

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

MELLS MANOR HOUSE

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**MELLS MANOR HOUSE**

Name: MELLS MANOR HOUSE

County: Somerset

District: Mendip (District Authority)

Parish: Mells

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.242110  
Longitude: -2.3923537  
National Grid Reference: ST 72708 49288  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: I  
List Entry Number: 1000442  
Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

## Details

Manor house gardens laid out in the early C16 and c 1902-10 with advice from Sir Edwin Lutyens.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The village of Mells is recorded in the Domesday Book as belonging to the Benedictine abbey of Glastonbury and remained so until the Dissolution and the seizure of the monastery's lands by Henry VIII in 1539. Visiting on behalf of the King in c 1543, John Leland wrote:

'There is a praty maner place of stone harde at the west ende of the churche. This be likelihood was partely builded by Abbate Selwodde of Glasteinbyri. Sins it served the farmer of thye lordship. Now Mr Horner hath bouthe the lordship of the King'. (quoted in CL 1917)

Documentary records of the pre-Reformation Horners are sparse and, according to Country Life (1917), 'fact being absent, fiction has had to step in'. This refers to the well-known nursery rhyme which supposedly recounts how a wicked Steward of Glastonbury named Jack Horner 'put in his thumb and pulled out a plum', the fair Manor of Mells, from the Dissolution pie. The erroneous connection with the Horners of Mells is a late Victorian fancy, the Jack Horner character figuring in popular literature in c 1340 and in the C18 and early C19. Leland's evidence states clearly that the property was not stolen but bought for a substantial sum. This is confirmed by the original title deed, bearing the King's seal, which survives in the family's possession. Mells Manor was purchased in 1543 by Thomas Horner and he left it to his nephew, Sir John Horner, who married Merial Malte, the heiress of John Malte, tailor to Henry VIII. Sir John was succeeded in 1587 by his son Thomas, and between them they enlarged the Manor into a spacious Elizabethan and Jacobean house. Thomas had married a daughter of Sir John Popham of Littlecote in Wiltshire (qv) and the Horners and Pophams (who also held large estates in Somerset) worked together in the county for the Parliamentary cause. Thomas Horner died in 1612 and his son, Sir John, armed his tenants to fight on the Parliamentary side in the Civil War. According to Symonds, King Charles' trooper-diarist, on 16 July 1644, 'the King lay at Sir John Horner's howse at Mells - he is in rebellion and his estate sequestered' (CL 1917). Sir John returned to Mells after the King's defeat at the Battle of Naseby and put the estate in order, dying a timely death a year before the Restoration, thus enabling his descendants to continue in possession. His great-grandson, Thomas, married the heiress of Thomas Strangways of

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Melbury Park, Dorset (qv), becoming Thomas Strangways Horner, but left only a daughter who carried the Melbury estates to Stephen Fox, Earl of Ilchester. In 1724 T S Horner built Park House, a more fashionable house in the recently enclosed Mells Park (qv), west of the village. T S Horner's daughter, Elizabeth, inspired Thomas Hardy's story 'The First Countess of Wessex' in *A Group of Noble Dames*, in which the Horners appear as the Dornell family and Mells Park as Falls Park (McGarvie 1992). T S Horner died in 1741 and was succeeded by his brother John (d 1746), and by John's son, Thomas, in 1758, after a period of minority. In c 1770 the north and central sections of the Manor were demolished to provide stone for the stable courtyard at Mells Park House. The remaining south wing of the Manor was used at various times in the late C18 and C19 as a farmhouse, a dower house and, between 1850 and 1860, as a small and short-lived vocational school. Sir John and Lady Horner returned to the Manor and restored it as their principal residence in 1902. Sir Edwin Lutyens, a frequent visitor to the house, provided designs for the gardens c 1905, a loggia c 1910, and a music room c 1925 at the eastern end of the house. The Manor remains (2002) in private ownership.

**DESCRIPTION**

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Mells Manor House is located in the Mendip village of Mells, 300m north of Selwood Street and c 60m west of St Andrew's Church. The gardens cover c 1ha and are set back 20m north of the public highway which forms the southern boundary of the property. The southern boundary of the site here registered is formed by a 3m high stone wall which separates the gardens from a former stable, now a shed, and yard at a lower level, except for the western 50m where the road forms the southern boundary of the drive enclosure. The eastern boundary is a 3m high stone wall, the northern c 100m of which is the boundary with the church, and the southern 40m is the boundary with the gardens of properties in the village, including the Talbot public house. The western boundary is formed by a 1m high stone wall west of a rectangular enclosure containing the entrance drive and car-parking area. The northern boundary is marked by a 4m high stone wall at the northern edge of the north garden and a 2m and 3m wall at the northern edge of the drive enclosure west of the house. The land drops gently from north to south, a drop accommodated in the gardens and for the buildings with shallow level terraces. To the east, south, and west the setting is the historic stone-built village of Mells, crowded around the narrow Selwood Street. To the north are flat open fields, including Manor Meadow, under grass.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The entrance to Mells Manor House is through a splayed stone gateway with ornate iron gates (Lutyens c 1925, listed grade II), 50m south-west of the house, with 3m high stone piers surmounted with stone sculptures of talbots, hunting dogs which feature in the Horner family coat of arms and crest. The curving drive climbs a sloping bank and passes, to the west, a grass area with an out-grown double avenue running north to south of formerly pleached lime trees with a solitary mature horse chestnut tree located in the centre. To the east is a sloping lawn beneath mature trees with a few evergreen shrubs. The drive turns east after c 100m to enter the northern court garden, north of the house, through a rectangular opening in the 4m high stone garden wall with stone gate posts topped with pointed stone finials and lattice-work oak gates (Lutyens c 1910, listed grade II). The oak gates were destroyed by falling trees in the 1990 storms and replaced in similar style. Some 30m south of the house is a Roman arched pedestrian entrance, approached between two 1m high stone pillars by a stone-flagged path lined with clipped rosemary, which gives access to the southern garden. The western garden wall is decorated on the west face, c 20m south of the opening, with an irregular pattern of scallop shells, fixed here by the family children in the 1970s. The northern boundary of the drive enclosure is formed by a stone wall 3m high to the east and 2m high to the west, the wall dropping in height above an opening into the productive garden to the north. In the north-west corner of the drive enclosure, 50m north-west of the house's main north entrance, is a C20 stone gazebo built on the southern boundary wall of the productive garden.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Mells Manor House (C16, C17, C20, listed grade I) is an imposing gabled stone building of Elizabethan appearance occupying the centre of the site. An earlier, pre-1543 house was altered and enlarged by Thomas Horner in the mid to late C16, and his son, Sir John Horner, enlarged it further in the early C17 into an H-shaped house, as pictured in an estate map of 1680 (CL 1917). Needing stone for the stable courtyard at Mells Park, Thomas Horner pulled down the north wing and centre of the old house in c 1770. The surviving south wing of the Manor was refurbished after 1902 by Sir John and Lady Horner, who made it their country residence, having let Mells Park House (McGarvie 1992). Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) provided advice on internal improvements and designs for the southern house terrace with a loggia supported on

