

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

THE LEASOWES

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

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
THE LEASOWES

Name:	THE LEASOWES
District:	Dudley (Metropolitan Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 52.453760 Longitude: -2.0364354 National Grid Reference: SO9762183979 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: I List Entry Number: 1001204 Date first listed: 01-Jul-1986

Details

A ferme ornee landscape laid out in 1740s and 1750s by William Shenstone which was a potent influence on the style of landscape gardening then and in the later C18.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

William Shenstone was born in 1714, the son of a moderately prosperous farmer who had died by the time Shenstone came of age. The property he entered into at that time, the Leasowes, a dairy farm near Halesowen, was let, and in 1739 when he first moved there he boarded with his tenants. He had published a volume of Arcadian poems two years before, and in 1743 he began to improve his farm with features intended to evoke the visions conjured up by pastoral poetry. In time the Leasowes estate came to be adorned with a wide variety of root houses, seats, urns, cascades and inscriptions, a landscape which Shenstone (apparently the first to use the phrase 'landskip-gardening' (Batey & Lambert 1990, p.181) termed a ferme ornee. His income was modest, and most of the structures he constructed were made from wood and other cheap materials found to hand. Only a few, the 'Priory Ruin', made partly from materials from Halesowen Abbey, the Temple of Pan, an obelisk and a couple of statues were more costly.

By 1746 visitors were starting to come to see Shenstone's work, although not until 1749 did he begin to link the scattered individual scenes together by a circuit walk. Ironically, it seems the Leasowes became most widely known after Shenstone's death in 1763, through the publication by Robert Dodsley in 1764 of Shenstone's Works in Verse and Prose, a second edition of which in 1765 included a description and map of the landscape. Henceforward, visitors, including William Pitt, Benjamin Franklin, Mathew Boulton, and in 1786 the American President Thomas Jefferson, tended to enjoy the landscape via the 'Circuit'path there described. By then, however, Shenstone's landscape was already being altered, not least because of a rapid succession of owners, of which there were six in the ten years following Shenstone's death. Subsequently there were changes to its setting. In 1797 a canal embankment was constructed down the west side of the site which cut through Priory Pool and altered the outward views in that direction. By 1831, when J.C. Loudon visited, it was in 'a state of indescribable neglect and ruin' (Batey & Lambert, 185). C19 and C20 suburban development, especially to the east and west, adversely effected the setting still further, while in 1906 Halesowen golf course was laid out across the central part of the site. Ownership of The Leasowes passed to Halesowen Council in 1934, and part of the site became a public recreation ground. Losses to Shenstone's

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
THE LEASOWES

landscape continued, notably the demolition in 1965 of the Ruined Priory of 1757, one of the chief features of The Leasowes. Even so, enough survived in the later C20 to permit a full-scale restoration to be begun in the late 1990s.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM AND SETTING The Leasowes lies c.2km north-east of Halesowen. To the west the site is bounded by the Dudley Canal and the main A458 road, while to the north, south and west it is surrounded by Quinton's suburban housing. The views westward, especially from the house and from the walk along the high, north-eastern, boundary of the site, are panoramic, albeit over the C20 sprawl of Halesowen. The Registered area comprises c.64ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Vehicular access to The Leasowes is via Leasowes Lane, which runs in a curving line east-west across the site. From the west it leads from the main Mucklow Hill road, and from the east off Manor Lane. A more northerly entrance, via Sylvan Green, on the west side joins Leasowes Lane north of Priory Pool. There is pedestrian access, some apparently unofficial, at various points on the perimeter of the site.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Shenstone's house was pulled down in 1776 and a new one built for Mr. Horne, who had bought the estate in 1773. Now the golf clubhouse, it is a grey, stuccoed, two-storey, three-bay building (listed grade I) linked by single-storeyed wings to two-storey side pavilions. Gothick stables were demolished in 1960.

