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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

Kelmarsh Gardens and Parkland

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Name:	Kelmarsh Gardens and Parkland
District:	West Northamptonshire (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Kelmarsh
label.localisation:	Latitude: 52.409444 Longitude: -0.91931361 National Grid Reference: SP 73609 79598 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1001712 Date first listed: 25-Feb-2010

Details

Kelmarsh Hall was designed by James Gibbs for William Hanbury c1730. Some landscape features survive from the C18 but the gardens around the house were principally created in the mid C20, notably by Nancy Lancaster.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT The Osbourne family owned one of the four manors of Kelmarsh in 1086. In 1618 it sold that property to the London Merchant Sir John Hanbury. He either built himself a new house or completely remodelled the old one soon after moving to Kelmarsh in 1620. J A Gotch, writing at the end of the C19, considered that to have possibly been the finest Renaissance house in Northamptonshire. A contemporary print shows a formal, walled forecourt with topiary planting and elaborate gates; further gates possibly led to park land to the rear of the house. That house (described by a visitor in 1728 as 'a miserable old house just going to be pulled down': Friedman 1984, 125) was demolished when the present Hall was built c1728-32 to a design by James Gibbs - by then one of the leading domestic architects in the country - for Sir John's great-grandson William Hanbury, an agriculturalist, astronomer and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, who had inherited the estate in 1721. This stood a mile away from the old house, on a more advantageous, elevated, site overlooking the Ise Brook from the garden front; it is likely that the present park was created at that time. William Emes, one of the leading regional landscape improvers of the time, was involved at Kelmarsh after 1760, possibly with the damming up of the Ise to form a lake, garden developments, and probably with landscape works in the wider estate. The Wilderness may well have been created about this time, and perhaps too the triangular walled garden. Documentary evidence for this early work is, however, limited. The lake was made serpentine c1790. John Bridges' county history of 1791 includes two illustrations of the Hall but these show little of its landscape.

Ownership of Kelmarsh remained with the Hanburys until 1865 when the estate was sold to R C Naylor. There followed a period when substantial alterations and extensions were made to the Hall, including a ballroom. In 1902 the estate was sold to C G (Juby) Lancaster, MP, who between 1927 and 1933 leased the house to Ronald Tree, a wealthy Anglo-American (who was elected Conservative MP for Harborough), and his independently wealthy wife, Nancy (1897-1994). A Country Life article of 1933 shows the gardens at then end of their time here. In 1948, after her divorce from Tree, Nancy married Claude Lancaster and returned to Kelmarsh Hall, although that marriage, too, foundered after three years. A year before her marriage to Lancaster, Nancy had acquired Sibyl Colefax's share in the well-known decorating firm of Colefax and Fowler; the partnership, which lasted until 1957, between John Fowler and Nancy Lancaster was hugely influential in English upper-class circles due to the

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popular and seemingly timeless 'English Country House Style' it promoted for houses and gardens, as well as through Nancy's introduction to many country houses of American bathrooms and other labour-saving devices. The partners sometimes worked with Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, and he is thought to have designed the present terraces on the west front of Kelmarsh and perhaps, too, the avenue of pleached limes. Herbaceous planting was by Norah Lindsay, a highly-regarded plantswoman. While the gardens at Kelmarsh are important examples of the work of Lancaster and her circle, there remains uncertainty about precisely when some parts of the garden were created, and their authorship.

Much work was done at Kelmarsh in the 1950s by Col. Lancaster himself, who built new lodges, added further to the gardens, and in 1956 had the Victorian extensions to the hall removed and alterations made by Sir Albert Richardson to Gibbs's original designs. Col. Lancaster died in 1977, and in due course, and following his wishes, his sister Miss Valencia Lancaster endowed the charitable trust which now (2010) owns Kelmarsh Hall and estate.

DESCRIPTION LOCATION, SETTING, LANDFORM, BOUNDARIES, AREA Kelmarsh lies in north Northamptonshire on the main road from Northampton to Market Harborough. The Hall stands in an elevated position with wide views across the valley of the Ise Brook to the west, and undulating, largely agricultural, land to the east and south.

The boundary of the registered area extends from Shipley Wood in the north-east, where in 1933 a 180-yard gap was cut through the wood to create a vista to the distant landscape and possibly to a feature which is shown as an earthwork on the modern Ordnance Survey map. To the east the boundary extends to Far Hill where a line of trees, shown on a historic map of 1887, extends south and appears to represent the Riding as laid out in the C18, stretches of which are still visible. The southern edge of the registered area is marked primarily by the road running east to west across the parkland.

The area here registered is c105 hectares.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approaches to the house are largely unaltered since the C18. The northern approach, from the A508, is secured by gates alongside which is an ashlar and stucco late C18 lodge (listed Grade II). A second lodge, possibly of the same date, stood at the southern entrance. It is shown on Ordnance Survey maps of 1900, but had gone by the time a pair of ashlar lodges to designs of 1778 by James Wyatt was built here in 1965-6. The approach from the south is lined by an avenue of limes, and Nancy Lancaster planted Snakes Head Fritillaries in the grass verges of the drive from the lodges to the Hall.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Kelmarsh Hall (listed Grade I) was designed by James Gibbs and built c1728-32. Constructed in red brick with ashlar dressings, it is an Anglo-Palladian building of seven bays and two storeys with an attic, basement, and two linked pavilions curving around each side of the entrance forecourt which is known as the Bull Ring. The sash windows to the ground floor are larger in scale than those above and a wide set of steps lead up to a central double door with a geometric fanlight above. The west, garden, front is similar, but with a projecting three-bay centre. A ballroom was added in 1928, and then in 1956 Sir Albert Richardson stripped off C19 alterations and additions and restored the house to its original early C18 appearance.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens and pleasure grounds lie west, north and south of the Hall extending for c600m south-west and 200m north. Immediately west of the house a broad flight of steps leads to a formal terrace garden (by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, 1936) with views outward across the landscape. The terrace is made up of three lawns interlocked with paths, and pleached limes in granite sets; double lines of pleached limes mark either end of the terrace. At the southern end of the terrace a sunken garden is planted with scented flowers. Here a narrow box hedge defines diamond shaped beds punctuated by four Irish Yews. From the northern walk concrete steps lead to a grass platform which marks the position of Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe's sunken 1951 Philadelphus Garden, in the north-west corner of which is a derelict ice house.

