

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

CORNBURY PARK

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*Inventory of Great Britain*  
**CORNBURY PARK**

Name: CORNBURY PARK

County: Oxfordshire

District: West Oxfordshire (District Authority)

Parish: Charlbury

County: Oxfordshire

District: West Oxfordshire (District Authority)

Parish: Cornbury and Wychwood

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.860320  
Longitude: -1.4971638  
National Grid Reference: SP 34725 18090  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

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label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II\*

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**CORNBURY PARK**

List Entry Number: 1001092

Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

## Details

A C16 and C17 country house with garden, surrounded by imparked forest landscape of the C17 and later. John Evelyn advised on the park layout in the 1660s and possibly the 1680s, with work by George London of the 1680s.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Cornbury Park originated as a hunting lodge in the Royal Forest of Wychwood, erected by Henry I close to his principal lodge at Woodstock (qv Blenheim Palace), the Crown keeping large areas of the Forest in hand until the middle of the C17. Almost every king and queen up to Charles I visited Cornbury Lodge, and it is connected with many major events of English history. The Rangership was granted to favoured courtiers, tenants including the Harcourts, Beauchamps and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. In 1617 it was granted to Henry Danvers, Earl of Danby, a courtier and founder of Oxford Physic (now Botanic) Garden (qv). Lord Danby died in 1644, having employed the mason Nicholas Stone to build the south wing, as well as the stone gateways at the Physic Garden. Following the Restoration, the Rangership and the park were given to Edward Hyde, first Earl of Clarendon and Viscount Cornbury. John Evelyn (1620-1705) visited Cornbury in 1664 (the same year that his *Sylva* or a Discourse of Forest Trees was published) with Hugh May, who had designed the stables and was, in 1666, to build the east, or Clarendon, front. Evelyn advised Clarendon on the planting of the park during his 1664 visit, and possibly again in the 1680s when it was owned by his friend the second Earl, Clarendon's son. In 1689 George London (d 1714) worked on the estate layout with William Talman, although London's exact input is uncertain (Pevsner 1974). It is possible that Alexander Pope advised at Cornbury in the early C18, although there appears to be little surviving evidence for his work (EDA 1994). The estate remained in the Hyde family's ownership until 1751, when it was bought by the third Duke of Marlborough and known as Blandford Park. It was sold by Viscount Churchill in 1896, and bought by Vernon Watney in 1901, remaining in this family until 1966. The House and park remain (1997) in private ownership.

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Cornbury Park lies close to the west side of the village of Charlbury, in west Oxfordshire. The 260ha park, at the centre of the medieval Royal Forest of Wychwood, is largely enclosed by a stone park wall. It is bounded to the west by the remaining woodland of Wychwood Forest, through which run various rides, and to the east by pasture running down to the River Evenlode, which flows through a valley below the park, and beyond this by Charlbury. Elsewhere the site is bounded by agricultural land. The land slopes generally from west to east, with the House standing on high ground overlooking the park to east and south. The setting is largely wooded and rural, with several other substantial landscape parks lying close by, including Blenheim (qv) and Ditchley (qv), these also having been created from the former Wychwood.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main approach, off the lane from Finstock to Charlbury church, enters the estate 1km north-east of the House, curving south-west flanked by a short avenue of trees. Partly raised above the steep bank down to the river, the drive crosses the Evenlode carried by a long, stone bridge (probably William Talman 1689, listed grade II). The five-arched bridge, with stone parapets, is terminated at its south end by a pair of tall, stone gate piers (probably C19) which mark the north entrance of the drive to the forecourt fronting the North Lodges. The forecourt, through which the drive runs, is laid largely to lawn and enclosed by tall, ashlar walls, flanked on the south side by the North Lodges. These single-storey lodges, built in Queen Anne style of local orange stone, stand 700m north-east of the House. Between them are two short, massive gate piers supporting outer pedestrian and inner carriage gates (John Belcher 1901, the whole listed grade II), marking the entrance to the park. The straight drive, flanked by the remains of a triple avenue, continues southwards up the rising ground in line with the stables and House beyond. Some 100m north-east of the House the drive divides into two, entering

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the stable court on either side of the stable block. A flight of stone steps at the south corner of the court leads up to a stone-paved terrace giving access to the north door.

A second, east drive enters the park 700m east of the House, from a lane off the Finstock road. The entrance is marked by South Hill Lodge, a single-storey, Queen Anne-style stone lodge (Belcher ?1901), built in similar style to the North Lodges to replace an earlier lodge on the other (north) side of the drive. The drive curves sharply up from the Lodge, running through the park across gently rising ground to join the north drive 130m from the House.

