

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

FIRLE PLACE

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

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**FIRLE PLACE**

Name:	FIRLE PLACE
County:	East Sussex
District:	Lewes (District Authority)
Parish:	Firle
National park:	SOUTH DOWNS
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.847541 Longitude: 0.093798143 National Grid Reference: TQ 47496 07424 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000235 Date first listed: 25-Mar-1987

## Details

A late C18 and C19 landscape park, with significant surviving earlier features and with late C19 formal terrace gardens.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

A park is recorded as being established on the site in 1333 but it presumably related to Heighton St Clere, a house formerly situated in the eastern part of the present park and destroyed at an unknown date. The Gage family came into possession of the Sussex manor, which included Heighton St Clere, through marriage. The present house may have been established on its site in the C15; it has been occupied by the Gage family since then and is still in private ownership (1998).

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Firle Place lies 1km south of the main A27 Lewes to Polegate road, c 7km east of Lewes. The site covers c 93ha, of which 1ha comprises the formal terrace gardens.

The eastern half of the northern boundary is formed by the A27 by-pass, built in the 1960s, running through a tree-lined cutting which screens the park from the road and separates land on the north side which previously belonged to the park. The western half is separated from the road by a narrow belt of farmland. To the west, the site is bounded at the northern end by an internal perimeter tree belt and by the road running south into West Firle village. The village itself, which is strung out along its main north to south oriented street, blends in with the estate buildings along the southern half of the western boundary.

To the south and east, the park merges into surrounding farm and downland and is enclosed by fences and hedges. A short section of flint estate wall forms the southern part of the eastern boundary.

The north-west third of the park lies on the relatively level ground of the River Glynde valley which then rises to the east and south in the form of gentle undulations which obscure views of the house from the north-east part of the park. South-east of the house the site extends up the steep, lower slopes of the South Downs and is overshadowed by Firle Beacon, the highest point of the Downs east of Lewes, immediately above it. An outlier of the Downs, crowned by Firle Tower (built as a semaphore tower in the early C19), overlooks the park on the east side.

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**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main, formal entrance to the park is at its north-west corner, at the junction of The Street, which leads south to the village, and the former route of the main east/west road before the construction of the by-pass in the 1960s. The entrance point and the route of the drive to the house are both shown already established on Thomas Marchant's map of the estate dated 1775. On the south side of the C20 white timber gates is a brick lodge with a verandah (listed grade II), built in the early C19. The drive runs due south-east across the park, curving south in the last 100m or so before approaching the forecourt terrace on north-east front of the house through wrought-iron gates in the enclosing balustrade wall.

There is a secondary entrance to the park in the south-west corner from the village, flanked by a small, flint-walled lodge, from which a drive leads past the south or service side of the stables, turns north to give access to their main east-facing front and then loops north-eastwards in front of the house to meet with the main drive from the north-west. It is likely that the house was approached from the west in the C16.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Firle Place (listed grade I) sits in the south-west corner of the park, immediately at the foot of the steep slope of the Downs and hidden from view from Firle Beacon above to the south. Much of the present house, including the buildings around the inner court and the gable on the south front, are of Tudor origin. Extensive alterations were carried out in the C18 which included rebuilding the northern elevation and the present entrance front. The stables (listed grade II\*) and riding school to the west of the house (the latter restored in 1996), although sited within some 100m, are separated from it visually by trees.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The present formal terraces (listed grade II) flank the entire north-west and north-east elevations of the house. On the north-west side they rise through four levels from the park to the house, supported by dressed flint walls with balustrades or by grass banks and linked by flights of stone steps. The lowest wall extends as a bastion north-westwards on the central axis of the house and is laid out with a circular, planted, stone basin and fountain and a surrounding gravelled walk. The top terrace was replanted to a new design in 1997. The walk on this terrace leads round to the north-east front where the single level terrace or forecourt is quartered by gravelled surfaces and lawn. The OS 1st edition map surveyed 1872 shows a single terrace only, on the north-west side of the house; the present layout was constructed in the late C19 and is shown on the OS 2nd edition, published in 1910.

On the south-east side of the house a level lawn is contained at its south-west end by a balustraded wall and central flight of steps (late C19) which lead up to an early C18 thatched dairy or summerhouse (listed grade II). The building was moved to this position in the late C18 (Sclater 1988). The lawn extends 25m beyond the south-east corner of the house and is enclosed by a bastion wall (late C19). The 80m long path shown connecting the bastion with the steps at the south-west end of the lawn on the OS 2nd edition was grassed over in the late 1980s. Firle Tower is a focus for views eastwards from the terraces.

