

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

PENNS IN THE ROCKS

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

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Name:	PENNS IN THE ROCKS
County:	East Sussex
District:	Wealden (District Authority)
Parish:	Withyham
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.091235 Longitude: 0.16602282 National Grid Reference: TQ 51784 34667 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1000233 Date first listed: 25-Mar-1987

Details

A largely C20 garden laid out by Dorothy Wellesley around natural rock formations and developed later with advice from Lanning Roper, with surviving C19 features and set within C19 parkland and woodland.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Penns in the Rocks, or Penns Rocks as it was referred to in deeds from 1829 until well into the C20, was the home of William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania and of his son and William Penn IV, from 1672 until 1762. Rocks Farm, the farmhouse which formerly stood on the site of the present house, was owned in the mid C17 by the Springett family who had long been concerned with the Sussex iron industry. It was acquired by William Penn on his marriage in 1672 to Gulielma Springett. In 1762, William Penn IV's son sold Rocks Farm to Abraham Osborn whose grandchildren, Augustus and Jane Currey, sold it to Steven Beeching in the early 1830s (sale plan dated 1832). He extended and enlarged the house before selling it in 1852 to John Pryce. It remained in the Rhys Pryce family, who in the mid C19 laid out some of the structure of the present garden, until it became the home of the poetess, Dorothy Wellesley (Lady Gerald Wellesley), in 1925. She made a number of additions to the garden and its planting before she died in 1953. The house, gardens and surrounding parkland and woodland were bought and further developed, with advice from Lanning Roper, by Lord and Lady Gibson in 1956 and the property remains (1997) in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Penns in the Rocks lies on the east side of the B2188, c 3km south-east of Groombridge village and c 3km from the north-east edge of Crowborough. The formal, enclosed gardens and the pleasure grounds containing the rock outcrops and the stream garden cover an area of c 2.5ha while the surrounding parkland and the woodland with the ornamental lake comprise a further 23ha.

The site is largely enclosed by wooden or wire estate fencing. It is bounded to the north and east by arable fields enclosed with copses with woodland beyond. To the south is a similar but more heavily wooded landscape. Only the width of the entrance gates directly borders the B2188, the site being otherwise separated from the road on its west boundary by wooded farmland.

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The registered site lies within one of the small-scale, steep-sided valleys or ghylls typical of the Sussex High Weald landscape. Two streams rising south of the boundary, in the forked head of the valley, flow north-eastwards to converge in the centre of the site. The valley sides rise steeply from the stream to the eastern and western boundaries.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The entrance to Penns in the Rocks is from the B2188, through white-painted gates set within a line of palisade fencing. The gravelled drive winds c 600m south-eastwards down the side of the valley through woodland with open grassy glades, passing the outcrop of High Rocks to the south before crossing the stream in the valley bottom. The drive then climbs the eastern side of the valley, skirting to the north of the parkland which slopes down from the west front of the house and arriving on the east front in a square, gravelled courtyard. The present route appears to follow the realignment of the drive made in 1858 (estate archives) for which a new entrance to the house was created at the east corner of the north wing. In the late C18, the drive approached the house on the south-west side of the parkland slope, passing to the east side of the rocks and arriving at the raised south front (CL 1961). It may have entered the estate from the north and passed along the west side of the stream to the present bridging point (no drive from the west is shown on the 1832 sale plan).

The north side of the entrance courtyard is enclosed by a line of pleached limes. On the south and west sides, drystone walls topped with clipped hedges separate the courtyard from the lawns and gardens beyond. A stone-built garage, converted from a former farm building, and the walled garden, define the east side. A double flight of stone steps with an iron-work balustrade leads up from the west side of the courtyard onto a stone terrace and to the principal entrance to the house on the south front. The layout of the courtyard dates from the late 1950s (CL 1974).

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Penns in the Rocks (listed grade II*) lies at the eastern end of the site on the upper slopes of the valley side, with views westwards over parkland and the stream valley. The house originated as a farmhouse, built before 1672 but possibly rebuilt in c 1700 (CL 1961). The present house forms a shallow U shape, the re-entrant space occupied partly by a raised terrace facing the eastern entrance courtyard. Remnants of the farmhouse are incorporated in the central block. The south, Georgian range, built on a raised platform (its ground floor lies at the first-floor level of the rest of the house), was probably added by the Penn family c 1737-40 while the reconstruction of the central block and the addition of the north range date from the early 1830s. The present principal entrance was re-established in its C18 position on the south front in the late 1950s.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The ornamental gardens comprise the informal landscape of the rock outcrops and the stream to the south-west and south of the house plus a series of four rectangular enclosures to the east of the entrance courtyard. The structure of the present, mature planting and features, introduced in the 1960s, were influenced by advice from Lanning Roper (CL 1974; Lord Gibson pers comm, 1997) although no plans exist.

The south front of the house opens onto a stone terrace and an extensive lawn which falls gently southwards to the foot of a steeper, facing slope, which is enclosed on the west side by the rocks. A grass path meanders up the slope through bracken and yellow azaleas and a scatter of trees, a number of which were planted in the 1990s to replace those lost in the storm of 1987. At the summit, and on the axis of the front door, is the Temple of Friendship (listed grade II) erected by Dorothy Wellesley in 1938 to 'those poets who loved Penns' (inscription, with names including W B Yeats, on the paved floor). Its open construction of timber columns flanked by brick wings allows vistas both north and west, to the house and out over the rock outcrops, also southwards across lightly wooded ground (largely planted after 1910, as it is not shown on the OS edition of that date) to palisade gates, c 30m distant on the southern boundary of the site.

