

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

ST JAMES'S SQUARE

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

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ST JAMES'S SQUARE

Name: ST JAMES'S SQUARE

County: Greater London Authority

District: City of Westminster (London Borough)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.507186
Longitude: -0.13528403
National Grid Reference: TQ 29510 80343
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1000833
Date first listed: 01-Oct-1987

Details

A C17 public square and garden developed by Charles Bridgeman in the C18, John Nash in the C19, and John Brookes in the C20.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1658 Newcourt and Faithorn's map of London shows the site of St James's as a square open space with a double row of trees. In 1662 Lord St Albans was granted the lease of 45 acres (c 19ha) (St James' Fields) but his development of the area was suspended during the Plague of 1665/6 and the Fire of London in 1666, building eventually beginning in 1667. A more comprehensive plan for development which included the allocation of building sites was made in 1676. Although Lord St Albans stipulated that the intended piazza should be paved, this does not appear to have been done; only a raised pavement around the square was made, the centre being left uneven and neglected with a few pre-existing trees surviving.

By the early C18 the centre of the square was a rubbish dump and a petition was lodged for a Bill to allow the raising of a special rate and the appointment of trustees to 'clean, adorn and beautify the square'. The Bill received Royal Assent in April 1726 and in the following year a survey was carried out and a plan drawn up by Charles Bridgeman (d 1738).

In 1817-18 John Nash (1752-1835) was called in to redesign the garden. He enlarged the enclosure, added curving walks and a shrubbery around the perimeter, and also produced plans and an estimate for a garden seat (the summerhouse), to be presented by the Duke of Northumberland. From 1909 to 1910 the garden was restored and replanted. During the First World War an Officers' hostel was built at the south end of the garden; after the war the garden was cleared, new paths laid, and the 'ancient openness had returned' (Forrest 1986). In 1927 a Royal Commission on London Squares was appointed to enquire and report on the squares and similar open spaces existing in the area of the Administrative County of London. The recommendations published by the Royal Commission were numerous and recognized the need to safeguard squares. The Royal Commission was followed in 1931 by the London Squares Preservation Act which listed 461 squares to be protected; St James's Square is listed in both reports. During the Second World War the statue of William III was removed for safe keeping, the railings and gates removed, and the garden dug up and made into allotments. The statue was reinstated in 1946 but it was not until 1974 that new railings and gates were installed.

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DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING St James's Square is situated 240m south-west of Piccadilly Circus and c 300m north of St James's Park (qv). The c 1ha level site is bounded on all four sides by the roads of St James's Square.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES There are four entrances, each centrally placed, which provide access to St James's Square from each direction. All are of similar status although the gate to the north of the site would appear to be the main one by virtue of the fact the statue of King William III faces north.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING St James's Square is surrounded by terraced C18 town houses, the majority now converted to offices. Of the twenty-five buildings, six are listed grade II; eight grade II*; and three grade I.

The classical summerhouse (listed grade II) designed c 1817-18 by John Nash is situated to the south of the site and faces north. The southern gate was moved a few metres to the east in order that the summerhouse could be placed centrally with its blank back against the southern railings. The building has two pairs of Ionic columns supporting a plain entablature and contains a single bench seat.

GARDENS The present cruciform design of the garden dates to the second half of the C20 when the square was replanted having been used as allotments during the Second World War. The site is enclosed within iron railings which in 1974 replaced the C18 ones which were removed as part of the war effort in 1941. The dominant feature of the garden is the equestrian statue of King William III (listed grade I) which stands at the centre of the square set on a high plinth and looking towards the north. The statue, designed by John Bacon and executed by his son, also John, between 1805 and 1807, originally stood in the middle of an C18 basin having replaced an earlier fountain. Charles Bridgeman was commissioned to design the central area in 1727. His design included extensive paving, gravel walks, and a fountain in the middle of a circular basin set within an octagonal enclosure. The basin had a diameter of 150ft (45.7m) and archaeological excavations in 1985 showed it to have been 4ft (c 1.2m) deep. The octagonal enclosure consisted of iron railings and eight stone obelisks with lamps on top (Forrest 1986). The pavement outside the enclosure was made from Purbeck flags. The basin was eventually filled in in 1854 when it was decided that this would be cheaper than continually cleaning it out.

To the inside of the peripheral shrubbery is a perimeter path which encloses the four quarters of the lawn. Both the path and shrubbery are shown on the OS 1st edition map of 1867. The lawn is studded with a number of mature plane trees, the oldest one thought to date from 1873 when Lord Derby and Lord Bristol (then residents of the square) measured out the site for additional planting (Forrest 1986).

The centre of the garden is taken up with rectangular shrub beds, planned c 1985 by John Brookes, and small paved paths laid around the statue. Four stone obelisks, similar to those recorded on Horwood's map (1813), are set in the corner of the small beds, all of which are set within a circular tarmac path of c 1854 which encloses an area slightly smaller in diameter than the C18 basin. Centrally placed against the southern fence is the summerhouse, in the south-east corner is an area set aside for storage, and in the south-west corner a paved seating area with C20 bird bath.

In January 2000 work commenced on the redesign of the gardens. The central flower beds, York stone paving, and obelisks will be removed and replaced by grass lawns surrounding the statuary. The paved seating area in the south-west corner is being removed, and the entire perimeter planting is being increased to provide a natural barrier between the garden and surrounding traffic. All works are due to be completed by mid 2000.

REFERENCES

A I Dasent, *A History of St James's Square* (1895) E B Chancellor, *The History of the Squares of London* (1907), pp 80-105 E Cecil, *London Parks and Gardens* (1907), pp 223-6 G S Cooper, *The Outdoor Monuments of London* (1928) Royal Commission Report on London Squares (1928) B Cherry and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: The Cities of London and Westminster* (1973), pp 644-7 D Forrest, *St James's Square* (1986) London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust, *London Squares* (conference proceedings, June 1995)

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Maps Newcourt and Faithorn, London, 1658 J Rocque, Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster and Borough of Southwark and the country near ten miles around, surveyed 1741-5, published 1746 R Horwood, Map of London, 1792-9, 2nd edition 1813 by William Faden Bacon, Map of London, 1888

OS 60" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1867 2nd edition published 1894

Description written: January 1998 Amended: February 2000 Register Inspector: LCH Edited: January 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.