

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

DOWNTON CASTLE

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

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Name:	DOWNTON CASTLE
District:	County of Herefordshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Burrington
District:	County of Herefordshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Downton
District:	County of Herefordshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Leintwardine
District:	Shropshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Bromfield
label.localisation:	Latitude: 52.363116 Longitude: -2.8143458 National Grid Reference: SO 44644 74208 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1000497 Date first listed: 28-Feb-1986

Details

A gorge or valley modified as the archetypal picturesque landscape by Richard Payne Knight in the later C18, associated with a country house of same date. C19 terraces, grounds and park associated with the house.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Extensive estates in south Shropshire and north Herefordshire were acquired in the early C18 by the ironmaster Richard Knight. Those estates, in all c 4000ha, were inherited on his twenty-first birthday in 1772 by his grandson Richard Payne Knight (d 1824), who within a few years had begun to build a new house at Downton and to lay out a landscape park. Knight later became a key figure in the debate on the true nature of the Picturesque (as well as MP and a leading figure in scholarly society), and in 1794 published his treatise on the principles of landscape design, *The Landscape, a Didactic Poem in Three Books*. This was followed in 1805 by *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*. In 1809 he handed over his Downton estate to his younger brother Thomas Andrew Knight (d 1838), although when not in London he continued to live in a residence, Stonebrook Cottage (on OS map as 4 & 5 The Gravels; recently renamed Stonebrook Lodge), in a dingle in the north part of the registered area. The younger Knight published widely on fruit cultivation and other horticultural subjects, and was President of the Royal Horticultural Society from 1811 until his death. The house and the Downton landscape remain in private (but separate) ownership in the late C20; the Gorge is leased to English Nature as a National Nature Reserve.

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DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Downton Castle lies 300m south of the A4113 road from Bromfield (to the north of Ludlow) to Leintwardine, and c 2km north-east of the village of Downton on the Rock. From the south front of the Castle there are dramatic views up the wooded Downton Gorge and across it to the woodland of Bringewood Chase. A long section of the north-west boundary of the c 350ha registered area follows an unclassified road; otherwise the boundary seeks to encompass the Gorge and its wooded surrounds, the essential picturesque landscape developed by R P Knight.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The Castle is approached from the north down a 300m long drive through a shrubbery, lined in part with C19 Wellingtonia, especially in its middle section. At the north end of the drive is a lodge with elaborate timber-frame cladding. This lies at the north end of a tall, mid C19 stone bridge (listed grade II) which carries the drive over a deep gorge carrying a tributary of the River Teme.

Map and other evidence indicates that a network of carriage drives formerly led from the Castle, for instance to the church and to Castle Bridge. Some remain as farm tracks. Brick Kiln Lodge, a mid C19, two-storey stone building with fretted bargeboards, converted in the 1990s from a pair of dwellings to a single house, lies at the end of the drive passing St Giles' church and 200m south-west of it.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Downton Castle (listed grade I), a two-storey, irregular L-plan sandstone building with crenellated towers at the corners, was begun in 1773 to a design by its owner, R P Knight, who moved in in 1778. Attached to the north-east side is a stables court, while c 20m to the south-east of the Castle, at the east end of the South Terrace, is a late C18 three-stage gazebo (listed grade II). Extensions and alterations were made to the Castle 1860-70.

The Castle has an arc of views across the Gorge from north-west to south-east, to the western part of the wooded Bringewood Chase (which lies to the north-east) and (opposite and south-west of the Castle) to the pasture ground of Hunstay Hill and the woodlands of Burrington Hays and Owney Wood. All this land slopes down into the Gorge.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Running along the south side of the Castle is a broad terrace retained by a 200m long sandstone ashlar wall (listed grade II). Up to 5m high, the wall is battered to the south and has an embattled parapet with loopholes in the merlons. There are turrets and projections along its length and at either end. A second terrace wall (also listed grade II) lies beyond, c 75m from the Castle. This is c 300m long, and has pinnacled buttresses at c 10m intervals along its length. Both walls were constructed in the late C18 as part of R P Knight's landscaping.

West of the Castle are the remains of a C19 formal scheme, with low terrace walls, a T-shaped lily pool and lawns. A further lawn extends north from the main formal area. At its north end, c 150m north-east of the Castle, and facing the main entrance, is an orangery (listed grade II) altered in the mid C20 into a rectangular temple-like summerhouse with open colonnaded front and sides. The orangery is probably one of the two glass structures noted in 1838 (*Gardener's Mag*), at which time both were used as vineries. North of the orangery, and extending to the kitchen garden and either side of the main drive, are shrubberies and specimen trees. Tree planting north of the Castle probably began in 1772.

The formal scheme presumably post-dates 1838 when it was said there were no ornamental grounds attached to the Castle (*ibid*). W A Nesfield (d 1881) designed a parterre (no longer extant), noted in 1862 (*Gardener's Chronicle*).

PARK The designed landscape associated with Downton Castle can best be considered as three separate (albeit inter-related) zones: the landscape park around the Castle; Downton Gorge; and the land including the western part of Bringewood Chase to the south of the Gorge.

