool is Red House, a grouping of five small octagons, built in 1828 to a design by George Repton as a breeding kennel for Lord Foley's hounds. This was converted for residential use in the early C20.

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
WITLEY COURT

To the south of Witley Court the ground rises, the highest ground lying in the south-west edge of the park, where a few small parcels of woodland represent all that survives of Deerbarn Covert, which in the early C20 formed a broad belt of woodland along the southern border of the park.

The existing park, created by the mid C16, was enlarged after 1718 when additional land north-east of the house was purchased. This was probably the time when the Hundred Pool was created, followed in the 1730s by the Front Pool with its Cascade, removed in the early C19. Also in the earlier C18, Keeper's Lodge (destroyed during the 1950s) was built as an eyecatcher 750m south-west of the house, on the site of a lodge documented in 1664 and 1732, to a design by Henry Flitcroft (d 1769). At the same time ornamental plantations were laid out. A Wilderness had been planted east of Front Pool by 1784. By 1793 the park had been extended east to include the Warford Pool and Lodge Pool. Between 1804 and 1817 Nash and Repton improved the park. KITCHEN GARDEN Witley's octagonal walled kitchen garden (walls in part listed grade II) lies c 100m west of the west end of the house's service court and forms part of Nash's improvements at Witley in the early C19. On the north side of the garden is the former gardener's house (listed grade II), now divided into two dwellings.

REFERENCES Country Life, 117 (8 June 1945), pp 992-5; (15 June 1945), pp 1036-9 B Pardoe, Witley Court: Life and Luxury in a Country House (1986) Witley Court, Great Witley, Worcestershire: Report on an Archaeological Landscape Survey, (City of Hereford Archaeology Unit 1994) Witley Court, Worcestershire: A Landscape Survey of the Southern Parkland, (City of Hereford Archaeology Unit 1996) Trans Worcestershire Archaeol Soc 15, (3rd Series), (1996), pp 283-303 Witley Court, guidebook, (English Heritage 1997 edn)

Description written: 1998 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: September 1999

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.