

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

WIDCOMBE MANOR

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

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Name:	WIDCOMBE MANOR
District:	Bath and North East Somerset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.373260 Longitude: -2.3482777 National Grid Reference: ST 75854 63858 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000571 Date first listed: 30-Apr-1987

Details

Formal early C18 villa garden, with 1930s overlay.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of Widcombe was held by the abbots of Bath from Saxon times, with a brief interruption at the time of the Norman Conquest. The present garden may occupy land formerly part of the priors' deer park, while the house is built on the site of a former large farm or manor house probably dating from medieval times. After the Dissolution in 1534-9, Widcombe Manor and grounds were acquired by Richard Chapman, a wealthy cloth-merchant, former mayor, and MP for Bath. Fragments of stonework in the cellar of the present house, and an elaborate cobbled pavement in the forecourt, together with a notable dovecote and a garden house east of Church Street (outside the area here registered) suggest a house and garden of some substance. A drawing by Thomas Robins (c 1750s/60s) of the early house which post-dates its demolition and is therefore presumably a copy of an earlier image, confirms this, showing a rectangular axial design on the south side, with what may be the present dovecote standing to the west.

In 1702 Jane Chapman, daughter of Scarborough Chapman of Widcombe House, married Philip Bennet of Maperton, Wiltshire and after their deaths in 1722, their son, also Philip, inherited and began rebuilding the house a few years later, between c 1727 and 1730 (Pearson Assocs 1995). A small landscape garden was laid out at the same time. Bennet was MP for Bath between 1742 and 1747 and was a close friend of Ralph Allen of Prior Park (qv), whose house was located on the high ground south of Widcombe. Bennet almost certainly met Alexander Pope (1688-1744) on one of his long sojourns at Prior Park during the 1740s and may have benefited from his thoughts on garden design. By 1749 however Bennet was in financial difficulties and he let the house to Lord Hamilton. Although the family later returned to Widcombe, Bennet's son dying there in 1774, it was sold by Philip Bennet IV in 1812. Thus little was changed in the designed landscape during the C18 after its initial construction phase. In the early part of the C19 the house was owned by General Clapham to whom are attributed alterations to the house including a bay on the west front overlooking the valley. Later in the century, c 1890s, Lord Weymouth, later Marquis of Bath, occupied the house. Sir John Roper Wright, who acquired the Venetian fountain in the forecourt, was the owner in the 1920s. He in turn sold it to Horace Annesley Vachell in 1927 and made significant alterations to the garden layout near the house, advised by Harold Peto (1854-1933). Since that date the house and garden have had a number of different owners; they remain in private ownership. The present owners (2002) acquired the property in 1994 and started a programme of garden restoration in 1997.

