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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

STEPLETON HOUSE

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Name:	STEPLETON HOUSE
District:	Dorset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Hanford
District:	Dorset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Iwerne Stepleton
District:	Dorset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Stourpaine
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.903001 Longitude: -2.1831596 National Grid Reference: ST 87217 11519 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001266 Date first listed: 08-Feb-1993

Details

Pleasure grounds and a park developed in the second half of the C18 by Julines and Peter Beckford.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Soon after 1623, the Stepleton estate was bought from the Daccomb family by Sir William Pitt of Stratfield Saye, Hampshire (qv). In 1634, it was sold by George Pitt to Thomas Fownes, who constructed the present house (Pearson Assocs 1993). Fownes' descendant, also Thomas Fownes, a pioneer of the scientific breeding of fox hounds (Oswald 1959), sold the property in 1745 to Julines Beckford, brother of Alderman William Beckford of Fonthill, Wiltshire (qv). Julines Beckford remodelled Stepleton House, and developed pleasure grounds and a lake formed by damming the River Iwerne. The park also appears to have formed part of Julines Beckford's improvements, with a public road passing to the south of the House being diverted to the west c 1753 (Mowl 2003). At Julines Beckford's death, the estate passed to his son, Peter Beckford (1740-1811), Ranger of Cranborne Chase and author of *Thoughts upon Hare and Fox Hunting* (1781). Beckford also published two volumes of letters describing his tour of Italy (1787).

Peter Beckford married a daughter of George Pitt, Lord Rivers, of neighbouring Ranston (qv) see Ranston, and in 1828 their son, William Horace, assumed the name Pitt Rivers in order to inherit the Rivers title in right of his mother. When William's son, George, inherited the estate, Stepleton was let to Sir John Hadley D'Oyly. It was purchased in 1917 from the last surviving daughter of Lord Rivers by Sir Randolph Baker. It has subsequently passed through several ownerships, but remains (2003) in private hands.

DESCRIPTION

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
STEPLETON HOUSE

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Stepleton House is situated at Iwerne Stepleton, a village depopulated by the Black Death in the C14 (Mowl 2003), which is itself situated in the valley of the River Iwerne c 5km north-west of Blandford Forum. The c 110ha site is approximately rectangular on plan and is bounded to the west by the River Iwerne and the A350 road, while a minor road, Smuggler's Lane, and a track form the southern and northern boundaries respectively. A row of cottages to the west of the A350 road, opposite the present entrance to the site (outside the site here registered), were built as kennels for Peter Beckford's hounds c 1770 and closely resemble a design published by Beckford in 1781 (Oswald 1959; Pevsner and Newman 1972).

To the north the site is adjoined by the Ranston estate (qv), from which it is separated by the A350 road.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Today (2003) the principal entrance to Stepleton is from the A350 road to the north-west. A drive leads south-east from this entrance, forming the eastern boundary of the pleasure grounds, before sweeping round the north and east sides of the House to arrive at a carriage turn below the south facade. An early C20 lodge stands on the public road, Smuggler's Lane, to the south of the House and park.

Formerly the principal entrance to the site was situated at its eastern extremity, adjacent to the junction of Smuggler's Lane and the track forming the northern boundary of the site. This entrance is marked by a pair of classical, square-plan lodges which are now (2003) in a ruinous condition. Known as the Beckford Lodges, they were constructed by Julines Beckford in the mid C18 as part of his improvement of the estate and formerly led to a drive which passed through an area of woodland before emerging on the edge of the Iwerne valley, revealing the House in its parkland setting with the wooded pleasure grounds forming a backdrop (Mowl 2003). This drive was ploughed out during the C19 and is not shown on the 1st edition OS map of 1891.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Stepleton House (listed grade I) stands towards the western boundary of the site. Constructed in ashlar under hipped stone slate roofs, the building comprises two storeys with attics and basements. The principal or south facade has a two-bay centrepiece surmounted by a pediment, with rustication to the ground floor. The central block of the House is flanked to east and west by a matching pair of pavilions which are connected to the main building by passages ornamented with rusticated pilaster strips. The eastern passage has an open Ionic loggia to the south.

The principal block was constructed in the early or mid C17 and was extensively remodelled in the mid C18 by Julines Beckford, when the entrance was moved to its present position on the south facade. Beckford was also responsible for adding the pair of flanking pavilions in 1758 (Pevsner and Newman 1972), perhaps inspired by the design of Alderman Beckford's Fonthill Splendens (Mowl 2003).

The stables (listed grade II), constructed in brick under hipped slate roofs, stand c 30m west of the House. These were constructed in the mid C18, presumably as part of Julines Beckford's improvements after his purchase of the property in 1745. The C11 parish church of St Mary (listed grade II*) stands to the west of the stables and contains the tomb of Peter Beckford (d 1811).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The informal pleasure grounds are situated principally to the west of the House. A series of sinuous walks passes through this area which is planted with mature trees and ornamental shrubbery. The focus of the pleasure grounds is a small lake, formed by damming the River Iwerne. Statues which formerly stood in the pleasure grounds were largely stolen during the C20. The lake is the northernmost of two bodies of water, both of which are shown on Isaac Taylor's Map of the County of Dorset (1765), the southern lake being little more than a widening of the river, with its length broken by a series of cascades. The pleasure grounds and lakes were laid out in their present form by Julines Beckford in the mid C18 and, with the exception of late C20 restoration, remain substantially unchanged (Mowl 2003).

PARK The House and pleasure grounds are adjoined to the north, east, and south by an undulating park which extends east of the plantation known as Steepleton Shrubbery and south of Everley Warren to reach the Beckford Lodges on the eastern boundary of the site. Shelter belts protect the western and southern boundaries of the park, merging into Steepleton Shrubbery to the east. An C18 icehouse stands at the northern tip of Steepleton Shrubbery.

The A350 road leading from Blandford Forum to Warminster dog-legs round the western boundary of the site, a stretch of road known locally as the 'Steepleton Bends'. A public bridleway marks the original route of the road across the park to the south of the House. Local tradition suggests that the diversion was effected by Peter Beckford (Oswald 1959), but it appears that the

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
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STEPLETON HOUSE

alteration took place c 1753 and is therefore likely to have formed part of Julines Beckford's improvements (Mowl 2003). A proposal to straighten this stretch of road in 1820 was not implemented (ibid).

KITCHEN GARDEN To the west of the northern lake are two mid C18 walled gardens. The walls are of red brick and the larger (northern) of them was laid out as a Queen Anne-style garden in the late C20.

REFERENCES

P Beckford, *Thoughts upon Hare and Fox Hunting* (1781) *Country Life*, 71 (9 January 1932), pp 42-8 A Oswald, *Country Houses of Dorset* (2nd edn 1959), pp 159-61 N Pevsner and J Newman, *The Buildings of England: Dorset* (1972), pp 240-2
Stepleton House, Iwerne Stepleton, Dorset - A Preliminary Assessment of the historic Park and Garden, (Nicholas Pearson Assocs 1993) [copy on file] T Mowl, *Historic Gardens of Dorset* (2003), pp 93, 95, 171-2

Maps Isaac Taylor, *Map of the County of Dorset, 1765* Tithe map for Iwerne Stepleton parish, 1840 (Dorset Record Office)

OS Old Series 1" to 1 mile, published 1811 OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1885, published 1891

Illustrations F Sartorius, three oil paintings of Peter Beckford's hounds in parkland setting, 1785 (National Trust/Bearsted Collection, Upton House, Warwickshire)

Description written: December 2003 Amended: April 2004 (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.