

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

VENTNOR BOTANIC GARDEN

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Name:	VENTNOR BOTANIC GARDEN
District:	Isle of Wight (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Ventnor
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.588882 Longitude: -1.2273612 National Grid Reference: SZ 54791 76857 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001598 Date first listed: 11-Mar-2002

Details

The formal and informal grounds laid out to accompany an early chest hospital, opened in 1869. The gardens were extended in the later C19, and again in the early C20 to aid a new therapeutic 'graduated labour' treatment for the patients who laid out much of the later structure.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The National Cottage Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest (shortly afterwards renamed the Royal National Hospital for Diseases of the Chest) was founded in 1868 by the eminent physician and naturalist Arthur Hill Hassall (1817? 94). Hassall had previously spent time at Ventnor in the Isle of Wight for the sake of his health and been impressed with its beauty, referring in the hospital prospectus to this 'highly favoured locality' (Laidlaw 1990). Ventnor thus became the location for his new hospital and a foundation stone was laid in July 1869 in Queen Victoria's name by her daughter Princess Louise, accompanied by Prince and Princess Christian (Mason 1876). The hospital opened in 1869 (Laidlaw 1990) at a time when open-air treatment for 'consumption' (tuberculosis) was beginning to be regarded as an effective method of treating the disease, following examples of sanatoria built in Europe at high altitudes (RCHME 1998).

When first constructed the building and gardens occupied a 6 acre (c 2.5ha) plot on the side of a valley overlooking the English Channel, which was leased partly from the Pelham Estate and partly from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The hospital received many gifts of plants from notable beneficiaries and nurseries (Laidlaw 1990), and Hassall was in communication with the Hookers of Kew (qv) (S Goodenough pers comm, Feb 2002). By 1878 the Hospital Committee had obtained the lease of 12 acres (c 5ha) of additional land adjoining the hospital, situated between the buildings and the sea (Laidlaw 1990). It was regarded as most detrimental should any building be erected on the plot of land which would shut out the view of the sea from the Houses (ie the hospital building). The land was intended for ornamental and productive purposes, including the provision of milk, eggs, vegetables, and fruit (ibid). Many trees, including cedars and palms, were planted in the early years, and the Annual Report of 1894 refers to trees having been planted by members of the British Royal Family and European royalty. Queen Victoria had since 1845 had a residence at Osborne (qv) on the north side of the island and took a keen interest in the hospital (ibid).

By 1896 (OS) the hospital building was backed by a narrow belt of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees, from which it was separated by a service drive. In front of the building a formal terrace was laid to lawns and overlooked a bank leading down to

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the agricultural valley below, laid out in rectangular compartments, and beyond this the sea. Paths and steps were constructed giving access to much of the site from the main building, and the site was flanked by further belts of trees.

By 1909 (OS) the path system had been extended significantly as part of the early use of the therapeutic system of graded walks and manual labour introduced in 1907 for the patients, which continued in use into the 1920s. This system had been introduced at the Brompton Hospital Sanatorium at Frimley, Surrey c 1905, and was used as the model at Ventnor (*ibid*). Much of the structure of the garden was laid out using patient labour as part of this 'graduated labour' system, including the paths, lawns, and stone terraces and retaining walls. In 1919 a further plot of land was acquired, to the north of the Undercliff road, on which was erected a Nurses' Home with vegetable plots laid out on adjacent terraced land (outside the area here registered). Further ornamental landscaping was carried out on the east side of the site between 1909 and 1946 (OS), including new paths lined with rockwork.

Following the discovery of an effective pharmaceutical cure for tuberculosis in the 1940s, the hospital was gradually run down and finally closed in 1964, the main building being demolished in 1969. Ventnor Urban District Council determined that the hospital grounds should be kept as an open space, and in 1972 the site, having been acquired by the South Wight Borough Council and subsequently by the Isle of Wight County Council, reopened as Ventnor Botanic Garden. For the next ten years a collection of plants was supplied by Sir Harold Hillier (d 1985), the noted nurseryman, whose main collection was at Jermyns (qv). The site has continued to be developed as a botanic garden, and remains (2002) in public ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Ventnor Botanic Garden lies c 5km south-west of Shanklin, situated at the west end of the town of Ventnor, and forms part of The Undercliff. The c 10ha site is bounded by the A3055 Undercliff Drive to the north, by Love Lane to the east, by gardens and paddocks to the west, and by Orchard Bay and Steephill Cove to the south. The site occupies a valley running parallel with The Undercliff, and with the coastal cliffs which form its southern boundary. The boundaries to the west and east are formed by stone walls believed to have been constructed by the hospital patients. The north boundary was formerly marked by a similar wall, but this has largely been replaced by a wooden fence. The south boundary retains intermittent lengths of iron fencing running along the cliff top, the remains of a fence which formerly extended along much of this boundary.

