

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

HEXTON MANOR

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

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Name:	HEXTON MANOR
District:	Central Bedfordshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Shillington
County:	Hertfordshire
District:	North Hertfordshire (District Authority)
Parish:	Hexton
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.962951 Longitude: -0.38241926 National Grid Reference: TL 11236 30621 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000910 Date first listed: 11-Jun-1987

Details

A country house surrounded by the remains of C19 formal gardens, with informal C18/early C19 pleasure grounds including a landscaped lake, surrounded by a landscape park.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1593 the Hexton estate was bought by Peter Taverner whose descendants lived at Hexton until 1772. By 1767 Poyntz Taverner had begun to build the present house, but he died in 1772, following which the estate changed hands several times in quick succession. A sale catalogue of 1782 (HRO) described the estate as follows: 'A spacious modern built Brick Mansion ... With Pleasure Grounds, Canal and Garden neatly laid out. Coach Houses, Stabling and every Convenient Office, and a proper quantity of land, also, Two eligible and Desirable Farms ... there is also a fine Canal of excellent Water, that springs at an agreeable distance, fully stored.' A sale catalogue of 1789 (HRO) refers to an excellent run of water, the Grove of fruit trees, a walled kitchen garden and a fine trout stream. A further description exists from 1809 (HRO) when the owner, William Young, considered selling the estate, detailing a well-appointed country estate with park and gardens. In 1809 Young passed the estate to his daughter Caroline and her husband Joseph Andrew Lautour, close friends of Lord and Lady de Grey who lived at nearby Wrest Park, Bedfordshire (qv). The Lautours carried out many improvements to Hexton during the next ten years, largely recorded in an estate plan of 1837 showing the park and pleasure grounds as very similar to those remaining today. Having spent the 1820s and 1830s largely in debt, Joseph died in 1845, Caroline continuing to make improvements to the park from 1848 until her death in 1869. In 1901 George Hodgson bought the estate, by this time derelict, spending the following eighteen years renovating the house, village and park and embellishing the gardens in lavish style. Hodgson left Hexton in 1919, following which many of his garden additions were lost. The estate remains (1998) in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

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LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Hexton Manor lies 9km north of Luton, forming the eastern boundary of the village of Hexton. The c 70ha site is bounded to the north and east by agricultural land, to the south by the B655 Barton-le-Clay to Hitchin road and to the west by the village. The estate is situated on largely level ground at the foot of the chalk escarpment lying at the north-east end of the Chiltern Hills, the shallow lower slope being incorporated within the southern extremity of the park. The setting is rural, with long views extending east and south from the park to the steeply rising heights of the scarp.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approach from Hitchin enters the park 1.1km east of the house, off the B655, passing the two-storey, timber-framed Pegsdon Lodge (c 1910) and adjacent gateway flanked by iron gates and piers and beyond this curved dwarf brick walls with tall brick piers supporting iron railings. From here the east drive descends a gentle slope through open woodland, entering the open south park 800m east of the house, flanked from here for 700m westwards by a beech avenue of mixed-age specimens, with glimpses north-west towards the east front of the house. Some 200m from the house the drive begins to rise gently to the entrance to the southern pleasure ground lying 100m south-east of the house. From here the drive continues westwards, curving around the pleasure ground, flanked by clipped box hedges, to arrive at a carriage sweep by the main, west front of the house, overlooking the croquet lawn to the west and park to the north.

A second, west drive enters 150m west of the house, off the main village street, passing the two-storey, timber-framed Hexton Lodge (c 1910) and adjacent gateway flanked by iron gates and piers and beyond this curved dwarf brick walls (the accompanying iron railings were removed during the Second World War), in similar style to the Pegsdon Lodge entrance. From here the drive, enclosed and closely flanked by clipped box hedges, dog-legs eastwards, meeting the east drive 50m south-west of the house. A spur southwards leaves the west drive 100m west of the house, leading south up the hillside, flanked by a mature lime avenue, giving access to the stable block on the south boundary. A second spur leads southwards from the junction of the west and east drives, also flanked by lime avenues, extending up the hillside to join the other spur leading to the stables. Until c 1900 (estate map, 1837; OS 1901) the main western approach extended directly eastwards from the west entrance, skirting the north side of an informal oval lawn to arrive at the north-west corner of the house and carriage sweep on the west front. This was altered to the present (1998) arrangement by George Hodgson in the early C20. Additionally, during the C19 the west drive appears to have continued north-east from the north front along the west bank of the south lake, turning north-west at the edge of The Rookery and extending out into the west park. This extension is now (1998) not visible.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Hexton Manor (C17-early C20, listed grade II) stands close to the south-west corner of the site, surrounded by gardens and the southern pleasure grounds. The three-storey house is built of brick and stuccoed, its main entrance being on the west front, with a garden door on the east front, on which side is attached a verandah, overlooking the Spring Head of the lake to the east and the park beyond.