Beyond the terrace to the west is the 'Tapis Vert' (also by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, 1936), a broad wildflower meadow flanked by avenues of red Horse Chestnuts leading down to the serpentine lake. This element of the landscape was designed by Jellicoe in 1936. On the far side of the lake a 180-yard gap had been cut through Shipley Wood in 1933 to create a vista to the distant landscape and possibly to frame the large earthwork feature to the west of the Estate.

South of the Sunken Garden, alongside the walled garden, was the drying ground for the laundry, subdivided with high yew hedges. Nancy Lancaster cut arches through the hedges, and on the advice of Norah Lindsey, planted the double herbaceous border. Dwarf box hedges provide a strong structure to the rose garden beyond. At the southern point of the walled garden

lies the Fan Rose Garden designed by Nancy Lancaster. From here is a view, improved by Col. Lancaster who demolished an intervening farmhouse, to Kelmarsh church.

The Long Border on the south-west of the walled kitchen garden was also designed by Norah Lindsay and leads to a small, formal Lavender Garden. From here mown paths lead through the Wilderness, an area of high oak woodland and ornamental shrub planting, to the Oak Walk which leads back towards the Hall.

PARK Kelmarsh Hall lies central to the linear park which extends almost a kilometre both east and west of the house. The park probably began to evolve at the time the Hall was rebuilt here from 1728, and the majority of the parkland, today permanent pasture, would have been visible from it as the ground rises gently in both directions. By 1739 elms had been planted to enclose both park and farmland views, and the Northampton to Market Harborough road (now the A508), which passed close to the Hall, had been sunken to quieten the noise and to cut out the view of passing traffic. A late C19 map shows lines of trees, particularly evident to the east and south, some of which survive, which appear to mark the park boundary at that time. The limits of the park to the west are less clearly defined but map evidence suggests Shipley Wood marked the western most extent in the C18. The land between the house and these boundaries is primarily used as pasture and much of this, particularly to the east and south, lies within the abandoned medieval settlement which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Subtle changes were made to the park in the mid C20, beginning in 1933 when the wood on the far side of the lake was cut down to leave the present bare slopes, and to restore a lost C18 avenue three rows of horse chestnuts were planted leading from the house to the lake. Then, in 1951, Colonel Lancaster pulled down a farmhouse which stood amongst the medieval settlement remains to open the view from the Hall to Kelmarsh church. Three years later he brought a late C18 orangery from Brixworth Hall, 10 miles away, and re-erected it to the south of the Hall to make a feature seen from the drive. This pasture is used (2009) to graze the estate's herd of British White Cattle.

KITCHEN GARDEN The triangular walled kitchen garden (listed Grade II) lies west of the Hall, immediately beyond its gardens. The walls appear to be C18 in origin, with sections rebuilt at various times in the C19 as recorded by several inscribed tablets. A probably C19 vinery stands in the centre of the garden enclosure, and supports rear sheds. There is also a series of manure-heated melon pits.

SOURCES Addison, C, Kelmarsh Hall, Northamptonshire. A report commissioned by English Heritage as part of a rapid survey for enhancement to the register (1997) Bridges, J, History and Antiquities of Northamptonshire (1791) Fergus Mann Architects, Kelmarsh Hall Conservation Plan (c.1990) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/55085>, accessed 8 Feb 2010] Friedman, T, James Gibbs (1984), 14, 125-7, 318 Griffiths, M, A, Love Affair with a Garden, Country Life (14 Feb 2008), 67-8 Mowl, T and Hickman, C, The Historic Gardens of England: Northamptonshire (2008), 157-60 Oswald, A, Kelmarsh Hall, Northamptonshire the property of Capt C G Lancaster. Country Life (Feb 1933) Pevsner, N and Cherry, B, The Buildings of England: Northamptonshire (1973 edn), 270-1 Vickers, H, 'Lancaster, Nancy Keene (1897-1994)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/55085>, accessed 8 Feb 2010] Wood, M, Nancy Lancaster. English Country House Style (2005).

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION Kelmarsh Hall's gardens and parkland are designated at Grade II* for the following principal reasons:

* Group value and setting: Kelmarsh Hall, one of James Gibbs's most important country houses (listed Grade I), was deliberately sited on rising ground which within a short time was being improved by landscaping; this is the origin of the current park. * Mid C20 gardens: Kelmarsh's gardens represents an important example of the work of Nancy Lancaster and her circle, Geoffrey Jellicoe and Norah Lindsay also working here. * Parkland: The landscape includes features including lodges, lake and planting introduced at various dates between the mid C18 (possibly in part through the involvement of the regionally-significant designed William Emes) and the mid C20. It includes the extensive medieval settlement remains (Scheduled Ancient Monument). * Kitchen garden: the triangular C18 walled garden includes a probably C19 vinery.

Legal

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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.