

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

CANONS ASHBY

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

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**CANONS ASHBY**

Name: CANONS ASHBY

District: West Northamptonshire (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Canons Ashby

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Longitude: -1.1643818  
National Grid Reference: SP 57276 50154  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

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label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden  
Grade: II\*  
List Entry Number: 1000488  
Date first listed: 25-Jun-1984

## Details

Formal terraced gardens and park, both of c 1710, associated with a small country house of largely late C16 and C17 date.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The original house probably formed part of the estate of the Augustinian priory of Ashby, dissolved in 1536. In 1537 the estate was granted to Sir Francis Bryan, from whom it was acquired in the following year by Sir John Cope whose family made a house (demolished in 1669) from the prior's lodgings. Canons Ashby House was built about 1550 by his son-in-law John Dryden (d 1584), incorporating parts of an existing farmhouse. It was completed and remodelled by his son Erasmus (d 1632), a Puritan who in 1619 bought a baronetcy. During his time the House was much visited by the poet Edmund Spenser. Erasmus's grandson Sir Robert died unmarried in 1708 and bequeathed the property to his cousin Edward Dryden, the title passing at the same time to an older cousin. Over the next seven years Edward (d 1717) and his father Erasmus (d 1718), both City merchants, extensively modernised Canons Ashby House and laid out the gardens still to be seen today. Edward's son John also inherited the baronetcy. In the C19 the property was owned for sixty-one years by the antiquary and amateur architect Sir Henry Dryden (d 1899). It remained in the family until 1981 when it was acquired by the National Trust.

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** The hamlet of Canons Ashby lies c 18km south-west of Northampton on the former B4525 to Banbury. It occupies a slight spur and is dominated by the mid C14 ironstone tower of the Augustinian priory 100m south-east of Canons Ashby House. The House and its grounds are bounded in part by the minor road which curves through the hamlet, which also forms part of the eastern boundary of the small park which extends north-west of Canons Ashby House. Otherwise the site boundaries mainly follow field edges. The area here registered is c 65ha.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** There is a gate leading off the former B4525 into a yard on the east side of the House. Until the Green Court was grassed over c 1840 the main approach was via a short, dog-legged drive which entered the park via the gates (listed grade II) 20m west of the north-west corner of the Green Court and turned to approach the House through the gates in the centre of its west side.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Canons Ashby House (listed grade I) is a two-storey stone house, quadrangular and arranged around a small, cobbled, central service courtyard. In scale it is more manor than country house. Although aligned north-east to south-west it is here described as if arranged from north (towards the road) to south (facing down the garden). The west range contains the hall with long gallery over, that to the south parlours and a withdrawing room with a dining room on the first floor, while the east and north ranges are mainly occupied by service rooms and servants' accommodation. It is the south range which stands at the head of and dominates the garden, with a squat, four-storey central tower of c 1550 flanked by two-storey wings refaced and refenestrated c 1710, at the time the garden was being made.

East of the House are former stables buildings, modernised in 1858 and 1865 by Sir Henry Dryden and after 1981 converted to a gardener's house, garages and lavatories.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS As with the House, the gardens, which in reality are aligned north-east to south-west, are here described as if aligned north/south, with Green Court to the west.

The main garden is an ironstone-walled compartment to the south of the House, 150m long and 40m wide. This slopes downhill to the south, and there are extensive views out to the park and countryside beyond. Grass ramp terraces, 1.2m high, divide this into four main sections. A main axial path runs down the garden from a door moved to this position c 1708 to a central gateway in the south garden wall with tall, early C18, ironstone piers surmounted with limestone demi-lions rampant (the Dryden crest), which support C19 wrought-iron gates with overthrow (gates and piers listed grade II\*).

The uppermost and second terrace, connected on the axial path by a splaying flight of stone steps, together form a c 48m square compartment. Gravel paths run around the exterior of each terrace, within which the parterre squares are laid to lawn with occasional shrubs and with four newly replanted cedars (replacing ones planted c 1780) at the corners of the stone steps. At the east end of the path along the bottom of the uppermost terrace is a wooden bench, probably C18, under a painted wooden canopy or shelter of 1910 (apparently replacing a summerhouse present in 1893), while at the east end of the path along the bottom of the second is a gateway through which there are views along a short, recently replanted, lime avenue to the church. An early C18 limestone sundial (listed grade II) stands on the axial path on the second terrace. The third compartment is c 36m long, the fourth c 60m. The axial path through them has not yet (1998) been restored, although its line is preserved in the formally planted fruit trees and yews.

West of the compartment formed by the first and second terraces and south of Green Court are two lawns divided east/west by a gravel path which is a continuation of that along the bottom of the uppermost terrace, and at its west end is a gate giving views into the park. On the north lawn is a mature cedar of Lebanon (one of a pair planted c 1780), while the south lawn, traditionally described as the Bowling Green, is now largely open. At the south-west corner of the Bowling Green is another C18 wooden bench, again sheltered by a wooden canopy of 1910.

