

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

COBHAM HALL

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Name: COBHAM HALL

District: Medway (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Cuxton

County: Kent

District: Gravesham (District Authority)

Parish: Cobham

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.393725
Longitude: 0.41087561
National Grid Reference: TQ6782568834
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1000182
Date first listed: 01-May-1986

Details

Late C18 and early C19 ornamental gardens and pleasure grounds laid out by Humphry Repton and, later, his sons, partly on the site of C17 terraces, with additional mid C19 exotic tree planting and early C20 formal features by the designer William Goldring, set within a park of probably C16 origin which contains a late C17 avenue and an C18 mausoleum by James Wyatt.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of Cobham was granted to William de Cobham in 1208, his elder son being created Baron Cobham in 1313. After 1408, the manor descended, through marriage, to the Brooke family, the tenth Lord Cobham, William Brooke, making Cobham Hall his principal residence, building wings to the house in 1584 and laying out a garden. Following involvement in a plot against James I, his son Henry forfeited the estate to the Crown and in 1612 the king granted the manor of Cobham with Cobham Hall, the gardens, park, and estate to Ludovic Stuart, second Duke of Lennox and later Duke of Richmond. The fourth Duke enlarged the estate in 1636-8 and then from 1660 until his death in 1672, the sixth Duke resumed the rebuilding of the house and the development of the park and gardens, the formal avenues probably being planted at this time. He died heavily in debt and Cobham descended, through a complex pattern of inheritance and purchase, to John Bligh, subsequently created Earl of Darnley. On inheriting Cobham in 1747, the third Earl Darnley began altering and refurbishing the house, work which was continued from the 1780s for the fourth Earl by the architect, James Wyatt. The fourth Earl also employed Humphry Repton in 1790, and later his two sons, to remodel the grounds and the exterior of the house, Repton producing a Red Book for Cobham in 1790. The sixth Earl carried out a programme of planting in the park and gardens in the 1850s and 60s and the eighth Earl, Ivo Bligh, who succeeded in 1900, commissioned new schemes for the south terrace and west courtyard from the designer William Goldring (1854-1919). Cobham Hall was let in the 1920s and in 1925, outlying estate land and the picture collection were sold and the eastern Deer Park laid out as a golf course. The ninth Earl died in 1955 and in 1959 the Land Fund purchased the Hall and some of the surrounding land, including the gardens and pleasure grounds. Following extensive repairs, these were sold in

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1963 to the Westwood Educational Trust who established the present school. Adjacent parkland was sold for agricultural use but subsequent division and sale leaves Cobham Hall today (1997) in the hands of more than a dozen private and commercial owners and three charitable trusts.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Cobham Hall lies on the south side of the A2, some 4km west of Rochester and at the east end of the village of Cobham. The registered site of c 338ha comprises c 22ha of formal gardens and pleasure grounds surrounded by a park of 316ha of which c 120ha are wooded. The site extends over both level and gently undulating ground which rises to a low ridge in the south-east and to an isolated hill, Windmill Hill (scheduled ancient monument), north of the house. The wooded slopes of the North Downs lie beyond the site to the south. Agricultural fencing encloses the site to the east and south from a surrounding landscape of woodland and arable farmland, with the minor Lodge Lane and the housing of Cobham village abutting the western end of the southern boundary. On the west side, Halfpence Lane bounds the southern end of the park then continues north through the registered site, with further woodland lying to the west of Ashenbank Wood. To the north the site abuts a wooded lane (a former Roman road) and the dual carriageway of the A2. The M2/A2 Wainscott Bypass interchange, under construction in 1997, occupies 4ha of former parkland in the north-east corner. The approved route of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, due for completion in 2003, is intended to run within the park, along the south side of the present A2.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The site is entered through gates at the north-west corner, from the late C20 link road bridging the A2. The drive, which formerly entered from Halfpence Lane at Shepherds Gate Lodge (now gone) before the link road construction, follows a gentle curve south-eastwards, on a line established in 1818 by the Reptons (Laurie 1984), to arrive at the forecourt on the north front of the house. A C20 lodge stands halfway along its route. In the early C18, the park had three main entrance gates: to the north at Brewer's Gate, to the north-west, and to the south-west from Cobham village. The gates lay at the ends of three of five avenues which radiated from the west front of the house and which were probably planted in the late C17 by the sixth Duke of Richmond (they do not appear on Norton's map of 1641 but are shown on Russell's map of Cobham of 1718). The avenues appear to have taken on a more ornamental role by 1758 which resulted in the felling of the ends furthest from the house of those to the north-west, north, and south. The drive from Brewer's Gate had become the principal carriage approach by 1789 (Peckham, 1798; Laurie 1984), this being re-routed by Repton in the early 1790s to follow a curve (now, 1997, grassed over) and in c 1800 given an entrance gateway designed by James Wyatt (demolished in the 1960s). The present south-west avenue to Cobham village, replanted in the late C20 and with its former drive now grassed, was the only one of the five avenues that Repton recommended to be retained in the 1790s.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Cobham Hall (listed grade I) stands west of the centre of its park, below the southern slopes of Windmill Hill. It is H-shaped in plan, with its principal entrance on the north front and is built in red brick with a stone cornice and a hipped, slate roof. The present central block, standing on the site of a former medieval house, was rebuilt 1662-72 to the designs of Peter Mills (Newman 1969), the wings forming the west court having been erected earlier, the south wing between 1584 and 1587 and the north from 1591. Between 1767 and 1770, the addition of a third storey to the central block and interior decoration was undertaken by George Shakespear although payments were also made to the architect Sir William Chambers (CL 1983; Laurie 1984). The addition of a kitchen court to the east was made 1771-7 and of a stable wing, by James Wyatt (1747-1813) in 1789-90. Wyatt also undertook extensive internal remodelling in the late C18 but the significant external alterations in the Tudor style were made between 1800 and 1820 by Humphry Repton (1752-1818) and his son John Adey (1775-1860). These included, in 1802, moving the entrance from the west to its present position on the north front and building the corridor with its porte-cochère (now in school use) which connects the house with the terraced gardens to the north by means of an upper-level walk (Laurie 1984). John Adey's brother, George Stanley, also undertook internal alterations in 1817, followed more recently in the mid to late C20 by additions and alterations for the present school use.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Formal terraces lie to the immediate north and south of the Hall while the pleasure grounds extend southwards, north-eastwards, and northwards over Windmill Hill.

