

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

ASTON HALL

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Name:	ASTON HALL
District:	Birmingham (Metropolitan Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 52.505959 Longitude: -1.8841715 National Grid Reference: SP 07959 89791 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001199 Date first listed: 01-Jul-1986

Details

Remains of formal gardens and a deer park associated with an early C17 country house, reworked in mid C19 and early C20 as public park and pleasure grounds.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

From the C14 the Holtes were lords of Aston, living until the later C16 at Duddeston, another manor in Aston parish. Thomas Holte inherited Aston in 1592 from his father Edward when twenty-one years old. Before he was thirty Thomas had served as High Sheriff of the county, was knighted in 1603 and created a baronet in 1611. Construction of a magnificent new house at Aston began six years later. Sir Thomas died in 1654, the estate thereafter descending in his family until 1817, when Heneage Legge, who had inherited the estate in 1794 under the terms of the will of Sir Lister Holte (d 1770), obtained an Act of Parliament to sell the estate. The Hall and Park were bought by Whitehead and Greenway, Warwick bankers, who leased the Hall to James Watt, the son of the famous engineer. He lived there until his death in 1848.

In 1848 the greater part of the estate was sold for building, leaving the fate of the Hall and the 17ha left with it uncertain. From 1850 an attempt was made to secure the Hall and grounds for the town of Birmingham as a museum and place of public recreation. In 1857 a private company, the Aston Hall and Park Co, was formed, a purchase price agreed, and the grounds opened as a park by Queen Victoria in 1858. Poor management and the accidental death of Mrs Powell, 'the female Blondin' (buried at Witton Cemetery, qv) during a high-wire act in 1863 led to the closure of the pleasure grounds in 1864. Later in that year the final £19,000 of the £35,000 purchase money was provided by the City of Birmingham, thereby securing the future of Aston Hall. This is believed to be the first instance where a major historic building was acquired by a local authority in order to ensure its survival.

From the mid 1920s considerable changes were made to the grounds, following a park scheme proposed in 1924 by Birmingham Civic Society. These changes were designed to cope better with the heavy use they sustained, and to create gardens whose layout and planting would reflect the C17 character of the Hall. The numerous sports facilities - tennis courts, bowling greens, playing fields, children's playground - were to some extent screened from the Hall itself, while formal bedding schemes were introduced east and west of the building, with an elaborate garden scheme extending west from the Terrace for 250m.

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After many years as a general museum the Hall was refurbished and restored in the years after 1946 and is now fitted out to show how a major house looked and was furnished in the C17 and C18. The park remains open, a mixture of open space, formal gardens, and playground and sports facilities.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Aston Hall and its associated park lie on high ground c 4km north-east of the centre of Birmingham, close to Aston church and the Aston Villa Football Ground which stand immediately north-east and north of the park. The park is bounded by the A38(M) Aston Expressway to the east, and by largely C19 urban development to the west (Bevington Road), north (Trinity Road), and south (Frederick Road). The area here registered is c 18ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES There is vehicular access off Frederick Road to the south of the park, with a main pedestrian approach from the north-east off Trinity Road as well as secondary entrances to the north-west and from the south.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Aston Hall (listed grade I) was begun on one of the highest points on the Aston estate in 1618 and completed in 1635, four years after Sir Thomas Holte had moved there. The architect was possibly John Thorpe (c 1565-1655?) (CL 1953, 553-4). Some alterations were made later, probably after damage in the Civil War, as well as in the 1730s or early 1740s. It is a red-brick building with diaper patterning in darker bricks, with stone facings and quoins only at the corners. The Hall comprises an east-facing hall block with projecting wings enclosing a courtyard. The second storey of the west front is a long gallery. A chapel projects from the south front with an arcaded loggia to one side. The north range housed the kitchens. Brick walls with decorative semicircular crests (copied at Strawberry Hill, qv, in 1761) connect the east ends of the north and south wings with lodges (listed grade I), either of c 1635 or a little later. These are of dark brick with stone dressings, two-storeyed, and have attics with shaped gables. On the east face of each lodge is a two-storeyed bay window. A wall with screen and central gateway originally linked them.