OTHER LAND The Leasowes estate slopes gently from east to west, with the house, roughly at the centre, standing on a ridge between two small valleys which lie to north and south. Both of these are wooded and have streams which flow east-west via several pools to meet at Priory Pool 350m south-west of the house. The landscape was accessible in 1997 principally through the modern paths constructed down the north and south valleys. In the description which follows no attempt is made to locate the sites of the majority of historic features of which no visible trace survives; for this see the 1991 Debois survey.

Historically, the proscribed walk around the landscape began on the western approach to the site, proceeding in an anti-clockwise circuit. Today the northern valley is most conveniently entered at the point where it is crossed by Leasowes Lane. Both valleys are well wooded, with large numbers of mature trees, mainly deciduous but also with some yews in Virgil's Grove above (north of) Lower Pool, at the end of the walk. From the point of entry the valley walk leads 200m south-west to Priory Pool, a view down which is revealed as the 150m long pool is approached. Running across its west end is the massive grassed canal embankment. The path skirts the east end of the pool, and then swings south-east up the southern valley, which is deeper and better defined than that to the north. The path climbs quite steeply up the north side of the valley for c.250m, to the area west of the kitchen garden. The path takes in a recently restored heart-shaped pond on the north side of the garden before turning down the west side of the garden to the southern perimeter of the landscape. From here the general line of the path follows edge of the golf course as it runs for c.800m north-east and north, overlooked by high ground with modern housing along the eastern edge of the site, to rejoin the eastern end of the northern valley at the east end of Beech-Water (restored c 1999). Passing around the east end of the pool the path runs north-east and then north-west for c.300m up and increasingly steep valley slope, before climbing north out of the valley up a steep flight of earth and timber steps. On reaching the top the path then turns north-west, to run for c.250m along a high shelf along the edge of the site with panoramic views west across the Leasowes, Halesowen and the hills beyond. Although in sections obscured by the tops of tall trees on the slopes below, the effect of the view, when contrasted with the dark and secret world of the wooded valley which precedes it, is still dramatic. Perhaps the best views are obtained almost at the northern extremity of the site.

The path then runs down the wooded slope along the edge of the golf course below, following its north-eastern edge before re-entering the northern valley above the Beech-Water. Retracing one's steps, past Beech-Water and dropping down into Virgil's Grove, the route runs past the site of drained pools, the obelisk to Virgil and the Chalybeate Spring. Around the house itself there are several mature specimen trees, mainly coniferous, which serve as a screen behind and either side of it, and serving as a backdrop to it when viewed from the east. The golf course itself, which surrounds the club house on all sites, is almost exclusively short, managed grassland. Planting, to divide up fairways, is mainly of fairly low trees planted in short belts.

KITCHEN GARDENS A walled kitchen garden lies 200m south of the house. It was constructed in the 1770s by Mr Horne in a well-concealed position between the Cascade and the Serpentine Pool at the same time he rebuilt the house. Its stone-capped brick walls survive in good condition (1997). In 1936, two years after the site was purchased by Halesowen Council, the walled

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
THE LEASOWES

garden became the head quarters of the parks department. It continued to be so used until 1974. In 1984 a Horticultural Training Unit was established by Stourbridge College, and this continued to occupy the site in 1997. Old glasshouses and buildings were removed c.1984, and portakabins and new greenhouses and other facilities replaced them.

REFERENCES

There is a considerable literature on The Leasowes: cf. references in R. Desmond, *Bibliography of British Gardens*, 1984, 172-3. In addition see: M. Batey and D. Lambert, *The English Garden Tour*, 1990, pp.181-5 Debois Landscape Survey Group, *The Leasowes: A Survey of the Landscape*, 1991 D.D.C. Chambers, *The Planters of the English Landscape Garden*, 1993 C. Gallagher, 'The Leasowes: A History of the Landscape', *Garden History*, 24, (1996), pp. 201-20 *Country Life*, no.9 (4 March 1999), pp 56-9

Description written: December 1997 Amended: May 2001 Register Inspector: PS

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.