

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

EASTON NESTON

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Name:	EASTON NESTON
District:	West Northamptonshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Easton Neston
District:	West Northamptonshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Shutlanger
District:	West Northamptonshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Towcester
label.localisation:	Latitude: 52.128314 Longitude: -0.96546760 National Grid Reference: SP 70916 48283 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1001032 Date first listed: 25-Jun-1984

Details

Formal gardens of c 1900 overlaid on earlier schemes of C17 and later date associated with a country house set in an early C19 landscape park which also has older elements, notably of a formal landscape of c 1700.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Richard Empson, Henry VII's notorious Treasurer, received licence to crenellate and impark Easton Neston in 1499, but forfeited his possessions when attainted in 1510. In 1530 the manor was sold to Richard Fermor, a successful Merchant of the Staple of Calais. It was his descendant Sir William Fermor (d 1711), MP for Northampton and a prominent politician, who rebuilt the house at Easton advised by his first wife's kinsman Sir Christopher Wren. In the event work only began following his second marriage in 1682, to Catherine, daughter of the third Lord Poulett. Fermor was created Baron Lempster in 1692, and in the same year made a financially advantageous third marriage to Sophia, daughter of the Marquis of Carmarthen. This may have prompted the radical alterations to the house which followed, although another factor may have been a desire to house properly the major part of the great collection of antique sculpture known as the Arundel Marbles which Fermor bought in 1691. William's son Thomas (d 1753), created Earl of Pomfret in 1725, held office at Court and was Governor of Guernsey. He met William Kent in Rome in 1718 and later employed him at the house.

The family retained the house until 1857 when it passed on the death of the fifth Earl to his sister's son Thomas Hesketh, sixth Baronet, of Rufford in Lancashire, who made Easton his seat. In 1935 Sir Thomas Hesketh was created Baron Hesketh. Easton remains in private hands in 1998.

DESCRIPTION

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LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Easton Neston House stands within its landscape park on the north side of Towcester, from which it is separated by a branch of the River Tove. Suburban growth began to extend in the mid 1990s along the west side of the old A43 (reduced to minor road status by a new by-pass further to the north-west) which bounds the park to the west. To the south-west the park runs up to the northern edge of the town and outside that to the A5. To the east and north the park boundary follows field edges. The area here registered is c 300ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approach is from First Lodge (listed grade II) and its gates on the west corner of the park. Of 1822-3 and designed by John Raffield (fl 1770s-1825), the gate comprises a pair of single-storey, limestone ashlar pavilions with Venetian windows, linked by iron spear railings to rusticated stone gate piers. From this a drive curves east and north to the sunken road which runs around the west side of the pleasure grounds. Off this there is access to the service yard north of the House. Second Lodge lies 900m north-east of First Lodge. Also by Raffield, it is a two-storey limestone building with a hipped slate roof. It stands south of cast-iron gates with spear finials supported on gate piers similar to those at First Lodge. From it a drive runs south-east to the road around the pleasure grounds. Third Lodge, a functional two-storey brick and stone building of the later C19, lies further north up the old A43, outside the registered area. On the north side of the park there is access from the pair of early C19 ironstone lodges with gate (listed grade II) on the south-west corner of Hulcote village. Close to the southern tip of the park is the most impressive of the entrances, the Chain Lodge (listed grade I) of 1822-3, also by Raffield and based on the screen at Sion House. Of Coade stone it is signed by William Croggan. From this a drive passes northwards across Towcester racecourse, which occupies the southern third of the park, via a bridge to the east of the Waterhall fishponds, before curving north-west to pass by the south side of St Mary's church on the south edge of the pleasure grounds. All five drives were present by 1806, probably having been established since 1791.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Easton Neston House (listed grade I) comprises a main, nine-bay, Helmdon ashlar house of the very end of the C17 and early C18. To the west, either side of the forecourt, it was connected by linking blocks to single-storey red-brick service pavilions of the 1680s. Of these only that to the north, used as a laundry, survives. The south pavilion housed stables, and was demolished 1780 x 1806 when a new stable court was built north of the main house.

The architect of the first phase of the present mansion, the two service pavilions and the carcass of the 'Great house' (the mansion itself) is unknown, although Sir Christopher Wren (d 1723) gave advice on building materials. In the 1690s, although much of the house had been completed, the design was dramatically adapted by Nicholas Hawksmoor (d 1736), Wren's trusted assistant. Begun when aged about twenty-five, it is among his earliest independent works, and other than the flooring-over of the great hall there have been few changes. Attached to the north, and linking the House with the kitchen garden, is a red-brick real tennis court of 1887 (listed grade II). This has a white-painted exterior balcony along its east side, overlooking the gardens.

