

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

OVERBECKS (SHARPITOR)

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

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**OVERBECKS (SHARPITOR)**

Name:	OVERBECKS (SHARPITOR)
County:	Devon
District:	South Hams (District Authority)
Parish:	Malborough
County:	Devon
District:	South Hams (District Authority)
Parish:	Salcombe
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.223222 Longitude: -3.7846732 National Grid Reference: SX 72787 37437 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000697 Date first listed: 12-Aug-1987

## Details

Overbecks is an early C20 terraced garden in an outstanding natural location benefiting from a favourable microclimate which has enabled the development of a specialised collection of tender Mediterranean and Australasian plants. The subject of numerous articles in the horticultural press, Overbecks has become an influential garden in the late C20.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The site of Overbecks, originally known as Sharpitor after the local landmark Sharp Tor c 1km to the south, was undeveloped woodland when acquired by Albert Stumbles in the late C19. Sharpitor was one of the first houses to be built on the steeply sloping coastline south-west of Salcombe, and was initially let and subsequently sold to Edric Hopkins, who constructed a series of terraces on the east-facing slope below the house. Hopkins purchased additional land to the south which was laid out as a terraced tennis lawn, rocky dell and orchard. The property was sold in 1913 to Mr and Mrs George Vereker who continued to develop the gardens and rebuilt the house, which was used as a Red Cross convalescent home during the First World War. George Vereker died in 1924, but his widow continued to live at Sharpitor until 1928, when it was sold to Otto Overbeck, a scientist who had invented the 'Overbeck Rejuvenator', a machine which helped to make his fortune and enabled him to retire to garden in a favourable location. A fellow of the Zoological Society, Society of Arts and the Geological Society, and a well-known collector of natural history specimens, antiques, stamps and armour, Overbeck was also a committed supporter of youth organisations, boys' clubs being a particular object of his generosity. During his ownership areas such as the tennis lawn were converted to horticulture and the garden, which was regularly opened to the public, became 'renowned for its wealth of sub-tropical plants' (The Gazette 1937). Overbeck's obituary published in 1937 (ibid) also noted 'the far-famed eucalyptus avenue, citrus fruits, banana grove, and many shrubs of extreme rarity', while the greenhouse contained 'an unusual display of cacti'.

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Many of the Chusan palms, a particular feature of the garden, were planted by Overbeck in the 1930s. Under his will, the house, contents and gardens were left either to the National Trust or to Salcombe Urban District Council. Under the bequest, which was accepted by the National Trust, the house was to be used as a museum and youth hostel, the gardens opened to the public, and the name of the property changed to record the identity of the donor. From 1937 until 1964 the property was administered by one of Overbeck's friends, Lady Clementia Waring, while Overbeck's gardener, Ellis Manley, continued to work at the property until 1951. Wartime restrictions left the garden in poor condition, and the harsh winter of 1947 killed many of the more tender specimens including the trees which made up the Eucalyptus Avenue on the east boundary of the site. The work of restoration was begun by Edward Pilkington, who was appointed Head Gardener in 1950; it has been continued by Tony Murdoch from 1973 to his retirement in 1999, and by his successor Claire Gosling. Planting schemes for the Statue Garden, originally the tennis lawn and later Overbeck's 'formal perennial garden', have been developed in this period, as has a parterre decorated with citrus trees in pots adjacent to the greenhouse. Additional land was purchased to the north of drive leading to the property in 1997.

**DESCRIPTION**

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Overbecks is situated 1km south-west of Salcombe on high ground to the south-west of South Sands and to the west of Splatcove Point. The 2.75ha site is bounded to the north by a steeply sloping wooded bank which falls away below the drive, while the west and short south boundaries are formed by stone walls and wooden fences which separate the property from woodland owned by the National Trust. To the east the boundary is formed by a track which serves for c 65m as a drive for The Anchorage, a property to the north-east, before continuing for c 150m as the Eucalyptus Avenue. The Avenue is separated from woodland on the slope below, now in separate ownership, by a post and wire fence. The site is located in an area of particular natural beauty, with fine views north across Salcombe Harbour towards Salcombe, and south-east across the estuary to Prawle Point and the sea.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The drive is adapted from an existing C19 track which ascends a steeply sloping zig-zag route from South Sands to high ground adjacent to Sharp Tor. A single, circular, rustic stone gate pier marks the north side of the entrance to the site adjacent to the drive leading south to The Anchorage. The drive climbs steeply west and is bounded to the south by a stone wall which retains grass banks and planting in the garden; to the north the ground drops steeply into a wooded valley, the slope being clothed with mixed deciduous trees including several mature sweet chestnuts. After c 150m the drive turns sharply east with a timber pedestrian gate set between circular rustic stone piers at the lower north end of the slope. It then ascends for c 80m between an avenue of Chusan palms (c 1930) underplanted with *Crocasmia* and *Libertia*, to a small carriage turning to the west of the house. A late C20 car park has been constructed c 25m west of the house. The former stables stand to the west of the carriage court, while the gardens are entered through an elaborate pair of Spanish-style timber doors decorated with metal ornaments dating from c 1930. Circular rustic stone gate piers support a trellised black-painted metal overthrow ornamented to each side by gilt metal coats of arms, with the name 'Overbecks' spelt out in white letters set on individual red squares. Within the gates a flight of sixteen tiled steps with late C20 serpentine wrought-iron hand rails designed by Alan Van der Steen descends through an avenue of Chusan palms to the level of the terrace to the east of the house.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** The present house dates from 1913/14 and is of rendered two-storey construction under a slate roof with gabled wings projecting to the north-east and south-west of the principal facade. A single-storey lean-to timber and glass conservatory occupies the ground-floor space between the projecting wings and contains a collection of citrus plants and tender climbers. The house is lit by large mullioned plate-glass windows, and the wings have two-storey canted bay windows; the roof is ornamented by a glazed cupola above the north facade. The house is unlisted and is used as a museum and youth hostel.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The gardens comprise two terraces on the east-facing slope below the house, with a further terrace lying below the present garden boundary, but within the registered site. Three terraces are located to the south of the house, while a more informal woodland garden occupies the slope below the north side of the house.

