

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE

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

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**BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE**

Name: BINGHAM'S MELCOMBE

District: Dorset (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Hilton

District: Dorset (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Melcombe Horsey

label.localisation: Latitude: 50.818684  
Longitude: -2.3251678  
National Grid Reference: ST 77190 02177  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II\*  
List Entry Number: 1000710  
Date first listed: 27-Dec-1986

## Details

Formal gardens of C16 origin, restored in the mid C20 by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, with planting schemes by Brenda Colvin.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Robert Bingham acquired the manor of Melcombe in the early C13 when he married Lucy, heiress of Sir Robert Turberville, whose family had owned the property for at least a century (Oswald 1959). Bingham was the second son of Sir Ralph Bingham of Sutton Bingham, Somerset, and nephew of the Bishop of Salisbury, and over the next two hundred years the family gradually acquired property in several Dorset parishes. Bingham's Melcombe was inherited in 1524 by Robert Bingham (CL 1947), who c 1554 reconstructed an existing house, probably using the same masons who worked for his neighbour, Sir John Horsey, at Clifton Maybank and Higher Melcombe, both in Dorset (Oswald 1959; Pevsner and Newman 1972).

Robert Bingham was succeeded in 1593 by his grandson, Richard (d 1656), who made further changes to the house. Richard Bingham's son, Col John Bingham, was a leading Parliamentary soldier during the Civil War, and Bingham's Melcombe was used as the headquarters of the local Parliamentary forces (CL 1947). Col Bingham was succeeded by his nephew, Richard (d 1735), and his grandson, also Richard (d 1755), under whom improvements were made to the C16 house (ibid). A third Richard Bingham inherited in 1755 and died in 1824. Few changes were made to the house and gardens in the C19, and the property was finally sold by the family in 1895.

Bingham's Melcombe was purchased by Reginald Bosworth-Smith, a master at Harrow School and an author and naturalist, who employed Evelyn Hellicar to restore the house. After his death the property passed to his daughter, Lady Grogan, and after her death in 1948 it was sold to Sir Francis Hopwood, later Lord Southborough. Lord Southborough commissioned Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900-96) to restore the gardens in 1949, and Jellicoe's involvement with the site continued periodically until 1979 (Spens 1992). Planting plans were provided for the gardens by Brenda Colvin (1897-1981).

Bingham's Melcombe was sold in 1980 and remains (2004) in private ownership.

### DESCRIPTION

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**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Bingham's Melcombe is situated c 1km south-west of Hilton and c 0.75km south-east of Lower Ansty. The c 17ha site comprises some 3ha of formal gardens, c 4ha of informal woodland pleasure ground, and c 10ha of parkland. The site is bounded to the south and south-west by a minor road which leads north from Dewlish to Cross Lanes, while to the south-east the boundary is formed by the Devil's Brook. To the west, north, and east the site adjoins agricultural land. The site is undulating, with level ground to the south of the house and rising ground to the north. A plateau of high level ground to the north of the house drops steeply to the north-east and east to the Devil's Brook which flows from north-west to south-east through the site. Coombe Hill rises to the east of the site, while a further hill, Henning Hill rises to the south-west. There are extensive views to the south and west from the high ground to the north of the house, and southerly views across the park and the valley of the Devil's Brook from the formal gardens to the west of the house.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** Bingham's Melcombe is approached from the minor road forming its southern boundary at a point c 1km east-south-east of Cross Lanes. The entrance is marked by a pair of C18 rusticated ashlar piers supporting C19 wrought-iron gates, which are in turn flanked by a pair of smaller rusticated piers forming pedestrian entrances (all listed grade II). The carriage entrance piers are surmounted by carved stone eagle finials (recently restored), while the outer piers were formerly surmounted by pineapple finials (Mr Langham pers comm, 2004). The entrance is flanked by C19 spiked railings set on stone kerbs. Beyond the entrance, a gravelled drive and avenue of young beech trees (replacing an earlier elm avenue, CL 1947) leads c 200m north-north-west and north through the park to reach a junction immediately south-west of the house. From this junction a track leads east to reach the parish church of St Andrew and the former rectory, now known as the Dower House (listed grade II), c 80m south-east and east of the house respectively. A spur leads north from this track to reach a gateway leading west to the central courtyard of the house, and continues north to a pair of timber carriage gates supported by brick and stone piers surmounted by pineapple finials and flanked by a pedestrian doorway set in a rubble-stone wall which lead to the service yard and C17 thatched stables (listed grade II) c 10m north-east of the house. A further track leads west from the junction, passing to the south and south-west of the formal gardens and continuing c 370m west and south-west beyond the site boundary to reach the minor road leading to Cross Lanes.

