

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

GROOMBRIDGE PLACE

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

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Name: GROOMBRIDGE PLACE

County: East Sussex

District: Wealden (District Authority)

Parish: Withyham

County: Kent

District: Tunbridge Wells (District Authority)

Parish: Speldhurst

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.117548
Longitude: 0.19077311
National Grid Reference: TQ 53430 37644
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1000933
Date first listed: 01-May-1986

Details

A C17 walled garden attached to a C17 moated house, with surviving C17 water and built features, mid to late C19 and C20 planting, and set within C19 parkland.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The existence of a manor at Groombridge was first recorded in 1286 when it belonged to the de Cobhams. In 1360 it was purchased by Thomas Waller, whose family built a medieval house on the site of the present house. Groombridge was acquired by John Packer in 1618 and his youngest son, Philip, a friend of the diarist John Evelyn, rebuilt the house in the mid C17 and probably laid out the built structure of the gardens (CL 1955). The property was purchased from the Packers in 1754 by William Camfield, on whose death in 1781 it was sold to Robert Burges of Hall Place, Leigh (qv), his widow bequeathing it to her sister Mrs Saint. She was succeeded by her son, John Saint, rector of Speldhurst from 1830 until his death in 1889, who appears to have begun planting some of the formal topiary in the walled gardens, as shown in the bird's-eye view painted for him by C E Kempe in 1884. John Saint's daughters, the Misses Saints (and friends of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle), inherited in 1889 and on the death of Elizabeth Saint in 1919, the estate was purchased by Mr Henry Stanford Mountain. He restored and repaired the house which passed on his death to his son, Mr S W Mountain. Groombridge Place was sold in 1992 to the Blenheim Asset Management Company and remains (2000) in private corporate hands.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Groombridge Place is situated on the east side of the B2110, on the immediate north-east edge of Groombridge village and 1.5km south of Langton Green. The 43ha site, comprising 2ha of formal walled gardens, 1.5ha of farm buildings, yards and kitchen gardens, and 39.5ha of parkland with woodland and a lake,

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lies contained within a broad, shallow, east to west stream valley (the narrow channel marks the boundary between Kent and East Sussex), the valley sides rising gently to the south and more steeply, to a higher, wooded crest, to the north. The B2110 runs along the west and north-west boundaries and is largely lined with a paling fence and occasional stretches of hedgerow or by village housing and also St John's church, built as a chapel by John Packer. The south boundary is formed by housing laid out on former railway land and by the wooded embankment of the disused line. To the east, the site's parkland and woodland merge with adjacent farmland.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main public entrance is on the west side, through timber and iron gates on the B2110 from which a drive, laid out in the mid 1990s, runs due east alongside the stream and then turns northwards to run along the outer edge of the western moat arm. A stone bridge, axial on the west front of the house, crosses the moat from the drive, stone gate piers framing the entrance into the gravelled forecourt leading to the principal entrance (gate piers listed grade I). The drive continues c 60m northwards from the bridge where it is joined by the former main drive which enters from the B2110 some 70m north of the public entrance and runs along the tree-lined bank of the lake. Shown on Andrews, Dury and Herbert's map of Kent of 1769 and containing one island, the lake was dredged in 1997-8. Standing at its western end on the site boundary is a complex comprising a water mill, Mill House (both listed grade II*), and a stable (listed grade II), of mixed late C17 and C18 origin. Beyond the eastern, tree-lined bank and a parallel, north to south stretch of canal, an open area of grass is bisected by an east to west axial path, framed by two pairs of giant redwoods (shown on the 1st edition OS map surveyed 1868-74), which leads to the west front of the house.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS Groombridge Place (listed grade I) stands on the level valley floor, towards the centre of the site. The two-storey, H-shaped house, built in Flemish bond red brick with sandstone ashlar dressings and a hipped, tiled roof, is entered on the west side, up steps to a sandstone loggia of Ionic columns which forms a deep porch. The house is surrounded by a brick- and sandstone-walled moat of medieval origin, the walls raised to form a low parapet. Stone or brickwork bridges cross the north, west, and east moat arms, that to the north featuring a two-room cottage built on its east side (bridges, cottage and moat walls listed grade I). Within the moat to the south of the house, three ranges of buildings including stables, coach houses and a pair of cottages in a tiny walled garden, overlook a service yard (all listed grade I), 7m north of which and set in lawn is a stone sundial (probably C18, listed grade II). The present house was built between 1652 and 1674 (the dates of John Evelyn's two visits in which he mentions the new house) within the courtyard of Waller's previous house and, apart from alterations to the windows of the west front, remains, externally, virtually unchanged from its original appearance.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The formal walled gardens lie in a rectangle on the north side of the house and are arranged on three rising levels of terrace which are bisected by an axial path aligned on the north front and linked by flights of sandstone steps embellished with stone urns (walls, steps, bridges and all structural elements listed grade I). Immediately north of the moat the lowest level is laid out either side of the axial path to two narrow rectangular lawns, the eastern lawn containing a box parterre, along the south side of which is a line of clipped, domed yews, similar to a layout being shown on Kempe's view of 1884 (in CL 1955) and in photographs of 1902 (CL 1902). In the centre of the east lawn is a chess board paved with black and white marble and edged in brick, laid out the mid 1990s. The north edge of the lawn abuts a narrow, east/west, stone-edged canal, probably of C17 origin (CL 1956), which is fed by a stream running westwards through the park (parallel and to the north of the main stream, of which it is a tributary) and entering the garden beneath a low arch in the east wall.