North of the Hall are red-brick stables (listed grade I) of c 1630.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS As designed c 1630 the main garden compartment lay west of the Hall, overlooked from the long gallery and balancing the forecourt to the east.

A 180m long terrace walk, in the C17 known as the Great Walk, runs across the west front of the Hall. In 1637 it was intended that a banqueting house be built at either end of the Walk. These were to be built according to a design supplied by Sir Thomas Holte (rather than, as originally intended, being copies of those at Campden House, Gloucestershire). Whether the southern banqueting house was ever built is unknown, but the basement of the northern one, demolished before the 1750s, survives as the lower section of one of the C19 balustraded bastions which terminate either end of the Walk.

West of the terrace, an area occupied in the C17 and in 1758 by a bowling green, are three gently terraced lawns with formal beds, in all occupying c 80m north/south by 250m east/west. These are probably of the early C19, when James Watt, the Hall's tenant, made many improvements to its surrounds. On the most easterly lawn are two urns, while in the centre of the most westerly lawn is a statue. Steps lead down from the centre of the west side of the west lawn to a north/south walk, and then continue down to a further (fourth) lawn which now forms part of the park rather than the garden. Further formal lawns lie north and south of the middle lawn west of the Hall, below the terrace walk.

A grass oval with central bed occupies the centre of the east forecourt. This arrangement was established c 1740, when it replaced a parterre with trimmed yews and sculptures. That was laid out here c 1700, about the time the original brick screen wall along the east side of the forecourt was replaced by wrought-iron work.

South of the Hall is a level lawn, with the Hall's car park to its east. A parterre was laid out south of the Hall c 1699, which was replaced in the C18 by a walled garden. The colonnade beneath the Hall was glazed and converted to a greenhouse. The garden south of the Hall became a flower garden and shrubbery in the late C18. A Victorian bandstand was removed in 1924. North of the Hall is a flat lawn. This occupies the site of a bowling green present in 1758 and probably laid out in the 1630s as a part of the original design. Service buildings and a bleaching green, also C17, survived until the later C19.

PARK Aston Park surrounds Aston Hall, running downhill from it for c 250m.

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Approaching uphill towards the east forecourt from the Trinity Road boundary of the park is a double avenue, mostly of C20 horse chestnut. At its east end is a statue pedestal. The avenue replaced the C17 Chestnut Avenue which extended 1km from the Hall. In the C18 and C19 a second avenue, of sycamores, approached from the south.

Various other lines of trees and avenues, all C20, radiate from the Hall and line approaches to it, especially on its south and west sides. There is a small area with children's play equipment to the west of the entrance off Frederick Street, and a much larger one north of the Hall where there are also various flat-roofed park buildings of the later C20. South-west and north-west of the Hall are large open spaces (the former partly occupied by a football pitch), while east and south-east of it is a sports field and hard tennis courts.

Aston Park was created in the second decade of the C17 over what had been the open fields of Aston, and was enlarged in 1621 when Sir Thomas Holte was granted licence to inclose highways. Then, as in 1758 soon after the park was walled, it comprised 327 acres (c 136ha). Features included several irregular lakes and ponds, and avenues. In 1758 the main avenue (the Chestnut Avenue) ran east from the forecourt to a point well beyond the boundary of the park; running south from this were three subsidiary avenues. By 1838 only the main avenue survived.

In 1818 Aston Park was bought together with the Hall by Whitehead and Greenway. Its outlying parts were split into paddocks and let, while 156 acres (c 65ha) were let with the Hall. During the 1840s that area shrank as Lozells and Aston New Town were built. Further urban development around the present boundary of the park followed James Watt junior's death in 1848, at which time the deer herd was dispersed.

REFERENCES

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OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1890 2nd edition published 1917 1938 edition

Description written: January 1998 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: October 1999

This list entry was subject to a Minor Amendment on 25/06/2019

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.