The landscape park, mostly pasture with parkland trees, extends mainly south of the Castle, falling to meadowland along the north bank of the River Teme, and to its south-west where it extends as a c 300m wide strip for c 1.5km to above Hay Mill. Some 900m south-west of the Castle is the parish church of St Giles (listed grade II), built here on a new site in 1861 to a design by S Pountney Smith. The old church (ruinous, 1997) lies on the north side of the hamlet of Downton on the Rock, outside the registered area. A drive ran from the Castle straight to the church; the first 400m west of the gardens, known as Lady Walk, is lined with an avenue of Wellingtonias.

A well-built 1.5m high stone wall divides the park from the woodland of the Gorge. Some stretches remained semi-ruinous (1997) but much has been rebuilt.

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That part of Downton Gorge (in the late C18 called Downton Vale) which was developed as a picturesque landscape in the later C18 lies principally south-west of Castle Bridge, 400m south-west of the Castle. Restoration works are in progress (later 1990s), and although it is not yet possible to undertake the full walk in practice, the landscape is best described as if the C18 circuit walk could still be followed along the north side of the Gorge for c 1.7km, to Downton on the Rock, before returning up the south side. As it is, although long sections of the C18 terraced paths can again be followed (eg from Castle Bridge south-west along the south side of the Gorge), other stretches remain difficult.

The Gorge itself is a dramatic natural feature, with the River Teme splashing along the bottom of a deep gorge the sides of which include long stretches formed by sheer rock faces. Some 400m south of the Castle, and visible from it, stands Castle Bridge (listed grade II). Of stone and with three elliptical arches, the bridge was built c 1780. At the north end of the bridge, on the west side of the road, is a stone cottage (semi-derelict 1997) and about 100m west of the cottage is a mill building. Some 150m north-west of the bridge is a small cave, 700m south-west of which, and perched on a ledge high above the river, is the ruinous Cold Bath or Roman Bath. Probably of the 1780s, the rude stone bathhouse had three rooms: an outer atrium; a high, inner plunge room utilising a natural spring; and a heated inner room. The approach to the Bath led through a secluded glade, and among the C20 softwoods there are several much older yews. Some 800m south-west of the Cold Bath, east of the hamlet of Downton on the Rock, is Bow Bridge, present by 1780. Of a single stone arch, the bridge had a new saddle and superstructure in the 1980s. A further 400m south-west is Downton Bridge, constructed in the later C19 to carry the Elan Valley waterpipe across the Gorge en route to Birmingham.

Returning up the south side of the Gorge the main extant features include, 300m west of the Cold Bath, Hay Mill, a ruinous stone mill building (iron gearing wheels lie inside) with leet channel in the riverbed. Some 150m north of the site of the upper Alpine Bridge is a short, V-plan Tunnel, intended to convey the visitor from one view to another. The tunnel is an artificial one of stone and brick; in 1997 its south-east end was partially collapsed. Some 100m west of Castle Bridge the riverside walk passes through a high, rock-hewn cave or chamber, generally known as The Hermitage. A tall, rough stone wall on the east side of the cave conceals the river from the visitor as he approaches the cave from the bridge.

R P Knight's landscaping of Downton Gorge appears to have been largely complete by the mid 1780s when he commissioned Thomas Hearne (d 1817) to paint a series of views of it. It then included several features no longer extant including rustic bridges and one or two cottages.

Another dingle runs west for 300m from the main lodge. It too was landscaped by Knight and, although overgrown with ash and sycamore, some fifty yews and traces of a path remain of the late C18 improvements. At the west end of the dingle is Stonebrook Lodge, which as Stonebrook Cottage was built by Knight as his retirement home. It is described as his home in his will dated 1814.

KITCHEN GARDEN The lozenge-shaped, eight-sided, brick-walled kitchen garden lies on a southward sloping site 300m north-west of the Castle. Overall the garden measures c 140m east/west by 70m north/south. The walls are probably of the late C18; incorporated in the north-west corner is a brick gardener's cottage of the mid C19. Several ranges of later C19 glasshouses lie along the north wall, with to their south a free-standing, curvilinear vinery, perhaps that mentioned in the report of 1838. In 1997 the interior was rough grass; a hard tennis court has been laid in the eastern half of the garden. Along the outside of the north wall are ranges of brick and stone sheds, probably of the late C18 and C19.

In 1838 the importance of the kitchen garden at Downton to T A Knight's horticultural experiments was noted (*Gardener's Mag*). As well as several, but scattered, hothouses (curvilinear-roofed pine-houses; a melon house; a fig house; and a peach house are all mentioned) it also contained seedling fruit trees planted by Knight and vegetable beds.

REFERENCES

Gardener's Magazine, (May 1838), pp 209-12 *Gardener's Chronicle*, (1862), pp 551-2 *Country Life*, 171 (28 January 1982), pp 218-21 M Clarke and N Penny, *Arrogant Connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight* (1982) *Downton Castle, Herefordshire: notes on the landscaping of the gorge*, (Debois Landscape Survey Group 1991) S Daniels and C Watkin, *The Picturesque Landscape* (1994), pp 49-65

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Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: Herefordshire sheet 2 SE, 1st edition published 1889 Herefordshire sheet 3 NW, 1st edition published 1887 Herefordshire sheet 3 SW, 1st edition published 1884 OS 25" to 1 mile: Herefordshire sheet 3.5, 2nd edition published 1903

Archival items Estate records (T74); C20 estate records (AW97), (Herefordshire Record Office)

Description written: 1998 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: August 1999

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.