To the north of the House, and abutting the west side of the kitchen garden, is a quadrangular, early C19 stables block (listed grade II) by John Raffield. This has been converted to workshops.

The House's predecessor, a large, late medieval house visited by Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I, stood on lower ground east of St Mary's church (listed grade I), which itself stands c 50m south of Easton Neston House.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The House and its surrounding formal and kitchen gardens lie within a roughly circular pleasure ground. To the east this is separated from the park beyond by a sunken ironstone wall, while to the west the drive around the perimeter of the pleasure ground is carried in a slight cutting across the line of the avenue. Here and elsewhere iron railings are used to keep stock out.

The House faces west, down a 50m long gravelled forecourt. Along the south side is a tall brick wall pierced with two broad gateways with stone piers of different designs and elaborate wrought-iron gates. There is another gate and statue niche west of the brick pavilion along the north side of the forecourt. At the west end of the forecourt is a low balustraded wall, with a central opening giving onto steps down to the grass walk beyond. From here there is a view down the walk to the gate piers which lie 250m to the west and down the west avenue beyond.

The forecourt was drastically remodelled in the early C20, probably c 1920, and what is to be seen today is largely of this date. Also of c 1920 are the complex formal gardens to north, south and especially east of the House. The designer is unknown. The east gateways on the south side of the forecourt lead through to a square, yew-hedged compartment with a central stone seat.

Pillars stand to either side of the gateway to the next, rectangular, yew-hedged section of the garden, within which there is a rotunda with birdcage roof. There is a simpler formal garden with yew hedging connecting the north side of the House with the kitchen garden. The East Parterre garden lies immediately east of the House; its main feature is a 60m long bow-ended basin lined with tall yew hedging. The level terrace is partly lawned and partly brick- and concrete slab-paved connects basin and House. This is planted with low topiary, notably hedged spirals. Flanking the terrace, and the basin, are further yew-hedged compartments. There is an axial view down the East Parterre garden from the double staircase to the central door to the House, over the terrace and basin and out to the park beyond, the line being continued by the east avenue and the canal.

About 200m north of the basin, on an axial path therefrom and forming a gateway to The Wilderness beyond, is a limestone ashlar garden building (listed grade I) of 1641, perhaps the 'old Banqueting House' noted by Tillemans in 1719 (Bailey 1996, 67) and the 'garden house' seen by John Loveday in 1731 (see Markham 1984) when it contained statues. Of three bays, the south facade has a central door, two windows, and a central pedimented attic displaying a coat of arms which is flanked with quarter-circle curved walls. The side elevations each have two windows, while to the north is a central door. The interior is largely stripped but residual plasterwork includes niches surrounded with wreaths. Standing on the stone-flagged floor is an inscribed marble slab, the tomb of a pug (d 1754).

The Wilderness, in the C19 and for much of the C20 roughly circular and 200m in diameter, forms a northward extension of the pleasure grounds. Comprising a collection of mature specimen trees with grass walks, it was already present by 1806 and in the mid 1820s was described as 'Shrubbery' (Bryant, 1827). On its east edge is an icehouse. In the later C20 the woodland to its east and south received additional planting, effectively extending The Wilderness around the north side of the irregular pool 200m north-east of the House which map evidence suggests was excavated in the 1890s.

Although his imperfect grasp of the detailed local topography suggests he may never have visited Easton, Wren provided advice on the gardens as well as the House. In an undated letter, probably of 1684 (Heward and Taylor 1996, 200), he discusses how the height of the 'walls on the corner of the garden next the church' should be such as not to prevent a view to Towcester, and how the 'greenhouses may have staircases without ... with a chimney for the room above' (CL 1927, 266-7). Interspersed about the garden, and set about the east front of the House, were statues and busts, the celebrated Arundel Marbles. These were purchased by Sir William Fermor in 1691 and taken to Easton Neston in 1692. Some were used south of the House, 'at the end of the terrace on the left hand of the House, adjoining the garden wall' (Bailey 1996, 56; today the site of the real tennis court) in 'the Tomb of Germanicus', a composite pastiche with niches beneath a pedimented arch. The structure apparently appears in a view of 1719 (ibid, 52) and was also noted in 1731 by Loveday. The 1719 view shows further statuary set about an elaborate walled parterre garden in the Dutch style to the east of the House. This has a central circular pool and axial and diagonal gravel walks lined with conical and smaller shrubs. In the north-west corner of the garden is shown a column topped with a statue of Apollo, while in the centre of the garden's north wall is a gate whose piers closely resembled those which now stand 350m west of the House. Another view of 1719 (Bailey 1996, 50) suggests that to the west of the House, beyond the forecourt, there was a square or rectangular pool.