The setting is suburban and marine, with occasional views from the site of the hospital building extending south-east to the sea, and long views from the southern boundary over the sea. To the north of the site, and set into the side of Steephill to the north of Undercliff Drive, is an area (outside the area here registered) developed in the 1920s, at the west end of which stands the former Nurses' Home (now a residential home) within its own landscaped grounds. To the east of this the open ground rising up the hillside to the north is laid out in a series of terraces running parallel with Undercliff Drive below (also outside the area here registered). This area was used for vegetable production in the early C20 and now (2002) contains one of the botanic garden nurseries. Long views extend from here over the botanic garden to the sea.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approach gives access directly off Undercliff Drive via a late C20 gateway standing close to the centre of the site of the former main hospital building, to the long car park which occupies the site of the hospital building. The former main entrance to the hospital stands c 50m east of this, at what was the north-east corner of the main hospital building, now (2002) at the east end of the car park. A single-storey stone lodge stands adjacent to the east of the former entrance, which is now blocked up, but is still flanked by stone piers with pyramidal caps. From the lodge the drive formerly extended west along the north side of the hospital building, giving access to the service entrances and continuing to the west end of the building (OS 1896). West of the building the drive turned south along the west boundary of the site, passing in turn the terraces to arrive at the bottom of the valley and the west end of the former kitchen garden.

A further drive enters at the west end of the car park (formerly the north-west corner of the hospital building), giving access off Undercliff Drive. From here it slopes obliquely down to the south-west, passing between stone-built staff houses and through the boundary belt of trees to reach the level of the main drive. This formerly gave access to staff accommodation which was erected at the west end of the main building in the late C19 (OS 1896).

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PRINCIPAL BUILDING The hospital building formerly stood at the north edge of the site, set into The Undercliff hillside which slopes away to the south. The long stone building was built, 1868-77, in Tudor style by the local architect Thomas Hellyer (Pevsner and Lloyd 1967). Initially it consisted of a row of eight pairs of semi-detached villas. Two groups of four villas flanked a chapel, each villa having two sitting rooms and a verandah on the ground floor facing the sea, while on the upper floors there were single bedrooms opening out onto verandahs; behind were bathrooms and nurses' rooms (RCHME 1998). The building and grounds were divided axially into male and female accommodation to west and east of the chapel respectively. To the west of the original eight villas three more villas were built between 1883 and 1897, which were slightly larger than the originals. The main building was demolished in 1969, but the long terrace which it occupied remains, together with several smaller, detached stone service buildings which stand close by, and the wooden former hospital library. A visitor centre was erected in 2001 on part of the terraces below the centre of the former hospital building.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens lie adjacent to the south of the hospital site, and were formerly overlooked by the wards and verandahs of the main building. They occupy the valley below the site of the main building, and are laid out with terraces and informal lawns divided into compartments by stone walls. Long views formerly extended to the south from the main building and upper levels of the gardens over the valley to the sea, but these views have largely been obscured by trees. The terraces and compartments are linked by paths which run along the west and east boundaries of the garden, marked by stone walls. These boundary paths lead from the top terrace on which the main building stood, southwards into the valley and then rise up to the top of the cliff. Between these two paths lies a network of further paths, carefully laid to particular gradients, many having been laid out to form part of the early C20 graduated or measured walks system of therapy. Various paths were identified by ornamental iron name posts, the walks being named after benefactors. Several posts have been re-erected alongside their original routes. The gardens were, by the early C20, divided by a stone wall into two halves for use by male patients, to the west, and female patients, to the east (Laidlaw 1990). Of the C19 and early C20 planting, scattered specimens of *Quercus ilex* remain, together with occasional Corsican and Austrian pines and some deciduous trees including beeches. Most of the planting dates from the late C20.

