

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

TOWN GARDENS, SWINDON

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Name:	TOWN GARDENS, SWINDON
District:	Swindon (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Central Swindon South
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.549577 Longitude: -1.7821679 National Grid Reference: SU 15201 83432 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001477 Date first listed: 24-Oct-2000

Details

Public gardens laid out in two stages in 1894 and 1902 as a recreation ground for residents of Swindon's Old Town, improved in the mid C20.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Town Gardens were laid out in the late C19 and early C20 on the undulating Okus Field, the site of old Purbeck stone quarries (VCH 1970) formerly owned by the Goddard family. The earlier part of the site was laid out by Mr Morris, the Old Swindon Local Board's surveyor, with Mr W H Read, architect, on behalf of Swindon Urban District Council. The Gardens were opened in May 1894 by Mr W Reynolds, Chairman of the Board. Mr G S Walters provided many shrubs and trees (Swindon Advertiser 1894). The northern area was laid out in 1902 at a cost of £1875 including a maze, a shelter, rustic bridges, and seats, to a design submitted by a Mr A John Gilbert who won first prize (£50) in a competition organised by the newly incorporated Swindon Borough Council (plans and watercolours, WRO). In the mid C20 improvements were made to the Gardens, including the creation of a rose garden and bandstand with arena. The garden designer George Dillistone (1887-1957) made a plan for a rose garden, but this seems never to have been executed (plan, WRO). Instead a plan by the Borough Surveyor and Engineer, John B L Thompson was adopted, who also designed a new bandstand with arena (plans, WRO).

The Gardens remain (2000) in use as a municipal park.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Town Gardens lie in the residential south-west corner of Swindon Old Town. Iron railings enclose the Gardens, which cover c 5ha. The need for 'corrugated and unclimbable steel fencing' was mentioned in the Swindon Advertiser at the time of the site's opening in May 1894.

The northern side of the site is bounded by Penfold Gardens, from which it is screened by a mature tree belt. The A4 Bath Road runs parallel to the Gardens, c 125m north of Glenview Road. Westlecot Road runs along the southern boundary, with Edwardian villas opposite the southern entrance. Quarry Road runs south from Bath Road to Westlecot Road to form the eastern boundary, with a recreation ground to the east at its northern end and late C19 terracing (VCH 1970) towards the southern end. The western boundary is marked by mature trees (probably 1890s planting), beyond which lie private gardens from C20 housing in The Quarries. Waste land from the old quarries backs onto further housing beyond the north-west corner.

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ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES There are four entrances to Town Gardens. These are linked by a perimeter path which is mostly edged with rough-hewn quarry stones or tiles in the same material and lined with mature trees and shrubs.

The main entrance lies on the southern boundary giving access from Westlecot Road. On the east side of the entrance stands a brick lodge (Joseph Williams, late C19) which is shown on the OS 2nd edition published 1900. The gateway is flanked by a pair of iron gates supported by brick piers; originally it was hung with wooden gates (Swindon Advertiser 1894; early C20 photos). This is the earliest of the entrances to the park (OS 1900).

A further entrance (late C19/early C20, listed grade II) in the north-east corner of the Gardens gives access from Quarry Road. A pair of elaborate wrought-iron gates providing vehicular access are flanked by iron gate piers with an iron overthrow; these in turn are flanked by pedestrian gates in similar style.

There are pedestrian entrances along the west and east boundaries. The western entrance, c 350m north-west of the southern entrance, is towards the north-west corner of the Gardens. The eastern entrance, c 175m north-east of the southern entrance, gives access from Quarry Road. The west gates are a similar style to the north-east gates, while the eastern entrance is a plain iron-railing pedestrian gate.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The layout of the Gardens is based in part on the tracks and topographical features of the old quarries. A central path runs north-east from the southern to the north-eastern entrance, bisected throughout the Gardens by various paths which provide links to key features and a perimeter path.

The perimeter path runs west and east from the southern entrance before turning north. Its two arms then following their respective boundaries (sometimes several metres inside the boundary railings and with palisade railings on its inner side) before they rejoin at the north-east corner of the site.

