

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

THE VENETIAN WATERWAYS

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

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Name: THE VENETIAN WATERWAYS

County: Norfolk

District: Great Yarmouth (District Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.616547
Longitude: 1.7386082
National Grid Reference: TG 53174 08650
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1001618
Date first listed: 10-Jun-2002

Details

Public Seaside Park, 1926 and 1928, by S P Thompson.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT Great Yarmouth began to emerge as a seaside resort in the later C18 and became a leading holiday destination in the Victorian period. During the 1920s Great Yarmouth Borough Council began work to construct a major new sea wall along the length of the town. The reclaimed land which lay between this wall and the seafront promenade was progressively being developed as public pleasure gardens, including features such as a bowling green, yachting ponds, and tennis courts. In 1926 a scheme for a boating lake, designed by the Borough Engineer, was constructed and opened on the northern end of the promenade, within part of the North Denes dune area.

Following this work, Councillor Docwra's proposal for the addition of Venetian-style water gardens was taken up by the Council. The gardens were designed by S P Thompson, the Borough Engineer, who had previously designed the boating lake. The Venetian Waterways were constructed between January and June 1928 as part of relief work for the unemployed. It is thought that the channels were all dug out by hand, using shovels and wheelbarrows and 6639 tons of soil were brought in from nearby Caister to replace the sand. The scheme contained winding rivers for gondolas, paths through rock gardens, leading to picturesque bridges over the water, and several thatched shelters. The Venetian Waterways were opened to the public on 2 August 1928. The Venetian Waterways and the boating lake together are known as the Waterways.

During the following years the Venetian Waterways became a great attraction and were developed to include illuminations, the replacement of salt water with fresh water to facilitate skating in the winter, the addition of amplified music, and the construction of a model of HMS Nelson in the central pool. During the war, the Waterways were damaged by bombs, but not significantly enough to prevent opening as usual for the 1946 season, after which the attractions resumed their pre-war popularity.

The original open fencing along the eastern side of the Venetian Waterways was replaced in 1953, presumably after the January floods. During the 1980s many of the planted areas were laid to grass. The Waterways remain in public ownership and are still a municipal space for public use. Boat rides are also still available along the Waterways during the summer season.

DESCRIPTION

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LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Waterways are located along part of the northern half of the Great Yarmouth seafront, on a relatively narrow strip between North Drive and the beach, covering an area of 4.3 hectares. They consist of two distinct areas: a boating lake at the north end, with circa 1 hectare the smaller of the two areas, and the Venetian Waterways to the south, a series of waterways set within rock gardens and walkways.

The site of the Venetian Waterways is bounded to the west by the remains of a low privet and Euonymus hedge planted on the inside of a late C20 metal fence along North Drive. Along the southern boundary of the Venetian Waterways, a road to the beach divides the gardens from a parking area on part of the former tennis courts. To the east, the site is bounded by a solid concrete fence, with the Esplanade and the beach beyond this. A wide road to the beach separates the concrete-balustraded northern boundary of the Venetian Waterways from the boating lake, which is itself bounded to the north by a concrete wall, beyond which lie the open grass and dunes of the North Denes.

The boating lake is constructed as a sheltered, rectangular lake, with a single island in the middle, and banks on its four sides, largely excluding any views beyond the lake. Both the boating lake and the Venetian Waterways are constructed of reinforced concrete and remain filled with water. The Venetian Waterways are heavily landscaped to create the serpentine waterways with sloping banks, and the mounds, sunken garden and other earthworks on the six islands within the water.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance to the Venetian Waterways is in the south-west corner, off North Drive, through a red brick and concrete entrance covered by a metal archway. This is a mid C20 addition to the gardens; the original main entrance would probably have been in the centre of the southern boundary, where there is still an entrance. There are four additional entry points along the main road and one at the north end of the site. Each entrance is marked by a pair of moulded concrete piers surmounted by large concrete urns (many of the latter are now either damaged or lost). In the late C20 or early C21 a further entrance was added on the eastern side, connecting the Venetian Waterways with the Esplanade. All entrances lead directly onto the serpentine path which runs around the water.

There are six main entrances to the boating lake, one in the centre of the southern and northern boundaries, and two each on the western and eastern sides. These consist of a series of wide concrete steps, flanked by moulded concrete walls, with terminal piers identical to the ones at the Venetian Waterways. Between the two western entrances a further entrance gives access, via a bridge, to the central island.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS Within the Venetian Waterways several rustic shelters are located around the gardens, each with a distinct but complementary style. Each is constructed of timber and thatch, with the exception of the cafe on the eastern boundary which is a later addition and built of brick and thatch. The southernmost, rectangular shelter was destroyed by fire and has been replaced by a more open timber and tile structure. The largest, centrally located island originally contained two round shelters; only the southern one is still present, although it lacks its original window panes and part of its brick base has been replaced. A rectangular shelter on the central-western side of the Venetian Waterways has been lost. Two rectangular shelters at the northern end of the Venetian Waterways are probably original, although one has been converted to a kiosk.