The stables (now, 1998, largely converted to office use), stand on rising ground 150m south-west of the house, adjacent to the kitchen gardens. The building is composed of a two-storey, U-shaped, brick-built block arranged around a courtyard, the fourth, north side being closed by a screen wall. The entrance is prominent from the two approach avenues rising from the main west drive to the north.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens surround the house to the west, north and east, and are laid largely to lawn. A croquet lawn lies adjacent to the carriage sweep on the west front, bounded to the south by the west drive and flanking box hedges, and to the west of the lawn by a shrubbery in which stand several mature trees and grassed banks of earth. A path leads round the lawn to the south, west and north, it being bounded to the north by a ditch and beyond this the west park. The lawn extends east along the north front of the house, planted with two mature red horse chestnuts. A gravel path extends from the carriage sweep around the north front and along the east front, a spur north-east leading to the lake. The east front of the house overlooks lawns embellished with two fountains and their basins, this being the remains of late C19 and early C20 formal features. The northern fountain (c 1905) stood at the centre of formal seasonal bedding beds. This lawn overlooks the adjacent southern arm of the lake and the Spring Head, a natural curved bowl set into the southern hillside, from which issues the spring feeding the lake. The sides of the bowl are furnished with ferns and other plants. At the north end of the east lawn a formal flight of stone steps leads down to the water-side.

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To the south, above the Spring Head, lies the southern pleasure ground, reached from the east lawn via a grass ramp up the hillside, flanked by shrubs. This area is divided by the east drive into northern and southern halves. The northern half is of open character, laid to lawn and planted with scattered mature specimen trees, including a magnificent cedar of Lebanon, as well as many other conifers. The west part of this half is more enclosed, with shrubberies screening the service yard to the south of the house. The southern half, extending beyond the east drive up the hillside to the roadside boundary, is much more densely planted with shrubs beneath the specimen trees, and with the remains of box hedges. A path through here connects the north-east corner of the stables with the east drive before it joins the west drive.

The northern pleasure ground is quite different in character, being situated on level ground and dominated by the lakes and connecting water course which it encircles. A wooden bridge crosses the south end of the south lake from the east lawn, opposite the east front of the house, giving access to a grass path running through a young arboretum (planted late C20) alongside the east bank of the lake. The path extends into The Rookery woodland, running around the narrow, tapering north end of the lake, returning westwards to the wooden, Chinese-style pedestrian Nikko Bridge which crosses the outfall from the lake some 250m north-east of the house. From here paths extend north-east on either side of the water course which falls via a series of weirs and cascades through The Rookery. The remains of an early C20, brick and stucco gothic summerhouse stand on the east side of the water course above the second cascade, 350m north-east of the house. Some 500m north-east of the house the water course opens out into the narrow north lake, flanked to the west by a narrow belt of trees, with to the east open views towards the distant hills. A small island lies at the north end of this lake, with the remains of a gothic pump house standing at the northern tip of the lake. A timber-framed mill cottage (c 1910) stands to the north of this on the north side of Mill Lane.

By 1837 (estate map) the lakes and connecting water course existed in very similar form to that found today (1998). The southern end of the south lake was flanked by the garden, and north of this by open parkland. Its northern end was enclosed by The Rookery, which also enclosed the outfall water course. An enclosed, ornamental garden was sited in the north-east corner of the woodland, on the east side of the water course, from where the north lake extended out into open parkland, flanked at its wider, northern end by scattered parkland trees. The southern pleasure ground was less extensive, much of the area south of the east drive being part of the south park.

PARK The park, laid to mixed arable and pasture and enclosed by a narrow belt of trees, is divided into three main sections: the west, lying west of the lakes, the east, lying east of the lakes, and the south, lying south of the east drive. Those areas laid to pasture generally contain scattered mature parkland trees. The west and east sections lie on level ground, whilst the south section is undulating, particularly running up a low hillside to the road to the south, and contains Meg Cottages (early C20), a group of estate cottages lying 600m south-east of the house. Views extend out between gaps in the surrounding belt to the hillsides to the north-east, east and south. The park retains a similar layout to that which it had acquired by the 1830s and later C19 (estate map, 1837; OS C19).

KITCHEN GARDEN The brick-walled kitchen gardens lie in the south-west corner of the site, bounded to the west by the village street and to the south by the Hitchin road. The area is divided into four sections defined by brick walls. The southern section is laid largely to rough grass with orchard trees and contains a C20 estate cottage. The adjacent section to the north, the largest compartment, is now largely disused, containing the remains of cold frames and a derelict ornamental lean-to greenhouse (early C20) on the north wall, with gardeners' bothies to the east of this. The compartment north of this contains a swimming pool and tennis court, whilst the northernmost, smallest compartment, reached off the west drive to the north, contains further associated lean-to buildings. The kitchen gardens were in existence in similar form to this by the 1830s (estate map, 1837).

REFERENCES

R J Whiteman (ed), *Hexton A Parish Survey* (1935), pp 85-92 *Hertfordshire Countryside* 7, no 28, (Spring 1953), p 148 A Ashley Cooper, *One Hundred Years of Hexton* (1982) *Hexton Manor Landscape Restoration Plan*, (Elizabeth Banks Associates 1992) *Maps Dury and Andrews, A topographical Map of Hartford-shire, 1766 Map of Hexton Estate, the Property of Joseph A Lautour Esq, 1837* (Hertfordshire Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1883/4 2nd edition published 1901 OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1901

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Description written: December 1998 Register Inspector: SR Edited: October 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.