From the southern entrance, the cherry-tree-lined main central path leads north, bisecting a lawn. On the west side of the lawn, which is laid out with scattered mature trees and seasonal bedding beds, a small putti stands on a plinth in a central flower bed. This may formerly have been the site of a statue of Flora (early C20 photos). The main central path leads uphill via steps in a planted rockery which was created from white spar rock; the steps originally had rustic larch balustrades (Swindon Advertiser 1894; early C20 photos).

A few metres north-west of the rockery steps stands an octagonal former Western Railways kiosk with timber-framed lead roof (1915, listed grade II), placed here by 1942 (OS). To the east of the steps, set within a clearing with recesses for benches and surrounded by mature trees, is a cast-iron octagonal bandstand (listed grade II) with aluminium sheet and lead roof. The bandstand, which stands amidst semicircular flower beds c 110m north of the southern entrance, forms the focal point of the Gardens. It was provided by Messrs Allan of Glasgow and was improved by J B L Thompson in 1927 to take a clock and turret (plan, WRO).

Beyond the bandstand, the main central path forks with paths leading off to the north-west and north-east. The central path continues north, parallel to and above a valley to its east, passing two small lawns scattered with mature trees. The more northerly of the two lawns has a small sculpture on its northern edge. A minor path leads west past the sculpture and across an iron bridge introduced in c 1982; this replaces a rustic oak bridge (1894; shown in early C20 photos) which marked the northern boundary of the Gardens' original extent. The path then divides into two: the southern spur leads south to a late C20 yard (marked as glasshouses on OS 1942), while the northern spur becomes the perimeter path around the bowling green's west side.

Just north of the sculpture and west of the central path is the southern entrance into a rectangular formal rose garden situated c 110m north of the bandstand. Statuary is set into a crazy-paved path running from south to north through the garden, which is laid out symmetrically. The garden is enclosed by hedging with specimen trees to the north and ornate iron gates on its north, south, and east sides. On the west side, steps behind three toilet blocks (early to late C20) lead down to a path running north/south below and parallel to the rose garden. The rose garden was laid out in the late 1920s/early 1930s on the site of the former maze, to a design by J B L Thompson (plan, WRO). A proposal for the rose garden was also made by the garden architect George Dillistone, from Tunbridge Wells in Kent, but this was never executed (plan, WRO).

North of the rose garden, the central path crosses an open cemented area which is the site of a former octagonal seat (OS 1923), which was removed by 1942 (OS). The seat is shown on A J Gilbert's plan of c 1900 and formed a central feature in the northern

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extension of the park, just north of the former maze. From the site of the former seat the central path turns north-east to join the western arm of the perimeter path.

On leaving the bandstand, the western fork of the central path, lined mostly with beech and then lime, forms the perimeter path for its first 100m, heading north underneath the bridge. Several paths lead off to the west along the south and west sides of a bowling green. The current (2000) pavilion replaces an earlier building which was present on the bowling green site by the 1920s (OS 1923). The western fork continues north to a T-junction, turning west towards the west entrance and east to join the central path in the open cemented area north of the rose garden.

The eastern fork of the trio of paths leading north from the bandstand is crazy-paved. At its southern end a small, plain, Portland stone and granite memorial sculpture commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of VE day (1995). Flanked with trees and shrubs and banked with C20 brickwork, the crazy-paving path descends into a valley in the former main quarry area which occupies the north-east section of the Gardens. A footbridge marked at the valley's southern boundary on early OS editions had disappeared by 1942.

The crazy-paved, trapezium-shaped southern garden in the valley contains raised stone-edged flower beds set around an urn, around which runs a circular path. The northern rectangular garden has a perimeter path around a lawn which has formally planted angular corner beds and a central circular bed.

The sloping banks to the west and east of the northern garden are supported by mid C20 brickwork. Mid C20 concrete steps at each corner, edged partially with quarry stone, lead west up to the central path and east up to the perimeter path.