To the north of the point at which the drive divides, a gravel walk leads north through an area enclosed by low stone walls to the south and hedges to the east and west, to reach the late C14 gatehouse, which in turn provides access to the courtyard. The enclosure is laid out with panels of lawn to east and west of the central walk, with a mature ilex oak at the south-east corner; it assumed its present form in the mid C20 under the guidance of Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe. The central courtyard around which the house is built is paved, with a raised terrace approached by a double flight of stone steps to the north. The terrace is retained by a brick wall and is planted with beds of hydrangeas. This planting conforms to that shown by Joseph Nash in his mid C19 engraving of Bingham's Melcombe published in his *Mansions in the Olden Time* (1869).

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Bingham's Melcombe (listed grade I) stands towards the centre of the site and is an irregular structure, mainly comprising two storeys, which is grouped around the north, west, and south sides of a central courtyard. The east side of the courtyard is closed by a stone wall. The house is constructed in a mixture of rubble, banded flint and stone, ashlar, and 'chequerboard' stone and flint under gabled roofs covered with stone slates and tiles. The northern range, which is approached from the raised terrace on the north side of the courtyard, has a central two-storey gabled porch, flanked to the west by a higher two-storey gabled oriel ornamented with a carved panel of the Bingham arms. This architecturally significant feature was constructed c 1554, probably by the same masons who worked at Clifton Maybank, Dorset, and whose work was later transferred to Montacute, Somerset (qv). The oriel is joined to the hall, which probably originated in the late C14 (Oswald 1959). The eastern end of the north range comprises the library and is lit by C18 sash windows which were inserted into an older structure. The outer facade of the north range facing the Ladies' Garden is of irregular construction and incorporates as a garden door an important late C16 classical porch relocated here from Tyneham House, Dorset c 1960 (Pevsner and Newman 1972). The western range of the house has an inner facade surmounted by three gables surmounting C17 stone mullion and transom windows, with a single-storey lean-to corridor providing access to the kitchen and service quarters at the south-west corner of the courtyard. The outer or garden facade of the west range is constructed in banded stone and flint and is lit by C18 sash windows. Two gabled bays lit by round-headed C18 windows project at the centre of the range, while to the south earlier

mullion and transom windows survive. The west range incorporates the oldest elements of the house. The south range, with the late C14 or early C15 gatehouse at its eastern end, is now lit by mid C18 sash windows.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** Formal gardens are situated to the north and west of the house, with further areas of informal pleasure grounds in the valley of the Devil's Brook to the north and east of the house.

The formal gardens are laid out in a series of three terraces ascending the south-facing slope to the west and north of the house. The lowest terrace comprises the kitchen garden and is separated from the higher terraces by a grass bank. Steps at the north-east corner of the kitchen garden ascend to a stone-flagged terrace which extends beneath the west facade of the house. Stone steps with quadrant wing walls ascend to the Bowling Green to the west of this terrace, while C20 brick steps ascend north from this terrace to reach a gravel walk which ascends to the dovecote. The Bowling Green, which is also approached by a flight of steps ascending from the north-west corner of the kitchen garden, comprises a level rectangular lawn which is enclosed to the south by a box hedge and to the north by a grass bank which ascends to the third terrace. To the west the Bowling Green is bounded by a yew hedge and a mid C18 brick wall (listed grade II) which also encloses the south and west sides of the kitchen garden and the west side of the third terrace. To the south-east the Bowling Green is planted with a row of five mature Irish yews.

