

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BISHOPS PALACE, WELLS

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

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BISHOPS PALACE, WELLS

Name: BISHOPS PALACE, WELLS

County: Somerset

District: Mendip (District Authority)

Parish: St. Cuthbert Out

County: Somerset

District: Mendip (District Authority)

Parish: Wells

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.207060
Longitude: -2.6389126
National Grid Reference: ST5546345511
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1001138
Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

Early C19 pleasure grounds created in and around the medieval precincts of the Palace of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, together with a deer park of C12 origin which was landscaped in the early C19.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In the C8 a collegiate church was founded at Wells, which in AD 909 became the seat of a Saxon bishop. The original cathedral was rebuilt by Bishop Robert de Lewes (1136-66), while the present structure was begun by Bishop Reginald (d 1191) and completed in the C15 (Pevsner 1958). To the south of the cathedral, the surviving buildings of the Bishop's Palace were begun in the early C13 by Bishop Jocelin, a native of Wells, who reversed his predecessors' practice of residing at Bath or Glastonbury (guidebook). Bishop Jocelin was also responsible for obtaining licence from King John in 1207 to impark the deer park to the south of the Palace (VCH 1911; guidebook). The Palace continued to be extended and improved until the great hall was built c 1280. The Palace is enclosed within a battlemented stone wall, for which Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury was granted a licence to crenellate in 1341. During the Reformation, the timbers and lead from the roof of the great hall were sold and the structure fell into decay, while during both the Civil War and the Monmouth Rebellion (1685) the Palace appears to have been garrisoned. During the Rebellion, Bishop Ken ministered to rebels who were incarcerated in the Palace after the Battle of Sedgemoor (guidebook). By 1733, when S and N Buck engraved a view of the Palace, formal gardens had been laid out within the moated enclosure to the east and south of the Palace (CL 1975; Bond 1998). This view shows that the tree-lined walk on the outer side of the moat was already established, and that the ramparts of the Palace had similarly been converted into walks with views over the garden and park.

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Inventory of Great Britain
BISHOPS PALACE, WELLS

The Palace grounds assumed their present form in the early C19 under Bishop George Henry Law (bishop 1824-45). Bishop Law appears to have had an interest in the picturesque landscape for not only was he responsible for remodelling the grounds of the Bishop's Palace in the Picturesque taste, he also laid out pleasure grounds with a series of picturesque follies on his estate at Banwell, Somerset c 1824-34 (Bond 1998). At Wells, in 1824-5, Bishop Law formed lawns and shrubberies, and demolished much of the south wall of the great hall in order to render the ruin more picturesque. An area of springs and marsh to the north of the Palace, the Camery, was laid out with a walk leading round an informal pool which provided dramatic views and reflections of the cathedral. The pleasure grounds continued to be developed in the C19 and early C20, with specimen trees being planted to mark various national and ecclesiastical events (guidebook). The Palace itself was altered and extended in the mid C19 by Benjamin Ferrey, and since the mid C20, the Bishop has resided in the north wing of the Palace. The site is administered by trustees on behalf of the Church Commissioners (2003).

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Bishop's Palace is situated c 100m south of Wells Cathedral and immediately east of Market Place. The c 32ha site is bounded to the north by a stone wall which separates it from the Cloisters and the Masons' Yard, and the gardens of domestic properties fronting St Andrew Street. The eastern boundary of the site is formed by the A371, Tor Street, from which the grounds of the Palace are separated by stone walls. To the west, the site is bounded by the east walls of properties fronting onto Market Place and by the late C19 Recreation Ground. The park to the south-east of the Palace is enclosed by a mixture of fences and hedges which separate it from adjoining agricultural land. To the north-east the park is adjoined by the A371 road. The site is generally level, with the ground beyond rising steeply to the east where Torhill Wood forms a dramatic backdrop to the park. There are extensive south-easterly views across the park towards Glastonbury Tor, while to the north the cathedral provides a series of designed picturesque views from the Palace pleasure grounds.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The Bishop's Palace is approached from Market Place to the north-west. At the eastern end of Market Place, a gatehouse, known as the Bishop's Eye or Palace Gate (listed grade I), leads to a tarmac drive which sweeps south-east through an area of informal lawns planted with mature specimen trees known as Bishop's Green, to approach the Palace. A service drive leads east from the gatehouse to provide access to the Masons' Yard east of the cloisters. The gatehouse leading from Market Place was constructed in the mid C15 by Bishop Beckington (bishop 1443-66).

