

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BELCOMBE COURT

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Name:	BELCOMBE COURT
District:	Wiltshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Bradford-on-Avon
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.345240 Longitude: -2.2666861 National Grid Reference: ST 81522 60718 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1001227 Date first listed: 01-Sep-1987

Details

A mid C18 landscape park laid out for Francis Yerbury and further developed by the Yerbury family in the late C18, surrounding a C15 house extended and improved by John Wood the Elder in 1734.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1722, Belcombe Court, a house dating back to the C15, was bought by John Yerbury who became a wealthy clothier. After his death in 1728, his son Francis Yerbury (1706-78) inherited the estate and commissioned the Bath architect, John Wood the Elder to extend and alter it considerably. Possibly as part of or following the alterations to the house, a small park was laid out on the north bank of the River Avon, with various garden buildings and features. After 1785 the woodland to the north, called the Grove, became part of the estate (CL 1989; Ashmead, 1836). Probably shortly after, a son or grandson of Francis Yerbury created a picturesque walk with rustic arches and caves in this area. In 1825-9, under the ownership of John William Yerbury II, the road from Bradford-on-Avon to Turleigh that ran through the southern part of the estate was moved c 45m further south (CL 1989).

Belcombe Court was still owned by the Yerbury family in 1836 but the park to the north was tenanted by a William Taylor (Ashmead, 1836). The estate remained in the ownership of the Yerbury family until at least 1859 (VCH 1953). By 1836 (Ashmead), the southern part of the park near the River Avon (outside the area registered here) was cut by the Great Western Railway.

On 30 March 1903, Belcombe Court was sold at auction (Sale particulars) but it is not known who subsequently bought the estate. In 1935 Belcombe Court was purchased by the architect W H Watkins (CL 1950) and then, in 1977, by Mr and Mrs A J Woodruff who restored the pleasure grounds (see Country Life article, 1989). At that time Belcombe Court was regularly opened to the public and became well known as a good example of a small-scale C18 landscape garden. In 1989 the estate was sold again; it remains (2000) in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Belcombe Court, a site of 13.5ha, is situated to the west of Bradford-on-Avon, to the north of Belcombe Road which forms its southern boundary. This boundary is marked by a stone wall (probably C18) along the full length of the site. Belcombe Court lies on the north bank of the River Avon, the site rising in a north and north-westerly direction with steeply sloping woodland in the far northern part of the site. From here a small

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stream called the Belcombe Brook runs down the valley in a southerly direction. To the north-east the site is bounded by a tall leylandii hedge with late C20 houses beyond it. To the far south-east the site is bounded by Belcombe Farm, now (2000) a private dwelling with a garden to its north which was formerly laid out as an orchard. To the west the site is bounded by fields, and to the far south-west by an electricity sub-station.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance to Belcombe Court lies on Belcombe Road in the far south-east corner of the site. This appears on Ashmead's map of Bradford-on-Avon surveyed in 1836. A pair of cast-iron gates (late C20) hung between earlier gate piers give access to a drive that runs in a north-westerly direction to the estate yard where an archway in the east wing of the house opens onto a courtyard to the south of the house which is paved with local ragstone in a decorative pattern. Until 1922 (OS), the drive ran in a northerly direction directly to this courtyard. Immediately east of the main gate, a smaller gate, now (2000) no longer used, gives access to Belcombe Farm.

