

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

CHEQUERS

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

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**CHEQUERS**

Name: CHEQUERS

District: Buckinghamshire (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Ellesborough

District: Buckinghamshire (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Great and Little Kimble cum Marsh

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.746566  
Longitude: -0.79873700  
National Grid Reference: SP8303006001  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II  
List Entry Number: 1000595  
Date first listed: 30-Aug-1987

## Details

An C18/C19 landscape park and woodland with late C19/early C20 formal gardens and work by Reginald Blomfield (1890s) and H Avray Tipping (1911-12); associations with most C20 Prime Ministers.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Hawtrey family owned the land around Chequers from the C13. There was no known enclosed park on the site, but there may have been a medieval warren to the north-west. The last male Hawtrey to occupy Chequers, William, built a manor house here c 1565, possibly on the site of an earlier building. William Hawtrey became one of the wealthiest men in the county and his house is a fine example of C16 building.

The estate was owned by several families, including the Russells, in the C18, and in the early C19 Sir Robert Greenhill Russell Gothicised the house. From 1892(1909 Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942) worked on the house for the Astley family, his contributions including the south terrace by the house. In 1911-12 H Avray Tipping redesigned the rest of the gardens around the house, creating several walled enclosures. Sir Arthur Lee (later Viscount Fareham) bought the estate in 1910, and, having restored the house to its pre-Gothicised appearance, gave it to the nation in 1917 as a country residence for the Prime Minister. The Lees vacated the estate in 1921, when the Prime Minister of the day, David Lloyd George, took up residence. The estate remains in this use, and nearly all subsequent Prime Ministers have used it as such.

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Chequers is located in the Chiltern Hills, 8km south of Aylesbury. The c 200ha site lies in a shallow valley, close to the northern scarp of the Chilterns which descends sharply to the Vale of Aylesbury. The site is sheltered by the surrounding hills and wooded hilltops. It is bounded on the east and south-east by the lane from Great Missenden to Ellesborough, and by hilly agricultural land and woodland on the other sides. Chequers is set in agricultural and wooded countryside which rises around it on three sides, with a gently sloping valley running south. Very few C20 developments are visible in its setting.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main drive approaches the house from the south. The entrance from the Great Missenden lane is marked by two two-storey red-brick lodges and gates and gate piers, c 750m south of the house. This drive was constructed in 1921, on what was probably the line of the Elizabethan approach from the south. It runs straight towards the south front of the house for 500m, dividing to west and east 250m south of the house. The southern part of the drive is enclosed by an avenue of semi-mature beech trees donated by Winston Churchill in the 1950s. Each arm of the drive curves around a large lawn bounded on the north by the formal garden. The west arm runs north to the service wing west of the house. The east arm also continues north, turning west by the house to arrive at the entrance to the east courtyard, providing a view of The Monument on Coombe Hill to the north-east. The large lawn south of the formal garden is crossed by another drive running from west to east. This drive enters the park south of Home Lodge on the east boundary, then runs west across the park into the area of wood and warren. Another track runs north from the house across the park towards Ellesborough church.

The OS 1st edition map published 1885 shows two drives east of the house and no south drive. The main drive entered at Home Lodge, a brick, C19, single-storey, Elizabethan-style lodge (E B Lamb 1838, listed grade II), now isolated from any drive. This drive curved north before turning south to arrive at the east front of the house. The 1885 OS map does not show the walled east entrance court.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Chequers (listed grade I) lies in a south-facing valley. The house consists largely of the c 1565 red-brick mansion built by William Hawtrey, particularly his north and south wings. An east wing with early fabric, and an early C18 west wing complete this courtyard house, with a service court (E B Lamb 1836-8) attached to the west. The central open courtyard thus formed was roofed over in the mid C19 to become the Great Hall.

In the early C19 the house was Gothicised and stuccoed on the exterior, it being returned to its Elizabethan style by Bertram Astley in 1892, with additional advice from Reginald Blomfield. Various alterations were made at this time. Lord Lee of Fareham bought the estate in 1909 and gave it to the nation in 1917. Subsequently no major alterations have been carried out.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The gardens lie close to the house. In the north garden Avray Tipping's broad, flagged path extends along the north side of the house. The level north lawn is bounded at the eastern end by his brick wall, with a square, brick garden house in the south-east corner. A ha-ha, possibly earlier, defines the north boundary of the lawn with the park. A lime avenue runs north from the edge of the north lawn. Crows Close, shown and named on the 1629 Chequers estate map, is a grove of mixed mature trees with many limes. Near this is the earliest area of memorial trees, mostly cedars, planted by the Lees and Theodore Roosevelt in the early C20.

East of the house Avray Tipping created the rectangular entrance courtyard against the house, surrounded by three brick walls, to form an imposing approach to the house. The north wall of this courtyard divides the courtyard from the north garden. The courtyard has a broad gravel turning circle with a quatrefoil lawn in the middle. It is entered through iron gates and brick piers with pointed stone finials on top, inspired by those at Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire (qv). Two doors in the walls on either side of the forecourt give access to the north and south gardens.