Green Court, 55m long by 30m wide, lies west of the House. Until c 1840 this was the main forecourt, but in that year it was grassed over by Sir Henry Dryden who preferred his guests to enter the House via the cobbled courtyard. To north and south Green Court is bounded by tall ironstone walls (both listed grade II), the latter surmounted with eared stone urns and with a re-used C16 doorway giving access to the garden to the south. To the west the Court is bounded by a low stone wall with short wooden posts supporting two wrought-iron rails. In the centre of the wall are tall, early C18, ironstone ashlar gate piers with elaborate obelisk finials supporting contemporary wooden gates with barley sugar-twist rails (piers and gates listed grade II\*). The Court is lawn; down its centre, running from the main west door to the House (moved to this central position in the post-1708 alterations and provided with a lead cartouche by John Van Nost) towards the gate, are parallel rows of four clipped yews. Between them is a lead statue of a shepherd boy with flute and dog, also by Van Nost (listed grade II) of c 1710, moved here c 1990 from its original position on the axial line north-west of the gate. There is a record of 1713 for a payment for coping the walls of Green Court; this seems likely to be the date of the walls and gates in their present form.

Contemporary documentation of the early C18 gardens at Canons Ashby, which are in the style of George London (d 1714) and Henry Wise (d 1738), is very slight. A survey of 1711 names the four terraces as 'the best garden', 'upper garden', 'lower garden' and 'the little one below'. The last is also referred to as a wilderness. A letter of 1713 from John Van Nost II (d 1729) to John Dryden asks for payment for a bill of £65 5s 10d, and mentions a gladiator which was to be gilded and a 'boy that I am making contrary to that you have', presumably the shepherd boy (quoted in Renow-Clarke 1994). Henry Dryden, the C19 antiquary-owner of Canons Ashby made the site well-known, and plans of the garden based on one made by him in 1893 were published in Alicia Amherst's *History of Gardening* (1895) and H Inigo Triggs's *Formal Gardens in England and Scotland* (1902). The gardens are said to have been 'an important influence on the whole Lutyens-Gertrude Jekyll generation of gardeners' (guidebook 1989, 33).

The earthwork remains (scheduled ancient monument) of a separate garden lie south of the church, outside the area here registered, and are argued by RCHM(E) (1981, 34(7)) to represent either those of the monastic garden and/or that of Sir John

Cope's mid C16 house. They overlie ridge and furrow. The area traditionally has been known as 'The Canons' Walk' or 'The Vineyard'. South of the church are two arms of a moat (damaged pre 1981), presumably that around Sir John's house, extending east and south of which is a larger, embanked, trapezoidal enclosure, c 120m north/south by c 50m wide. Within this are the remains of three ponds and a low mound.

**PARK** The House stands in the south-east corner of a small, roughly oval park, 1km long from north to south and up to 700m wide. The park is entered from the gates at the end of Green Court, and off the Preston Capes road via an early C18 gateway with tall piers surmounted with carved trophies (listed grade II). Its northern third is wooded, while its central and southern parts are largely permanent pasture with some mature specimen and parkland trees. The park slopes downhill to the west, into the shallow valley of a tributary of the River Cherwell. This has been dammed, notably below the House, to create a series of large ponds, which presumably originated as monastic fishponds. RCHM(E) (1981, 36) suggest they may have been altered in the C17 to make them more ornamental. The grassland is underlain with ridge and furrow, representing open-field land belonging to the medieval village of Ashby. That was much larger than the present settlement ( there were forty-one houses in 1343 ( much of the shrinkage occurring at the end of the C15 when the prior evicted villagers as he converted ploughlands to pasture. Earthworks of tofts and crofts lie north of Canons Ashby House down the east side of the road to Preston Capes, immediately outside the registered area, although hollow-ways to the village do approach through the park. At the north end of these settlement remains, within the registered area and surrounded by a ditch, is a low castle motte (scheduled ancient monument), planted with some mature coniferous specimen trees.

Some 150m north-west of the Green Court gates is Park Cottage, an early C18 deer larder converted c 1867 into an ironstone gamekeeper's cottage.

There are several avenues in the park, which began to be replanted after the National Trust acquired the property. One, of lime, on the line of the earlier main double elm avenue, runs south-east from the gates at the bottom of the main axial path down the garden, continuing its line for a further 700m. Another, as mentioned, runs towards the church from the east garden gate. A third, also of lime, leads west from the Green Court gates towards the keeper's cottage, which acts as an eyecatcher, and then turns south.

The park was presumably laid out at the same time as the gardens, c 1710. Deer are mentioned in 1717, and a herd remained in the park until the mid C20. The 'canals' mentioned in the 1711 survey may be the fishponds. Eayre's 1779 map of Northamptonshire shows avenues radiating west and south-west from the House to the park edge, and c 1km south towards Moreton Pinkney.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The survey of 1711 mentions a kitchen garden. Its location is unknown. Sources between 1711 and 1868 also mention a vineyard.

#### REFERENCES

Country Life, 16 (31 December 1904), pp 978(87); 49 (6 February 1921), pp 246-52; (5 March 1921), pp 278-84; 169 (9 April 1981), pp 930(3); (16 April 1981), pp 1026-9 Roy Comm Hist Mons Engl Inventories: Northamptonshire 3, (1981), pp 34(7) Canons Ashby, guidebook, (National Trust 1989) C Renow-Clarke, Canons Ashby: Park and Garden Research, (typescript report for National Trust 1994) J Heward and R Taylor, The Country Houses of Northamptonshire, (RCHM(E) 1996), pp 115(26) Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1891 2nd edition published 1900(1)

Archival items The Dryden Collection (D/Ca) is held at the Northamptonshire Record Office.

Description written: 1998 Register Inspector: PAS 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.