Along the northern boundary of the rectangular garden is an entrance porch with iron turnstiles and brick pillars that leads to a domed bandstand in Art Deco style, called the Concert Bowl, situated in a valley below. Both the Concert Bowl and entrance were designed by J B L Thompson in 1934(6 (drawings, WRO), and were formally opened by the Mayor of Swindon on 6 May 1936. The Concert Bowl, referred to in Thompson's drawings (see above) as 'Bandstand and Arena', and in Civic News, July 1963, as 'a concert bowl and shell', stands 65m south of the north-eastern entrance. It is approached from the south along a lawn at the bottom of the steep grass-banked valley, with mature trees to the north, west, and east. In 1994 the Concert Bowl and its entrance porch were restored to celebrate the Gardens' centenary year, as acknowledged by a small plaque on the porch. A former small rockery and crescent-shaped pond, with steps up to the bandstand platform, are now (2000) concreted over.

The eastern arm of the perimeter path turns north where a formal concrete-edged pond and decorative black iron aviary stand c 45m and 50m north-east of the southern entrance respectively, in what was called the 'children's corner' when the Gardens opened (Swindon Advertiser 1894). The pond was reworked between the 1920s and 1942 (OS), probably by Thompson (see his plan called 'Marsh Garden', WRO). It formerly contained a single-spray bronze fountain (now, 2000, replaced) known as 'The Water Carrier', which was supplied by Messrs Edwards, Bays and Rye for the 1894 opening (Swindon Advertiser 1894). The aviary was built in the late C20 and replaced an old (wooden) aviary (Swindon Borough Council pers comm, 2000) marked immediately to the north-east of the lodge on the OS 3rd edition published 1923.

North of the aviary, a group of early C20 greenhouses formerly stood to the east of the lawn and perimeter path (OS). From here the path dog-legs to the east before continuing northwards past a former park keeper's cottage of c 1927/8. It is situated along the eastern boundary of the Gardens and is now (2000) in use as a private dwelling. Further north the path passes the east gate, continuing north through pedestrian gates towards the north-eastern entrance.

The western arm of the perimeter path runs parallel to the Gardens' boundary for c 70m after leaving the southern entrance, before turning north to run parallel to the western part of the lawn. After c 60m, the path turns north-east and uphill towards the kiosk and bandstand, with a track leading north from it to the southern entrance to the C20 yard. The path joins with the western fork of the central path to run north under the footbridge, forking west to the north of it to run west along the south and west sides of the bowling green. A spur then veers west to exit through the west gate while the perimeter path continues north-east. It runs south of, and parallel to railings separating the Gardens from wasteland, then keeps north of two mature copses to meet the main central path which joins it from the south c 25m south-west of the north-eastern entrance.

REFERENCES

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'Swindon Town Gardens Opening Ceremony', Swindon Advertiser, 12 May 1894 Civic News, (July 1963) [Swindon Borough Council monthly news sheet] Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire IX, (1970), pp 106, 116 Swindon in Old Photos, (The Swindon Society, nd)

Maps OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1885, published 1886 2nd edition surveyed 1899, published 1900 3rd edition surveyed 1922, published 1923 1942 edition

Archival items A J Gilbert, Extension of Town Gardens, watercoloured plan, 1" to 2', c 1900 (G24/707/1H), (Swindon Borough Collection, Wiltshire Record Office) 24 plans, surveys, and drawings showing proposals for Town Gardens, Swindon (including those by G Dillistone and J B L Thompson), c 1900(c 1935 (G24/705/3), (Swindon Borough Collection, Wiltshire Record Office) Correspondence relating to conveyancing between Swindon Corporation and E Whiting dated between 16 October 1935 and 20 August 1936 relating to land adjoining west side of boundary (G24/132/403), (Swindon Borough Collection, Wiltshire Record Office) Swindon Borough Council, Leaflet published for the official opening of the bandstand by the Mayor on 6 May 1936 (G24/132/403), (Swindon Borough Collection, Wiltshire Record Office) Old Swindon photos and postcards, early C20 (Swindon Central Library)

Description written: September 2000 Amended: October 2000; December 2000 Register Inspector: FH/FDM Edited: May 2001

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.