

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

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

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Name: ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

County: Cambridgeshire

District: Cambridge (District Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.208442
Longitude: 0.11459612
National Grid Reference: TL 44586 58798
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1000632
Date first listed: 16-Jan-1985

Details

College courts, landscaped pleasure grounds and gardens, laid out C17-C20.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

St John's College was founded in 1511 on the site of the suppressed Hospital of St John the Evangelist (established C12) with money left by the Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, who had also founded Christ's College, Cambridge (qv) in 1505. The college was developed during the C16 and C17, three courts being built axially from east to west, incorporating the old hospital chapel in First Court. In the late C17 Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723), upon being asked for suggestions about rebuilding the college bridge over the river, suggested moving the site of the bridge further north, so that it would have been on the axis of the three courts. Wren's assistant, Nicholas Hawksmoor produced a plan for the new arrangement in 1698, but this was rejected by the college, who in 1709 began a new bridge on the old site, based upon Wren's early sketches when initially consulted (Crook 1980). In 1772 the Master, William Powell, consulted Lancelot Brown (1716-83); although little detail is known about his influence on the college grounds, in 1778 Brown was presented with a piece of plate valued at £50, indicating some little influence. New Court was built in the 1820s on marshy ground to the west of the river, and the chapel was rebuilt in the 1860s, slightly to the north, based on the Sainte Chapelle in Paris. In the late C19 and early to mid C20 two new courts were built north of First and Second Courts. The site remains (1998) in college use.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING St John's College lies at the centre of Cambridge, on flat ground crossed by the River Cam and various drainage ditches including the Bin Brook. The c 9ha college is bounded to the north by domestic and commercial buildings and Bridge Street, to the east by St John's Street and beyond this the city centre, and to the south by Trinity College (qv). To the west is Queens' Road and beyond this the college playing fields. St John's College is set within a group of city-centre colleges, cut from north to south by the river, the area to the west forming the northern section of the sequence of five adjacent college gardens and meadows which, taken together, are known as The Backs. In 1779 Lancelot Brown provided a plan to landscape The Backs, including that part of St John's west of Third Court. He intended to widen the river into a serpentine lake, and remove the boundaries between individual college grounds together with

King's, Clare and Trinity College bridges, using King's College Gibbs Building as the substitute focal point for a great house. This plan was never carried out and The Backs remain individually owned and designed pleasure grounds and gardens.

ENTRANCES, APPROACHES AND COURTS The college is approached at its east end, straight off St John's Street, through Front Gate beneath the Gate Tower (1511-20), giving access to the east side of First Court (1511-20, listed grade I). The court contains two panels of lawn divided by the axial path running west from the Gate Tower which links First, Second and Third Courts. The foundations of the medieval chapel are visible in the north panel, to the north of which stands the C19 chapel (Sir Gilbert Scott 1863-9, listed grade I) built in C13 Gothic style, dominating the court and its surroundings with its massive tower. A passage through the west range of First Court emerges into Second Court (C17, listed grade I), enclosing panels of lawn divided by two central cruciform paths. The axial path continues west, through the archway beneath the Shrewsbury Tower in the west range into the smaller Third Court (1620s and 1670s, listed grade I). North of Second Court stands Chapel Court, and to the north of this North Court (both late C19-C20), bounded on its open north side by an iron screen, opening onto Bridge Street beyond.

Third Court encloses two panels of lawn divided from west to east by the axial path. The west range contains an arcade, open into the court at ground level, and is bounded by the river to the west. A passage through this range leads to the New Bridge (H Hutchinson 1827, listed grade I) or Bridge of Sighs (on which it was modelled), a single-span stone bridge with a highly decorative neo-gothic covered footway which gives direct access to the east end of New Court cloister.

A passage through the south range of Third Court gives onto a disused lane between St John's and Trinity Colleges, close to the entrance to St John's off this lane which is marked by two tall stone gate piers surmounted by stone eagles, the college emblem (mason Robert Grumbold 1711-12, listed grade I). The old lane to the east is now blocked by college buildings. The westward continuation of the lane crosses the river via the three-arched, stone Old Bridge, or Wren Bridge (to designs by Wren, built 1709-12, listed grade I). The entrance to the east side of the bridge is marked by two tall stone gate piers, surmounted by Yales (mythical gazelle-like beasts, the emblem of Lady Margaret Beaufort), supporting wrought-iron gates and overthrow (mason probably Robert Grumbold 1712, listed grade I), the piers in similar style to those close by to the north. The balustraded parapet contains panelled pedestals, the panels containing carvings including Neptune and Father Cam.

From the Wren Bridge, St John's Meadow to the west is crossed by the Broad Walk, a gravel path with a subsidiary path to the south, flanked by lawns surrounded by a perimeter gravel walk. The curved, tree-lined walk along the south boundary is known as the Bachelors' Walk. This path connects the college via the Wren Bridge with Trinity Paddock immediately to the south via an ornate, single-span cast-iron bridge over the Bin Brook (1874, listed grade II), and with Trinity Pieces to the south-west via a causeway. The meadow is bounded by drains to the west and south and the river to the east, with New Court (T Rickman and H Hutchinson 1826(31, listed grade I) dominating to the north side. This Tudor-gothic composition terminates the northern end of The Backs, consisting of a three-sided grassed court with a single-storey cloister to the south, at the centre of which stands a gateway giving access to the meadow to the south. To the north of New Building stands the Cripps Building (Powell & Moya 1960s), a linear structure broken by various changes of direction running from west to east along the north boundary of the college.

