

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

TOWNHILL PARK

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**TOWNHILL PARK**

Name:	TOWNHILL PARK
District:	City of Southampton (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.933511 Longitude: -1.3595763 National Grid Reference: SU 45100 15091 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000868 Date first listed: 31-May-1984

## Details

A series of interconnected formal terraces and a sunken garden, with associated informal woodland and an arboretum, laid out between 1910 and 1912 by Leonard Rome Guthrie on the site of an C18 house and park, the planting scheme for the sunken garden being designed by Gertrude Jekyll.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of Townhill was one of several granted in 1536, after the Dissolution, to Sir William Paulet, later to become Marquess of Winchester. The third Marquess sold Townhill in 1605 and the property passed through a number of ownerships before being bought in 1750 by John White who conveyed it at some point in the second half of the C18 to Nathaniel Middleton, an Indian 'nabob' (Coney and Brown 1999). A house was built in 1792 (Colvin 1978) which was surrounded by parkland (Milne 1791). In 1799, Middleton sold Townhill to William Cator or Gater and it remained in his family, although tenanted towards the end of the C19, until acquired in 1910 by the Swaythling family (VCH 1908; Coney and Brown 1999). The Swaythling family were an important Anglo-Jewish financial and liberal political dynasty, closely associated with the strictly orthodox Federation of Synagogues which had been founded in 1887 by Samuel Montagu, later the first Baron Swaythling, to cater for the influx of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe.

The first Lord Swaythling commissioned the architect Leonard Rome Guthrie to alter and enlarge the house in an Italianate manner and to lay out new terraces, a rose garden, and tennis lawns. Informal gardens including a woodland dell and an arboretum were developed when the second Lord Swaythling inherited in 1911. From 1912, Guthrie further extended the formal gardens with a sunken garden surrounded by a pergola, the central part of which was planted by Gertrude Jekyll (plans held at Reef Point, USA). The second Lord Swaythling died in 1927 and the family continued in residence until the outbreak of the Second World War when the house became a Red Cross convalescent home. After the war, Townhill proved too expensive to maintain; the family moved out in 1945, many of the interior furnishings and pictures were sold, and the estate was put on the market in 1948 (Hocking Notes, 1991). The house and 30 acres (c 12ha) were purchased by Middlesex County Council as a residential school for children with special needs while the remainder of the estate and parkland was developed as the Townhill Park housing estate. The school closed in the late 1960s and Townhill was bought by Southampton City Council as a hostel for cadets. Marlhill Copse was sold separately to a private buyer c 1990 while the house and gardens were sold again in 1994 to the

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Gregg School which since then has begun a programme of restoration of the gardens with the help of the Friends of Townhill Park Gardens. The house and gardens remain (1999) in the hands of an educational charity.

**DESCRIPTION**

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Townhill Park is situated on the north-west edge of Southampton, on the south side of the A27 road about halfway between West End and Swaythling. The c 12ha registered site, which comprises c 1.5ha of formal gardens and 10.5ha of informal ornamental woodland and open grass, lies on land which slopes gently from a level platform in the eastern half to both the south-west and the north-west. The housing estate of Townhill Park abuts the boundaries immediately to the west, south, and east, the houses on the east side being separated by the hedge-lined Cutbush Lane. To the north, an area of open playing fields lies between the site boundary and the scattered development along the A27 while along the north edge of Marlhill Copse, which forms the northern extension of the site, a strip of meadowland in the Itchen Valley forms a buffer to the A27.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main approach to Townhill lies through the housing estate on its eastern side, via a network of minor roads which are accessed from a roundabout on the A27, Swaythling Road, some 300m east of the junction where Cutbush Lane emerges. The estate road system forms a junction with Cutbush Lane immediately east of the house, from which point a drive leads through timber entrance gates and winds across lawns in a westerly direction to enter the rectangular tarmac forecourt on the north, entrance front of the house. The north and east sides of the forecourt are enclosed by a low stone balustrade, the north side framing a central arched gateway surmounted by a pair of urns and hung with a single wrought-iron gate. The west side is formed by a yew hedge, with an arch cut to give access to the garden front. The drive from Cutbush Lane is shown as an established route in 1870 (OS), although a further drive from the south, built over in the mid C20, was described in 1923 (CL) as having been the main approach before Guthrie's improvements. A second drive, now an unsurfaced track and closed off at the site boundary, enters from the extreme north-west corner of the school's grounds (adjacent to Marlhill Copse) and runs eastwards along the north boundary where it is lined by an avenue of pollarded limes. It then turns south to approach the entrance forecourt. This drive was designed by Guthrie as the new approach to his remodelled house (site plan, see Hocking 1991) and provided a link with the Swaythling family's other country residence on the west side of the River Itchen at South Stoneham (for which Guthrie designed a river garden in 1906-07, Ottewill 1989).