A third drive, Cranehill drive, enters the estate from the Leafield to Charlbury lane 1.7km north-west of the House, giving access from the Ranger's Lodge and Ranger's Lawn close by to the west. Entering between wooden gates, the drive curves south-east, flanked initially by a lime avenue, entering Cranehill Copse and running down the hillside to the two-storey, stone Cranehill Lodge standing at the entrance to the park, 1km north-west of the House. Here the drive emerges into an open informal lawn encircled by European limes, this feature possibly designed by John Evelyn in the late C17 or early C18. The drive crosses the circle, running up a steep slope to the south-east side of the lawn, continuing straight south-east through the park between the remains of rectangular platoons of limes before crossing the 2km long Tower Light ride 400m north-west of the House. The drive meets the edge of the garden 150m from the House, curving north then east to meet the north drive where it divides to encircle the stable block.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Cornbury House (late C16, C17, listed grade I) stands at the centre of the park, on the east side of the garden. Situated on a plateau in the hillside, The House enjoys long views east across the park to the distant countryside beyond. The two-storey stone building has two main fronts, that to the south by Nicholas Stone in the 1630s, and that to the east by Hugh May in the 1660s/1670s, overlooking the gardens and park. Behind these fronts, to the north, stands the earlier, C16 gabled wing, on the site of an earlier building described in 1337 as 'built of stone and timber' (Pevsner 1974). John Belcher carried out alterations 1901-6 for Vernon Watney, removing 1850s additions, and making further additions, these in turn largely removed in 1972.

The rectangular stone stable block (Hugh May 1660s, listed grade II\*, converted 1997 to offices) stands 40m north-east of the House, on the axis of the main approach to the House, terminating the view south along the north drive. Of a single storey, with two-storey pavilions, it also forms the north side of the stable court, enclosed to the south by the House, to the west by low service buildings, and to the east by a tall, stone garden wall (probably William Talman 1689, listed grade II) attached at its south end to the House. A round-arched gateway in this wall next to the House gives access to the garden terrace.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The 5ha gardens surround the House to the west, south and east, being enclosed to the east by a straight stone wall retaining a terrace which gives uninterrupted views over the park to the east and beyond while keeping livestock from entering the garden. This wall, with its prominent buttresses, is faced with ashlar stone and topped by stone slabs and may date from Hugh May's work of 1665/6 (possibly with 1850s work). If so, it is a very early version of the ha-ha device. The other walls, of drystone construction, are largely sunk below the level of the garden and park beyond, forming part of a ha-ha.

The northern third of the 300m long terrace is laid out formally in two sections. That to the north (J J Joass for John Belcher c 1901-6) contains a central sunken lawn with a stone well-head at the centre. A brick herringbone pattern path runs along the west side, at the bottom of the 1689 Talman wall which forms the east wall of the stable court. The path, flanked on the east side by a low brick wall, gives access from the House to a pavilion with wooden lattice-work decoration, a portico and a small dome. The path runs beneath the portico, flanked by low, curved brick walls, formerly supporting an elaborate trellis-work pergola. The pavilion, standing at the north end of the garden terrace, is backed by an informal screen of evergreen shrubs and trees, with an evergreen hedge growing along the east side of the garden, above the terrace wall.

Adjacent to the south end of the pergola garden, running along the east front of the House, lies a formally laid out parterre, largely paved with stone. Four rectangular panels of lawn, each containing a central flower bed, are divided by two central paths arranged in cruciform pattern and surrounded by perimeter paths. A set of double stone steps with double iron gates stands opposite the main east door, giving access from the parterre to the park.

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The southern two-thirds of the terrace, running 200m from the House, is largely laid to lawn, merging to the west into the informal south lawn. The straight path from the parterre continues south in gravel, to a double gateway at the south end giving access into the park.

The south front is bounded by stone paving giving onto the informal, open south lawn, which has several mature trees around it, and, at its south end, a formal water garden running parallel with the south retaining wall. The water garden, sunk into the surrounding ground, is largely enclosed by a brick wall. Open at the centre of the north side to allow views of the south front, at the east end it overlooks the park. A long, narrow, stone-edged canal, crossed by a central path, occupies the centre of the long east/west axis, surrounded by a gravel path (1996) and terminated at the west end by an apsidal brick wall topped by a clipped hedge. West of the south lawn a serpentine path runs north from a gateway at the west corner, through higher ground planted informally with trees and shrubs, curving round to the south front. A spur off this path 50m west of the House runs to the edge of the garden and is aligned on the straight section of Cranehill drive between Cranehill Lodge and Tower Light.