A causeway flanked by drains runs south from the end of the Bachelors' Walk at the south-west corner of the meadow. The causeway runs between the Wilderness to the west and Trinity College's North Paddock to the east, arriving at a wrought-iron gateway (early-mid C18, erected elsewhere 1780, moved to current position 1822, listed grade II*) with flanking iron piers and overthrow, giving onto Trinity Piece to the south.

The Broad Walk continues west beyond the meadow as High Walk, carried over the Bin Brook by the single-span, decorative cast-iron High Walk bridge (1822, listed grade II). High Walk is flanked by a lime avenue, and beyond this the hedged Wilderness to the south and the Scholars' Garden to the north. These gardens are entered off High Walk via four iron pedestrian gates (three modern, one, to the Wilderness, C19, all listed grade II) set into the hedges towards their east and west ends. The walk is terminated at Queens' Road by the Field Gate (1822, to C17 design, listed grade II), set back off the road, with stone piers and eagle finials supporting wrought-iron gates and overthrow with the college arms, and flanked by dwarf walls with railings above.

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The layout of the Meadow and High Walk has altered little since the late C17 (Loggan, 1688, 1690), when cattle were grazed on the Meadow and the Broad Walk was lined with an avenue of trees.

GARDENS The Fellows' Garden or Wilderness lies at the south-west corner of the college, bounded to the west by Queens' Road from which it is divided by a sunk wall with cast-iron railings above (C19, listed grade II). It is bounded to the south and east by drains, and to the north by High Walk. The rectangular area is largely laid to an informal lawn planted with many mature trees and shrubs, underplanted with many bulbs, surrounded by a straight perimeter gravel path, raised in places along the south and east boundaries. In the north-east corner lies a bowling green with a small pavilion at the west side. In the late C17 (Loggan, 1688, 1690) the Fellows' Garden was laid out formally, with the bowling green in its present position, adjacent to two enclosed rectangular areas to the south where the lawn now lies. All three areas were separated by paths, and enclosed by a perimeter path. This is the area which it is believed Lancelot Brown worked on, possibly removing the formal layout in favour of the present informal, landscaped design. By the late C18 (Custance, 1798) the area had lost most of its formality, replaced by a grove of trees, as now remains.

The Scholars' Garden (C20), standing on former orchard grounds, lies adjacent to the north side of High Walk, a rectangular garden bounded by clipped hedges with a perimeter path and, between the two, mixed borders. The area is divided into two, that to the east laid to open lawn, that to the west planted with specimen trees and shrubs.

The Master's Garden lies north of Third Court, adjacent to the river, bounded to the north by the dark red-brick Master's Lodge and adjacent stables (Sir Gilbert Scott 1863, listed grade II) and to the east by the west range of Chapel Court. The Garden is reached from a garden door in the south side of the Lodge, and from a passage through Chapel Court's west range at the north end. The Garden is laid out in several sections, the largest to the south, principally laid to lawn, overlooking the river and River Court beyond, between the back of New Court and the Cripps Building. A large old horse chestnut dominates the lawn, with a mature plane tree by the river. A raised terrace supported by a low, drystone retaining wall runs along the north side of this lawn, connecting it with the south front of the Lodge. A gravel path runs along the top of the terrace, flanked by broad borders, with several sets of stone steps leading down to the lawn. At the west end of the terrace a formal lawn is set with island rose beds, enclosed to the north, east and south by clipped yew hedges. Gravel paths lead south from the terrace's east and west ends, that to the west along the riverside adjacent to a low wall above the river.

REFERENCES

Loggan, *Cantabrigia Illustrata* (1690) Beeverell, *Les Delices de la Grand Bretagne ...* (1707) R Willis and J W Clark, *Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* 4, (1886) *Country Life*, 68 (18 October 1930), pp 470-7; (25 October 1930), pp 516-23; (15 November 1930), pp 616-23 *Architectural Review* 50, no 601 (January 1947), pp 13-18 *The Eagle* 54, (1951), pp 412-19; 56, (1954), pp 1-5 *Victoria History of the County of Cambridgeshire* III, (1959), pp 437-44 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cambridgeshire* (1970), pp 143-58 D Stroud, *Capability Brown* (1975), pp 171-2 A Crook, *From the Foundation to Gilbert Scott* (1980), pp 61-6, 72, 86-9 L P Wilkinson, *Le Keux's Engravings of Victorian Cambridge* (1981) R Gray, *Cambridge Colleges* (1984), pp 520-7 M Batey, *The Historic Gardens of Oxford and Cambridge* (1989), pp 24, 39, 92-3, 99-100, 120-2, 131, 141, 171-2, 178

Maps Lyne, *Map of Cambridge, 1574* Hamond, *Map of Cambridge, 1592* Loggan, *Map of Cambridge, 1688* (from *Cantabrigia Illustrata, 1690*) Custance, *Map of Cambridge, 1798* Baker, *Map of Cambridge, 1830* Copy of an old plan in *Clare College Treasury* showing layout of Fellows' and Master's gardens before C17 rebuilding (in Willis and Clark 1886)

OS 25" to 1 mile: 3rd edition published 1925 OS 1:500: 1st edition published 1888

Description written: February 1998 Register Inspector: SR Edited: January 2001

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.