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The south, garden front opens onto a 50m deep, west to east terrace which is laid to gravelled walks and lawns and bisected by a north to south axial walk with a central stone fountain basin. The flanking lawns are planted with square enclosures of topiary yew hedges, the layout dating from William Goldring's (1854-1919) plan of 1909-10 (Laurie 1984) and, at the western end, with mature trees including cedars probably planted as part of Repton's design. Beyond the terrace and extending c 240m southwards, the South Lawn is framed by tree belts and inner, serpentine-edged shrubberies, much of the planting dating from restoration work in the mid 1990s. The South Lawn, first planted with shrubberies by Repton in 1792-3 (ibid) contained, by 1882, huge beds of rhododendrons interspersed with evergreen trees and shrubs (The Garden). At the south end, the lawn rises gently towards James Wyatt's gothic Dairy, a two-storey stuccoed structure of 1794 set within a vaulted cloister (partly restored 1990s, listed grade II). The west front of the Hall encloses a rectangular courtyard between the north and south wings which is laid out with a central C18 fountain and three symmetrical pairs of square beds, the central pair each enclosing a neoclassical vase within topiary yew hedges, these probably also Goldring's work, from 1904. Repton's scheme for this west court which had been replaced by circular island beds by the early C20, is recorded on a plan of c 1820 by George Stanley Repton (Laurie 1984). The north forecourt, laid out to a drive bordered by lawns, is enclosed along the north side by a raised shrub border backed by a high brick wall which retains an Upper Terrace with an east to west walk terminating in a bastion giving views out westwards over the park. This walk, now occupied by a tarmac path and mid C20 school buildings, was constructed and planted by Repton in 1812 as part his scheme for the north front. It occupied the site of grassed terraces shown on Russell's map of 1718 which, by 1789 (Peckham survey) had been planted in a formal manner. Beyond the school buildings is the open North Lawn, planted with trees and island shrubberies by Repton (plan in *Fragments* 2, see Loudon 1840) around an C18 Menagerie (now gone) and now framed by cedars planted in the 1990s to replace those lost in the 1987 storm. Adjacent to the east end of the terrace is Lady Darnley's Garden, a roughly rectangular lawn with trees and with, along the south side above a further C17 terrace bank, a C19 iron-framed rose pergola. The garden, planted by Repton in the 1790s as an 'irregular modern flower garden' (plan in *Fragments*, see Loudon 1840) with serpentine paths, contains, at the east end, an Ionic temple by Sir William Chambers (listed grade II), brought to Cobham in 1820 and, against the north wall, a stone and flint aviary (now, 1997, roofless, listed grade II), possibly converted by Repton in 1799 (Laurie 1984). The garden also contains Sarsen stones dating from the construction of Merlin's Grotto in the 1770s and the site of an C18 Orangery which survived until the 1960s.