The south garden is the focal formal feature. Here Avray Tipping created a formal, rectangular, brick-walled rose garden south of Blomfield's terrace which runs across the south front of the house. Steps lead from the centre of Blomfield's terrace down to the parterre. A narrow stone path runs around the other sides of the parterre which is sunk just enough to gain shelter and privacy from the buttressed south wall. This wall has a paved terrace running along the top of it connecting a brick garden house at each end. Stone-flagged paths separate the box-hedged rose beds on the parterre.

Immediately west of the house is the service area and service entrance to the house. This is screened by an area of shrubs and trees bounded by a shallow ditch and edged in places with large box plants. This feature shelters the house from the west and appears to be the remains of the shrubbery with many paths shown on the 1st edition large-scale OS map surveyed 1881-2. There is an informal water feature with rockwork here.

The 1629 estate map shows two parallel, independent ranges, through which the house was approached from a forecourt with separate gatehouse south of the southern range. The foundations of this gatehouse were uncovered during the construction of the parterre in 1911 and the outline marked on York-stone paving. Additionally, on the estate map regular rectangular enclosures are shown adjacent to the west of the house, and a rectangular belt of trees in Crows Close to the north. A maze is indicated

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350m north-west of house. Most of the rest of the landscape shown is divided into fields and woodland. Lipscombe (1847) refers to a 'small but very elegant parterre' which existed on the south front of the house.

**PARK** The park is divided into several sections. The North Park and South Park lie north and south of the house respectively, separated by the kitchen garden area and the house. These park areas are visually bounded to the east by the area of extensive woodland beyond the site, running up the eastern hillside. The South Park is divided into two: the southern half is arable, with some single park trees and an occasional clump; the northern half is pasture, also with single trees. The North Park is pasture, bounded at the north end by a belt of trees. South-west of the house the park is open arable, bounded on the west by Mable and Whorley Woods. These woods frame the view to the south-west and west. A park is shown on the 1885 OS map north, east and west of the house.

The large tract of land west of the house is rough pasture with the remains of field boundaries marked by trees. North-west of the house is a valley called The Dene running uphill away from the house. This is arable with several large clumps in it. North of this, Beacon Hill, a high, grassy ridge, dominates the western parkland. Its single clump stands out as a landmark for miles around from the Vale of Aylesbury to the north. There are panoramic views of the Vale of Aylesbury from the north edge of the site, particularly the spine of Beacon Hill. In the north-west of the site a detached area of parkland is bounded by Little Kimble Hill and the lane to Ellesborough, and the Warrens to the south-east. It is pasture with a series of mostly dry, small ponds running north through it, which are connected with Silver Springs pond to the south-east. The parkland slopes down to the north-west. A C19 brick lodge stands at its north-west point. Extensive ancient ditches and earthworks are present.

The western end of the site consists of woodland and scrub on the Chiltern escarpment. Many paths and a drive run through this area which was a medieval warren. In the late C19 various ornamental features existed in this area, such as the Velvet Lawn south of Cymbeline's Castle (scheduled ancient monument), Happy Valley, and Silver Springs (now two dry ponds), in the north of this area. In 1909 the Silver Springs ponds were stocked with trout. These features are now largely overgrown. A dominant natural and very rare feature is the quantity of native box plants growing beneath the trees (SSSI). Panoramic views of the Vale of Aylesbury open up at various points in this area.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden lies east of the house, separated by a lawn and specimen memorial trees planted by past Prime Ministers and visiting foreign heads of state. The kitchen garden is surrounded on three sides by brick walls. On the west side a C20 agricultural dwelling has been built. The garden is still used for produce for the house, and two small glasshouses lie against the north wall. On the other, north side of the north wall is a range of potting sheds and related outbuildings. East of the walled garden is an orchard area. The half-timbered and brick gateway is aligned with the straight path running from west to east through the kitchen garden and orchard. West of the walled garden is an ornamental brick and flint kennel and associated buildings.

#### REFERENCES

G Lipscombe, *History and Antiquities of the County of Buckinghamshire* (1847) *Country Life*, 28 (30 December 1910), pp 970-81; 42 (6 October 1917), pp 324-33; (13 October 1917), pp 348-55; (20 October 1917), pp 372-9 J Gilbert Jenkins, *Chequers, A history of the Prime Minister's Buckinghamshire home* (1967) P S Fry, *Chequers, The country home of Britain's Prime Ministers* (1977) N Pevsner and E Williamson, *The Buildings of England: Buckinghamshire* (1994), pp 234-6 N Major, *Chequers, the Prime Minister's country house and its history* (1996)

Maps A topographical description ... of the Manors of Ellesborough, Chequers ..., 1629, (Buckinghamshire Record Office)  
OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1885 2nd edition published 1900 3rd edition published 1922 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1881-2 2nd edition published 1898

Description written: November 1997 Amended: June 1998; April 1999 Register Inspector: SR Edited: June 1999

## Legal

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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.