A second entrance to the site lies c 15m further west along Belcombe Road. Here decorative cast-iron gates (late C20) hung between earlier gate piers give access to a path that runs along the south boundary of the site. Formerly (OS 1887) a footpath ran northwards towards the picturesque cottage (see below) in the park. Opposite this entrance, on the other side of Belcombe Road, there are two further gate piers (outside the area registered here) which formerly, before the railway was constructed, gave access to the southern part of the site along the River Avon.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Belcombe Court (listed grade I) stands in the far south-east corner of the site and its U-shaped ground plan encloses the courtyard to its south. The house dates back to the C15 but its fabric is mainly C18. The main facades are built in ashlar and the roofs are covered in slates. The three elevations in the courtyard have two storeys with windows overlooking the courtyard. The central elevation has a clock carrying the initials 'J Y' (probably for John Yerbury), and the date '1770'. The southern end of the eastern elevation has an archway with a circular stone turret above with a lantern with cupola and windvane. The wing to the west of the courtyard dates from c 1734 and was designed by John Wood the Elder. The two-storey south facade with basement is divided by four Ionic pilasters rising through both floors creating a classical front. From each corner of the elevation a stone balustrade, topped with urns, runs diagonally into the garden. The two-storey west elevation, with a lower wing attached to its east, is divided into three bays with the pedimented side wings projecting slightly forward. A central door gives access to a stone-paved terrace from which there is a fine view of the pleasure grounds and park beyond. The courtyard to the east of the house is lined to the west by a coach house (listed grade II) of c 1740 built for Francis Yerbury and to the east by a C15 barn (rebuilt c 1900, listed grade II).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The pleasure grounds are situated immediately south and west of the house and are separated from the park to the west by a mid C18 natural stone ha-ha (listed grade II as part of the grotto and rotunda described below). To the south the pleasure grounds are screened by a belt of trees planted along the southern boundary wall. The garden to the south of the house is laid to lawn and slopes gently in a southerly direction. At the far end of the lawn stands a lead figure of Athena on a stone base (date unknown), screened by a yew hedge clipped in geometrical patterns. In the eastern part of the lawn near the drive stands a large mature cedar. To the west the lawn is screened by a shrubbery (mid to late C20), with to the north-east a mature oak tree with a semicircular decorative stone seat, both possibly of mid to late C18 date. In the centre of the lawn to the west of the house is a small pond with, in its north-west corner, a mid C18 grotto (listed grade II) built of tufa with a segmental-arched entrance and two windows to the north. Water from the Belcombe Brook that descends through the woodland in the northern part of the site cascades over the grotto into the pond. The interior room overlooks the pond and has seats against its rear wall. In its design the grotto is very similar to those created in the mid C18 by Joseph Lane at Bowood, Wiltshire (qv), and it may have been influenced by these although there is no evidence to confirm that Lane was working at Belcombe Court too (CL 1989). Along the north side of the grotto a path runs in an easterly direction through a shrubbery (OS 1887) which was replanted in the late C20. The path continues and passes through a small, open garden building, slightly oriental in style, situated to the north of the house. This may possibly be of mid C19 date as suggested in *Country Life* (1989). Its interior walls and floor have recently (early 2000) been decorated with shells and pebbles to create a grotto.

To the south-west, the pond curls around a small hillock with a mid C18 classical rotunda (listed grade II*), built for Francis Yerbury. It is of limestone ashlar and its lead domed roof rests on nine Roman Doric columns. In his *Essay towards a description*

of Bath, published in 1765 but first written in the 1740s, John Wood the Elder describes his contempt for the architectural detailing of the rotunda, which was built by a local mason at the time Wood was working at Belcombe Court. To the south-east of the rotunda is a square lawn with, to its west, an octagonal pavilion set within a raised square-shaped garden; this was laid out by the garden designer Rupert Goldby in the late C20. The pavilion was moved to its current position in the late 1980s, having formerly stood further south on the north bank of the River Avon (OS 1887). The building may possibly date from just after 1792, when the then owner John William Yerbury obtained his river rights (CL 1989).

PARK The park is laid out in the south-west part of the site, and to the north against the hillside. The latter area is separated from an ornamental woodland beyond by a stone wall. The wall runs downhill in an easterly direction, gradually merging into a ditch, with further parkland to its north.

