

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

The Italian Garden at Great Ambrook

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

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| Name:               | The Italian Garden at Great Ambrook  |
| County:             | Devon  |
| District:           | Teignbridge (District Authority)   |
| Parish:             | Ipplepen   |
| label.localisation: | Latitude: 50.475932<br>Longitude: -3.6598466<br>National Grid Reference: SX8231865329<br><a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>  |
| label.overview:     | Heritage Category: Park and Garden<br>Grade: II<br>List Entry Number: 1419629<br>Date first listed: 05-Jun-2014<br>Location Description: Italian Garden, east of Great Ambrook Avenue, Great Ambrook, Ipplepen, Newton Abbot |

## Historique de la conservation

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The garden at Great Ambrook was laid out between 1909 and 1912, for Arthur Smith Graham (1871-1928), on farmland lying to the east of Great Ambrook House, to which Graham had moved in 1899. The architect/designer employed for the work was Thomas Henry Lyon (1869-1953) of Ilsington, Dartmoor, who also built a music room addition to Great Ambrook for Graham at the same time as creating the garden. Also contemporaneous was his large extension and remodelling of the chapel of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge; Lyon served as first Director of Design at the new School of Architecture at Cambridge. His architectural output included work for the university, as well as ecclesiastical commissions, and a number of private houses in the Dartmoor area. Lyon worked on other garden designs, Great Ambrook being his largest commission of this kind, and the only one known to survive. The builder is thought to have been Lewis Bearne, who also worked at Castle Drogo.

Arthur Graham, whose parents came from wealthy merchant families, grew up in Surrey and Kent. He moved to Devon, having read classics at Christ Church, Oxford, without graduating, buying Great Ambrook together with the adjacent farm of Newhouse Barton. It may be that his move to the secluded Devon property, and his creation of the enclosed garden there, was connected with his homosexuality. Graham appears, his identity thinly veiled, in the novel 'Nicholas Crabbe: A Romance' by the cult author Frederick Rolfe (or 'Baron Corvo'). The novel sees Theophanes Clayfoot (Graham) steal the affections of Robert Kemp (Graham's close friend, the poet and author Sholto Douglas) from Crabbe (Rolfe), and transport him to Sonorusciello, the idyllic Cornish estate which represents Great Ambrook. Evidence regarding Graham's life at Great Ambrook, and the form and features of the garden itself, appear consistent with the idea that the garden was created as a setting for a form of social life and recreation which would not otherwise have been possible in the early years of the C20.

The garden, known from early on as the 'Italian Garden', was created across the boundary of two existing fields, taking advantage of the dramatic possibilities of the sloping site; near the centre, a former quarry, thought to have been used as a carrion pit in the C19, was dug out to make the feature of the garden known as 'The Dell'. The hard landscaping, consisting of steep paths

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of Portland stone, leading between garden buildings and sporting facilities, was largely complete by 1912. The raised terraces and summerhouse provide early examples of the use of reinforced concrete slabs – Lyon was later cited for his use of Truscon flooring by the Trussed Concrete Steel Company in its advertising. The planting too was largely established by 1912; there is evidence that Graham bought from the renowned nursery of the Rovelli brothers on the banks of Lake Maggiore.

Following Graham's death in 1928, Great Ambrook House and its garden were occupied for five years by Thomas Cuthbert Shaw, before coming into the ownership of Enid Milner, whose family remained until 1963. In the 1930s and 1940s Great Ambrook was noted in Kelly's Directory for its 'Italian garden with many rare and unusual trees and shrubs'. During the 1950s and early 1960s, however, the garden fell into neglect and was so thoroughly overgrown at the time of the 1963 sale, when then estate was broken up, that its existence appears not to have been known of. The garden was rediscovered by its owners, Mr and Mrs Kenneth Rees, in 1988, and since that time has been gradually uncovered and restored. Much of the undergrowth which had obscured the garden has been cut back, though those trees and plants which survive from Arthur Graham's time are now mature and the overall appearance is considerably more shady and verdant than is shown in early photographs.

