

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

COWDRAY HOUSE

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

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COWDRAY HOUSE

Name: COWDRAY HOUSE

County: West Sussex

District: Chichester (District Authority)

Parish: Easebourne

County: West Sussex

District: Chichester (District Authority)

Parish: Midhurst

County: West Sussex

District: Chichester (District Authority)

Parish: West Lavington

National park: SOUTH DOWNS

label.localisation: Latitude: 50.992824
Longitude: -0.71618761
National Grid Reference: SU9019622276
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1001210
Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

Remnants of the layout and built features of C16 and early C17 formal gardens surrounding the ruins of a Tudor house, altered and extended by Lancelot Brown in the late C18 and set within a C16 park, also improved by Brown, which contains, at c 1.5km from the ruins, a Victorian house with associated formal and woodland gardens of early C19 origin.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Bohun family owned Cowdray from c 1185 to 1492, Sir John Bohun building a new house on or near the site of the present Cowdray House in the late C13; his former house on St Ann's Hill to the south was probably demolished in the early C14. Sir John's son-in-law, Sir David Owen, rebuilt the Bohun house in the early C16 before selling the estate to Sir William FitzWilliam, created Earl of Southampton in 1537, who was granted a licence in 1532-3 to impark land to make the present park at Cowdray. On the Earl's death in 1542, the estate passed to his half brother Sir Anthony Browne, then in 1548 to Browne's son, another Anthony, who in 1554 was created Viscount Montague. The Earl and his Viscount nephew probably laid out the formal

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walled gardens around the house (Cowdray archives). The estate passed successively between 1592 and 1717 to the second, third, fourth and fifth Viscounts, the sixth Viscount continuing his father's sale of outlying properties (including, in 1719, that of Battle Abbey, qv) to clear debts. The seventh Viscount, Anthony Joseph, succeeded in 1767 and made many alterations to the park and to the house, attempting 'to render the vicinity of the park, which is sterile and capable of little improvement, more agreeable by plantations of fir which in some measure have the desired effect' (Roundell 1884). He employed Lancelot Brown (1716-83) to work for him from 1768 to 1774, Brown's account book recording payments of £3459 for 'Montague Lord Vist' between those dates. Although the accounts make no reference to which estates were concerned and no other primary sources confirm fees being related to Cowdray, several secondary sources refer to Brown having worked there. The seventh Viscount died in 1787 and was succeeded by his son George Samuel. On 25 September 1793, fire reduced the house to its present ruined state, and the eighth Viscount died shortly after in the same year. The title passed to a fourth cousin and was extinguished on his death in 1797 while Cowdray passed to George Samuel's sister, who in 1794 married William Stephen Poyntz. They did not rebuild the house but moved to a remodelled cottage, Cowdray Lodge, and embarked upon improvements and new planting on the estate. Following William Poyntz' death in 1840, the estate was purchased in 1842 by the sixth Earl Egmont, in whose family it remained until 1909, the seventh Earl building the present house known as Cowdray Park on the site of the former Lodge in c 1875. The estate was bought in 1909 by Sir Weetman Pearson who in 1910 was created Baron, and in 1917, Viscount Cowdray. The estate passed to his descendants, who have continued to develop the gardens around Cowdray Park, and it remains (1998) in private hands.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The registered site of Cowdray House lies either side of the A272 Petworth to Midhurst road, on the east side of Midhurst and Easebourne. The c 355ha site comprises c 17ha of formal gardens and pleasure grounds and c 238ha of parkland, farmland and woodland, a golf course and sports fields. The south-west corner occupies the north-east side of the level valley floor of the east-flowing River Rother, from which it extends north-eastwards up the undulating, south-facing slopes of a sandstone ridge. North of the A272, the upper slopes of the park are enclosed by agricultural fencing from the surrounding landscape of wooded farmland and enjoy panoramic views southwards to the South Downs. South of the A272, Easebourne Lane (A286) abuts the western boundary while the buildings and gardens of Midhurst and Easebourne and the wooded slopes of St Ann's Hill form the setting in the south-west corner. To the south and south-east, the site's wooded farmland and meadow land along the river merge into a similar, surrounding landscape.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The ruins of Cowdray House are approached from the west, from the north end of Midhurst. North of a car park on the east side of North Street, timber gates open onto the Causeway, a track raised some 2m above the surrounding Town Meadow, which leads 300m south-east to cross the River Rother over an early C18 stone bridge and to arrive at the iron-fenced forecourt on the west front of the house. This approach, dating from the C16, is shown on Thomas Heather's survey of 1712 as lined by a double avenue of trees, these probably being removed as part of Lancelot Brown's landscape works in the 1770s (Barson 1997). The forecourt is entered through wrought-iron gates hung on gate piers of ashlar surmounted by urns (ensemble listed grade II), the gateway having been moved to this position in the 1960s from the North Street end of the Causeway where it had been erected by the seventh Viscount in 1720.

