

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BABINGTON HOUSE

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Name:	BABINGTON HOUSE
County:	Somerset
District:	Mendip (District Authority)
Parish:	Kilmersdon
County:	Somerset
District:	Mendip (District Authority)
Parish:	Mells
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.256399 Longitude: -2.4230985 National Grid Reference: ST 70571 50889 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001137 Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

C18 and C19 gardens and pleasure grounds, surrounded by mid C18 and C19 parkland.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

During the medieval period, a village with a church and manor existed at Babington (CL 1943). The property passed through several hands until it was forfeit to the Crown in 1593. By the late C17, the manor belonged to Thomas Pacey (d 1687) who left it to his sister Margaret, who was married to a Bristol alderman, William Crabb. Babington was inherited by the Crabbs' eldest daughter, Elizabeth, wife of Henry Mompesson of Corston, Wiltshire (1633-1715) who was Sheriff of Somerset in 1698. Mompesson was responsible for building the present house c 1705.

Babington was inherited by the Mompessons' niece, Mrs Elizabeth Long, who c 1750 rebuilt the medieval parish church adjacent to the House and cleared away any surviving elements of the village in order to create the park (Bond 1998). In 1758, Mrs Long's daughter and heiress, Judith, married Major Norton Knatchbull, son of Sir Edward Knatchbull, Bt of Mersham Hatch, Kent, who had been sent to Somerset to suppress a riot among weavers in Shepton Mallet (CL 1943). Babington was inherited by successive members of the Knatchbull family until 1952, when the House and immediate grounds were sold. The House subsequently passed through several hands before becoming a hotel and club c 2000. Today (2003) the site is in divided ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Babington House is situated c 1.2km south-east of Kilmersdon, c 620m to the north of a minor road, Charity Lane, which forms the southern boundary of the site. The c 57ha site comprises c 5ha of gardens, pleasure grounds and lakes, and c 52ha of parkland and ornamental plantations. To the north, west, and south-east the site adjoins agricultural land, from which it is separated by hedges, and to the east it adjoins a minor road.

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The site slopes gently from south to north-west, with a valley containing a stream dammed to form a chain of pools extending from south-west to north-east to the west of the House, and a further valley, also containing a dammed stream, falling away to the north, c 650m north-north-west of the House. There are views north and north-east across the park and surrounding country towards Ammerdown House, Somerset (qv) and the Jolliffe Column, a mid C19 folly in Ammerdown Park.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Babington House is approached from the minor road which forms the eastern boundary of the site, at a point c 400m south-south-west of the junction known as Cornish's Grave. The east or principal entrance is marked by a mid C19 lodge, c 450m east of the House, and leads to a tarmac drive which follows a straight course for c 350m west-north-west through a beech avenue, separated from the park to the north and south by C19 fences. The drive divides immediately south-east of the parish church of St Margaret, c 90m south-east of the House, with one branch leading c 130m south-west to reach the stables (C18, listed grade II), coach house, saw pit, and a former farmyard south-west of the House, the other sweeping c 100m north-west through pleasure grounds to reach a rectangular carriage turn below the east facade of the House.

A track, formerly a drive, enters the site from Charity Lane to the south, immediately west of Charity Cottage (C17, listed grade II). The former entrance is marked by a pair of stone piers (early C18, listed grade II) constructed in rusticated ashlar and supporting stone ball finials, c 600m south of the House. The line of the former drive extends north through the park for c 550m and is marked by a partial avenue of mature beech trees. The former south drive joins the east drive immediately south of the parish church.

Another track, formerly a drive, enters the site from the B3139 road, c 1.3km north-west of the House and outside the site, c 400m east of the village of Kilmersdon. The track ascends for c 200m before entering the registered site at the northern boundary of Babington Wood and climbs gently southwards for c 500m, extending parallel to, and east of a stream which is dammed to form a series of picturesque cascades. Sweeping south-east, the track continues for c 250m before entering the park through an elaborate gateway (early C18, listed grade II) flanked by a pair of rusticated and vermiculated piers. The gates are now (2003) missing. To each side lower ashlar walls contain pedestrian gates and are terminated to east and west by secondary piers. The track continues for c 200m south-east through the park before crossing a further stream and turning south-south-east for c 275m to form the boundary between the pleasure grounds and the park. Passing to the east of the parish church, this former north-west drive joins the east drive at its junction with the former south drive. The north-west drive appears to have formed the principal early C18 approach to the House, while it, together with the south-west service drive, form two sides of the triangular-shaped pleasure grounds.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Babington House (listed grade II*) stands on level ground towards the western boundary of the site. The two-storey house is constructed in stone with a hipped tile roof and dormer windows. The east, entrance facade comprises seven bays with a central door placed beneath a carved stone shell hood and the south facade has a projecting Gothick-style door leading to the gardens. The north facade has a full-height bow window. A single-storey service wing extends west from the south-west corner of the House. Babington House was built c 1705 for Henry Mompesson, who had acquired the property in right of his wife. The House was altered and extended in 1790 for Capt Charles Knatchbull, perhaps by the Bath architect John Patch.