The Venetian Waterways were originally laid out with a large number of bridges. Most of these were constructed in wood with rustic railings; these have all been lost and most have been replaced with simple, concrete and metal structures. Three original bridges survive the most elaborate of which lies to the north of the southern entrance. This north-south aligned, white-painted concrete bridge has some simple circular and lozenge-shaped mouldings on its sides and gives access to the southernmost of the six islands. The other two are located either side of the large central island and the surviving round shelter. These west-east aligned bridges are constructed from concrete with some red brick decorative features added.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The boating lake has a relatively large brick and thatch pavilion on the island in the centre of the lake. Although it still has a thatched roof, it has otherwise been altered considerably; it now serves as a café. On the eastern side of the lake, a low, flat-roofed, concrete building has been added in the late C20.

An original, concrete bridge, located on the central-western side of the boating lake survives and connects the island with the path on the western side of the lake. The sides of the bridge and its four flights of steps have moulded concrete railings with a pier surmounted by a large concrete urn at each end. These are similar to those on the terminal piers of the main entrances (but again most have been lost). A wooden bridge was added to the eastern side of the lake in the late C20.

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The basic layout of the gardens around the boating lake and within the Venetian Waterways remains unaltered. The boating lake contains a small oval-shaped island in the centre of the lake, which is occupied by the café. Surrounding the lake is a perimeter path running alongside rockeries and inset areas for seats. On the western side, in a small square clearing, stands a stone pillar, which would have originally supported a sundial. Only a few shrubs from the original planting schemes survive. The concrete-lined serpentine water channel of the Venetian Waterways is edged with small artificial rocks and winds around the gardens. It broadly follows the perimeter path and occasionally joins together to form a string of small islands running from south to north through the centre of the site. Each of the islands have been landscaped to include sunken areas, mounds, seating and ponds (some of which are of later C20 construction). A path leading off the perimeter circuit at the southern end of the site runs north through a series of these islands. Towards the northern end of the Venetian Waterways the channels open out to form a larger body of water, with a central island.

During the 1950s a series of Nursery Rhyme tableaux were placed around the sides of the Venetian Waterways and were illuminated at night for exciting trips in the dark but these have been removed. Other decorative features, such as a large 'volcano' in the water, and pergolas and statues in the gardens, have also been removed. The five original, electrically powered boats, built by J.W. Brooke & Co. of Lowestoft were named after Broadland rivers, but have also been removed. Originally much of the area was covered in rock gardens and areas with bedding plants. During the 1980s, a large part of the gardens of the Venetian Waterways were laid to lawn; now only some small rockeries, a few wind-pruned shrubs and small areas of bedding remain.

SOURCES Ashbourne, T, *The Boating Lake and Waterways*, in *Yarmouth Archaeology: Journal of Archaeology and Local History* (1998), 6-18 Copplestone, A W, *Great Yarmouth 1886-1936* (no date) [copy held in Norfolk Local Studies Library] Database of past and present photographs of Great Yarmouth, <http://yarmouth.things.cc/home.aspx>, retrieved on 19 February 2010 *Designing the Seaside: Architecture, Society and Nature* Eastern Daily Press (28 March 2003) English Heritage, *Supplementary Criteria for the assessment of 'Public Parks'*, in H Jordan, *Public Park Review* (2003) Hedges, A A C, *Yarmouth is an ancient town* (1959), 60 Layton, J, *Venetian Waterways*, www.ourgreatyarmouth.org.uk/page_id__160_path__0p44p55p.aspx, accessed on 19 February 2010 Minutes of Great Yarmouth Borough Council, 1919-56 (L352.018) [Norfolk Local Studies Library] OS maps, 1887, 1907, 1928 PastScape, www.pastscape.org.uk, retrieved on 19 February 2010. Viewfinder, www.viewfinder.english-heritage.org.uk, retrieved on 19 February 2010 Taigel, A, *Norfolk Gardens trust: Town Gardens Survey Volume One* (unpublished document, 1997) Temple, C R, *Great Yarmouth and Gorleston: a pictorial history* (1993) Wentworth-Day, J, *Broadland Adventure* (1951)

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION The Venetian Waterways, Great Yarmouth, a 1920s Park and Garden, is Registered at Grade II for the following principal reasons: * Architectural interest: The Venetian Waterways and boating lake were designed to complement each other with recurring decorative features across the two areas; the piers and large urns which flank the entrances, the bridges and the overall design of the landscape provide a unique composition. * Historic interest: The Venetian Waterways were created as part of a large relief scheme for the unemployed just prior to the Great Depression. * Intactness/Alteration: Although a number of the built structures and the original planting schemes have been removed, altered or replaced, the physical layout of the boating lake and the Venetian Waterways survives virtually intact. * Rarity: The Venetian Waterways are unique nationally.

Amended description: 2010

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.