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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

FRANT COURT

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Name:	FRANT COURT
County:	East Sussex
District:	Wealden (District Authority)
Parish:	Frant
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.094337 Longitude: 0.26664158 National Grid Reference: TQ 58819 35224 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001178 Date first listed: 14-Apr-2003

Details

Early C20 terraced formal gardens in part laid out with advice from Gertrude Jekyll, together with an extensive woodland garden also designed by Miss Jekyll.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Frant Court was originally constructed on the site of existing almshouses by Lord Stratford de Redclyffe after his retirement from the diplomatic service in 1858. The nephew of the Prime Minister George Canning (d 1827), Lord Stratford de Redclyffe served as ambassador in Turkey, Russia, the United States, and Switzerland (Eeles 1947). The mid C19 house was substantially altered c 1870, while after Lord Stratford's death in 1880, it continued to be occupied for some years by his daughters, before being sold to a Miss Thornton. The new house was provided with a formal terraced garden, which took advantage of views over Eridge Park (qv). In 1912-13, Miss Thornton commissioned Granville Streitfeild to make substantial additions and alterations to the house, and at the same time Arthur Charlton & Sons, garden contractors of Tunbridge Wells, provided a plan for alterations to the existing garden (Reef Point Collection). This scheme was extensively revised by Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932), who provided planting plans for the existing terraces, designed new features in the formal garden, and also drew up a scheme for an extensive woodland garden on the slope below the formal garden (RPC; Jekyll notebooks 1913-15). Jekyll's proposals appear to have been executed by Arthur Charlton & Sons, and the new garden was completed by 1916 (photographs, private collection). Miss Thornton sold Frant Court in 1918, when the gardens were described and illustrated in the sale particulars (East Sussex RO), and it subsequently passed through several hands. Further sale particulars issued in 1932 contain illustrations of the garden which correspond closely to Miss Jekyll's plans.

In 1932 Frant Court was sold to St Lawrence's School, which made several additions to the original house, including a chapel which extended across the servants' garden north-west of the house. The site remained in institutional use until c 2000, when it was sold for conversion to apartments. At the same time, several detached houses were constructed on the site of the early C20 service yard and greenhouses. Today (2003), the site remains in divided private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

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LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Frant Court is situated to the south-west of The Green at the centre of the village of Frant, and immediately west of the A267 road. The c 4ha site is bounded to the east by the A267 road, while to the north-east and south-east it adjoins late C19 domestic properties. To the north and south the site adjoins agricultural land from which it is separated by fences and hedges, while to the west it adjoins Eridge Park (qv), from which it is separated by a bank and trees. The site slopes steeply from east to west, the upper section adjacent to the house being terraced, while the lower slopes form a west-facing woodland garden. There are extensive westerly views from both the formal garden and the woodland garden across Eridge Park and the Sussex Weald beyond.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Frant Court is approached from the A267 road at a point c 80m south-south-east of its junction with the minor road which forms the north side of The Green, a triangular-shaped open space at the centre of the village. The principal early C21 entrance to the site comprises a pair of early C21 wrought-iron carriage gates supported by brick piers and adjoined to the south by a similar wrought-iron pedestrian gate. The entrance is flanked by brick quadrant walls, and is adjoined to the north-west by the early C20 gardener's cottage. A tarmac drive provides access to the early C21 detached houses built on the site of the early C20 service yard and greenhouses north-west of the house, and a car park which occupies the site of the mid C20 school chapel, which itself took the place of the early C20 servants' garden. The present entrance occupies the approximate site of an early C20 pedestrian entrance immediately south of the gardener's cottage, while the drive takes the place of a grass walk bordered by shrubberies shown on Jekyll's scheme (Plans, RPC).

The principal early C20 entrance to the house was directly from the road, at a point c 70m south-south-east of the present entrance. Brick walls (listed grade II) frame a pitched-roof porch which shelters a recessed arched front door. A vehicular entrance was situated c 40m south-south-east of the present entrance, where further high brick quadrant walls and timber gates (all listed grade II) led from the road to a garage court at the northern end of the house. The walls and gates marking this entrance survive today (2003). The grass verge adjacent to the north-east facade of the house is planted with a group of mature Scots pines, and is included in the registered site.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Frant Court (listed grade II) stands on the eastern boundary of the site, at the summit of a steep, west-facing slope. The house is built in a vernacular-revival, Arts and Crafts style, with many tall gables. Irregular on plan, and asymmetrical in elevation, the house comprises two storeys and an attic, and is constructed in red brick on the ground floor, with the upper storey hung with plain or curved tiles. The roofs are tiled, while the skyline is enlivened by eleven clustered brick chimney stacks. The house is lit by irregularly spaced windows which are mainly of timber, mullion and transom, and leaded light construction.