The drive crosses the moat which encloses the Palace and its immediate grounds on five sides on a drawbridge (last raised 1831, converted to a roadway 1930s), and passes through a further mid C14 gatehouse (listed grade I). Within the Palace, the drive divides to encircle an approximately elliptical-shaped lawn, known as Front Lawn, to the west of the domestic buildings and to the north of the ruined great hall. To the south-west, a branch leads off from the drive to pass beneath a stone arch to reach a yard west of the great hall. A gateway in the south wall of this yard provides access to the pleasure grounds. The arrangement of the drive leading from Palace Gate, and the carriage turn encircling the Front Lawn, form part of Bishop Law's early C19 improvements.

From Palace Gate a tree-lined tarmac walk extends south-east parallel to the western arm of the Palace moat. Separated from the moat by a low stone wall and grass verges, the walk leads c 150m south-east to join a further walk which extends north-east from the north end of Silver Street to join the southern end of Tor Street, to the east of the Palace. The course of this partly tree-lined walk lies parallel to the south-east branch of the moat and separates the Palace and its pleasure grounds from the park to the south-east. The Palace moat was dug in the C14 and formed part of the defences constructed by Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury (bishop 1329-63). The outer walk is shown in the early C18 engraved view by S and N Buck.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING The Bishop's Palace (listed grade I) is situated within a five-sided moated and walled enclosure which assumed its present form in the early C14. The stone and slate-roofed building comprises a north wing which is set at right-angles to a central block. A chapel extends from the south-west corner of the central block, while the ruins of the great hall are situated to the south-west of the chapel. The north wing comprises two storeys and an attic lit by dormer windows. It is terminated to the north-east by a three-storey tower. The north wing was remodelled in the C15 and C16. The central block comprises two storeys with three C19 gables lighting an attic storey. A centrally placed single-storey porch of C19 construction

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
BISHOPS PALACE, WELLS

gives access to the interior of the Palace. The central block is largely of C13 construction, with gables and the porch added by Benjamin Ferrey as part of his restoration scheme in 1846. The chapel has a battlemented parapet and is lit by large gothic windows; it is of C13 construction. The ruins of the great hall (scheduled ancient monument; listed grade I) comprise the north, west, and part of the south wall of the building constructed by Bishop Burnell c 1280. Stripped of its roof in the C16, this building was further ruined by Bishop Law in 1825-6 in order to render it a more picturesque object in his pleasure grounds. The crenellated stone walls encircling the Palace (scheduled ancient monument; listed grade I) and its immediate grounds have circular turrets at each corner. The walls were constructed by Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury in the C14.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The pleasure grounds to the west of the Palace comprise the area known as Front Lawn, and further areas of informal lawn to the west, north, and south of the drive. These areas are planted with specimen trees and groups of ornamental shrubs and assumed their present form in 1825-6 under Bishop Law.

To the south of the ruins of the great hall further lawns are planted with specimen trees and shrubs. A gravel walk leads through the ruins and below the south facade of the chapel to reach a further area of lawns and formal flower beds to the east of the Palace. The ruins of the great hall are planted with a variety of shrubs and climbing plants, while the south-east corner pinnacle of the hall stands isolated as a picturesque feature on the south lawn. A walk leads south-south-east from the yard west of the ruins of the great hall and returns north-east below a grass bank which supports a further gravel walk which extends below the battlements of the curtain wall. A flight of steps at the south-west corner of the garden gives access to this rampart walk, from which there are views across the moat and the deer park towards Glastonbury Tor. Known as Bishop Ken's Walk, this walk extends from the south-west bastion to the east bastion and is popularly held to be where the Bishop walked when composing his hymns, *Awake my Soul* and *Glory to Thee My God this Night*; it is more likely that these were in fact composed while he was residing at Longleat (qv) after his ejection from the See of Bath and Wells in 1690 (guidebook). The walk is terminated to the north-east by further stone steps which descend to a gravel walk which extends parallel to the eastern curtain wall; this provides access to a doorway in the north-east bastion leading to a walk on the outer side of the curtain wall. The informal pleasure grounds to the south of the Palace were laid out in their present form by Bishop Law in 1825-6 on the site of late C17 or early C18 formal gardens which are shown in the Buck engraving of 1733.

