

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

HIGHDOWN

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

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Name:	HIGHDOWN
County:	West Sussex
District:	Arun (District Authority)
Parish:	Ferring
County:	West Sussex
District:	Worthing (District Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
National park:	SOUTH DOWNS
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.825896 Longitude: -0.44259236 National Grid Reference: TQ 09788 04084 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1001212 Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

An early to mid C20 plantsman's garden, created and developed in and around a former chalk pit by Sir Frederick and Lady Stern.
HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The present house was built at Highdown around 1820 and was owned at some time in the C19 by the Lyons family (Head Gardener pers comm, 1997). In 1909 the house and surrounding grounds were bought by Major, later Sir Frederick Stern, who came from a prominent European Jewish banking family, and his wife. From that date until Sir Frederick's death in 1967 they created and developed the present gardens, in and around a former chalk pit, partly as an experiment in gardening on chalk. Many of the original plants were grown from newly imported seed or stock obtained directly from contemporary collectors such as Frank Kingdon-Ward and Reginald Farrer or, through purchase from James Veitch's nursery at Coombe Wood, material collected by E H Wilson, George Forrest and Joseph Rock.

Lady Stern maintained the gardens for a further year until in 1968, in accordance with her husband's wishes, she gave them, with the house, to Worthing Borough Council who since the mid 1970s have restored and managed the gardens to the Sterns' original design including the propagation of their original stock. In 1980 the Council sold the freehold of the house and its immediate surroundings to the Chapman Group who run it as a conference centre and club. The site remains (1997) in divided private (commercial) and local authority ownership.

DESCRIPTION

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LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Highdown Garden lies 0.4km due north of the A259 east to west Littlehampton to Worthing road, between the settlements of Angmering and Goring. The 4.5ha, square-shaped registered site, comprising the house, the surrounding gardens and the drive, is situated on the gentle, south-facing upper slopes of Highdown Hill, a southward extension of the South Downs, and enjoys panoramic views of the coastal plain and the sea. The lower slopes of the Hill, to the east, west and south of the site, are under arable cultivation while to the north and north-west, open downland and scrub cover the crest of the Hill. The site is enclosed along most of its north, west and south sides by close-boarded fencing (erected in the 1980s) and by internal shelter belts of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees, largely replanted after the storm of 1987 and the ravages of Dutch elm disease. A public footpath lined by hedgerows runs alongside the west boundary fence, while to the east the drive forms the boundary to the partially fenced site.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The site is approached from the A259 to the south, a surfaced drive lined with clipped holly hedges entering between two roadside lodges built in 1860 (date on front elevation) and running 0.4km due north. The drive verges are planted with two daffodil cultivars, Emperor and Empress, raised in 1867. At its north end the drive gives access on the west side directly onto the unfenced north and south forecourts of the house. The public car park (outside the registered site) opens off the east side of the drive. The public entrance to the gardens is through timber gates on the west side of the drive, just beyond the north forecourt of the house.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Highdown Tower, built around 1820 (Stern 1960), sits on a levelled terrace in the east-centre of the site. The L-shaped, two-storey house is faced in dressed flint with stone mullions and has a pitched slate roof. The flat-roofed tower sits at the south end of the building, its south and east elevations faced with render in the C20 by Sir Frederick. Since its sale in 1980 the house has been occupied as a language and a dancing school until its present use as a conference centre and club. To the immediate north-west of the house is a flint- and cement-faced stable range and a two-storey butler's and carriage house, in use now (1997) as offices and a tea room. Permission was granted in 1997 to convert and extend these buildings to form an hotel.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens at Highdown surround the house on the north, west and south sides, but are almost completely screened from it and its surrounding rectangle of surfaced car parks, formerly laid out as garden, by belts of mature holm oak along the west and south sides and by a high hedge and ornamental trees along the north side. The public gate to the garden gives onto a bark-surfaced path which leads due west towards the chalk pit. On its south side is a linear range comprising a tile-roofed shelter (built in the 1980s), an early C20 glasshouse and outbuilding (in use as office and store) and, at the west end, a herb garden laid out in the 1970s on the site of a further glasshouse. The path is lined with flowering cherries planted by Sir Frederick in 1938. On its north side, the rising grassy slope of former downland, cultivated for arable crops during the Second World War, is planted with a wide range of berrying trees and shrubs, some surviving from Sir Frederick's original planting in 1945 (guide leaflet).

