

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

MELLS PARK

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**MELLS PARK**

Name: MELLS PARK

County: Somerset

District: Mendip (District Authority)

Parish: Leigh-on-Mendip

County: Somerset

District: Mendip (District Authority)

Parish: Mells

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.233309  
Longitude: -2.4150806  
National Grid Reference: ST 71116 48318  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II  
List Entry Number: 1001150  
Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

## Details

An C18/C19 park, incorporating a C17 deer park, with early C20 gardens by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll around a country house.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

It is likely that Mells Park was the creation of the Horner family, who bought the manor of Mells from the Crown in 1543 and held it until the death of Sir John Horner, the last of the name, in 1927. The evidence suggests that it was originally enclosed as a deer park in the early C17 by Sir John Horner (d 1659) and was improved by succeeding generations of the family. The park was enclosed between 1604 and 1642 when the 'Parke at Mells, excepting the woods called Mellcome woods or anie part of them', was included in the marriage settlement of George Horner, son of Sir John. In accordance with his father's will, George granted his mother 'all that Lodge and Parke within the Parish of Melles' in 1659. The Park and Lodge, on or near the site of the present Park House, are shown on the 1682 manorial map of Mells. In 1724 Thomas Strangways Horner, who married the wealthy heiress of Melbury, Dorset (qv), abandoned Mells Manor House, Somerset (qv) and commissioned Nathaniel Ireson, architect of Crowcombe Court, Somerset (qv) and Berkley House, to build Park House, a new mansion in the park. T S Horner's daughter, Elizabeth, inspired Thomas Hardy's story 'The First Countess of Wessex' in *A Group of Noble Dames*, in which the Horners appear as the Dornell family and Mells Park as Falls Park. T S Horner died in 1741 and was succeeded by his brother John (d 1746), and by John's son, Thomas, in 1758, after a period of minority. Thomas Horner embarked on a major programme of enlargement and improvement, creating the structure of the existing park (Rice, 1764). His accounts (Mells Estate Office) include a section headed 'Park improvements' to 1799, including extensive planting, especially beech and firs, and building walls. His scrapbooks were filled with ideas for hot-houses, follies, grottos and temples, rustic cottages, hermitages and Turkish

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tents, lakes, plantations, and eyecatchers although most of these schemes were not carried out. Humphry Repton (1752-1818) was consulted and Thomas Horner subscribed to *Sketches and Hints of Landscape Gardening* (Repton 1794), but there is no record of any commission. Thomas died in 1804 and was succeeded by his son, Colonel Thomas Strangways Horner (d 1840), who employed Sir John Soane (1752-1837) to make further improvements to Park House and consulted William Sawrey Gilpin (1762-1843) on the landscape (Piebenga 1994). The C19 saw the introduction of a large collection of conifers to the park. In 1900 Mells Park was described by Raymond Asquith as 'a typically comfortable English country house in an Elizabethan park full of magnificent trees' (quoted in McGarvie 1992). The Horners moved back to Mells Manor House in 1900 and Park House was let. The mansion was gutted by fire in 1917 and rebuilt between 1922 and 1925 on a more modest scale for Reginald McKenna, Chairman of the Midland Bank, to the designs of Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), who also designed the garden with Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932). Mells Park was sold to the Trotter family in 1939 and became the property of Amey Roadstone Corporation in 1977. It has recently (c 2001) returned to private ownership.

#### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Mells Park is located 5km west of Frome and covers an area of c 140ha. The park is on an upland plateau approached from the east by the slopes of Berry Hill. To the south it is enclosed by the steep-sided Finger Valley and the woods of Hare Warren, and bounded by minor roads which meet at the southernmost point, Park Corner. The eastern boundary follows the top of the bank above Finger Valley and the steep-sided Snatch Bottom. To the north the park slopes down to the Mells River and is enclosed by the rising ground of the opposite bank on which stand Lily Batch Wood and Bilboa Plantation to the north-east, the top of the bank forming the north and north-east boundaries. The western boundary follows the western edge of Serpentine Plantation, the perimeter stone wall of Melcombe Wood, and a fence and ditch between the north edge of Melcombe Wood and the village of Vobster, c 1km north-west of the House.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The principal entrance to Mells Park, marked by a single-storey gate lodge (probably by Chapman of Frome, early C19), is from Berry Hill 950m east of the House. The drive heads west up Berry Hill for 250m to Berry Lodge (c 1822-37) and then turns south-west for c 500m before curving north to enter the stable yard from the south. The drive runs north of, and parallel to Snatch Bottom, the steep valley of a stream previously called Beech Grove Bottom, with a beech hedge and the post-mature beech trees and conifers of Beech Grove between. To the north is extensive parkland containing numerous mature trees with magnificent specimens of oak, beech, lime, and other species. The drive over Berry Hill was laid out in 1758 by Thomas Horner. A former drive from the north-east enters the park at the Duckery (1775, listed grade II) 600m north-east of the House and passes over a weir, joining with a track south-east to Berry Hill. The Duckery, a stone cottage orné, now two dwellings, was built on the site of Wraggs Mill when a lake was made in the Mells River south of Lilybatch Plantation c 1775, and was formerly linked to the park by a Chinese bridge. A former drive, now a track, enters from Vobster close to Tor Rock 800m north-west of the House. Tor Rock is a natural outcrop which was made into a feature of the northern gardens in 1787 by the addition of a gothic archway built onto it with steps down to an artificial cave. The track from Tor Rock runs east for c 500m where it meets a track, formerly a drive, at the stepping stones 150m south-east of the gothic Lilybatch Lodge (1784, listed grade II) which lies c 400m north of the House. The gothic Finger Lodge (George A Underwood 1824) marks a former entrance drive, now a track, which enters the park c 1.1km south of the House at Finger Gate and opens onto a network of tracks to the south-west in Hare Warren (c 1750s), connecting to the site of the former Keeper's Lodge (c 1750s), the remains of which still stand to the north of the Warren. The former drive (1761) from Finger Gate heads north-east along the wooded Finger Valley, formerly Primrose Vale, and emerges into the parkland west of Cobby Wood to approach the House from the south.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Park House (c 1925, listed grade II\*) is located towards the north centre of the park. It was built between 1922 and 1925 for Reginald McKenna to a design by Sir Edwin Lutyens who incorporated the service court and arcaded covered way of the C18 house destroyed by fire in 1917. Adjoining the north of the arcade are the stables and coach house (probably John Wood the Younger (1728-81), 1761, listed grade II) which replaced earlier stables erected north of the old house prior to 1741. The earlier house was built in 1724 for Thomas Strangways Horner. This house was altered for Thomas Horner in 1763 by Bristol architect Daniel Hague (c 1736-c 1816) who added east and west wings and canted bays, much of

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the stone being obtained from the demolition of the north wing of Mells Manor House. A new wing was added to Park House c 1794 and Soane made further improvements between 1807 and 1824 (McGarvie 1992).

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The gardens (Lutyens and Jekyll c 1926) lie to the south, east, and west of the House with pleasure grounds to the north, west, and south-west. Around the House are formal gardens on two terraces retained by freestone walls with stone steps connecting the levels. To the south is a sunken lawn enclosed on all sides by clipped yew hedges, an axial path leading via steps through this garden and onto a gravel path to a stone ha-ha 30m from the south front of the House. To the east is a sunken garden with a stone pool with fountain, with views east to the park through a gap in the yew hedge. An iron rail fence, east of the east garden and eastern approach to the stables, defines the boundary with the park. To the west is a network of straight gravel paths, one of which runs along the west front terminating in a yew niche with a C20 stone sculpture of a family group. Another extends the east to west axis of the House terrace westwards and meets a dog-leg path from the north which goes through an orchard and links with the south-west end of a terrace walk with balustrade, c 70m long, c 100m north-west of the House. The western paths and terrace were part of a major enlargement of the pleasure grounds laid out by Gilpin between 1825 and 1832. As well as moving the old approach to the stables from the west to the east side of the House, Gilpin extended the pleasure grounds to the west and south-west of the House and provided the terrace walk north-west of the House to command views, now partially obscured, north over the lake and the northern pleasure grounds, where he added picturesque planting south of the Mells River (Piebenga 1994). The western pleasure ground is defined by iron railings, with an iron gate. The gardens and western pleasure grounds are currently undergoing restoration (2002). The northern gardens on the south-facing north bank of the river, between Tor Rock and east of the Duckery, are partially overgrown but contain notable trees. Temple Garden, 500m south of the House, is a mature mixed plantation (1771) with yew trees on a rocky outcrop commanding views north over Park House. The temple (1760) has disappeared but the remains of the garden can be made out. Temple Garden was pentagonal in shape with a high stone wall, which survives. There was a hot-house there by 1770 and below the temple was a grotto of rustic stonework, with three gothic seats cut from rock, now lost (McGarvie 1992).