The principal entrance to the late C19 house known as Cowdray Park lies on the A272, some 0.9km south-east of its junction with the A286 in Easebourne village. A drive enters between stone gate piers and runs southwards for 250m before turning west onto the forecourt of the east, entrance front of the house. Both the entrance and the approach were established between 1795 and 1808 (Gardner and Gream; OS preliminary drawing) and served the former Cowdray Lodge which stood on the same site.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Cowdray House (listed grade I; scheduled ancient monument), which forms the principal focus for the surrounding designed landscape, survives as a ruin following its almost complete destruction by fire in 1793. It stands in the south-west corner of the site, within the meadows of the Rother valley with distant views restricted by St Ann's Hill to the south and rising ground to north. The house, begun in c 1520 and completed by 1542, forms a complete courtyard; the principal components which survive, although without their roofs and staircases, are the central section of the west front, including the gatehouse with its three-storey octagonal stair turrets, the main house on the east side of the courtyard which contains the great

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hall and chapel, and the Tudor kitchen tower. The north and south ranges were completely destroyed. The ruins have undergone several phases of repair and consolidation, including work being carried out by Sir William St John Hope from 1909 to 1914 and by English Heritage from 1983 to 1991. To the south and south-east of the House and forming a group with it, is a largely C18 cottage range (part is listed grade II) built on the site of former Tudor outbuildings, a C17 timber-framed granary (listed grade II) and, to their west, the former stables and coach houses built in 1726 as a three-sided, stone rubble courtyard block (listed grade II) which is now used as farm buildings.

Cowdray Park lies c 1.5km to the east of the ruins, the two houses visible from each other above surrounding trees. The two-storey, stone-built house with gabled dormers, a pitched, tiled roof and a short, stone tower, was erected in c 1875 by the seventh Earl Egmont as an extension to Cowdray Lodge, a cottage orné enlarged by the Poyntz family from a keeper's lodge at the end of the C18.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS These surround both Cowdray House ruins and Cowdray Park. To the south and south-west of Cowdray House ruins and enclosed by the stable range to the west and the cottage range to the north, a roughly 65m square area of domestic gardens occupies the site of the former Tudor Privy Garden (recorded as Cowdray Old Garden on the Tithe map of 1843). The southern boundary of the Old Garden, where it abuts Wall Meadow, is formed by an east to west stone wall which may date from the C16 (CHC 1998). In the south-west corner of the garden, immediately above the river bank, stands a small, square, brick and stone garden pavilion with a pitched, tiled roof. This is shown, with a second matching pavilion c 200m further east (now gone), on Heather's survey of 1712 and may be either a further surviving C16 feature or one associated with the C17 gardens referred to in an inventory of gardening equipment of 1682 (Cowdray archives). The east side of the Old Garden is enclosed by a high brick wall dating from the C18 when the garden may have been in use as a kitchen garden. Eastwards and northwards from the Old Garden and the ruins are open areas of grass which are shown on Heather's 1712 survey as occupied by a large square enclosed by further walls, these having been replaced by lawns by the date of S H Grimm's views of the east and south fronts made in 1781 and 1785. Field evidence exists for the position of the east wall (Barson 1997). From a point some 200m north of the ruins, an ashlar ha-ha following a southward curve defines the northern and eastern boundaries of the C18 pleasure grounds, which are now laid to open grass. The ha-ha, shown on the OS preliminary drawing of 1808 and now (1998) heavily overgrown, probably formed part of Lancelot Brown's improvements to Cowdray carried out between 1768 and 1774 (Brown's account books). Some 90m north of the north-west corner of the ruins stands a late C16, two-storey, octagonal, stone-built conduit house (listed grade II), also known as the round or water tower and now in use as a custodian's office. A survey of 1568 describes it as 'situate in one close called conduit close ... it contains one acre and a half' (Cowdray archives). At the south end of the ha-ha, some 150m east of the ruins, a walk, enclosed within belts of mature deciduous trees underplanted with yew and holly, follows the curve of the river for 600m eastwards to Lodge Wood and the grounds of Cowdray Park. This walk had been laid out by 1808 as a private walk between the Lodge and the ruins (OS preliminary drawing), the *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* describing the alterations made to Brown's work as 'under the auspices of Mr Gilpin [and] made more in accordance with the natural scenery, and, consequently, in purer taste'. The ornamental gardens of Cowdray Park cover some 12ha around the house and have been developed from the early C19 to the present day (1998). The east front is laid to lawns with a central stone fountain basin and corner beds of mixed planting, the fountain having been moved to this position in 1997 from its former site west of the house. The lawns are bounded on the east side by a stone ha-ha, established by 1808, which winds northwards almost to the main A272 road, enclosing the entire pleasure grounds from the park. On the south front, several levels of terrace descend to a rectilinear lawn, enclosed on the east side by a raised walk, wide border and a high wall, features laid out after 1910 (OS 3rd edition), and flanked on the west side by a swimming pool surrounded by yew hedging and with garden pavilions, built in 1997. Westwards of the house and pool, lawns slope steeply down into a north to south valley containing two lakes, the southernmost one built in 1997(8). The valley sides are abundantly planted with rhododendrons and other shrubs under a light canopy of trees. West and north above the valley are further tracts of ornamental and native woodland and, running north to south parallel to the valley, a 350m long Wellingtonia avenue, planted between 1896 and 1910.