At its west end (100m from the entrance gate), the path leads northwards down a slope flanked by mixed shrub and herbaceous beds into the bowl of the chalk pit, the almost vertical face of which rises c 21m on the north side. A limestone rockery, built by Sir Frederick in 1910 and planted with low-growing rock plants and shrubs, stretches along the foot of the cliff with, at its western end, a small cement-lined pond, its large clumps of bamboo planted in 1910. Above the pool and rockery, shrubs including immense spreading junipers, cotoneasters and Himalayan musk roses grow in abundance in pockets and on the lower slopes of the chalk cliff, some surviving from the original experimental planting in the early C20. The floor of the pit is laid to an informal lawn with, on its south side, a further oval lily pool, surrounded by paving laid in the 1970s and backed by a cave framed by a high wall of Horsham stone, a feature created by Sir Frederick from a former lime kiln. The pool is flanked by a Horsham stone rockery, laid out in 1910 with advice from the nurseryman Clarence Elliot (1881-1969).

Southwards, paved paths lead up the southern edge of the pit through the rockery into the rose garden which is laid out on an east to west axis with species roses in parallel oval beds set in lawn and enclosed along the south side by a clipped hedge of holm oak. Its western end is enclosed by a semicircular, timber, rose-covered pergola from the west side of which steps lead down onto a lawn set with island beds and specimen trees (including a maple, *Acer griseum*, from Veitch's nursery planted in 1912). Westwards beyond the lawn the bank around the perimeter of the garden is planted with massed hellebores. South of

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the rose garden, a grass path on the axis between the cave and the southern boundary descends by two flights of stone steps through a small beech wood, shown as an established belt in 1889 (OS 2nd edition) and largely replanted in 1987 after severe storm damage. Along the south side of the beech wood a broad shrub border, lined by an east to west grass walk, overlooks the Middle Garden Island Beds, laid out as large ovals on the gently south-sloping lawns. These Beds, altered in the 1970s from their original rectangular forms separated by narrow grass paths, are planted with shrubs including tree peonies, cultivars of day lilies and bearded iris grown in the early C20, and with a wealth of spring-flowering bulbs. At the far east end of the Middle Garden is a small area of raised beds growing acid-loving plants. South of the Middle Garden and divided from it by a pittosporum hedge and a further east to west grass walk, are the Lower Garden Island Beds, similarly modified from their original rectangular form and planted with flowering shrubs and a wide range of the herbaceous peonies, iris, agapanthus and fox-tail lilies grown by Sir Frederick.

East of the Lower Garden and separated from it by a broad border of trees and shrubs, open lawns, which formed the principal area of garden before 1909, extend southwards from a steep bank below the south front of the house. The two flights of steps connecting the lawns to the house, a sundial above the bank on the south forecourt and two rose beds on the lawns are now (1997) gone (photographs in CL 1937). The garden is enclosed along its entire southern edge by a rose-covered timber trellis backed by a shelter belt of fallen cypress and a replanted belt of mixed deciduous hardwoods, pine and holm oak.

REFERENCES

Country Life, 81 (20 February 1937), pp 198-203 F C Stern, A Chalk Garden (1960) A Hellyer, A Shell Guide to Gardens (1977) Highdown Chalk Gardens, guide leaflet, (Worthing Borough Council, nd)

Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1899 OS 25" to 1 mile: 3rd edition published 1912 1932 edition

Description written: November 1997 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: June 2000 This list entry was subject to a Minor Enhancement on 29/04/2019

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.