

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

FRIAR PARK

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

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Name:	FRIAR PARK
County:	Oxfordshire
District:	South Oxfordshire (District Authority)
Parish:	Henley-on-Thames
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.540090 Longitude: -0.91418632 National Grid Reference: SU 75401 82913 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000504 Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

A late C19 house surrounded by contemporary elaborate gardens and pleasure grounds designed by the original owner Frank Crisp.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In the 1870s the area presently covered by Friar Park was occupied by two small estates, Friar Park to the west, and Friar's Field to the east, each with its own approach drive, pleasure grounds and small area of parkland (OS 1883). In the late 1880s Frank Crisp (1843(1919) began to draw the two estates together, building a large and ostentatious new house close to the site of the old Friar Park house and demolishing the Friar's Field house to the east. Crisp was a wealthy solicitor, a partner in the firm of Ashurst, Morris, Crisp and Co, and was created a baronet in 1913. He was involved with the Royal Horticultural Society, donating many plants to Wisley, and was treasurer of the Linnean Society. He built extravagant gardens around the house, dividing them into many themed sections, possibly advised by H E Milner (Inspector's Report 1990). Many of these areas are still recognisable when compared with Crisp's extensive Guide for the use of Visitors, which was published in several editions during the early C20 in response to a protracted argument with E A Bowles regarding what a truly authentic rock garden should be. The house was sold in the 1950s, becoming a convent school run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco, and the gardens suffering much neglect, losing much of their detail. The house and gardens were returned to private ownership in 1971, since when considerable restoration work has been carried out.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Friar Park stands on the west edge of Henley-on-Thames, located 1km from the centre of the town and the River Thames, on an east-facing hillside towards the southern end of the Chiltern Hills. The c 13ha site is bounded to the east by the straight lane called Hop Gardens, to the south by Gravel Hill, the lane from Henley to Greys Court (qv), to the west by an access lane, and to the north by a mid C20 housing estate. The setting is partly urban, to the east, and rural to the west, with long views north from the house and northern pleasure grounds over Fair Mile towards Henley Park.

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ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance to Friar Park, standing 400m south-east of the house, is approached from the east, up the hill from the Market Place at the centre of Henley. The gateway, set back off Gravel Hill, is flanked by two sets of gate piers supporting central iron carriage gates and flanking pedestrian gates (late C19, listed grade II). The piers, of red brick and stone banding, formerly (stolen 1997) supported grave and gay friars' heads on the top of the outer two, with iron lamps remaining on top of the inner two. The gateway is flanked by brick walls with stone coping and banding. On the west side, behind one of the brick walls, stands the two-storey, brick and stone-banded Lower Lodge (late C19, listed grade II), built in Flamboyant Gothic style, with a polygonal watch tower supporting a pyramidal roof. The curving drive climbs north-westwards through the pleasure grounds, overlooking the lawns below and passing south of the lakes, arriving at the semicircular carriage sweep by the south, entrance front.

A service drive (late C20) enters from the west boundary, passing the kitchen garden and arriving at the west, service front of the house. Access was formerly gained from the west via the upper drive (disused), past the two-storey Upper Lodge (late C19, listed grade II) standing 200m west of the house, also built in Flamboyant Gothic style. The drive divided to the north and south of the kitchen garden, arriving at the rear (west side) of the house.

Middle Lodge (late C19, listed grade II) stands on the south boundary, half way between the other two lodges, adjacent to Gravel Hill. Built of red brick with stone dressings in similar style to the other lodges, it stands behind a railed wall with brick and stone-banded piers supporting iron gates (late C19, listed grade II). From here a short spur path joins the main drive 150m south-east of the house.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Friar Park (M Clarke Edwards 1889, listed grade II) stands on a plateau towards the west of the pleasure grounds, at the top of, and overlooking, an east-facing slope. The large, two-storey house, built in Flamboyant Gothic style of brick with stone dressings, is of irregular plan, with the entrance front to the south and the long garden front to the east. The latter, which is dominated by a large, square tower, overlooks a formal terrace and parterre below, and beyond, lawns leading down to the lakes.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The central garden feature is the formal terrace running along the east front, and the parterre below it. The 50m long terrace is approached via short paths from the south entrance front and through a door from the north front. A central, broad gravel path running along its whole length is bounded to the east by a grass bank, with a low stone wall at the top of the slope. At each end a bastion with a curved outer end projects over the parterre below, with steps curving down around the projection to the lower level. Here a central, apsidal parterre contains two box-hedged knots set within a panel of lawn, with a circular stone pond at the curved east end of the lawn. Stone steps at the north-east and south-east corners lead down to the open, informal lawn below, beyond which lie the lakes, partly screened by mature trees.