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PARK South of the A272, most of the parkland is open in character and under arable cultivation or, as in the area north-east of Cowdray ruins, is laid out to sports fields and polo grounds (established after the Second World War). The meadow land south and north-west of the ruins has occasional tree clumps and trees line the Rother channel and several field boundaries. The parkland immediately east of the ha-ha bounding the pleasure grounds of Cowdray Park is planted with a dense scatter of mixed trees, the ha-ha wall itself extending from the east lawns of the house eastwards across the park, on a line shown as a fence or pale on the OS drawing of 1808, to the site boundary at Moor Lodge.

North of the A272, the park comprises a combination of open, largely treeless arable fields interspersed with swathes of a well-treed golf course, established within existing parkland in 1904 and extended from the 1920s. The highest slopes in north-east corner of the park are laid to permanent pasture dotted with trees.

Cowdray was first imparked in 1532-3, when William FitzWilliam was granted a royal licence to enclose c 240ha known as the Singlepark. A survey of 1568 records this as having been extended southwards from the line of the present A272 to Cowdray House and increased by the addition of a second deer park, known as the North Park, which lay some 3km north of the house. Budgen's map of Sussex of 1724 shows the boundaries of Cowdray park similar to the present ones. Although considerable planting has been carried out on the golf course in the mid and late C20, significant elements survive from the planting pattern shown on Gardner and Gream's map of Sussex of 1795 and, at a larger scale, on the OS preliminary drawing of 1808. These include the chestnut avenue lining the track (known as The Race) along the north-west boundary, this avenue being shown continuing south of the A272 towards Cowdray ruins on Heather's survey of 1712 and some of its trees surviving until the mid C20; Oaters Wood; remnants of linear lime groups in Lime Bottom and, north of the A272, several large, round clumps including the Yew Oval and Broomhill plantation, the latter replanted with its encircling beech trees in 1996.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden lies to the south of Cowdray Park. Its asymmetrical hexagon, which is shown in a roughly similar form on the OS drawing of 1808, covers c 1ha of the south-facing slope. It is enclosed by walls of brick and flint and is laid to grass planted with orchard trees and to areas of hard surface which serve as car parking for events.

REFERENCES

J A E Roundell, *Cowdray: the History of a Great English House* (1884) *Victoria History of the County of Sussex IV*, (1907), pp 49-50 I Nairn and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex* (1965), pp 195-8 D Ray, *Cowdray Ruins: a short History and Guide*, guidebook, (nd) S Barson, *Cowdray Ruins, Easebourne, Midhurst, West Sussex: an Assessment of Documentary Sources*, (English Heritage Historical and Research Team 1997) C Beresford, *Cowdray Park: Chronological Development of the Landscape*, (nd) [copy on EH file] *Gazetteer to Draft Conservation Plan* (Cultural Heritage Consultants (CHC) 1998) *Maps* T Heather, *A Survey of certaine lands ... in Sussex, 1712*, (CA 1645), (West Sussex Record Office) R Budgen, *An Actual Survey of the County of Sussex ...*, 1/2" to 1 mile, 1724 W Gardner and T Gream, *A Topographical map of the County of Sussex ...*, 1" to 1 mile, 1795
OS Preliminary drawings for the 1st edition, 2" to 1 mile, 1808 OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1874-5 2nd edition surveyed 1896, published 1898 3rd edition surveyed 1910, published 1913 1950 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1875 3rd edition surveyed 1910, published 1912
Illustrations S H Grimm, *Views of Cowdray*, (British Museum map library and Society of Antiquaries)
Archival items Lancelot Brown's account books are held at the RHS Lindley Library. Other material relating to Cowdray is held in the Cowdray Archive, to which there is a two-volume index (A A Dibben (ed), 1960, West Sussex Record Office, Chichester).
Description written: May 1998 Amended: January 2000 Register Inspector: VCH Edited: June 2000

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.