

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

HOUGHTON HALL

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Name: HOUGHTON HALL

County: Norfolk

District: King's Lynn and West Norfolk (District Authority)

Parish: Bircham

County: Norfolk

District: King's Lynn and West Norfolk (District Authority)

Parish: Harpley

County: Norfolk

District: King's Lynn and West Norfolk (District Authority)

Parish: Houghton

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.826668
Longitude: 0.64058513
National Grid Reference: TF 78005 28727
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: I
List Entry Number: 1000462
Date first listed: 18-Sep-1987

Details

An early C18 landscape park by Charles Bridgeman and Sir Robert Walpole, with buildings by William Kent, the principal layout of which has been retained through two centuries of parkland development.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Walpoles had been lords of the manor of Houghton since at least the early C14 when, in 1700, Sir Robert Walpole succeeded to the estate. He embarked on the construction of the present hall in 1721 on a site a few metres east of the old house. The development of the C18 gardens at Houghton is illustrated in a series of maps and plans, the earliest being undated but pre 1721 and 'produced by Mr Eyre an imitator of Bridgeman' (presumably Kingsmill Eyre) (Walpole 1780, 1995). A plan of 1720 by Thomas Badeslade, drawn up just before work on the new hall began, records the park recently extended to 120ha, laid out with a geometric pattern of intersecting avenues, with a major central axis aligned on the hall and a number of minor axes, some of which continued the lines of the main walks in the garden. Between 1725 and 1729 another survey records the new hall set in a park now covering 200ha with the existing avenues reaching into the new areas, and a new avenue which continued the main cross-axis of the house northwards into the parkland. Under Robert Walpole's successors the estate deteriorated. His

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
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HOUGHTON HALL

son, the second Earl of Oxford, inherited debts of £40,000 and did little in the park beyond planting a cedar and pine grove. Following the second Earl's death in 1751, the landscape declined further under the third Earl as family fortunes fell. The paths within the walks and groves close to the west front of the Hall fell into decay and by the end of the century (1797) Faden's map of Norfolk show the groves to have been removed, leaving an open area of lawn on the west front. In 1791 the estate passed to Horace Walpole, Robert's younger son who died in 1797, to be succeeded by the fourth Earl Cholmondeley, grandson of Robert's daughter. The Cholmondeley family were resident in Cheshire and showed only a marginal interest in the Norfolk estate, such that by 1841 Grigor commented that Houghton was 'a melancholy instance of premature decay'. The Hall was extensively restored in the 1920s and there has been much new planting in the park, most of it maintaining the formal lines of the Bridgeman layout but during the Second World War the west of the park was ploughed and the complex pattern of rides in the west wood has largely been lost. The site remains (1999) in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Houghton Hall is situated midway between King's Lynn and Fakenham, to the north of the A148 main Cromer road. It lies in a rural part of west Norfolk which is essentially flat and dominated by larger agricultural fields and blocks of forestry woodland. The park is enclosed by boundary woodlands to the north, west, and south but has an open aspect over the surrounding farmland to the east. A minor country road connecting the villages of New Houghton in the south-east corner of the park to Great Bircham beyond the northern boundary, runs close to the southern boundary before turning north through the densely wooded western section of the park. Although the surrounding land is relatively flat, the park is gently undulating and has a slight fall from east to west. The main views are focused by four great tree-lined vistas (the North, West, South, and East Views which are aligned on the Hall.)

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Lodged entrances are situated to the north, west, and south of the Hall. The rectangular, two-storey, whitewashed brick South Lodges (listed grade II*) flank elegantly scrolled and decorated wrought-iron gates and lie 1km to the south of the Hall. These late C18 buildings were erected at the end of the straight street leading through the model village of New Houghton and lead to a serpentine drive running north through the park to the east front of the Hall. The village was laid out by William Kent and lies outside the boundary of the site here registered. The early C19 North Lodge (listed grade II), 900m to the north-east of the Hall, is a single-storey, rectangular, whitewashed brick building set on the north side of the drive. The drive is lined with very mature sweet chestnut (the remains of one of the allées in place prior to Bridgeman's involvement) and runs south-west through the park to the east front of the Hall. The early C19 West Lodge, c 1.5km to the west, marks the approach from the Great Bircham road and its drive runs for c 1km east along a straight oak-lined avenue to the north side of the stable block. This drive is currently (1999) used as a farm track. A modern (late C20) service road enters the park at Hall or Home Farm and runs due north then east around the walled garden.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Houghton Hall (listed grade I) lies in the centre of the eastern half of an extensive parkland with its main entrance facade facing east over parkland and farmland beyond, and its west front facing the garden with parkland and woodland beyond. It is a large country mansion built in the Palladian style with Whitby stone ashlar under a pantile roof. The three-storey, nine-bay central block has flanking colonnaded two-storey wings to north and south. The entrance front faces east with a rusticated ground floor and elegantly decorated first and second floors. Four domed towers at each corner angle link the east front to the five-bay north and south fronts, and to the garden front on the west, with its central three-bay giant Ionic portico. The Jacobean hall was abandoned at the beginning of the C18 and building of the new hall a few metres to the east was started in 1721 to plans originally by James Gibbs, which were revised by Colen Campbell. As part of the revision, Campbell proposed providing pyramidal roofs to the corner towers, but these were abandoned in c 1726 in favour of Gibbs' original domes. The building work, which continued into the 1730s, was carried out under the direction of Thomas Ripley and the interior designs were provided by William Kent.

