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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

Hemel Water Gardens

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Name:	Hemel Water Gardens
County:	Hertfordshire
District:	Dacorum (District Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.748326 Longitude: -0.47450886 National Grid Reference: TL 05409 06615 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001710 Date first listed: 01-Feb-2010

Details

This list entry was subject to a Minor Amendment on 09/09/2011

Civic Water Gardens 1957-9, designed by Geoffrey Jellicoe as part of the new town development of Hemel Hempstead, also master-planned by Jellicoe in 1947.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT After the Second World War, the government designated Hemel Hempstead as one of the sites of its New Towns Programme which was intended to re-house Londoners who had been left homeless by the Blitz. Architect and Town Planner, Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900-1996) was commissioned in 1947 to devise a Masterplan for the new town of Hemel Hempstead, for which his vision was a 'city in a park'. A key component of the planned new town's centre were the Water Gardens designed between 1957-59 by Jellicoe. The original drawings survive and show how he envisaged the site's layout. Jellicoe's intention was to create a place for pleasure and relaxation, by way of a sophisticated, well-arranged linear public park to create certain illusions and impressions.

Hemel Hempstead Water Gardens is one amongst a number of Jellicoe's earlier schemes designed in the 1950s, which share many of his distinctive signature characteristics, such as canals, weirs, bridges, viewing platforms and associated planting by Jellicoe's wife, Susan. They have been subject to some minor alteration and changes in the 1980s including the construction of a screen wall and a children's play area on the north-western corner.

The Water Gardens are an early instance of allegory and the sub-conscious being incorporated within landscape design, and a theme that featured in Jellicoe's subsequent work. Taking inspiration from the painter Paul Klee, whose works drew upon the comparatively new science of aerial photography, Jellicoe had the idea of concealing a ghost within the visible. When viewed in plan or from a distance, Jellicoe's design suggested the form of a snake, the tail curving away around the berm at the northern end of the gardens, the head with the fountain for its eye to the south, and the gently cascading weirs suggesting the snake's locomotion. The inclusion of the invisible within the visible is a documented aspect of Jellicoe's work which gives distinction and interest. In the case of the Water Gardens, the 'ghost within' gives the scheme an additional layer of intellectual and artistic intent that elevates it to something that is more than merely practical landscaping, contributing to its special interest.

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DESCRIPTION LOCATION, SETTING, LANDFORM, BOUNDARIES, AREA The Water Gardens are situated in the centre of Hemel Hempstead and occupy approximately 3.5 hectares. The urban setting of the gardens, is apparent from inside them as well as outside, as they are not defined by a solid boundary such as a high wall or hedges and have an almost open-plan aspect to them. They are bounded to the west by the Leighton Buzzard Road (A4146) and a two-storey car park at the south-western corner; and Water House Street to the east, which has various public and commercial buildings fronting it.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The gardens have an open-plan aspect to them with a number of different access points. Entry to the gardens can be gained from the south (Moor End Road), where there is a pedestrian entrance via a break in the iron railings, to the North (Combe Street) or via any of the four pedestrian bridges that link the public footway on Waterhouse Street with the gardens.

GARDENS The Water Gardens are of linear plan-form and have an irregular shape. They are approximately 615 metres long from north to south and reach approximately 50 metres at their widest point east to west. A footpath runs the length of the garden on the west side of the canal. From the southern entrance on Moor End Road is a view north with the lake in the foreground, the fountain in the near middle distance, the formal planting to the west, and the canal crossed by the bridges as it recedes into the background. There is also an island on the lake's east side, and a piece of sculpture set in the water which depicts a couple dancing.

From this entrance the path leads north following the contours of the lake on its western side for about 100 metres where some shallow steps lead to a raised viewing platform from which there is a view from the north-west corner of the lake towards the south-east corner, taking in the island and sculpture and the buildings beyond the gardens boundary. As the path continues north there is an area of formal planting immediately to the west, laid out by Susan Jellicoe, which includes flowers and shrubbery, and an arcade of pleached, flowering cherry trees, as the centre-piece. It is set out within a grid of paths and covers just over third of a hectare. On the opposite side of the path at this point is a pair of pedestrian bridges which are approximately 30 metres apart, and link the garden with Waterhouse Street on the eastern side of the canal.

The path continues north for approximately 25 metres where it meets a raised viewing platform. Approximately 5 metres north of this, a low, south-flowing weir punctuates the canal. From this point the path continues for approximately 100 metres where there is informal planting of shrubbery and trees on a more dense scale immediately to the west, and grassed canal bank to the east. Water plants such as grasses and water lilies are used to create drama at the water's edge.

On this stretch of the path, there are two raised seating areas, which are approximately 50 metres apart. There are also two small islands at this point in the canal. The path is interrupted by a road bridge which carries Bridge Street across the canal, bisecting the garden, approximately at its half way point. The path continues on the north side of Bridge Street for a distance of about 240 metres, past more informal shrubbery and tree planting which screens the multi-storey car park to the west. There are two raised seating areas on the canal side and two pedestrian bridges linking the garden to Waterhouse Street. Two small pieces of sculpture depicting animals are sited at the water's edge. At this point the canal bends to the west and forms a small basin, which is crossed by a pedestrian bridge leading back onto Waterhouse Street, beyond which is a series of weirs and a large berm which is planted with mature tree specimens which include willow, horse chestnut and lime and which marks the extent of the garden. The public footpath then returns south along Waterhouse Street, parallel to the canal, making a circular walk around the garden possible.

Four footbridges cross the canal, allowing pedestrian access from Waterhouse Street to the garden at various points. The bridges are of a simple, elegant design with gentle arcing concrete decks and simple plain railings. There are also other features of note including a fountain at the lake end, and various pieces of sculpture (not part of Jellicoe's original design) throughout the gardens, including a classical Greek statue of a discus thrower, and a modern piece of a couple dancing by Herbert Yencesse (1962). REFERENCES Spens, M, *The Complete Landscape Design and Gardens of Geoffrey Jellicoe* (1994) Weddle, A E (Ed), *Techniques of landscape Architecture* (1967) Transcript of report presented by Jellicoe to Hemel Hempstead Development Control Board (1959) Notes and drawings from the Landscape Institutes

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION The Water Gardens, 1957-9 by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, at Hemel Hempstead are designated at Grade II for the following principal reasons: * As a major, and relatively early, commission by one of the foremost landscape

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designers of the C20 * For the way Jellicoe integrated this civic design with his earlier, 1947-8, town masterplan for Hemel Hempstead * As an increasingly rare and largely intact example of a town centre water garden, created during the era of post-war renewal and new town developments * As an early instance of Jellicoe using landscape design to explore allegory and the sub-conscious, a theme that increasingly featured in his later schemes

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.