Several further garden features surround the house, connected by informal lawns and screened by mature trees, including many Scots pines. The 1.5ha rock garden, said to be the largest artificial rock garden in Britain (Inspector's Report 1990), lies north of the house, enclosed by mature trees. It is entered from a spur west off the path north from the house. The spur curves between large rock formations, opening out into the main body of the rock garden, built from 23,000 tons of rock by Backhouse of York and including a scaled-down Matterhorn. Begun in 1896, it contained c 4000 varieties of alpine plants, and during Frank Crisp's time was populated with china or tin chamois (Ottewill 1982). The view west, up what appears to be an alpine pass, focuses on the Henley Matterhorn, originally visible on the skyline and seeming to stand in the far distance but now with a background of mature trees obscuring the view and lessening the false perspective. The Ice Grotto, reproduced from a photograph of the cave in the Glacier du Geant, Chamonix, is said to lie beneath the Matterhorn, formerly populated with stalactites and cavities of blue ice, and with water from an artificial glacier entering in a fall which made real icicles (Jones 1974). Close by, and possibly still extant, a further grotto consisted of a series of caves lined with artificial tufa made with clinker from the glasshouse boilers, including the Vine Cave (with large bunches of glass grapes), the Wishing Well Cave, the Skeleton Cave, the Illusion Cave and the Gnome Cave. On the way out a distorting mirror gave the visitor's body the figure of a gnome (ibid).

East of the rock garden lies the Topiary or Dial Garden, with many evergreen topiary specimens set in a lawn crossed by gravel paths, laid out according to the plan of the labyrinth at Versailles, formerly with thirty-nine sundials. From here a path leads down to the remains of the adjacent Medieval Garden and Elizabethan Herb Garden, with pergolas and brick retaining walls.

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A path leads south to the two lakes, the upper one being divided north/south into two levels by a dam. It is crossed by stone stepping stones which lead onto a small peninsula from where a path rises up onto the raised Japanese Garden, placed largely over the artificial cave system which separates the two lakes and containing a small waterway and encircling paths. Two sets of steps lead down to doors into the cave system, which is largely filled with water and encircled by perimeter paths linking the separate caverns. At the west end, a canal within a covered passage leads boats north out of the system, beneath the dam overhang, to the lower level of the north lake, overlooking the lower water level to the east. Within the caves the walls are formed into stalactites and stalagmites, with various reflective minerals incorporated into the dripping plasterwork. Light is admitted from above via panes of coloured glass set into the roof, incorporated into the Japanese Garden above. The water cave seems to have been based on the Blue Grotto of Capri (Jones 1974; Crisp early C20), lit by blue glass skylights and electricity. The main cave formerly contained stalactites, fossil trees, petrified birds' nests and rainbow lighting as well as blue glass (Jones 1974), some elements of which still remain.

The Japanese Garden overlooks the lower lake which lies in a small valley to the south, with a cascade on a rock face on the south side. Both lakes contain many small inlets, forming very irregular edges. The remainder of the pleasure grounds are laid to open lawns bounded by mature plantings, with many Scots pines. A maze formerly lay on the west boundary.

Crisp himself outlined his philosophy towards the gardens, which 'were however, designed, as it were, as specimens in a museum to illustrate the taste of a period or a Nation, leaving the observer to come to whatever decision he pleases for or against the particular idea, an opportunity having been given him of forming an opinion from an actual object lesson' (Crisp early C20).

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden, still under cultivation, lies immediately west of the house, bounded to the east and south by clipped evergreen hedges, and on the north side by a brick wall which formerly held a range of glasshouses, parts of which remain. The west side is bounded by further glasshouses, including a former 'Aquatic House' (Crisp early C20), which contains the remains of a large central pond with rockwork, surrounded by heating pipes beneath the perimeter path. North of this stand the remains of a fine fernery.

REFERENCES

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Description written: March 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.