The upper terrace to the north and east of the house is retained by a wall of brick and stone construction with stone castellations which supported a pergola in the 1930s, but which today support planted pots during the summer. Late C20 wrought-iron gates c 10m east of the house lead to steps descending to the second terrace, while a semicircular bastion with a flag pole c 20m

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*  
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*OVERBECKS (SHARPITOR)*

south-east of the house gives wide views across the garden and Salcombe Harbour. Planting on the terrace has a Mediterranean character which extends to the 'Museum Borders' surrounding a level rectangular lawn south-west of the house which is enclosed to the west and south by steep rocky banks. The grass slope above the west bank is planted with specimen trees and shrubs including Chusan palms and myrtle, and rises to the stone boundary wall in a corner of which a late C20 conical-roofed shelter has been constructed. The axis of the upper terrace continues south for c 30m as a gravel walk bordered by exotic herbaceous planting which rises south-west towards the Statue Garden, originally the Edwardian tennis lawn. Enclosed by a low stone wall to the west which retains a steep bank planted with palms, and by brick and stone pillars with linking metal supports set on low walls to the south, east and north, the garden has as its focus a bronze statue of a young girl, First Flight by Albert Bruce Joy (c 1900). To north and south four large rectangular herbaceous borders set in grass are lavishly planted in the summer with tender and exotic-looking plants in predominantly warm colours. A gravel path leads south to a small grassed enclosure planted with a young date palm, from which there is a view down on to a late C20 box-edged coloured gravel parterre which is decorated in summer by citrus trees in pots. To the north stand a large group of Japanese banana and a late C20 timber glasshouse.

A further walk c 35m from the house flanked by Chusan palms, brick and metal pergola supports and a planting of Hydrangeas ascends west for c 30m towards a service gate. To the south lies the Rock Dell which appears to have been adapted from a former quarry and has a central bed planted with Cordyline and Phormium; surrounding planting includes Pittosporum. Stone steps at the south-west corner of the Rock Dell rise to the former orchard, now an east-facing grass slope laid out as a picnic area with seats placed against the stone west boundary wall and planted with specimen trees.

The second terrace below the house provides a north/south axis in the lower garden. Flanked by richly planted borders, the walk leads south c 50m to an arch in a stone wall which encloses a further irregularly shaped walled terraced garden. Within, a stone wall retains a grass walk to the west and beds containing specimen shrubs including a Magnolia cambelli which was planted in 1901 as a wall shrub and is now a famous spring feature of the garden. Other planting at the lower level of this garden includes a group of Japanese bananas which are said to have been grown in this situation since the late C19 (Tony Murdoch pers comm, 1998). A gate at the south-west corner of the walled garden leads to the glasshouse and parterre. To the east of the house the second terrace is planted with a group of Crinodendron hookerianum. The terrace leads north-west and enters a woodland garden with mature beech trees underplanted with a collection of young magnolias, before reaching the wooden pedestrian gate to the drive. A minor path partly lined with Chusan palms diverts north-east along a rocky spur to a viewpoint sheltered by a group of evergreen trees including oaks, Monterey cypress and pines.

North-east of the walled garden a minor path descends south-east to a flight of stone steps which links the garden to the former Eucalyptus Avenue, which formed the third and lowest terrace, and which now (1998) lies outside the area open to the public. Entered through a timber gate, the walk extends c 150m south-west and south, and is flanked to the west by the east wall of the walled garden for c 50m. A semicircular recess c 20m from the north-east end of the wall contains a pool, and a line of regularly spaced Chusan palms is planted along the length of the wall. The Eucalyptus Avenue, in reality a single line of trees on the west side of the terrace, originally extended c 100m to the south of the wall. Some trees have regenerated since being cut back in 1947. In the early C20 the terrace allowed easterly views down a lightly wooded slope towards Salcombe Harbour, but now adjoins woodland which is in separate, private ownership.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** There is no kitchen garden within the registered site. An area west-south-west of the house was formerly used as a kitchen garden (Tony Murdoch pers comm, 1998), but is no longer cultivated.

**OTHER LAND** Early C20 staff cottages to the west of the house and service drive have associated gardens planted with early C20 trees and shrubs which are included in the registered site.

#### REFERENCES

Gardening Illustrated (May 1937) The Gazette, May 1937 [Otto Overbeck's obituary] Gardeners' Chronicle, ii (18 November 1961), pp 380-1 P M Syngé, Gardens of Britain 1, (1977), pp 78-81 B Cherry and N Pevsner, The Buildings of England: Devon (1989), p 709 G S Thomas, Gardens of the National Trust (1979), pp 209-10 The Garden, (1985), pp 470-5 Overbecks, gardens guide, (National Trust 1986) Country Life, no 31 (4 August 1994), pp 54-7 Country Life Gardens, (Summer 1999), pp 50-9 Maps OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1885, published 1886 2nd edition revised 1905, published 1906

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*  
*Inventory of Great Britain*  
*OVERBECKS (SHARPITOR)*

Archival items Correspondence and photographs c 1900-97 (National Trust and Overbecks Museum)

Description written: August 1998 Amended: May 1999; May 2000 Register Inspector: JML Edited: July 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.