

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN

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

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Name:	CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Kensington and Chelsea (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.484588 Longitude: -0.16211697 National Grid Reference: TQ 27711 77783 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: I List Entry Number: 1000147 Date first listed: 01-Oct-1987

Details

A physic garden founded in 1673. Many notable figures are associated with its development including Philip Miller and Sir Hans Sloane.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1673 the Worshipful Company of Apothecaries founded the Chelsea Physic Garden as a training ground for their apprentices. They leased a plot of land of c 1ha which had a 100m frontage onto the River Thames and by 1679 1200 different plants were recorded there. A high proportion of these were native to South America and the East and West Indies. The late C17 layout was geometrical, being divided by straight paths with series of rectangular beds on each side, arranged (as at Padua, Leiden, and Uppsala) as pulvilli or teaching beds. John Watts, an apothecary, was appointed first director of the garden in 1680 and two years later Dr Paul Hermann, Professor of Botany at the prestigious Leiden University, visited Chelsea. Watts returned Hermann's visit in 1683 and proposed a plant and seed exchange with the University. This was the origin of the botanic garden's Index Seminum. In 1692 John Watts was removed from his post because the garden had become neglected and from c 1695 until his death in 1706, Samuel Doody, also an apothecary, undertook the care and funding of the Garden on a short lease. After Doody's death a committee was set up to oversee the welfare of the Garden and some ninety people were asked to support it on a subscription basis. The idea was not a success and the future of the Garden was in doubt until in 1712, Dr (later Sir) Hans Sloane (1660-1753) purchased the Manor of Chelsea from Charles Cheyne. This included the land of the Physic Garden (Survey of Westminster, Chelsea and Kensington, 1717). In 1722 the Deed of Covenant was approved and the garden was described as being '3 acres, 1 rood and 35 perches plus greenhouse, stove and barge houses' (Report 1996). The grounds were leased to the Society of Apothecaries for £5 a year in perpetuity as a Physic Garden and in the same year Sloane appointed Philip Miller as head gardener. In 1750, after examining the Garden, the Management Committee was very impressed by the large number of rare plants which Miller had obtained as plants or seeds from various parts of the world. Philip Miller continued as head gardener until 1770; he died the following year and is buried in Chelsea Old Church.

During the C19 the Garden experienced fluctuating fortunes. In 1836 John Lindley, the then Praefectus Hortis, reported on the general poor state of the garden and plant collections. In 1847, with the help of the curator Robert Fortune, Lindley began to

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN

rearrange the garden collection. Six years later the post of Praefectus Hortis was abolished and John Lindley's services were dispensed with. In the latter part of the C19 the Garden suffered as a result of the general lack of interest in botany in relation to medicine, and in 1893 the Apothecaries finally decided to relinquish their trust. The Garden was then put into the hands of the Charity Commissioners but the Director of Kew Gardens (qv) and other eminent people decided to approach the Treasury to try and save the Garden. An inquiry was held which reported that the Garden was fit for study and botanical purposes by students at polytechnics and colleges in London. Six years later the Garden came into the care of the trustees of the London Parochial Charities, who completed a major rebuilding programme with research and teaching under the curator, William Hales.

After another period of neglect during the latter part of the Second World War a new curator, William Mackenzie, was appointed, under whose direction the Garden continued to function as a major research resource for the London University colleges, principally for research relevant to agricultural production. The London Parochial Charities relinquished the Garden in 1981 and the Chelsea Physic Garden Company was formed two years later, the administration of the Garden passing to a new body of trustees, the Management Council of the Chelsea Physic Garden Company. The Garden opened to the public in 1983. In the later C20 the Garden's role as a centre for research and public education is confirmed, with a particular emphasis on medicinal plants, and those plants associated with the Garden and its staff by their introduction, or naming.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Chelsea Physic Garden is situated in west London on the north bank of the River Thames. The Royal Hospital, Chelsea (qv) lies c 300m to the east, Chelsea town c 0.5km to the north-west, and Battersea Park (qv) 0.5km away on the opposite bank of the River Thames. The virtually level site of c 1ha lost its river frontage when the Chelsea Embankment, which provides the southern boundary, was constructed in 1874. The original line of the southern boundary is marked by a low, level brick wall which runs c 1m to the north of the C19 low brick boundary wall which is finished with high iron railings. The Garden is bounded to the north-east by Swan Walk, by neighbouring houses and gardens at the south-west corner, and by Royal Hospital Road to the north-west. High brick walls provide the boundary on these three sides.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main public entrance to Chelsea Physic Garden is through an early C18 tall iron gate with side pieces and stone-capped brick piers (listed grade II), set in the brick boundary wall which runs along the length of Swan Walk. The ornamental double iron gates on the southern boundary are not (1999) in general use.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING The first heated greenhouse in England, now demolished, was situated near the centre of the site, immediately south of the present (1999) Sloane statue. The greenhouse and library constructed on the north-west boundary of the site in 1752 was demolished as unsafe in 1854. It was replaced by a curator's house, itself demolished when a strip of land was sold in 1902 to allow for the widening of Royal Hospital Road, and to finance the construction of the current range of two-storey brick buildings and glasshouses. These buildings, which are situated along the north-west boundary of the site, now (1999) house laboratories, lecture rooms, offices, and a curator's residence. To the north-east of the main building is a range of glasshouses, and to the south-west the late C20 laboratory and Research and Education Centre.