The stable block or Square (listed grade I) lies 120m south-south-west of the Hall and is linked to it by a rectangular plantation of pleached limes planted in the late 1940s. The Square is a large Palladian-style building of carstone and slate with some pantiles, comprising fifteen bays to east and west and thirteen bays to north and south built around a courtyard. Octagonal three-storey turrets mark each corner and the entrance arches at the centre of each bay are marked by a three-storey projection with

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
HOUGHTON HALL

half-moon light above. To make way for the new south avenue the old stable block was demolished and rebuilt as The Square to the south-west of the Hall in 1733-6 by William Kent.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens at Houghton lie to the west of the Hall and comprise a simple central grass plat flanked by grass banks to north and south and bordered to the west by a substantial ha-ha, with central bastion, recreated on the original C18 line in 1999. The former southern arm is no longer visible. A few small clumps of box survive in the lawn here. To the north and south of the lawn are two blocks of formal wilderness, planted in the mid C20 as groves of ornamental trees cut through by a series of paths. As early as 1723 the main area of gardens lay to the west of the Hall and consisted of an axial walk flanked to north and south by wildernesses or groves containing both straight and serpentine walks. An undated drawing by Prideaux (private collection) shows the west front under construction and buildings immediately to the west which appear to be the remains of the old hall. Other drawings record the gardens relating to this older building as being very geometric in character with pleached hedges and abundant topiary. By the early C19 the area was reduced to a simple lawn with a few trees remaining from the original flanking groves. Late C20 aerial photographs however reveal a pattern of complex geometrical beds, paths, and borders under the lawn and archive material confirms the detail of an elaborate mid C19 layout which survived for a few decades before being returned to grass in the early C20.

The early C19 Pleasure Grounds Covert lies 450m to the north-west of the Hall and comprises a mixed broadleaved woodland, underplanted with rhododendrons and linked to the northern garden grove by a raised terrace walk and serpentine paths.

PARK The park at Houghton covers c 160ha, the eastern half surrounding the Hall being of an open parkland character while the western half is densely planted with woodlands. The whole site is firmly linked to the Hall by the four great vistas running north, south, east, and west (beech to the north; oak to south and east; lime to west) which are intended to focus attention on the Hall rather than take the eye out to features outside the park.

To the east of the Hall and immediately to the north and south, the park survives under grass and is well wooded with trees of very mixed ages, most densely planted to the south and south-east of the Hall. There are a number of earthworks in the east park including extensive settlement remains and relict field boundaries, along which some pre-park oaks survive. The east park also contains some survivors from the late C17/early C18 formal layout, most notably the avenue of sweet chestnuts along the north drive, as well as the remains of some of the Bridgeman period planting (1730s and 1740s) including oaks along the South View, some beech along the North View, and a scatter of free-standing timber in the open park. The C18 Icehouse (listed grade II) lies 550m to the east of the Hall, set within a substantial mound which creates a striking feature in the landscape. The Mound lies beside the East View which was cut through a small hill to the east of the Hall in c 1740 by Robert Walpole, the spoil being used to create the great icehouse mound as well as six smaller tree planting mounds. Some 250m south of the Hall stands the Monument (listed grade II), a C13 stone village cross thought to be a relict from the settlement moved following enclosure of the park in 1729 (Williamson 1998). The church of St Martin (listed grade I), 450m south-east of the Hall, built from the C14 onwards of knapped and squared flint with stone dressings and restored in 1727, forms a focus in the landscape, as does the Water Tower (listed grade I), a substantial limewashed stucco classical temple which lies 650m north-north-west of the Hall and served as the Hall's main water tank, built c 1730 by Henry Lord Herbert, later Earl of Pembroke. An avenue of early C18 beech frames the view to the Water Tower from the junction of the garden and pleasure ground 400m to the south.