The parish church of St Margaret (listed grade I) which stands in the pleasure grounds c 100m south-east of the House comprises a nave, apsidal chancel, and a west tower which incorporates the entrance porch. Baroque in style, the church was constructed c 1748 for Mrs Elizabeth Long, to the design of John Strahan (d c 1740) of Bristol or William Halfpenny (d 1755). The design of the church is related to that of Redland Chapel, Bristol, perhaps indicating Mrs Long's family connections with that city (CL 1943). The church has a close visual relationship with the House.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Informal pleasure grounds are situated principally to the north and south of the House. The area to the east comprises the carriage turn immediately adjacent to the House, lawns, and the churchyard associated with the parish church. To the north of the House are lawns planted with C19 specimen deciduous and coniferous trees and ornamental shrubberies. From here there are views north and north-east across the park beyond the former north-west drive towards the grounds of Ammerdown House. Walks lead north-west from the House, descending gently to reach a chain of five informal pools situated in a shallow valley c 70m west of the House. The pools are surrounded by further mixed specimen trees

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and shrubberies and dams between the pools allow access to further walks to the west. A walk on the western side of the pools leads c 200m south, avoiding the service and farm yards to the east of the upper pools, to a kitchen garden c 200m south-west of the House. A walk returns east along the north side of the kitchen garden, to regain the pleasure grounds south of the House. The pleasure grounds appear to have been developed from the mid C18, although the surviving planting is predominantly C19. It is likely that the present layout was implemented in the late C18 or early C19 as part of improvements undertaken for Capt Knatchbull (d 1826). It is not known whether the present informal pleasure grounds replaced formal gardens contemporary with the construction of the early C18 house, but the formal alignment of the drives to the east, north-east, and south-east forming two sides of the triangular-shaped pleasure grounds may indicate the previous existence of an early C18 formal scheme. The surviving pleasure grounds and the pools to the west of the House reflect the arrangement shown on the mid C19 Tithe map (c 1840).

PARK The park is situated to the north-east and south-east of the House and is divided into two approximately equal areas by the east drive. Both areas of park fall gently from south to north and are in pasture with scattered trees, some of which may survive from former field boundaries. The northern area of park is bounded to the north-west and north by a sunk fence, which allows views out to the surrounding country and towards the grounds of Ammerdown House.

The park appears to have been developed from the mid C18, when Mrs Long removed any surviving fragments of the medieval village of Babington (Bond 1998). In 1791 it was noted that, 'the mansion of Mr Knatchbull stands... in a very pleasant situation being sheltered on the north by a fine wood at about a furlong distance, between which and the House, is a large piece of water' (Collinson 1791). This description broadly conforms to the surviving disposition of the park and pools to the north-west of the House. The park was further developed by successive members of the Knatchbull family during the C19 (Tithe map, c 1840), and remains substantially unchanged since the late C19.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden is situated at the head of a valley which descends north-east and contains the chain of pools west of the House. Square on plan, the kitchen garden is enclosed by brick walls c 3m high, with a range of glasshouses and bothies constructed against its north wall. The garden is partly cultivated (2003). The kitchen garden appears to have been constructed in the late C18 or early C19, perhaps as part of Capt Knatchbull's late C18 programme of improvements. The garden is shown in its present form on the mid C19 Tithe map (c 1840).

REFERENCES

J Collinson, *History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset* (1791) *Country Life*, 93 (16 April 1943), pp 704-07 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), p 82 J Bond, *Somerset Parks and Gardens* (1998), p 96
Maps Tithe map for Babington parish, c 1840 (M5016/1), (Somerset Record Office)
OS 6" to 1 mile: 2nd edition revised 1902, published 1904 1931 edition
Description written: February 2003 Amended: March 2003 Register Inspector: DAL Edited: May 2004

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.