GARDENS The main part of Chelsea Physic Garden is divided into four by gravel paths. The quadrants are in turn subdivided into theme areas. To the south of the main garden and running parallel to the Embankment are two shrub borders. Major paths cross the Garden, meeting in the centre at the statue (listed grade II) of Sir Hans Sloane. The original marble statue by Rysbrack was erected in 1748 and faced north-east; it was replaced by a replica in 1983. A lesser path runs around the perimeter of the site. From the Swan Walk entrance a stone step leads down to a gravel path (c 2m wide) which then immediately divides. The main path, lined with small lawns edged with herbs, runs west for c 30m to where the statue of Sir Hans Sloane stands. To the north and south of the main entrance perimeter paths run parallel to the Swan Walk boundary wall. The path to the north leads between the Swan Walk shrub border and the late C20 culinary beds, terminating at the north-east corner of the site adjacent to the rooms and offices set aside for the garden staff and the range of 1902 glasshouses. The national Cistus collection is also located in this area. To the south the path runs south-east parallel with Swan Walk, with the shrub border to the north-east and the Systematic Order beds to the south-west. The rectangular beds are divided by narrow grass paths and take up much of the south-east quadrant. After c 20m the path, which is bordered with a variety of stones, divides, one path swinging to the west

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN

to pass to the south of a rectangular tank made for water plants c 1846-8 by Robert Fortune. The ground around the tank was developed in 1866 for the collection of American plants and this is reflected with current planting. The rectangle of ground to the south of the path contains the triangle beds which support the Peony border, the Hypericum collection and South American plants. The perimeter path continues south, passing to the east a small yard set aside for storage. Divided into two parts, this area was made in 1877-8 and replaced two of the C18 barge houses. The path then curves to the west, between the triangle beds and the Embankment border to the south. The Embankment border was replanted with shrubs by George Jackman in 1877-8 after the Embankment was constructed between 1870 and 1874. The line of the earlier riverside wall survives in the border c 1m to the north of the existing (1999) wall. Some 30m to the west the Embankment boundary wall is breached by double iron gates with the arms of the Worshipful Company of Apothecaries of London centrally placed at a high level. Restored in the 1980s, the gates are hung from brick piers capped with stone. A wide gravel path leads from the Embankment gate and continues across the perimeter path to the statue of Sir Hans Sloane, passing to the east the Systematic Order beds and to the west a rectangle of land formerly part of these beds but by the 1980s laid out as a woodland garden. The perimeter path continues west for c 20m before swinging to the north-west, at which point a short path leads west to the Cool Fernery. Built against the western boundary, this glasshouse, restored in 1985, was rebuilt in 1901 on the site of the 1862 original. This had been made according to the design developed by Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward for a collection of ferns and aquatic and bog plants. Ward is better known as the inventor of the Wardian Case, a sealed glass case popular in the second half of the C19 for transporting living plants from abroad. After the restoration the Cool Fernery was replanted with a selection of ferns, the majority being native varieties or cultivars first described and popularised by Thomas Moore, curator between 1848 and 1887.

The perimeter path, now (1999) identified on plans as the Historical Walk, continues parallel with the western boundary wall. The ground either side of the Historical Walk, laid out in 1985, was planted with species chosen to illustrate the history of plant introductions to England. After c 10m the Historical Walk divides, the eastern branch running for c 18m between the formal lawn and the woodland garden to the statue of Hans Sloane, the main branch continuing to the north-west, passing to the west a collection of Australian plants and a small area of plants dedicated to Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820). These areas are on the site of Philip Miller's shrubbery (Field and Semple plan, 1878). To the east is the area now (1999) used to illustrate the work of Philip Miller. The remainder of the north-west quadrant to the east of Philip Miller's garden is taken up with the level formal lawn. The Historical Walk continues north-west to the west gate (not in use, 1999). Some 5m to the south-east of the gate the path divides and a branch runs north-east along the south front of the new (1987) Research and Education Building, then past the principal buildings and a C20 range of glasshouses. The path terminates at the offices used by the garden staff in the north-east corner. To the north of the statue of Sir Hans Sloane is the Rock Garden (listed grade II), made with volcanic stone from the coast south of Reykjavik in Iceland. The stone was brought back by Sir Joseph Banks in 1772 and used, together with old stone from the Tower of London (which was undergoing refurbishment at the time), to make an artificial rock garden to cultivate plants which delight in such habitat. The Rock Garden was probably made on the site of glass cases, stoves, and other buildings (Haynes, 1751) and was modified by 1836 when a pond was made in the top. In the late C20 most of the Tower of London stone was removed and the Rock Garden extended to the west. It is intended (1999) to restore the rockery in the immediate future. From the statue of Sir Hans Sloane, the gravel path runs north-west between the formal lawn to the west and to the east, the Garden of World Medicine and Pharmaceutical Garden, terminating at the east front of the principal buildings.

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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN

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Description written: October 1999 Amended: November 2001 Register Inspector: LCH Edited: January 2002

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.