The axial path crosses the canal on a stone bridge and is carried up to the second terrace level by steps which are flanked by a pair of mature thuja trees (planted since 1902) and by grassed banks. The path, lined by an avenue of clipped, drum-shaped yews, apparently shown on Kempe's 1884 plan as small plants, divides the terrace into two symmetrical, rectangular lawns, the eastern one laid to four intricate brick-edged corner beds and a central island bed, all containing mixed planting and climbing roses on frames. This design was laid out in the mid 1990s to replace former beds. The south side of the lawn is screened from the terrace below by a tall yew hedge decorated with busts on its southern side. The western rectangle is laid to open lawn with a central statue and a row of golden yew drums along its western edge (on the line of formal trees shown on Kempe's plan) planted in the mid C20. Both lawns are lined with wide, mixed borders planted against the east and west walls and at the foot of the retaining wall along the north side, which is topped by a balustrade.

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Axial steps lead up to the third terrace level and onto a narrow, grassed bowling green which is enclosed on the north side by a clipped yew hedge and which leads, at its western end, to Ivy Cottage (listed grade I), a former late C17 brick and tile-hung garden pavilion built into the west wall and enlarged in the C19 to form the present two-room cottage. North of the bowling green the axial path continues 30m through a nut walk flanked by mixed borders to terminate at the gateway, hung with wrought-iron gates, in the buttressed northern boundary wall. The terrace garden to the west of the path is laid to lawn set with a symmetrical pattern of urns and Japanese maples and with a central, probably C18, fountain shown on the OS map of 1869. The lawn in the eastern garden, which features a central circular pool (built in the mid 1990s to replace a former sundial) is lined along its east and west edges with yew drums and is dotted with topiary juniper trees. Both gardens are shown laid to kitchen garden use on Kempe's plan.

East of the walled garden and running southwards against the outer face of the east wall is a narrow grassed and paved walk, enclosed on the east side by yew hedging (planted mid 1990s), which leads over the stream at the south end into a small rock garden planted with ferns and overhung with juniper and cherry, its rocky water channels conducting water from the stream to feed the moat. North of the walled gardens on the north side of the drive is a grassed tennis court with a pavilion clad in rustic timber, constructed on the slope of the parkland in the 1920s.

PARK The park, probably established in the mid to late C19 (Greenwood, 1819-20), lies eastwards along the floor of the valley and up the valley sides to the north and south of the gardens. To the north-west, the rising slopes are laid to pasture with a few scattered, mature trees surviving from the many individuals shown on the OS edition of 1881 and two or three loose, mixed clumps planted in the 1990s. To the north-east, the open grassland and vineyard (planted mid 1990s) occupying the lower slopes are abutted by mature woodland above, the north-east section of which is shown as parkland with a dense scatter of individual trees in 1881 and which was partly replanted following storm damage in 1987.

The valley floor is laid to meadow grassland with trees, including weeping willows, dotted along the banks of both water courses. The southern valley slopes are partly under arable cultivation and partly laid to pasture (with the grassed cricket and recreation grounds in the extreme southern corner), tree cover consisting of several sizeable clumps and a scatter of individuals (largely mature oak) which survive from the more extensive cover in 1881. Eastwards from the east side of the moat, the continuation of the present drive as a grassed public footpath is lined for 100m by an avenue of eleven pairs of limes, shown on the OS edition of 1909, several of these trees dating from replanting in the late C20. The avenue was extended eastwards to the registered site boundary in 1995.

KITCHEN GARDEN The rectangular, c 80m long, kitchen garden area lies to the immediate east of the walled gardens, on the gentle slope running southwards to the northernmost stream. The north side is enclosed by former farm buildings and a c 105m length of brick wall, the eastern c 75m of which, and the wall enclosing the east side of the garden, were erected between 1909 and 1937 (OS). The present western half of the garden, shown as orchard on the OS edition of 1869 and redesigned in 1997, is laid out at the north end to formal squares of vegetable beds enclosed by beech hedging and at the south end, extending south to the weatherboard and tile-roofed squash court built in the 1920s, to a yew maze. North of the kitchen garden is a complex of farm buildings, enlarged to its present layout by 1937 and arranged around a west-facing courtyard, the northern and southern ranges converted to a shop and tea room in the mid 1990s. At the west end of the yard (c 140m north-east of the house) is a late C17/early C18 weatherboard and tile-roofed double barn (listed grade II).

REFERENCES

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Maps J Andrews, A Dury and W Herbert, *A Topographical Map of the County of Kent*, 2" to 1 mile, 1769 C Greenwood, *Map of the County of Kent from an actual survey made in the years 1819 and 1820*, c 1" to 1 mile, 1821

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1868-74, published 1872-8 2nd edition published 1898 3rd edition published 1910 1947 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1869 (Kent area only) 1st edition published 1881 (Sussex, including Kent area already surveyed) 3rd edition published 1909 1937 edition

Description written: January 1998 Amended: January 2000 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: October 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.