**PARK** Mells Park extends to the north-east, east, south, and west of Park House which sits at the high point of an undulating landscape park which falls away gently at first, then more steeply to river valleys in all directions. The park's most striking feature is its collection of magnificent C18 specimen trees, principally oak, lime, and beech, nearly all arranged as individuals rather than clumps, and its heavily wooded perimeter. A ha-ha 300m west of the House marks the former park boundary before it was extended to include West Park c 1814. The 1682 manorial map shows a 100 acre (c 42ha) park, then stretching from the Mells River to the south-east corner of Melcombe Wood, at that time delineated by a wall which went east and north-east along the side of Berry Hill, curving north then west to Wraggs Mill, now the Duckery. A 1764 map of Mells Park by James Rice shows the beech grove on Berry Hill, planted by Thomas Strangways Horner before 1750, who also probably established Hare Warren and the Keeper's Lodge, the remains of which still stand to the north of the Warren. In 1759-60 Thomas Horner established Bilboa and Newberry Hill Plantations on previously bare hills to the north-east and east and pulled down the wall separating the upper, northern, and lower, southern parks, a ruined section of which remains on the south-east side of Berry Hill. By 1762 the Conigar to the south-west had been taken into the park and Serpentine Plantation planted on its western boundary. By 1764 serpentine walks were laid out through Serpentine Plantation. In the early C19, Col T S Horner extended the park by creating West Park and enlarged the upper lake to Vobster. A bridge designed c 1814 by Soane is gone, probably lost in a great storm of 1825 (McGarvie 1992).

**KITCHEN GARDEN** There is no kitchen garden at Mells Park though there are Edwardian greenhouses 20m north of the stables used for the cultivation of plants for the House. In 1758 Thomas Horner built a nursery and a kitchen garden in an unknown location but these proved unsatisfactory and were relocated c 1770 to the south-facing slope north of Mells River between Lily Batch Lodge and the Duckery. This area has now reverted to inaccessible woodland.

#### REFERENCES

J Collinson, *History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset II*, (1791), p 464 H Repton, *Sketches and Hints of Landscape Gardening* (1794) *Country Life*, 42 (10 November 1917), p 254; 131 (24 May 1962), pp 1254-8 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), p 226 J Brown, *Gardens of a Golden Afternoon* (1982), p 174 M McGarvie,

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Notes towards a history of Mells Park... in Frome Society Year Book 4, 1990; 1992 (1992), pp 31-40 S Piebenga, William Sawrey Gilpin (1762-1843), (English Heritage Designer Theme Study 1994)

Maps Manorial map of Mells Park, 1682 (Collection of the Earl of Oxford and Asquith) [reproduced in McGarvie 1992] J Rice, Map of Mells Park, 1764 (private collection) Samuel Donne, Estate map, 1779 (Collection of the Earl of Oxford and Asquith) [reproduced in McGarvie 1992] Sale map of Mells Estate, 1923 (copy on EH file)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1885, published 1891 2nd edition revised 1902, published 1904 3rd edition revised 1929, published 1931

Illustrations E Lutyens, Drawings for Mells Park (RIBA Drawings Collection))

Archival items Thomas Horner's accounts from the C18 are held at the Mells Estate Office. Mells Park, July 25 1926, Photocopy of drawing annotated with 'This is the garden plan by Gertrude Jekyll' (copy on EH file) Copies of Jekyll's planting plans (film 201) are held on microfilm at the National Monuments Record (originals held at Reef Point, USA).

Description written: November 2002 Register Inspector: SH Edited: May 2004

## 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.