The lawns to the east of the Palace are divided into two approximately rectangular areas, each laid out with a group of geometrical flower beds. The curtain wall is partly screened from the lawns by groups of mature evergreen shrubs. This area appears to have been laid out in its present form in the mid C19 and is perhaps contemporary with Benjamin Ferrey's restoration of the Palace in 1846 for Bishop Bagot. The formal gardens replaced informal lawns laid out by Bishop Law in the early C19, which were themselves laid out on the site of the late C17 or early C18 formal gardens shown by Buck (Buck 1774; CL 1975). The walk on the outer side of the curtain wall leads to a footbridge which crosses the moat c 50m north-east of the Palace. The bridge gives access to a further area of informal pleasure grounds laid out around an informal pool known as The Wells, from the abundant springs which rise in this vicinity. Some 40m north-west of the footbridge stands a C15 stone well-house, St Andrew's Well (scheduled ancient monument; listed grade I). From the well-house gravel walks lead west through an area of informal lawns and specimen trees, and parallel with a leat, to reach a gateway in a stone wall which separates the pleasure grounds from Bishop's Green. A C19 glasshouse or conservatory built against the south-facing wall of the Masons' Yard does not survive (OS 1889). From the footbridge, further gravel walks lead east and north-east through areas of lawns and informal planting to form a circuit round the informal pool. The eastern walk crosses a leat which feeds the moat from the pool via an ornamental cascade. The walks allow picturesquely framed views of the cathedral across the pool. The informal pleasure grounds around the pool were laid out in the early C19 by Bishop Law.

PARK The Park, also known as Park Fields, is situated to the south-east of the Palace and separated from it by the moat and a footpath. The park slopes from north-east to south-west, with the wooded slopes of Tor Hill to the north-east forming a backdrop. To the south-west, The Park is adjoined by Park Wood. The area remains pasture with scattered trees.

Bishop Jocelin was granted the right to form a park to the south of the Palace by King John in 1207. The medieval park extended beyond the boundaries of the present park to include Park Wood and land adjacent to the River Sheppey. The larger area appears to have been disparked in the C16 or C17, and by the C18 much of the former park was in agricultural use. The Park Fields

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
BISHOPS PALACE, WELLS

appear to have been laid out to provide an ornamental prospect from the Palace and rampart walks in the early C19 as part of Bishop Law's improvements.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden is situated c 100m east and north-east of the Palace, beyond the moat. The garden is divided into two irregularly shaped areas enclosed by stone walls. The smaller, southern enclosure is laid to grass and planted with a collection of ornamental trees. This arboretum was formed for Bishop Bickersteth to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 1977, with advice from Sir Harold Hillier (1905-85) (guidebook). To the north of the arboretum, the larger walled enclosure remains in partial cultivation as a kitchen garden.

REFERENCES

S and N Buck, *Buck's Antiquities II*, (1774), pl 263 *Gardeners' Chronicle*, ii (1893), pp 743-4 *Country Life*, 2 (13 November 1897), pp 528-30; 158 (11 December 1975), pp 1666-9; (18 December 1975), pp 1738-41 *Victoria History of the County of Somerset II*, (1911), p 567 N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), pp 278-9, 312-16 *The Bishop's Palace Wells*, guidebook, (1985) J Bond, *Somerset Parks and Gardens* (1998), pp 38, 110

Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1887, published 1889 2nd edition revised 1902, published 1904

Illustrations S and N Buck, view of the Bishop's Palace from the Cathedral tower, 1733 (in *Buck's Antiquities 1774*, pl 263)

Description written: January 2003 Register Inspector: DAL Edited: September 2004

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.