

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

COMBERMERE ABBEY

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

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**COMBERMERE ABBEY**

Name: COMBERMERE ABBEY

District: Cheshire East (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Dodcott cum Wilkesley

District: Cheshire East (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Marbury cum Quoisley

District: Cheshire East (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Newhall

District: Shropshire (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Whitchurch Rural

District: Shropshire (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Whitchurch Urban

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.992434  
Longitude: -2.6142572  
National Grid Reference: SJ 58866 44077  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II  
List Entry Number: 1000639  
Date first listed: 10-Jun-1985

## Details

A landscape park, probably of C18 origins, associated with a country house.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Combermere Abbey, a Cistercian house, was originally founded in 1133 as a Savignac house. In 1539, following its Dissolution in 1538, Combermere was granted to Sir George Cotton. It was his son, Richard, who in 1563 rebuilt Combermere as a country house. It remained little altered until the 1790s, when Sir Robert Salusbury Cotton remodelled the house and landscaped the park. The family fortunes were transformed in the early C19 by his son Sir Stapleton Cotton (d 1865), who had a notable military career in India and the Peninsula Wars. He became Baron in 1814, Viscount in 1827 and Field Marshall in 1855, and was successively Governor-General of Barbados, Commander-in-Chief in Ireland and in India. Exceedingly vain, he provided Thackeray with the model for Sir George Tufto in *The Book of Snobs*, published in *Punch* in the 1840s. During his time the house was again altered and extended.

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The family's fortunes declined in the later C19, with losses through their Indian bankers and with the decay of the Caribbean sugar industry during the time of the second Viscount and because of what has been described as the 'rackety life' (CL 1994, 42) of the third Viscount. The latter put the Combermere estate, some 12,000 acres, up for sale in 1893, although it was not until 1919 that it was finally sold, the Abbey and the nucleus of the estate being purchased by Sir Kenneth Crossley (d 1957), of the Manchester 'Crossley Cars' engineering family. Combermere remains (1997) in private hands.

**DESCRIPTION**

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Combermere Abbey stands on the west side of the A525/530, 6km north-east of Whitchurch and 10km south-west of Nantwich. Locally the countryside is relatively level and well-watered, with numerous natural meres; among the largest is Comber Mere itself, which is the main feature of the park. To the east the park boundary is formed by the A530, but otherwise it follows field and especially wood boundaries. To the south these coincide with the Cheshire-Shropshire county boundary. The area here registered is c 400ha.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main approach to the Abbey is from the south-east, across the park. At the end of the drive, on the A525/530 Whitchurch to Nantwich road, is Stone Lodge (listed grade II), an Elizabethan-style building of c 1829 designed by the Irish architects the Morrisons. To one side are contemporary iron gates and screens on elaborate stone piers (listed grade II). A second drive, now disused, led north-east from the house, via a bridge at the east end of Comber Mere, to the A525/530. At the end of the drive is a single-storey, timber-framed, lodge with two gables and a loggia between, probably of the late C19.

Until the mid to late C18 the main approach was from the west, via a drive which crossed the land bridge (later removed) between Comber Mere and the smaller pool to the south.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Combermere Abbey (listed grade I) looks west over the mere. Following Combermere's acquisition at the Dissolution by the Cottons, the abbey church and most of the conventual buildings were demolished. What was retained, the west range, was converted in 1563 into a timber-framed country house which survived little changed for 250 years. Some alterations were made in 1795, but the house took on its present gothic appearance between 1814 and 1821, following the elevation to the peerage of Sir Stapleton Cotton for military service and the grant of an annual pension of £2000. Neale in 1812 refers to designs by the Irish Morrisons. Further additions and alterations were made in 1854 and in the 1870s. The old timber-framed house is rendered with grey concrete, is crenellated, and has gothic windows set in pointed arched recesses in a long, low and irregular facade overlooking the mere. The C19 work was ill thought-out and poorly built however and after 1975 the house was reduced in size to a scheme by A H Brotherton & Partners of Chester. Major restoration works were in progress in 1997.

On the south-east side of the house is an early C19 stables and service court (listed grade II) containing an octagonal game larder (listed grade II\*).

Some 300m north-east of the house is a Tudor-style stables court (listed grade II) of 1837 based on a design by Edward Blore (d 1879). The stables are of brick with stone details. They were converted in the 1990s to holiday cottages.