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Tuscan columns. He later added, behind the columns, a ground-floor room, used as a music room, in c 1925 (Oxford 1985). In 1912 a single-storey kitchen wing, designed by Owen Little, was added to the south-west of the south front against the east face of the west wall of the former kitchen garden (CL 1917).

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The gardens at Mells Manor are formed from five main enclosures: the drive enclosure to the west and south-west; the northern drive enclosure; the northern court garden, a former monastic garden, to the north; the southern garden; and the productive garden to the north-west, outside the site here registered. The northern drive enclosure contains the drive, parking spaces, and lawn and is visually dominated by the west tower of St Andrew's Church, framed by mature churchyard trees. This enclosure is 70m long from east to west, running the length of the house, and c 25m wide from north to south and is enclosed by the house to the south, by the church boundary wall to the east, by 2m high clipped yew hedges, with topiary, to the north, and by the western garden wall. The northern court garden is c 60m square and is reached by a low flight of four steps, with cement lions couchant either side, opposite the north entrance to the house and on the line of the former north wing of the Elizabethan house. The steps lead into a flat and level grassed square enclosed by massive clipped yew hedges and topiary with narrow herbaceous borders on the east, west, and north sides. In line with the steps, 50m to the north, is a further flight of steps in a retaining wall leading to a further lawn backed to north and west by the 4m high northern stone boundary wall (C17, listed grade II), containing a door to the fields beyond. The inner face of the 5m high western boundary wall has eight half-round pilasters or narrow buttresses and a central arched door opening to the productive gardens to the west. According to John Harvey, the garden walls were probably the work of Richard Beere (1493-1524), Abbot of Glastonbury and successor to Abbot John Selwood, c 1500 (Harvey 1981), and the walled garden 'formerly had internal mounds at its northern angles, looking over raised parapets into the countryside' (Harvey 1988).

South of the Manor, the garden was laid out to a plan by Lutyens and is divided into roughly equal eastern and western sections by a stone wall. On the east side of the south front is a loggia and single-storey orangery or summerhouse (Lutyens c 1910, listed with house, grade I) built on land exchanged with the church. The garden walls to the south of the Manor are stone built but faced with brick. In the eastern wall is a carved stone shelf above a lead faucet. In the southern wall, in line with the axial path to the loggia is a hexagonal stone clairvoie set into a brick panel with flanking pilasters surmounted by stone balls. The pattern of beds in the eastern section of the southern garden is symmetrical about cruciform axial paths with a stone-mounted sundial in the centre. The southern part was grassed over soon after the Second World War and planted with fruit trees. The northern part contains some herbaceous and shrub planting. The western section of the south garden is entered by two doors in a brick dividing wall and is laid out with symmetrical beds edged in box, the north to south axis terminated at the south by two juniper trees. To the west is a 2m high yew hedge with a 3m high section above an opening which leads to the former rear approach and well, now a lawn with ornamental planting containing the C20 partly thatched, partly stone-tiled kitchen wing, with a narrow passage or 'drang' separating it from the western boundary wall.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden was formerly located in the west of the southern gardens. Early in the C20 the productive garden was relocated to an enclosed area 50m north-west of the Manor, outside the site here registered.

#### REFERENCES

Country Life, 42 (17 November 1917), pp 444-8 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), p 226 J Harvey, *Medieval Gardens* (1981), pp 136-41 J Harvey, *Restoring Period Gardens* (1988), p 30 M McGarvie, 'Notes towards a history of Mells Park', in *Frome Society Year Book* 4, (1992), pp 31-40

Maps Estate map of Mells, 1682 (Horner family archive; redrawn modern version at Somerset Record Office, DD/X/MGR 4)  
Tithe map for Mells parish, 1841 (Somerset Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1891 1931 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1902

Archival items Sir Edwin Lutyens, Plan of gardens at Mells Manor, c 1900 (Horner family archive)

Description written: November 2002 Amended: March 2003 Register Inspector: SH Edited: September 2004

## Legal

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