The third and uppermost terrace is divided into several discrete garden areas. To the south it is bounded by a massive yew hedge, probably originally a walk bounded on each side by yew hedges, which surmounts the grass bank ascending from the Bowling Green. To the west the yew hedge is terminated by a mid C18 recessed summerhouse or alcove (listed grade II) set in the mid C18 brick boundary wall; the design of this arched recess is attributed to Thomas Archer (1668-1743) (Mowl 2003). To the north of the massive yew hedge, a grass walk extends c 50m east to reach the walk ascending from the west terrace to the dovecote. The grass walk is bounded to the north by two box-edged beds planted with roses, ornamental shrubs, and herbaceous subjects, which are in turn backed by yew hedges. A further grass walk enclosed by yew hedges extends parallel to the flower border walk. The central point of this northern walk is aligned on openings cut in the yew hedges to the north and south, allowing a vista through to the Bowling Green. The C17 circular stone dovecote (listed grade II) stands at the north-east end of this walk. The northern section of the upper terrace, to the north of the yew walk, is enclosed by yew hedges and is laid out with an area of lawn to the west with a circular stone-kerbed pool and a C20 hard-surfaced tennis court to the east. To the east of the tennis court and beyond the yew hedge is an area of level lawn planted with specimen trees. Formerly an orchard (OS 1891), this lawn is enclosed to the east and north by hedges which separate the formal gardens from the pleasure grounds in the Devil's Brook valley, and to the south by stone walls which separate it from the Ladies' Garden north of the house. A grass walk flanked by mixed borders extending parallel to the western boundary of the gardens leads to a doorway in the west wall, and a wrought-iron gate in the north-west corner of the gardens, both of which lead to the pleasure grounds.

A path leads south from the upper terrace, past the dovecote, to reach the terrace at the north-west corner of the house. The path is bordered by high yew hedges and to the east an opening leads through to the Ladies' Garden, an approximately square enclosure retained above the level of a stone-flagged walk north of the house by stone walls. Enclosed to the north and east by brick and rubble walls and to the west by a high yew hedge, the garden is laid out with a series of eight box-edged square beds planted with low shrubs and separated by narrow gravel walks. Perimeter borders extend below the north and east walls, with a mature specimen magnolia at the north-east corner of the garden. The terrace edge to the south of the garden is marked by a pair of Irish yews. A doorway in the north wall of the Ladies' Garden leads to a further, small walled enclosure with a central lawn, perimeter beds, and a pergola comprising brick piers supporting timber beams against the west wall. The pergola shelters a brick-paved terrace, while a stone-flagged walk leads east to a flagged area at the north-east corner of the enclosure. An opening in the east wall leads to the former orchard.

The terracing of the formal gardens is said to have originated in the C16, while some structural elements such as the dovecote and the walls north of the house appear to date from the C17 (Oswald 1959). The wall enclosing the south and west sides of the formal gardens is mid C18, and the massive yew hedge, the alcove, the Bowling Green, and the Ladies' Garden are likely to be contemporary or earlier (*ibid*; CL 1947). The layout of the northern terrace beyond the massive yew hedge, and of the enclosed garden north of the Ladies' Garden, forms part of the scheme devised by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe for Lord Southborough between 1949 and 1979, while the planting schemes for these areas, and for the Ladies' Garden, were provided by Brenda Colvin. Some

of these planting schemes have been modified and developed in the late C20 and early C21 (Mr Langham pers comm, 2004). When undertaking his restoration, Jellicoe described Bingham's Melcombe as the best example remaining of the 'Stonehenge of English gardening' (Pevsner and Newman 1972).

