

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

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

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

Name: NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

District: Cheshire West and Chester (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Neston

label.localisation: Latitude: 53.272484
Longitude: -3.0441208
National Grid Reference: SJ 30467 75564
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1001364
Date first listed: 10-Jun-1985

Details

A plant collector's garden begun in 1898, developed from 1948 as Liverpool University Botanic Garden.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Land around a sandstone outcrop at Mickwell Brow, looking across the Dee estuary to the Welsh Hills, was bought in 1897-8 by Arthur Kilpin Bulley (1861-1942). Bulley, a wealthy Liverpool cotton broker and amateur naturalist, already knew the area well, and apparently chose the site quite deliberately because of the potential its microclimate and soils offered for the development of a garden with a wide range of plants. A new house, Mickwell Brow, was built there in 1898, and between then and 1904 extensive gardens and a nursery were laid out within newly planted shelter belts. From very soon afterwards the gardens were open to the public and in the 1920s, when bowling greens, tennis courts and playing fields were laid out, were commonly known as 'Bulley's Rec'.

Bulley had an interest in unusual plants, and corresponded with missionaries in various parts of the world in the hope that they would collect seeds and plants for him. Those appeals proved unsatisfactory, and instead Bulley sponsored plant-gathering expeditions by collectors including George Forrest (1873-1932), who was appointed Bulley's principal collector in 1904 and who made in all seven expeditions to western China, and F Kingdon Ward (1885-1958), who from 1911 ventured in western China, Tibet, Sikkim, Butan, and Upper Burma. Many of the plants brought back by the collectors were planted at Ness.

Bulley began a seed and plant firm, Co-operative Bees Ltd (from 1906 Bees Ltd), at the Mickwell Brow nursery in 1905. This was the first firm to sell, in 1905, seeds in penny packets, and the first to market them in illustrated packets. In 1911 it moved to a 1000-acre site at Sealand, and soon afterwards the former nursery area was incorporated in to the amenity gardens.

In 1948 A K Bulley's daughter Agnes Lois Bulley (1901-95) gave the house and gardens to the University of Liverpool with an endowment of £75,000. Development of the gardens continued, especially after Ken Hulme was appointed director in 1957. Bulley had had little interest in landscape design; his garden was highly compartmentalised, and the different zones of plants were separated from each other by hawthorn hedges. During his thirty-year career at Ness, Hulme created more naturalistic settings for the plants, the area of the ornamental gardens increasing over this time from 2.4ha to 18.4ha as major collections of rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, cherries and heathers were established. An especially notable theme among the hard landscaping during this period was the employment of large amounts of salvaged stone from railway platforms and various buildings to form paths and terrace walls.

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

In 1991 the title of the gardens, since c 1950 known as Ness Gardens, became Ness Botanic Gardens, University of Liverpool Environmental and Horticultural Research Station.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Ness Botanic Gardens lie midway up the west side of the Wirral peninsula, which is one of the driest places on the west coast, with an average rainfall of c 750mm and with less frost and less severe winters than the rest of the Cheshire Plain. The Gardens are on the south side of the village of Neston, and Chester is c 15km to the south-east. From the sandstone promontory of Mickwell Brow there are extensive views to the west, across the Dee estuary below and to the Welsh Hills beyond. The soils within the Gardens vary, and are thin, acidic and well drained in its higher parts on the sandstone ridges, whereas the lower areas are on lime-rich clays.

The registered area, bounded to the east by the minor road from Neston to Burton and to the west by the railway line of the 1860s, comprises c 20ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The grounds are entered off the minor road from Burton to Ness. Between the road and the house is car parking.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING The Bulleys' house, Mickwell Brow, was built in 1898. It is a large, south-facing, Ruabon brick villa, which was extended c 1927 into an L-plan building when the billiard room wing was built for Alfred Bulley (d 1976) as a twenty-first birthday present. Under the terms of her daughter's bequest Mrs Bulley lived in the house until her death in 1955. It was then converted for use by the university, and is now (late C20) used as a ticket office, shop, cafe, and as offices.

A large new visitor centre was built c 75m north of the house in 1981, and an adjoining conservatory opened in 1984.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Between the house and the Visitor Centre to the north, and to either side of a prefabricated 1960s Education Room, is a series of formal garden compartments including the Jubilee Garden of 1977. To the east is the Sorbus Lawn (in the early C20 a crown bowling green), separated from Wood's End Lawn to its north by the Herb Garden (earlier two tennis courts) and Laburnum Arch. The last was planted in the early 1970s. Wood's End Cottage, at the north end of the eponymous lawn, was built soon after 1910.

Extending north from those areas, down the eastern border of the site, is a broad grass walk with to the east the Rhododendron Border and, rising behind, Pine Wood. At the north end, beyond the entrance to the glasshouses, the area broadens to the west into the Specimen Lawn in which stand further rhododendrons. The Pine Wood was planted in 1900 as a shelter belt to a fruit orchard; the current rhododendron scheme was largely developed from the mid 1950s. At the extreme north end of the garden is a pair of early C20 gardeners' houses. To the west of the Rhododendron Border is a Rose Garden planted in 1964, to the north of which are the glasshouses. All the glass is of the 1950s and later. Also part of the complex are two long brick ranges of c 1900, now (late 1990s) used as workshops and stores. The more northerly was used in Bulley's time as stables and garaging, the other as the packing shed for Bees Nurseries.

The track between the two brick ranges then runs west, past the north ends of the Herbaceous Border and the Azalea Bed and the narrow lawn between them which form a vista uphill to the house. Beyond this the track gives access to the western part of the site, the northern half of which area is divided into a series of Research Areas to which there is no public access. The southern half, sloping down towards the Dee 1km to the west, includes an area of woodland with azaleas, and borders of meadow flowers and cereals. Flint View and Dee Vista give views west over the river to the Welsh Hills.

The most densely planted and most landscaped areas lie south and west of the house. The bank which slopes quite steeply down to the west of the house was planted as a Heather Garden in 1961. To the south of the house stone retaining walls were built to create terraces in the 1960s and 1970s. The May Gertrude Davidson Belvedere, commemorating a benefactor, was built on the upper part of the terraces in the late 1980s. To the south of the terraces, in a hollow which before Bulley's time had been a marl pit, is the Rock Garden. Although used as a garden since the early C20 the present design has been developed since the later 1950s, with the introduction of tufa rockery stones, the re-coursing of the stream through the garden, and the construction of bridges. On the west side of the terraces and the Rock Garden is Pingo, so-called from the field name on the mid C19 Tithe map and meaning a small enclosed space, a west-facing wooded slope which forms the southern continuation of the Heather

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

Garden. A waterfall over a sandstone outcrop was constructed c 1996. At the bottom of the slope below Pingo the same water source feeds the three pools which form the Water Garden, created c 1970.

The south-east part of the site, lawn with trees, is an overflow car park. At its south end is Great Dale Hey, where on a slight hillock stands a stone seat contrived from the portico from Hansen's Lodge in Birkenhead. From this there are views west over the Dee estuary.

REFERENCES

Country Life, 175 (19 April 1984), pp 1058-60 J K Hulme, Ness Gardens: Bulley's Beginnings to the Present Day (1987) Ness Botanic Gardens, guidebook, (1983; c 1998) B McLean, A Pioneering Plantsman (1997)

Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1871-2, published 1872 OS 25" to 1 mile: 3rd edition surveyed 1909, published 1912
Description written: 1999 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: February 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.