A detached house in the gothic style was under construction in 1997 c 75m east of the stables court. The site was previously occupied by Steward's Cottage.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The main garden front is to the west, where a lawn runs from the house down to the Mere. On its south side is a screen of mature pines and shrubs. East of the house the turning circle is occupied by formal beds. Specimen trees, shrubs and lawns lie to the south of the drive leading east from that, while to the north is a view across rising parkland to Garden Wood. This, which lies c 300m north-east of the house, is largely mature ornamental woodland, and serves to screen the west side of the kitchen gardens.

Early C18 views of the house (Harris 1979) show a forecourt before the west front, then the principal facade, and a small quartered garden adjoining to the south. On the east side of the house were further gardens and ponds, and a long ride leading away from its centre. A long gate screen, probably made by Robert Bakewell, is now at Westbury Manor, Long Island.

**PARK** Combermere's park is roughly circular, 2km from east to west and 1.5km north to south. Its main feature is a large natural mere, Comber Mere, c 2km long and 300m wide, which curves across the central part of the park. The Abbey lies on the west

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side of the inner arc of the mere, with views across it to the rising ground and woods beyond. Immediately west of the Abbey Comber Mere narrows appreciably, where a promontory juts out from the west bank. Until the later C18, when a landscape park was created, the promontory formed a complete land bridge, separating the mere to the north from a smaller pool to the south. Summerhouse Island lies 600m north of the house, on the west side of the mere. On it stand the foundations of a square brick summerhouse, possibly that of c 1700 shown on a topographical view of the house painted c 1720 (CL 1996, 40). Some 200m to the north-east is a further small island, Duckbay Island. Behind the two islands rises Big Wood, mature woodland cut through with drives, which covers the eastern two-thirds of the north bank of the Mere. The 'Cottage in the Wood', mapped and named thus on the 1st edition OS map published 1881, was ruinous in 1997. The other main blocks of woodland are Garden Wood (mentioned above), Cocked Hat, in the south-eastern portion of the park, and Stone Lodge Wood, which lies on the south-eastern border of the park either side of Stone Lodge. Woodland, extending northward as Poole's Riding Wood, also lies around the fringes of Brankelow Moss, which occupies an area of low ground 300m north-west of Brankelow Cottage.

Brankelow Cottage, or Folly (listed grade II), a brick keeper's cottage with arrowslits and pinnacles, is the main eyecatcher at Combermere. It stands 500m west of the house on the skyline above the mere. When built in 1797 it contained a model dairy and a summer sitting room decorated by the family's daughters. Some 500m to the north-west, on a low hill, is a monumental obelisk (listed grade II) of 1890 commemorating Lord Combermere (d 1865).

Although large areas of the park are under arable cultivation there are large tracts which remain as permanent pasture. The latter include an area south of the Abbey and the drive from Stone Lodge, at the south-west end of the Mere, and especially in the north-western part of the park, including the whole area south-west of Big Wood centred on Brankelow Cottage. In the grassland around that building, and running down to the Mere, is a series of straight earthwork depressions, either broad ditches or hollow ways.

The whole park contains large numbers of specimen trees, mainly oaks but also including some beech and sweet chestnut. A high percentage of these are massive and ancient.

The park is said to have been landscaped in 1795-7, and it has been suggested that John Webb (1754-1828) may have been involved (CL 1994, 40). The apparent age of the parkland trees however suggests a landscape already well provided in the 1790s with mature trees.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The early C19 brick-walled kitchen gardens lie c 300m north-east of the house, behind the stables courtyard. A low hill and Garden Wood screen them from the house. The gardens comprise three linked compartments, the south and central ones rectangular and that to the north semicircular. The south compartment was laid out in the mid 1990s as a pleasure garden with tennis court. The central one lay fallow in 1997. An early C19 brick gardener's cottage is incorporated in its east wall. That to the north (possibly added to the existing compartments at a slightly later date) has a ruinous circular fig house against the north wall. South of it a concentric fruit tree maze was planted in the mid 1990s.

Immediately north-west of the gardens is a ruinous icehouse (listed grade II).

#### REFERENCES

Published works N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Cheshire* (1971), pp 181-2 J Harris, *The Artist and the Country House* (1979), pp 132-3 The Victoria History of the County of Chester 3, (1980), pp 150-5 P de Figueiredo and J Treuherz, *Cheshire Country Houses* (1988), pp 60-5 *Country Life*, no 1 (6 January 1994), pp 40-3

Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: Cheshire sheet 61, 1st edition published 1881 Cheshire sheet 65, 1st edition published 1881 OS 25" to 1 mile: Cheshire sheet 65.2, 1st edition published 1875 Cheshire sheet 65.3, 1st edition published 1875

Description written: October 1997 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: April 1999

## 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.