A broad grass walk or green lane ascends a gentle south-facing slope from the track outside the south-west corner of the gardens, passing parallel to the west garden wall for c 80m to reach a gateway leading east into an avenue of limes and sycamore, underplanted with rhododendrons, which descends an east-facing slope for c 200m to reach a mid C18 stone bridge (listed grade II) which crosses the Devil's Brook. To the south-west of the bridge and immediately below a cascade, a small, single-storey stone mill (early C19, listed grade II) contains an iron mill wheel which formerly powered water pumps. The level floor of the valley is laid out with a formal water garden comprising three pools, the northern two of which have been linked in the C20 by a narrow channel (OS 1891). The northern pool is rectangular in outline and is aligned from north to south, while the middle pool is approximately square. The southern pool is also square and contains a central square island planted with mature yews. The valley is planted with specimen trees and groups of ornamental shrubs, probably in part to a mid C20 scheme by Brenda Colvin. There is no documentary evidence relating to the creation of the formal water garden, but on stylistic grounds it is likely to have been constructed in the early C18, or possibly significantly earlier (Inspector's Report 1990). A mid C19 painting shows the ponds with Chinese-style bridges (private collection; Inspector's Report 1990), while the late C19 OS map describes the area around the fishponds as the 'Lower Gardens', presumably in contrast to the formal gardens around the house (OS 1891). A sale plan of 1948 indicates 'Former Fish Ponds', suggesting that the present ponds were reinstated by Jellicoe and Lord Southborough in the mid C20.

To the north of the water garden a walk leads through the wooded valley parallel to the Devil's Brook. Crossing the stream on timber footbridges and passing a segmental-shaped cascade, the walk passes west through Raspberry Copse to emerge at the north-west corner of the north park. This woodland garden or wilderness appears to have been developed in the early C19, or possibly earlier, and is shown on the OS map of 1891.

To the south of the fishponds there is a further, late C20 informal pond, while to the west of the Devil's Brook, the lawns and shrubberies surrounding the Dower House adjoin the pleasure grounds without any physical division.

**PARK** The park is divided into two distinct areas which are separated by the house and the formal gardens. The area to the south of the house is undulating and remains pasture (2004). The park is crossed from north to south by the drive and ash avenue, and is planted with scattered deciduous trees. The north park, c 100m north of the house, and separated from the formal gardens by the avenue leading to the valley pleasure grounds, also remains pasture and occupies a knoll of high ground which drops away to the north and east to the wooded valley of the Devil's Brook. The avenue, and a further belt of trees to the west, define the other boundaries of the park, while there are clumps of trees within the park.

There is little documentary evidence relating to the park at Bingham's Melcombe. The present areas of park correspond to those shown on the 1891 OS map.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden is situated on the lowest of the garden terraces to the west of the house. The garden is rectangular on plan and is enclosed to the south and west by C18 brick walls (listed grade II), and to the east by the west wall of the service court. To the north, a low box hedge separates the kitchen garden from a grass bank which ascends to the Bowling Green. The garden remains in cultivation (2004) and is laid out with a central gravel walk extending from east to west, and a further box-edged walk parallel to the southern wall. The central walk separates two rectangular beds, the eastern ends of which are marked by clipped Irish yews. To the west, the beds are terminated by further Irish yews and espalier fruit trees which separate them from a large fruit cage. A timber-framed glasshouse stands against the west wall of the garden, adjoined by further box-edged borders.

#### REFERENCES

J Nash, *Mansions in the Olden Time* (1869) *Country Life*, 102 (17 October 1947), pp 778-81; (24 October 1947), pp 826-9  
A Oswald, *Country Houses of Dorset* (2nd edn 1959), pp 69-73  
N Pevsner and J Newman, *The Buildings of England: Dorset* (1972), pp 278-81  
G A Jellicoe and S Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man* (1975), p 147  
Bingham's Melcombe, Dorset: Inspector's

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Report, (Land Use Consultants 1990) M Spens, Gardens of the Mind The Genius of Geoffrey Jellicoe (1992), pp 62-3, 186 T Mowl, Historic Gardens of Dorset (2003), pp 51-2

Maps Sale plan, 1905 (D622/E22), (Dorset Record Office) Sale plan, 1948 (Ph 649), (Dorset Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1885, published 1891 OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition revised 1901, published 1902

Illustrations J Nash, engraving of Bingham's Melcombe, c 1869 (in Nash 1869)

Description written: June 2004 Amended: January 2005 (PAS) Register Inspector: JML Edited: January 2005

## 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.