From a point on the slope c 10m north of the Temple, a further broad glade descends westwards to create, with two paths branching northwards, a circuit around and between the immense (up to c 5m high) boulders. A dense scatter of mature, newly planted (1990s) and seedling trees dot the landscape, some springing from crevices within the rocks.

The rocks form the southern boundary of the large, level lawn which extends c 35m westwards from the west front of the house to a stone ha-ha. The lawn and ha-ha were created in 1858 (estate archive) on the site of the former farmyard to Rocks Farm. Climbing shrubs grow on trellis-work against the house wall and one immense cedar tree on the lawn survives from the pair planted in 1858 and shown on the OS 1st edition map surveyed 1874. This map also shows a central, circular pool which was removed in the late 1960s (CL 1974). The lawn is enclosed from the drive on the north side by a curving brick wall, also built when the lawn was laid out. From the lawn, there is a vista westwards over intervening parkland to the classical

temple on the west side of the lake. This was brought to the site from the Manor House, Finchley, by the present owners in 1963 and erected in 1966.

East of the house and entrance courtyard, steps flanked by Irish yews lead up from the drive into the walled garden which slopes from east to west. Built in 1860 (estate archives) and shown laid out as a kitchen garden on the OS 1st edition, it is planted with wide, mixed borders against the stone walls while the central area is laid to lawn and bordered by a stone path. An axial grass path, terminated at each end by wrought-iron gates erected by Dorothy Wellesley in the 1920s, connects this garden with the compartments to the north and south. The path is framed by a symmetrical arrangement of box-edged rose beds and linear trios of pear trees. The present layout of the walled garden was designed by Lanning Roper in the late 1960s to replace a previous one of central rectangular beds and an avenue of cherries (CL 1974).

North of the walled garden, the axial path leads into the present kitchen garden which is enclosed on three sides by tall, clipped hedges. East of the path, which is partly flanked with pleached limes, is a range of glasshouses (first shown on the OS edition of 1910). On the west side is a cruciform herb and fruit garden, laid out in the late C20. The axial path leads on northwards into the last and largest compartment, terminating some 80m from the kitchen garden in further wrought-iron gates, matching those to the walled garden but hung on free-standing stone gate piers set in yew hedging and opening onto pasture land. These were also erected by Dorothy Wellesley. Either side of the path, open grass is lightly dotted with flowering trees planted in the late 1960s to replace fruit trees and flowering shrubs. In an earlier scheme by Dorothy Wellesley (photographs in private collection) massed irises are shown bordering the path.

South of the walled garden, the gates lead into the southernmost compartment. It is enclosed on the east side by a tall clipped hedge and bisected by an avenue, still on the line of the main axis, of white mulberry trees. These were planted in 1997 to replace the previous avenue of crab apples. The avenue ends at a large, semicircular stone seat, installed in the 1960s and backed by clipped yew. East of the avenue the lawns surround an oblong swimming pool; built at its north end against the walled garden is an open-fronted summerhouse with a steeply pitched tiled roof. Both features were built by Dorothy Wellesley in 1926 (Lord Gibson pers comm, 1997). At the south end of the pool is a seat to a design by Sir Edwin Lutyens, framed by two Versailles tubs containing clipped bay trees.

South of the pool, a grass path winds through informal planting of shrubs and trees and over a stone bridge to a collection of old roses laid out in the 1960s in island beds on the site of the former grass tennis court of the 1920s. West of and running parallel to the pool and mulberry avenue is a narrow, grassy stream valley, dotted with shrubs and spanned by a bridge festooned with wisteria. At its north end, tucked against the south wall of the walled garden, the stream forms a small, shrub-enclosed lily pool with sculpture. From the pool, steps lead both eastwards up to the walled garden gates and westwards, beneath hornbeam and rose arbours, onto the south lawn.

PARK Open parkland lies on the valley slopes to the north-west and south-west of the house. Its tree cover consists only of a new clump planted on the slopes to the south-west and one or two individual trees, planted since the storm of 1987. Only the slopes immediately below the house to the north-west are shown established as parkland on the OS edition of 1874 although tree cover, now (1990s) gone, was limited to linear groups on the southern fringe. It is likely to have been laid out as parkland in the mid C19 when the drive was re-routed, as the sale particulars map of 1832 shows the land still with field divisions.

The remainder of the park has a wooded character, with areas ranging from closed canopy broad-leaved woodland to open, light woodland with glades and coppice. Downstream from the bridge but now (1990s) silted up, are depressions which field and map evidence (OS 1910) indicate may have been former hammer ponds. The ornamental lake which lies upstream some 120m south-west of the bridge, was also probably a hammer pond. It was enlarged and given its present triangular shape, ornamental planting, weir and temple on the north-west bank in the 1960s.

REFERENCES

D Wellesley, *Far Have I Travelled* (1952), pp 157-76 *Country Life*, 129 (23 March 1961), pp 644-7; (30 March 1961), pp 704-7; 155 (20 June 1974), pp 1624-6 I Nairn and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex* (1965), pp 512-13 T Wright, *Gardens of Britain* 4, (1978), pp 171-2 *The Garden* 106, pt 4 (April 1981), pp 134-41

Maps A Plan of The Penns Rocks Estate, near Tunbridge Wells....., Sale Particulars 1832, (private collection), [copy on EH file]

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1874 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1874 2nd edition published 1910

Archival items The estate archives are held in a private collection.

Description written: April 1997 Amended: July 1998 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: March 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.