Below the site of the main building lies the long top terrace, formerly reached in several places directly from the south front. Now largely laid to lawn, it is divided into several sections and bisected by the late C20 visitor centre. The westernmost section is now occupied by the late C20 Temperate House and nursery area, with at the west end a small, wooden open-air ward (early C20, OS 1909), now (2002) used as a potting shed. The lawns below the hospital building were used by the patients for croquet and putting (guidebook). The west boundary path links the western half of this top garden terrace with the broader second terrace below. A path runs east towards the centre of the garden along the north side of the second terrace, which is laid partly to lawn and partly to borders. On the north side of the path, beneath the retaining wall above to the north, stand two early C20 wooden shelters with glass windows. The west boundary path leads from the second terrace down to the bottom of the valley, which is laid out with a broad central path running eastwards, flanked by lawns and borders. The northern side of this compartment is bounded by a high stone wall forming the retaining wall for the second terrace above. At the centre of the southern side of the valley bottom a late C19 tunnel leads 120m south through the cliff, emerging c 6m above the shore. This was formerly used for access to the shore for sewerage and other service purposes. At the east end of the valley compartment stands the southern end of the visitor centre, which now forms the north side of a former service yard. To the east the yard is bounded by a stone wall, the former south and west boundaries being marked by planting borders. The yard contains a central, late C20 oval pond and borders. It formerly held glasshouses, and on the north side stood a range of service buildings including the gardener's office and fruit store.

From the south-west corner of the former service yard a path system leads south-west and south-east diagonally across a lawn. The paths rise to meet a path, known as Henry Behrend Walk, which runs from west to east above the south side of the valley bottom compartment. The path, which overlooks the valley below to the north, is identified by a C19 iron marker and is named after an eminent benefactor of the establishment. These paths, together with further connected paths to the south, date from the C19 and early C20 and formed part of the graded walks system (OS 1896, 1909, 1946). A stone wall divides the western half

of this southern compartment from the eastern half, the ground rising up to the south to the cliff top, and the area being laid largely to lawns enclosed by paths and trees and shrubs.

The eastern half of the grounds below the site of the hospital building is divided from the western half by the remaining sections of a stone wall which marked the division between the areas allocated to male and female patients. It is entered from the south-east corner of the site of the building via a flight of steps leading down the valley side at the east end of the top terrace, into a rectangular wooded area traversed by paths. This area was laid out in the early C20 (OS 1909, 1946) using patient labour. Some of the paths are lined with rockwork and are terraced, and lead westwards via further terraced compartments to the Palm Court which lies to the east of the former service yard and new visitor centre, at the centre of the garden.

The Palm Court contains a central lawn set with beds and mature palm specimens (*Trachycarpus fortunei*). It is surrounded by stone walls to the south and west, in which are set stone archways which formerly held gates which were opened at certain times of day to allow free access for either males or females (but never both simultaneously) to the other half of the garden to complete their allocated measured walks. The Palm Court was planted with palm specimens in the late C19 and was one of the earliest ornamental compartments. Eight palm trees were supplied by the nurserymen Messrs Veitch and Sons and the present specimens may be part of that gift (Laidlaw 1990). On the top terrace, above the Palm Court, stands the former hospital library (1920), a timber building with a verandah on the south side overlooking the Court below, now (2002) once again a library.

A path leads south out of the Palm Court giving access to an extension east of the valley bottom path linking the west and east garden boundaries. The eastern half of this path gives access, formerly via a stone wall which extended south from the Palm Court, to the path system on the south side of the eastern half of the valley. These paths, laid out by 1909 (OS), enclose further lawns, surrounded by mature trees, leading south up the valley side to the cliff top.

East of the gardens a 2ha cricket pitch occupies the valley. It is enclosed to west and east by stone walls, to the north by a concrete wall replacing an earlier stone wall, and to the south by the cliff. It is entered at the north-west corner via a gateway east of the lodge, as well as via a gap in the east garden boundary wall, c 50m south of the lodge, giving direct access from the gardens. A C20 pavilion stands at the north-west corner of the ground, replacing one which was present in the C19 (OS 1896). The cricket ground was laid out by the end of the C19 (OS).

REFERENCES

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Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1866 3rd edition published 1909 OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition surveyed 1896, published 1898 1946 edition

Archival items Hospital file 102758, (National Monuments Record, Swindon) Annual Reports, Post-mortem Register, and alphabetical list of patients, 1869?1952 (94/18) (Isle of Wight County Record Office) Copies of many C19 and C20 photographs are held at the Botanic Garden.

Description written: March 2002 Amended: April 2002 Register Inspector: SR Edited: May 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.