In 1734 George Vertue compiled a Description of Easton Neston (1758), the best description of the disposition of the Arundel Marbles. He notes 'The east front looks onto a parterre, the evergreens of which are taking up, to bring it to a modern taste.' (Bailey 1996, 54). This ambiguous statement may indicate the removal of the topiary from the East Parterre, although the Arundel Marbles remained at Easton Neston until 1755 when presented to the University of Oxford. In 1806 the east side of the House opened straight onto a lawn, separated from the park beyond by the ha-ha. Early C20 photographs (CL) show the lawn east of the House, then slightly terraced.

PARK The House lies in the central-northern part of its park, the southern part of which is occupied by Towcester racecourse. Both halves of the park slope down towards the River Tove which runs from west to east through the park. Alongside the drive east of First Lodge the Tove has been broadened as the slightly serpentine Broad Water. The park is bounded to the south-west, along the A5, with a tall brick wall, and by a stone one down its west side. South of Third Lodge, outside the registered area, the latter turns to brick, probably indicating a northward extension of the park in the C19.

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Elements of east and west avenues on a common axial line still survive. These were probably planted in the earlier C18. That to the west, of limes, runs for 550m up to the boundary of the park. It is aligned on the spire of Greens Norton church, 3km distant, which forms an eyecatcher, although the effect has been greatly lessened by the construction (in progress 1997-8) of housing on the line of the avenue immediately west of the park boundary. An elaborate pair of mid C17 stone gate piers (listed grade I) stand on the line of the avenue on a slight rise c 350m from the House. These were moved here, after 1806, probably from the centre of the north wall of the East Parterre (cf Bailey 1996, 52). Originally, and until the area was developed for housing in the 1990s, the line of the avenue continued for a further 800m, to the A5. Eastward of the House the avenue has been removed for its first 700m, to the end of a 500m long canal, heavily embanked along its south side, which continues the axial line. From the east end of the canal the avenue, here double, survives, extending eastward for a further 1km.

Immediately south of Easton church are the earthwork remains of a part of the village of Easton Neston, which although still populous in the later Middle Ages with twenty-nine tax payers in 1525, was probably deserted by 1673. That shrinkage and desertion may have been associated with imparkment. Licence to impark 400 acres (c 166ha) of land and 30 acres (12.5ha) of woodland at Easton Neston and Hulcote was acquired in 1499, and there was a park here in 1541 and 1610. In the early C19 that part of the park south of the church was called 'Old Park', and this may represent its historic core. In 1700, when the House was rebuilt, the park ran only 350m west of the House, to the then line of the Towcester to Northampton road. Jefferys' map of 1791 appears to show the park extending well west of the present boundary, roughly to the line of the modern A43. The present boundary was probably established between 1791 and 1806, at the time when the new, straight Northampton Road was built and the road from Hulcote to Towcester past the west side of the House was closed. In or soon after 1819 the park was extended to the south, across the River Tove, to take in Heathencote Field. This is the part of the park where Towcester racecourse was later established. North of the River Tove there is extensive ridge and furrow beneath the permanent pasture. Around the racecourse the ground is largely levelled and improved, and within the course itself is a lake dug in the 1990s.

KITCHEN GARDEN The C18 walled kitchen garden (walls, piers and ironwork listed grade II) lies north of the House and is abutted to the west by the stables. It is 130m long north/south by 70m east/west. The main gate is in the centre of the south side, where tall stone gate piers support elaborate wrought-iron gates with screens to either side, in 1908 the ironwork being described as of Spanish origin and recent installation. From this an axial path lined with apple espaliers leads north to a greenhouse of c 1900 built against the north wall. To either side are lawns with fruit trees, and in the south-east part a hard tennis court. At the south-east corner of the garden is a brick pavilion with access both to the kitchen garden and to the formal garden compartment to the south. North of the rectangular garden compartment is a semicircular one, its east half with C19 sheds along its south side and some glasshouses, and its west half workshops and a barn.

The kitchen garden was probably already sited here by c 1680. In the early C18 two greenhouses stood within the garden, one of which contained statuary. Footings, believed to be of these buildings, lie just beneath the modern lawns.

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1892 2nd edition published 1900

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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.