Frant Court was substantially remodelled c 1870, and again remodelled in 1913 by Granville Streitfeld, a pupil of Sir T G Jackson, for Miss Thornton, replacing an earlier house on the site. The house was altered and extended after 1932 when it passed into institutional use. The mid C20 extensions were removed in the late C20, and two early C21 wings, conceived in a style similar to the early C20 house, now adjoin the original building to north and south.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens and pleasure grounds are situated on the west-facing slope to the west of the house, with the formal terraced gardens immediately below the building, and the informal woodland garden on the lower slope. The formal garden is laid out in six terraces of varying depths below the house. The upper terrace, immediately below the west facade, today comprises an early C21 tarmac walk flanked by panels of lawn, with low immature yew hedges to the north. This arrangement replaces that shown on early C20 photographs, which comprises a broad crazy-paved stone walk flanked by panels of lawn and narrow flower borders. The terrace is today terminated to the north by brick steps which descend to the early C21 car park. The steps occupy the site of an early C20 open-fronted, pitched-roof shelter, which appears to have been demolished in the mid C20 when a school chapel was built to the north-west of the original house. This structure occupied the site of the early C20 servants' garden, which was situated at a lower level, to the north of the upper terrace. Miss Jekyll provided planting plans for the servants' garden in 1914 (RPC).

The upper terrace is retained to the west by drystone walls which were originally extensively planted (early C20 photographs, RPC). To the north-west and south-west, stone steps flanked by similar retaining walls descend to the second terrace, which is today laid out as a rectangular lawn enclosed to north and south by gravel walks flanked by mature Irish yews. Both Arthur

Charlton & Sons' plan of the garden (RPC), and Miss Jekyll's scheme (RPC) indicate that the second terrace was laid out as a parterre with box-edged beds. Miss Jekyll's planting plan suggests that her scheme represented a significant simplification of either what Charlton proposed, or what already existed. It is unclear from the available photographic evidence which scheme was implemented.

Stone steps descend from the north-west and south-west ends of the second terrace to reach the third terrace, which comprises a narrow grass walk adjoined to the east by the planted drystone retaining wall of the second terrace. Miss Jekyll's scheme shows the third terrace laid out with a grass walk flanked by narrow borders planted with lavender, china roses, cistus, and other subjects (RPC); this arrangement is confirmed by early C20 photographs. The southern end of this terrace leads to a curving walk which descends through shrubbery and specimen trees to reach the southern end of the fifth terrace. Stone steps descend from the north-west and south-west ends of the third terrace to the fourth terrace, which comprises a further rectangular lawn enclosed to north and south by gravel paths and mature specimen Irish yews. The centre of the lawn is marked by a slightly raised circular, brick-edged bed; this replaces a square border shown on Miss Jekyll's scheme (RPC) which appears never to have been implemented. Two approximately rectangular depressions in the lawn to the north and south of the circular bed correspond to the site of two stone-edged water-lily tanks designed by Miss Jekyll and shown in early C20 photographs of the garden. Miss Jekyll's scheme for this terrace also included, to the north of the northern path, a square raised border for Yuccas; this feature does not survive (2003).

Stone steps at the north-west and south-west ends of the fourth terrace lead to the fifth terrace or Upper Long Walk, a narrow terrace which today comprises a grass walk bordered to the east by the stone retaining wall of the fourth terrace, and to the west by irregularly spaced specimen shrubs. The southern end of the Walk is terminated by a stone-walled recess formerly containing a seat, to the east of which emerges the shrubbery walk descending from the third terrace. Miss Jekyll's scheme shows this terrace laid out with a grass walk bordered to the west by low shrubs, and to the east by planting on the retaining wall. The Upper Long Walk extends further from north to south than the upper terraces, hence the steps at its north-west and south-west ends are not aligned with the steps connecting the upper terraces. The steps from the Upper Long Walk descend to the Lower Long Walk, a grass walk adjoined to the east by the buttressed brick retaining wall of the Upper Long Walk which is planted with trained fruit trees; to the west the Walk adjoins the woodland garden. The terrace is terminated to the south by a flight of stone steps which descends to a further terrace laid out with a hard-surfaced tennis court; although not shown on Miss Jekyll's plan, the site of the tennis court may correspond to the croquet lawn mentioned in the 1918 sale particulars.

The six terraces below the house are shown on Arthur Charlton & Sons' plan of the garden, and appear to be contemporary with Streitfeild's rebuilding of the house c 1870. The Charltons' plan suggests, however, that the terraces were separated by banks and steps, and the surviving retaining walls seem to have formed part of Miss Jekyll's extensive reworking of the existing formal gardens in 1914.