In the late C18 (Pride, 1787) the garden was narrower and rectangular, aligned on the south front, with what seems to have been a perimeter terrace path along the south and east boundaries, extending along the east front as far as the north-east corner of the House.

**PARK** The ornamental deer park, initially formed from Wychwood Forest in the C17, is laid to pasture with many park trees and open wooded areas. A broad, open lawn east of the House is overlooked by the east front and parterre. The park is divided roughly in half axially, north-east to south-west, by the Grand Vista and the main north drive. The north-western half contains the remains of several formal avenues from the C17 and later whilst the south-eastern half is less formally laid out, containing a chain of ponds.

The north park is crossed by several straight rides. These are survivors from the formal structure of avenues and rides which the park possessed in the late C18 (Pride, 1787). Two of these, the parallel Tower Light and Grand Vista, extend south beyond the park into the adjacent woodland, and are themselves crossed by a further ride, Hazelwood Light, traversing the woodland. Tower Light (late C17/early C18, lime and beech) is aligned at its north end on Charlbury church tower, cutting across the park to Towerlight Gate to the south, giving access from the park to the ride's southern end in the woodland. The parallel Grand Vista (late C17/early C18, beech) lies on the main axis of the House, continuing the line of the north drive. The northern half of Grand Vista runs south from the south boundary of the garden through open parkland, rising and then dropping down to the park boundary, flanked by a replanted (c 1997) triple avenue of beeches. A gateway, Vista Gate, in the boundary wall gives access to the southern half of the Grand Vista, which becomes a broad, undulating, open grass ride flanked by woodland, which extends to the open Newhill Plain to the south. Hazelwood Light (probably late C17/early C18, beech, replanted 1990s), which connects these two rides, runs entirely through woodland, crossing undulating terrain. In the late C19 (OS 1885) the feature known as Seven Dials (now gone, 1998), lying within Hazelwood Copse between Tower Light and Grand Vista, consisted of radiating avenues and incorporated Hazelwood Light. The curved Witney Light runs through the woodland adjacent to and to the east of Hazelwood Light. Beech Avenue (probably C16/C17), like Cranehill drive, is aligned on the west side of the garden; it is newly replanted (1997) with a beech avenue, terminating in an open circle of trees at its north end.

The south-east side of the park contains informal plantings of trees, amongst which stands a brick icehouse (restored late C20), c 400m east of the House. The park slopes south down to a serpentine chain of lakes in a steep valley running south-west to north-east, the uppermost one, at the west end, known as Lake Superior. Flanked by woodland on the valley slopes, the south valley side was known as The Wilderness in the late C19 (OS 1885) and from here glimpses of the House are visible through the trees. The lakes are divided by substantial dams and run down to a large earth bank adjacent to South Hill Lodge. In the late C18 (Pride, 1787) the lakes (possibly fishponds from the earlier use as a hunting lodge) were largely rectangular, and appear to have been smaller and more numerous. They were naturalised in the late C18 or C19 when several were joined together, in particular those three upper lakes which were joined together to form Lake Superior at the south end of the chain.

South of the lakes the Little Park covers land rising up from the lake valley, now divided by post and rail fences into paddocks but previously (Pride, 1787; OS 1885, 1900) of a more open park nature. An L-shaped sycamore avenue (C19) runs through

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the Little Park, starting at the west end, running east and opening out into a circle from which it continues north down to the lowest lake.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The octagonal, stone-walled kitchen garden stands towards the south end of the park, divided internally by a central brick wall running from north to south. The main entrance, on the north side, is flanked by two tall stone gate piers with ball finials, with wooden gates between, and a curved arched pedestrian doorway adjacent to the east. The gardener's cottage stands along the west boundary, largely built of stone but of brick on the east front overlooking the garden, flush with the garden wall. The garden is largely laid to lawn; it formerly contained a further dividing wall running from west to east at right angles to the surviving internal wall, to form four square compartments (OS 1885). It is not shown on Pride's map of 1787.

#### REFERENCES

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Cornbury Park Historic Landscape Conservation Report, (Environmental Design Associates (EDA) 1994)

Maps Thos Pride, Map of Cornbury Estate, 1787 [copy in EDA 1994] R Davis, *A New Map of the County of Oxford ...*, 1797  
A Bryant, Map of the County of Oxford ..., surveyed 1823 Tithe map for Cornbury Parish, 1853 (Oxfordshire County Record Office) Map of the Forest and Purlieus of Whichwood, 1854 (Oxfordshire County Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1881(2/1885 2nd edition published 1900 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1880  
Description written: January 1998 Amended: March 1999; April 1999 Register Inspector: SR Edited: January 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.