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DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Widcombe Manor is in Widcombe village which adjoins the south-east side of the city of Bath, 1km from the city centre. Widcombe Manor is located near the foot of Widcombe Hill which ascends the east side of a limestone combe to Combe Down. The grounds cover c 3.4ha. The eastern and most of the southern boundary of the property are formed by a 3.5m high stone wall on Church Street, Widcombe, which curves round the combe. The north-west boundary is defined by properties in a modern housing development. The south-west boundary is formed by Prior Park Drive. The whole of the landscape is enclosed by a belt of trees but there are long views south up the valley to Prior Park on a hillside 1km away.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES A forecourt on the south side of the house is entered by a gateway with rusticated gate piers, topped by heraldic beasts, and iron gates from Church Street, Widcombe, to the south-east. The forecourt is separated from Church Street to the east by a 3.5m high stone wall, possibly dating back to the earlier house. On the west side is a stone Victorian balustrade separating the forecourt from the top terrace of the garden, with a central flight of stone steps down onto the terrace (forecourt walls, balustrade, gate piers and gates all listed grade I). In the centre of the forecourt is a bronze fountain (listed grade I), thought to be late C16 Venetian and installed in the 1920s.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Widcombe Manor (1727-30, listed grade I) was built for Philip Bennet, probably to a design by the Bristol mason and architect Thomas Greenway. It is a two-storey classical design of seven bays with a central pediment over the slightly projecting central three bays, constructed of Bath stone ashlar with a hipped Cotswold stone roof. It occupies a level platform on the east side of the site here registered. The south entrance front has a forecourt with a central fountain and the west, garden front, which has a C19 bay, overlooks falling ground to the west and south-west.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens at Widcombe Manor lie to both north and south, but principally on falling ground to the west which contains terraces and a central meadow. The west, or garden front of the house opens onto a broad gravel walk (1727-30) which runs for some 100m north-west to south-east between grass strips planted with topiary cones of yew backed by herbaceous borders. There is a 1.5m high stone retaining wall along on the west side of the terrace. At the southern end of the terrace, 80m south of the house, is a garden house, of knapped flint with Bath stone dressings, re-erected here in 1975 from a site in Wiltshire, replacing an earlier structure at this location in the late C19. At the northern end of the terrace, 20m north of the house, a swimming pool (late C20) has been constructed behind a clipped yew hedge. Below and some 15m north-west of this is the keyhole-shaped paved surround of a former plunge pool (C19), now infilled, reached by a flight of stone steps. Below and west of the broad walk is a grass terrace bounded by clipped yews. Centrally placed is a semicircular stone-lined pond reached from the broad walk by central stone steps, both part of the early C20 improvements for H A Vachell. Either side of the pond, curving stone steps descend via late C20 timber pergolas to a third terrace with beech-hedged enclosures to either side, the northern containing a lawn and the southern containing a tennis court. In the centre of this terrace is a late C20 parterre edged with box topiary and lavender, with a curved stone retaining wall on the west side overlooking a meadow. A winding gravel path leads from the southern end of the broad walk into a perimeter belt of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees which encircles the site. The path descends behind the garden house, passing some C18 lime trees, into woodland where there is an C18 well constructed of tufa, some 10m south of the garden house. This appears to have had an inflow from the site of the garden house as a structure on its site is shown on the OS map of 1885. Some 20m south of this is an arrangement of small pools and winding watercourses, presumably 1930s in origin, laid out under the trees in the perimeter planting.

The perimeter path continues round the garden with views northwards across a meadow, to approach a cascade and top pond located axially west-south-west of the house across the meadow. Immediately west of the pond stands a well-preserved C18 mount, ascended by a spiral path and surmounted with two C18 yews. In the C18 a chinoiserie pavilion also stood on the top of the mount (Pearson Assocs 1995), and a statue of Neptune was located on the original axis, overlooking the pond. North of this pond, and fed by a cascade is a second pond, which in turn feeds via a second cascade into a now dry stone-lined canal. In the early C18 this canal fed a corn mill and later in the C18 was used as an adjunct to commercial pleasure grounds known as Bagatelle, located on the west side of Prior Park Road (Avon Gardens Trust Newsletter, 1996). The path then winds c 120m

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up the north-west boundary of the garden, which is contained by thick perimeter planting of horse chestnuts, beech, yew, and laurel, backed by a 2m high rubble-stone wall.

The lower, western part of the site is grassland with flanking plantations to the north and south which are encroaching upon the open grassland. It is shown as grazing land in mid C19 engraved views (eg Westall, 1830), with railings to protect the flanking plantations. The perimeter path was designed to command views across the grazing land in the manner of a *ferme ornée*, while from the broad walk the park formed the setting for views to the mount.

In the current layout of garden, the axis through the steps, pond, and parterre is out of line with an original axis which ran from the west facade of the house, through the cascade to the mount. A Thomas Robins drawing of the house and garden (1750s/60s) shows a grand flight of steps leading down and west axially from the house but there is no evidence that this was ever constructed.

REFERENCES

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Maps T Thorp and J Overton, *Survey of the Manours of Bathampton, Claverton and Widcombe belonging to Ralph Allen Esq, c 1761* (28/854), (Bath City Record Office) Tithe map for Lyncombe and Widcombe parish, 1839 (Bath City Record Office)
OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1882-3, published 1885/7 1933 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1882-3, published 1885 OS 1:500: 1st edition surveyed 1882-3, published 1886
Illustrations T Robins, 3 drawings of Widcombe, late 1750s - mid 1760s (Courtauld Institute) S H Grimm, *View of a mount, near the school on the way to Prior Park*, 1789 (British Library) W Westall, *Widcombe Church*, engraving, 1830 (Bath Reference Library)

Description written: November 2002 Amended: May 2003 Register Inspector: DAL Edited: September 2003

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.