Beyond the gates at the South Lodges lies New Houghton model village, erected in the early C18 at the end of the straight lime-lined road leading to the park from the main King's Lynn to Fakenham road. To the east of the street lies Village Farm and to the west Home Farmhouse and barns (listed grade II), both of which appear on the Isaac Ware plan of 1735 and may be attributed to William Kent.

Park Farmhouse and Cottages (listed grade II) lie c 450m to the south-west of the Hall. This row of early C18 picturesque two-storey cottages are built of red brick under red pantile roofs with trellis-work bargeboards and steeply pitched roofs. They form part of a group of built features in this part of the park which include the stable block (see above), the walled kitchen garden (see below), and a range of service buildings 250m south-south-west of the Hall, most notable of which is Carpenter's Yard Barn (listed grade II), a mid C18 red-brick and pantile barn in the William Kent style.

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
HOUGHTON HALL

There are few surviving trees in the area to the west of the Hall, which in 1999 was returned to pasture as far as the western woodlands which are currently (2000) C20 conifer plantations. The woodlands were mainly planted with oak and beech in the late C18 and early C19, as was the oak avenue leading to the west lodge. Limes were planted to line rides cut throughout the western woods and some of these survive amongst the conifers. The main west vista, 2km in length, cuts through these woods and is interrupted where the woods meet the open park by St James Pond, a small informal area of water c 1.2km west of the Hall. In addition to the four great vistas there are also the remains of other early C18 formal avenues of trees aligned on the gardens. The expansion of the park around 1730 coincided with a radical change in its layout. It is this phase of landscaping which is associated with Charles Bridgeman (d 1738) and the design was published by Isaac Ware in 1735. The earlier mesh of avenues was replaced by a simpler layout, dominated by wide avenues running north and south, focused on the north and south facades of the Hall, and by vistas framing the eastern facade. Despite the change in character of the park, some of the earlier avenues were not destroyed and some survive to the present day. The landscape was not entirely neglected in the late C18 and early C19. An undated survey of c 1798 and Joseph Hill's survey of 1800 show that it continued to develop. The rigid formality of avenues and vistas was softened, the straight south drive abandoned and a new, more serpentine, drive created, approaching the Hall through parkland from the south-east. The north and west lodges were constructed around the same time. A map of 1836 shows that substantial new planting had taken place in the park during the first three decades of the C19, especially in the west park and on its western periphery. By the time the 1st edition OS 6" map was published in 1881-2 Houghton park was well-timbered, ornamented with a variety of clumps and avenues, and largely encircled by plantations and belts, which were particularly extensive on the western side.

KITCHEN GARDEN The 5 acre (c 2ha) walled garden lies c 350m south-west of the Hall behind 3m high red-brick walls (listed grade II). The interior has been developed over the past five years (1992-7) by the present owner as an ornamental flower, fruit, and vegetable garden and is divided into four compartments by mature yew and beech hedges connected to a late C20 central circle of yew with tree peony beds. Paths of grass and gravel radiate from this, with the long north/south axis defined by double herbaceous borders. The north-east quarter contains a newly planted (1990s) rose garden with herbaceous areas, yew hedging, a central pool, and four statues, while the north-west quarter is currently (1999) being planned. The south-east quarter is divided by a newly planted (1990s) pleached hornbeam walk and the north-east quarter planted with old orchard trees in part, new fruit areas in part and an ornamental potager for vegetables. The walled garden is contemporary with the building of the new hall and stables in the early C18 whilst the internal layout and glasshouses are all of late C20 origin.

REFERENCES

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Maps Thomas Badeslade, *Plan of Houghton Park, 1720* (private collection) Houghton 23, map, nd (c 1725-9), (private collection) Issac Ware, *Geometric plan of the garden, park and plantation of Houghton, 1735* (private collection) W Faden, *A new topographical map of the county of Norfolk, 1797* (Norfolk Record Office) *Untitled survey of Houghton, 1797*(8, (private collection) Joseph Hill, *The parish of Houghton and Great Bircham, 1800* (Norfolk Record Office) A Bryant, *Map of the county of Norfolk, 1826* (Norfolk Record Office) Jonathan Hill, *Map of the parish of Houghton ...*, 1836 (private collection)
OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1889 3rd edition published 1950 OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1912
Illustrations Prideaux, drawings showing the Hall and its gardens, nd (early C18), (private collection)
Archival items Aerial photographs, late C20 (Norfolk Aerial Survey Collection) The majority of the papers relating to Houghton are held in a private collection.

Description written: April 1999 Amended: August 1999 Register Inspector: EMP Edited: March 2001

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.