The south-west part of the park is situated to the west of the ha-ha and here a C19, or possibly earlier, picturesque cottage (listed grade II), first shown on the OS map of 1887, forms an important eyecatcher from the pleasure grounds. A sunken semicircular stone drinking trough, possibly of C18 date, is located c 5m to the south of the cottage. To the west of the cottage, the park, which is scattered with mature oak trees, stretches in a westerly direction to the far south-west corner of the site. Along its north boundary is a thick belt of trees, thinning to the east where it meets the northern park. Along the southern boundary wall is a thin belt of mixed trees. In the far south-west part of the western park, along the northern tree belt, is a square stepped base of stone and concrete (late C20), possibly for a sculpture or obelisk. The OS map of 1887 indicates there was a small square building or structure situated along the northern tree belt in the western part of the park, but nothing survives (2000) on the ground.

The northern part of the park rises gently in a north-westerly direction. On the hillside, set against the wall which separates the ornamental woodland from the park, stands a classical building which forms an important eyecatcher from the pleasure grounds in the valley below (OS 1887). This gazebo, now (2000) roofless, probably dates from the C18. It has an open south-east front with columns, offering fine views of Bradford-on-Avon to the south-east and the hills to the far south. Attached to the interior walls are stone seats, and in the rear wall is a doorway giving access to the ornamental woodland to its north. In the park wall, c 15m to the east of the gazebo, a rustic arch marks the entrance to the ornamental woodland. From here a peripheral path runs in a northerly direction through the woodland, now much overgrown, which drops steeply in an easterly direction to where the Belcombe Brook runs through the valley below. The path has natural stone steps in places and leads under two more rustic arches, the third one situated close to the northern boundary of the site. Along the path are further rockwork features that are carved into the cliff face, including a set of twinned caves with stone seats against the rear walls, and further north, a larger circular cave. The features formerly allowed views into and across the valley but these now 2000 largely obscured. The Belcombe Brook, situated in the valley below, runs into a small dell to the east of the woodland, from where it runs southwards into the park and eventually to the pond in the pleasure grounds. Immediately north of the dell are the remains of further decorative rockwork, partly reinstated in the late C20. To the east of the dell lies further parkland with mature trees. In this part of the park stands a mound of unknown origin, topped with a mature ash tree. It forms an eyecatcher to be seen from the north-west part of the park and although it is first shown on the OS map of 1924, it is possibly of a much earlier date.

KITCHEN GARDEN The rectangular-shaped walled kitchen garden of c 0.5ha is situated on a steep slope immediately north of the house. It can be entered via two doorways in its south wall, one from the rear of the house to the west and one via steps that lead from the courtyard along small outbuildings in a north-easterly direction. There are two other doorways: one in the west wall and one in the north wall, both leading into the park, the latter passing the tennis courts situated immediately to the west of the kitchen garden. The kitchen garden is formally laid out (mid 1990s) with terraces and stone steps and planted as a Mediterranean garden. Along the north wall is a stone loggia with a red-tiled roof with a swimming pool in front of it, both also introduced in the mid 1990s. Recently (2000) the height of the walls of the kitchen garden has been raised and a greenhouse is being built (2000) outside the kitchen garden along its south wall. Formerly (OS 1887) the kitchen garden had a greenhouse attached to its north wall and a perimeter path running along its walls. This layout probably remained unaltered until 1922 (OS 1924), further greenhouses having been added by then along the north wall.

REFERENCES

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Maps Andrews and Drury, *Map of Wiltshire*, 1773 G C Ashmead, *Town map of Bradford-on-Avon*, surveyed 1836 and corrected up to 1864 (G13/990/13L), (Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1884-5, published 1887 3rd edition revised 1922, published 1926 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1884-5, published 1887 2nd edition revised 1899, published 1901 3rd edition revised 1922, published 1924

Archival items Sale particulars for Belcombe Court, to be sold at auction 30 March 1903 (3142/1), (Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office)

Description written: September 2000 Amended: October 2000 Register Inspector: FDM Edited: November 2004

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.