## Details

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING:** Great Ambrook lies to the south-west of Ipplepen, and is surrounded by undulating agricultural land. The garden covers an irregularly-shaped area of approximately 4 acres, sloping upwards to the east away from Great Ambrook House, from which it is separated by the house drive, running from north-east to south-west. Standing to the north-east of the house is the converted coach-house. On a plot to the south-west of the garden is a late-C20 house, Abbot's Croft. The garden is bounded on the north, east and south-east sides by rendered walls: those to the north and east reach up to 15 feet high, and are wired for plants on both sides; the south-eastern wall is lower, allowing views into the field beyond. The southern boundary is edged by post and wire and the south-western boundary by post and rail, both sections having been put in place after the 1950s. Defining the north-west corner of the garden is a walled orchard, pre-dating the Italian Garden, its south-east wall having been lost in the 1960s. To north, south and east the garden is bounded by fields.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING:** Great Ambrook House, listed at Grade II (National Heritage List entry 1164677) is a largely C18 house on the site of a medieval manor, with a C17 rear wing. A substantial music room addition was built in 1909-12 by T H Lyon, in neo-Georgian style, with an attached terrace defined by Doric columns. The house is not included in the registration, because the garden occupies a clearly defined area, representing a designed landscape created within a short period of time, but the relationship between house and garden remains legible. **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES:** the original main entrance to the garden is at the west end of the site, with wide stone steps leading up from the former carriage drive; the steps are flanked by large stone troughs. The carriage drive originally curved south and then north-east into the garden from the main drive to Great Ambrook House, and ran along the north-west side of the garden; the south loop of the carriage drive was cut off when the plot on which Abbot's Croft is built was created. A modern entrance here, at the junction between the truncated carriage drive and the main drive, is the one now most frequently in use. A wide gateway at the north-west corner of the garden, having circular gate piers with scalloped capitals, and double timber gates, provided access to the carriage drive which is believed to have run along the north side of the garden wall to the summerhouse at the north-east end of the garden. Here, an archway gives pedestrian access to the garden. Near the east end of the garden is an opening in the wall, approached from within the garden by the Palm Walk; replacement timber gates open to give a view of the field, known as the Peacock Field.

**GARDENS AND RECREATIONAL AREAS:** the layout of the garden is fluid and cohesive, the naturally sloping site being divided by a number of walkways leading between a variety of features and vistas. The overall conception is in the picturesque tradition, rather than forming a series of compartments in the style more usually associated with Arts and Crafts gardens. The paths form a unifying feature throughout the garden, being constructed of irregularly shaped or 'crazy' paving in Portland stone, with rills running alongside them; the sound of running water would have added a further sensory dimension to the garden. The **NORTH WALK** follows the line of the north wall from the carriage gateway to the north end of the eastern terrace; the **CENTRE WALK** begins at the original main entrance, and moves upwards through the centre of the garden, passing to the south of the

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DELL, to the terrace; the SOUTH WALK, which defines the south-east edge of the garden, leads from the terrace, towards the recreational areas in the south-west part of the garden. The garden contains numerous trees planted in the early C20, and now mature, including western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) Chusan palms (*Trachycarpus fortunei*), maidenhair trees (*Ginkgo biloba*), Monterey cypresses (*Cupressus macrocarpa*), Lawson's cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*), Nootka cypress (*Xanthocyparis nootkatensis*), yew (*Taxus baccata*), holm oak (*Quercus ilex*), London planes (*Platanus x acerifolia*) and a *Magnolia acuminata*.