South-east of the house from the lawn are further pleasure grounds. The ground rises to the foot of a series of terraces, parallel to the front of the house, cut into the steep slope of hillside and following its contours. The second terrace is the most clearly defined. It is turf-covered, over 100m long and its approximately 1 in 1 slope rises c 4.5m to a grass platform walk 3.5m wide. At the east end of the terrace, the walk continues eastwards on a steep, north-facing bank with mature yew trees. At the bottom of the bank is a flint-walled ha-ha. An icehouse, now in ruins and shown in existence on the OS 1st edition, is built into the wall c 60m east of the end of the terrace. Southwards above the terrace a more gentle slope rises to another, less clearly defined terrace and beyond it, undulating ground extends some 300m to the site's southern boundary. There are views from the walks within the pleasure grounds over the park and focused on Firle Tower. Much of the area was replanted in 1995/6 with horse chestnut and yew as part of a restoration following severe storm damage in 1987. There are also areas of shrub cover, probably surviving from the ground being laid out as a woodland or wild garden, as shown on the OS map of 1899.

The line of the terraces is shown on Marchant's map of 1775 but it is likely that the layout is considerably earlier and was more extensive, relating either to the construction of the Tudor house (completed in 1557) or to an earlier house on the site. Field evidence (Sclater 1988) has revealed evidence of a flint retaining wall, indicating that at some point at the end of the C18 the terraces were softened in profile and planted with the horse chestnut and yew of which some survive within the areas of new planting.

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**PARK** The park extends to the north-west, north and east of the house, with the open areas managed as pasture. Its planting consists largely of scattered groups, clumps and individual trees, a high proportion of which were replanted in the mid 1990s following both severe storm damage and losses from Dutch elm disease. Planting in the western part of the park was carried out in the early C19 (Horsfield 1827) and continued throughout the century as shown by the pattern on the OS 1st edition. Field evidence indicates a number of mature trees surviving from the mid to late C19. The parkland also appears to have been extended northwards at this time, replacing the mid C18 field pattern. There is no surviving field evidence of earlier, C18 planting. Remnants of part of an elm avenue shown on Marchant's map of 1775 which appeared to link the present house with the presumed site of Heighton St Clere (0.5km to the north-east near the park boundary), survived until the mid C20.

The park is encircled on its western and northern boundaries by a continuous tree belt, shown established on the Tithe map of 1843. The OS 1st edition shows this belt threaded by a path, known as The Walks, which has now vanished.

A system of ponds and canals connected by a series of weirs extends from the centre of the park in a north-easterly direction to the park boundary. Decoy Pond, just inside the northern boundary, is the largest at over 1ha in area. It was established between 1775 and the Tithe survey (it is shown on the Tithe map of 1843). The system of waterworks was more extensive in the mid C18: Marchant's map shows a further canal, gone by the mid C18, extending south-westwards from the present chain and crossed by the present drive over a bridge. The Long Pond north-east of the kitchen garden, viewed as a landscape feature from the house, survives from this earlier water system. A canal also occupied the site of the present terrace along the north-west front of the house.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden is situated north of the stables, between the house and the village, and on a slight north-facing slope. It is 90m long and enclosed by red-brick walls with a central wall dividing the garden into two equal compartments. The eastern section, with glasshouses restored in the 1990s, is laid out to fruit and vegetables while the western section is grazed. It is shown in existence on Marchant's map of 1775.

#### REFERENCES

T W Horsfield, *The History and Antiquities of Lewes and its Vicinity* iii, (1827) *Country Life*, 47 (17 January 1920), pp 78-85; 117 (17 February 1955), pp 480-4; (24 February 1955), p 564; (3 March 1955), p 620 I Nairn and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex* (1965), pp 624-5 B Jones, *Follies and Grottos* (1974), p 321 A Sclater, *Firle Park and Pleasure Grounds: An Account of their History* (unpublished ms 1988) [copy at Firle Place] *Garden History* 17, no 2 (1989), p 177 *Firle Place Master Plan*, (Elizabeth Banks Associates 1990)

Maps T Marchant, *West Firle, the Estate of the Rt Hon Wm Hall, Viscount Gage ...*, 1775 (East Sussex Record Office) Tithe map of West Firle parish, 1843 (East Sussex Record Office) C & J Greenwood, *A Map of the County of Sussex...*, 1" to 1 mile, surveyed 1823-4

OS Old Series 1st edition 1" to 1 mile, surveyed 1793-6 OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1872 2nd edition published 1899 3rd edition published 1911 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition, surveyed 1873-5 2nd edition published 1910

Description written: February 1996 Amended: July 1998 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: March 2000

## 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.