North from the North Lawn is the Pleasure Ground, laid out over the slopes of Windmill Hill and planted informally, at the northern end as continuous woodland and, on the summit and southern slopes, with trees and a shrub understorey interspersed with open grassy glades. A network of paths, including one around the perimeter, threads through the trees. The northern area was planted as woodland between 1718 (Russell) and 1749 (Price) but the hill was first designed as an ornamental pleasure ground when, between 1802 and 1805 and presumably under Repton's direction (Cobham Hall accounts, in Darnley Papers), it was fenced and laid out with gravelled paths focused on vistas. By the mid C19 it was known as the Wilderness. Some 140m due north from the bastion at the west end of the Upper Terrace, the perimeter path passes between four limes surviving from the C17 northern avenue. East of the path, towards the summit of Windmill Hill, a few mature Wellingtonias survive from the pinetum planted in the mid C19. On the north side of the hill, at the south end of Brewer's Pond and the Fountain Pond (450m north of the bastion) are the remaining brick walls of Samuel Lapidge's (c 1740-1806) 1789 Engine House (listed grade II) which was given decorative lancet windows by Wyatt in 1804. The ponds, of at least C17 origin, were also altered ornamentally in 1805. The former conduit ditch which carried the water to the Hall runs adjacent to the perimeter path on the east side of the hill. Some 270m north-east of the bastion, a stone vertical and a brick base survive from Repton's seat. This, a classical alcove facing south-east towards Wyatt's Mausoleum, was erected by his sons after his death in 1818. The site of Charles Dickens' chalet, removed in 1961, lies some 70m south-west of Repton's seat.

PARK The park surrounds Cobham Hall although the main surviving area of parkland lies to the west in the West Park. Immediately west of the Hall are loose clumps of trees of mixed ages from which the south-west lime avenue extends 300m to Cobham village. North-west of the main entrance, and to the south-west either side of the avenue, the park consists of largely open grassland with a few isolated trees. The manor of Cobham was largely an agricultural estate in the C14 although Speed's map of 1611 shows Cobham within a park pale and Norton's 1641 survey refers to the eastern Deer Park as 'The Ould Park'.

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The plantations shown in the West Park on Norton's survey appear to have been removed to allow the planting of the avenues in the mid to late C17 while the extensive scatter of clumps and individual trees recorded in both the West Park and the Deer Park by Adams in his survey of 1851 would appear to show the planting carried out by the fourth Earl in the 1790s. Much of this survived until the mid C20. West of Halfpence Lane is Ashenbank Wood, laid out with a network of paths and planted with trees of mixed ages and containing, at its centre, The Mount (listed grade II). This manor house of Elizabethan origin was purchased by the fourth Earl in 1802 and, embellished with pinnacles and a stepped gable by the Reptons in 1813-14 and surrounding tree groups (Adams, 1815), was used as a focus for 'many fine picturesque views of the park' (Ackerman's Repository, 1826). East and south-east of the Hall and gardens, the park is laid out to a golf course with loose clumps of largely C20 trees, beyond which, on the eastern boundary, is Cole Wood, shown on Norton's survey. South and south-east of the golf course, further woodland with open glades of bracken and scrub and a network of drives and tracks forms the surviving part of the Deer Park. On William's Hill, on the south-east boundary, stands James Wyatt's Mausoleum (now, 1997, in a derelict state, listed grade I). Completed in 1783 for the third Earl but never used, the Portland stone mausoleum consists of a square base with fluted columns of Roman Doric order, surmounted by a pyramid.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden lies south-east of the Hall, on the east side of the stable wing. Its walled enclosure of red brick is roughly 110m square and has been occupied since the early 1960s by school buildings and sports areas. A walled enclosure is shown in this position on Russell's map of 1718 which appears to have been reduced to allow for the construction of a terrace walk at the north end by 1789 (Peckham). With an adjacent area of former glasshouses to the west, the garden was used for nursery purposes in the early to mid C20.

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1864-7, published 1869 2nd edition published 1897 3rd edition published 1909 1931 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 3rd edition published 1909 1939 edition

Archival items Humphry Repton, *The Red Book for Cobham, Kent*, 1790 (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone) Darnley Family Papers (U565), (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone)

Description written: October 1997 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: November 2003

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.