At the eastern end of the garden, the three main walks converge on the semi-circular TERRACE, 33 feet in diameter, which marks the garden's summit; beneath the terrace is the spring-fed water tank which feeds the complex water system, served by the rills edging the paths, and by a number of large stone-built reservoirs. At the centre of the terrace is a plinth, made of Portland stone and sandstone, which formerly held a sundial. Set against the north-east wall is the south-west-facing SUMMERHOUSE. This is a two-storey building, square on plan, with a storage area below and a single room, the floor of which is laid with terracotta tiles, above, reached by an external stair rising diagonally across the frontage. Beneath the stair, to right, is a small loggia. The north wall of the building has an octagonal window at ground-floor level. The summerhouse originally had an ogival domed roof, now lost. The arched gateway in the garden wall to the north of the summerhouse leads into an enclosure in the adjacent field, in which are planted a holm oak and a cork oak. Set into an angle in the outer face of the north garden wall, a small colonnaded SHELTER provides views towards Dartmoor and Haytor. To the south of the terrace, on the outer face of the garden wall, lies a disused HOTHOUSE which formerly contained a grapevine, and retains the original boiler and pipework. The lower, south-western part of the garden is dominated by the tennis court (converted from lawn to hard court in the 1930s). At the court's southern end, the stone-built TENNIS PAVILION, which consists of a viewing terrace raised on columns, accessed by a wide central stair. At the centre of the terrace, with its square-pierced balustrade, is an octagonal plunge pool. At the back of the terrace, a curved seat of grey Ipplepen marble, with scrolled pedestals and arm-rests. Benched seating is built around the sunken areas beneath the terrace. Leading south-east from the tennis pavilion, the grassed Apostles Walk, lined with western red cedar and holly, leads past the small ROSE GARDEN, with rectangular beds set into stone paving, to the SWIMMING POOL. This feature consists of a rectangular pool, narrow but deep, constructed of brick with concrete-rendered sides and a terracotta-tiled base, edged by a low wall suitable for seating, and surrounded on three sides by roughly-hewn pillars of Dartmoor granite, which originally held wooden beams and trusses, forming a pergola. To the south side of the pool, shallow steps lead down to the SUNBATHING AREA, with a stone bench at the south-west end.

One section of the South Walk is covered by a PERGOLA, 111 feet long, formed of concrete-rendered brick columns with tall squared bases, and planted with *Akebia quinata* and *Vitis cogneticiae*, both of which appear in photographs of the garden in its early days. At the centre of the pergola, the PALM WALK (lined with *Trachycarpus fortunei*) leads from the Centre Walk, and ends at the gateway to the Peacock Field, from which there is a view of an area of ornamental tree planting, thought to be contemporaneous with the garden, and a 'borrowed view' of the landscape with a copse pre-dating Graham's work at Great Ambrook. Here is planted a *Camellia japonica* 'Alba Plena', thought to be original to the garden. At the east end of the South Walk, a group of five *Podocarpus salignus*. To the north of the South Walk, between the swimming pool and the Palm Walk, is the area now known as THE SQUARE, planted with mature specimen trees, including Corsican pines (*Pinus nigra* subsp. *laricio*), a Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and a Rocky Mountain Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), as well as a wild cherry, which at 26 metres was recently (2014) designated Devon champion by the Devon Gardens Trust.

## Summary

The Italian Garden at Great Ambrook, laid out between 1909 and 1912 by T H Lyon for Arthur Graham.

## 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.

## Reasons for Designation

The Italian Garden at Great Ambrook is registered at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

\* Design: for the unusual design of the garden, reflecting the early-C20 fashion for Italian style in gardens, but taking a more informal, picturesque approach suited to the Devon landscape within which it is set; \* Designer: as the only surviving garden created by T H Lyon, a local architect with a more far-reaching role as first Director of the Cambridge School of Architecture, whose eclectic tastes are well represented in the garden design; \* Garden structures: the garden includes a number of buildings and structures of unusual design, which form an integral part of the layout and experience of the site; \* Survival and Documentation: despite decades of neglect, the garden remains remarkably close to its original design, as evidenced by contemporary documents and photographs; \* Planting: a number of mature trees and plants survive from the original planting scheme; \* Historic interest: for the socio-historical context in which the garden was produced, being commissioned, designed, and written about by men linked by homosexuality as well as by aesthetic interests; \* Group value: with Grade II-listed Great Ambrook House, to which Lyon added a music room extension contemporaneous with the garden.

## Bibliographie

### **Other**

Photographs, plans and other papers in private hands.,