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Townhill Park stands on level ground towards the south-east side of the site, with its west, garden front enjoying views over the formal gardens and beyond to the city of Southampton. It is a two-storey L-shaped house built in an Italianate style, faced in cream-painted stucco and roofed with tiles. The north, entrance front consists of a projecting pedimented central block, pierced at ground level by a three-arched entrance loggia and flanked to either side by wings. The west or garden front opens into a colonnade which runs almost its entire length. This is surmounted by a centrepiece, on the axis of the formal gardens, which rises to form a pedimented attic storey. A house built on the site in 1792 by the architect Thomas Leverton (1743-1824) appears to have been altered and extended in the 1840s. Country Life (1923) described it as 'four square with cement pilasters from ground to eaves', although it had a south-running wing by 1870 (OS). Lord Swaythling engaged the architect Leonard Rome Guthrie (1880-1958) from 1910 to remodel and enlarge it, the work being completed in 1922 after the interruption of the war. The house was converted to institutional use soon after its sale in 1948 and to the present (1999) school use in 1994.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The principal feature of the garden comprises a series of formal terraces that descend the gentle slope west of the house. These, for which signed and dated plans and drawings (see Hocking 1991) and contemporary photographs (CL 1923) survive, were designed and built by Rome Guthrie, the top terraces and former tennis lawns in association with the remodelling of the house in 1910 and the lower terraces, including a sunk garden, from 1912 (dated drawings; Ottewill 1989). The gardens are at present (1999) under restoration with the sunk garden nearing completion. The colonnade on the west front opens onto the top terrace, laid to stone flags and grass, which runs the length of the house and beyond it along the west side of the entrance forecourt. It is retained by a brick wall surmounted by a pierced terracotta balustrade. A central flight of stone steps leads down onto a second, narrow grassed terrace, from which the axis continues west as a broad grassed walk which is flanked on each side by a deep herbaceous border backed and enclosed at the west end by

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a clipped yew hedge. Square compartments, completely enclosed by clipped yew, lie either side of the walk, the north square laid to lawn and the south to formally planted orchard trees. These were originally laid out by Guthrie as tennis lawns. On the north side of the northern compartment, and also accessible from the north end of the top terrace, a further enclosure, also laid to open lawn, is the site of Guthrie's rose garden. Passing through a gap in the yew hedge, the axial walk leads down a grassed ramp and across a third terrace, also grassed and originally designed as a bowling alley, before descending a flight of stone steps into the rectangular pergola garden. Also known as the sunk garden (CL 1923), the central area, at the lowest level, is laid out as a flower parterre with beds divided by narrow brick strips and with a circular pool as a central feature. The beds were originally planted by Gertrude Jekyll (plans at Reef Point, USA). A low drystone wall runs around the parterre to retain a ribbon of grass edged with a border. This in turn is surrounded by, on the north, south, and west sides, a massive pergola constructed of timber horizontals resting on pairs of pre-cast concrete pillars which stand on a low wall of stone rubble. At the centrepiece of its west side, eight pairs of pillars support a hipped, tiled roof to form a loggia, from which semicircular steps descend westwards down onto the lowest terrace level. This, also enclosed by yew hedging, is divided from north to south by a low box hedge. The eastern half, abutting the pergola garden, is laid to a central grass plat, edged with flags, which formerly contained a central well-head (now, 1999, gone). Flanking squares of ground, at present (1999) open and unplanted, were formerly surrounded by yew hedges (also now gone). The western half of the terrace, bisected from north to south by a flagged path terminating in circles of paving, is laid to grass. The whole terrace was planted as a herb garden by Gertrude Jekyll, for which planting plans survive (Reef Point, USA).

South of the terraces, lightly wooded pleasure grounds are informally planted with a mixture of native and exotic trees and swathes of shrubbery. This area was developed as an arboretum from 1911 by the second Lord Swaythling, as was the woodland of Marlhill Copse which occupies the north corner of the site. Marlhill Copse, although now (1999) heavily overgrown and its paths impenetrable, still contains a number of ornamental trees and rhododendrons from the early C20 planting of eastern Himalayan trees, shrubs, and *Lilium giganteum* (CL 1923).

PARK North of the terraces open grass, now (1999) in use as an informal recreation ground by the school, extends northwards to the drive where it is fringed by a tree belt of mature pines. Further open grass in recreational use extends north from the house to the tree-fringed north boundary. East from the house to the boundary with Cutbush Lane are groups of mature specimen trees, on the south side of which (30m from the house) an C18 stable block, now (1999) in use for storage, stands adjacent to late C20 temporary school buildings, a former coach house and dairy (now in school use), and a pair of cottages.

#### REFERENCES

Victoria History of the County of Hampshire III, (1908), pp 483-4 Country Life, 53 (14 April 1923), pp 504-10; (21 April 1923), pp 536-41; 74 (14 October 1933), p 394 H Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840 (1978) J Brown, Gardens of a Golden Afternoon (1982), p 190 D Ottewill, The Edwardian Garden (1989), pp 178-82 R Coney and J Brown, Townhill Park House (Bitterne Local Historical Society 1999) Maps Thomas Milne, Hampshire or the County of Southampton, 1" to 1 mile, 1791

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1866-9 2nd edition published 1898 1938 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1866-9 3rd edition published 1910 1933 edition 1941 edition

Illustrations Rome Guthrie, Townhill House, signed plans and drawings, early C20 (see Hocking 1991)

Archival items Copies of Jekyll's planting plans are held on microfilm at the National Monuments Record (originals held at Reef Point, USA). S Hocking, unpublished article on Townhill Park and copies of signed plans and drawings by Rome Guthrie, (Hampshire County Council 1991) [copy on EH file]

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This list entry was subject to a Minor Enhancement on 03/05/2019

## Legal

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