From the north-west end of the Lower Long Walk, a long, curving flight of stone steps descends c 40m into the woodland garden. The woodland garden is now (2003) partly overgrown by scrub and young sycamores, but areas of ornamental shrubbery including groups of rhododendrons survive from the early C20 planting scheme, together with mature specimen trees including horse chestnuts, oaks, silver birch, and Scots pine, some of which pre-date Miss Jekyll's involvement with the site, and which formed focal points informing her design (Charlton plan, c 1913, RPC). The lower end of the steps descending into the woodland garden emerges on to a grass path which follows a curvilinear course from the former glasshouse yard to the south-east corner of the kitchen garden c 120m north-west of the house. Further walks diverge from this grass path, traversing the west-facing slope of the woodland garden. Changes in level, and connections between the paths, are handled by flights of stone steps, the upper and lower ends of which are marked by pairs of upright stones. The steps are all of similar construction, and formed part of Miss Jekyll's early C20 scheme. Some 100m west of the house, a tennis lawn is terraced into the west-facing slope of the woodland garden. The east, north-east, and south-east sides of the lawn are enclosed by drystone retaining walls for which Miss Jekyll provided planting schemes (RPC), while the lower, west, south-east, and north-west sides are supported by similar walls of drystone construction for which a planting scheme was also provided. The lawn is approached by openings at the central points of the north and south sides. A mature oak, which pre-dates Miss Jekyll's woodland garden, stands on an axis with the

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northern opening, while the axis of the southern opening is projected c 100m south by an artificially levelled glade. This glade provides access to further flights of stone steps which ascend south-east to reach the hard tennis court, and descend north-west to reach the lower levels of the woodland garden. To the south-west of the glade, c 250m south-west of the house is an informal pool, which is overlooked by a recess with a stone seat built into the bank.

A walk and further flights of stone steps descend parallel to the northern boundary of the woodland garden to reach an informal pool situated at the north-west corner of the garden. The margin of the pool is marked by a series of upright stones which define the inner edge of a walk which encircles the water. The pool is crossed by two sets of stepping stones, one at its north-west corner and the other at its southern end. To the north-west of the pool a flight of stone steps descends from a walk extending parallel to the western boundary of the garden to provide access to the kitchen garden.

The woodland garden was designed by Miss Jekyll in 1914, and laid out in 1914-18 (RPC; Jekyll notebooks, 1913-15). Miss Jekyll's scheme incorporated and refined several existing features, including the pool at the north-west corner of the woodland garden and several mature specimen trees, and some elements originally proposed by Arthur Charlton & Sons, including the terraced tennis lawn retained by stone walls. Charlton provided detailed plans for the construction of the tennis lawn, but proposed siting it immediately below the south-west end of the Lower Long Walk. Jekyll's plan shows it in its present location, and early C20 photographs confirm that the tennis lawn was laid out and planted according to her proposals. Although now overgrown and lacking much of its early C20 ornamental planting, the structure of the woodland garden, including the many flights of stone steps, the pool, tennis lawn, glade, seat recess and most of the principal paths survive.

KITCHEN GARDEN The principal kitchen garden is situated towards the lower end of the west-facing slope, c 250m north-west of the house and immediately north of the pool in the woodland garden. The area is enclosed by fences, and is today overgrown and disused. Several late C20 polytunnel frames survive. This area is shown as productive garden on the 1910 OS map. A further area of productive garden was situated c 35m north-west of the house, to the north-west of the servants' garden and adjacent to the service yard. This area included three glasshouses, and is shown as an existing feature on the 1910 OS map. This area is now occupied by early C21 detached houses, which in turn partly occupy the site of mid C20 institutional buildings. To the south of the house, an approximately rectangular area is shown on Miss Jekyll's plan as an orchard. It is unclear whether this element of her scheme was implemented, and today (2003) this area is occupied by an early C21 domestic structure.

REFERENCES

F Jekyll, Gertrude Jekyll A Memoir (1934), p 223 H S Eeles, Frant: a parish history (1947), pp 209-11 I Nairn and N Pevsner, The Buildings of England: Sussex (1965), p 508

Maps The Jekyll and Charlton plans are held in the Reef Point Collection, USA; microfilm copies are available at the NMR, Swindon. Arthur Charlton & Sons, Plan of Frant Court Grounds, c 1913 (file V, folder 119) Arthur Charlton & Sons, Tennis Court at 'Frant Court', 16 September 1913 (file V, folder 119) G Jekyll, untitled plan of formal gardens and woodland garden at Frant Court, together with planting plans for the garden, c 1914 (file V, folder 119) C J Hannington, Frant Court, East Sussex, masterplan of Jekyll Garden, October 2002 (private collection) [copy on EH file]

OS 6" to 1 mile: 2nd edition revised 1907-8, published 1910 OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition revised 1908, published 1910

Archival items G Jekyll, Notebooks, 1913-15 (Godalming Museum) [detail work at Frant Court, including plant lists] Sale particulars, 1918 (East Sussex Record Office) Sale particulars, 1932 (East Sussex Record Office) Photographs of the gardens, 1916 (private collection) Photographs included in 1918 Sale particulars (East Sussex Record Office) Photographs included in 1932 Sale particulars (East Sussex Record Office)

Research by C J Hannington.

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Legal

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