

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

ASHDOWN HOUSE

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Name:	ASHDOWN HOUSE
County:	Oxfordshire
District:	Vale of White Horse (District Authority)
Parish:	Ashbury
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.532936 Longitude: -1.5934763 National Grid Reference: SU 28295 81637 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1000502 Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

A mid C17 hunting lodge with formal rides cut through surrounding contemporary or earlier woodland (partly covering the site of a medieval deer park) and C19 landscape park, and formal parterre garden reconstructed 1950s on the site of C19 original.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

From c AD 975 Ashbury Manor, within the Forest of Assheton, was owned by Glastonbury Abbey, which body subsequently built the park pale and enclosed the deer park. The Abbey was seized by Henry VIII in 1539 and Ashbury Manor, including Ashdown, was granted to Sir William Essex, in whose family it remained until bought in 1625 by Elizabeth, the widow of Sir William Craven and mother of the future first Earl of Craven (1608-97). A hunting lodge existed at this time, but was replaced by the present house in the 1660s, when the Craven estates were restored to the first Earl following the Restoration. The Earl was a devoted supporter of Charles I's unlucky sister Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia (1596-1662), known as the Winter Queen, and is supposed to have been building the house for her to occupy, possibly as a refuge from the plague, when she died in 1662. The Earl owned many properties, and his closest main residence was Hamstead Marshall, Berkshire (qv). By the early C18 (Knyff and Kip, c 1716) the house stood in a small, enclosed, compartmented space, surrounded by woodland cut through by four axial avenues, one centred on each front.

Following the first Earl's death, Ashdown passed to a distant relative, continuing in sporadic use as a hunting lodge during the C18 and C19. During the C19 the woodland immediately surrounding the house was thinned to form more open parkland. The house was occupied by the army during the Second World War, being left in a near-derelict condition until 1956 when it was given by Cornelia, Countess of Craven to the National Trust and restored, together with the Victorian parterre. Ashdown House remains (1997) in private occupation, owned by the National Trust.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Ashdown Park lies towards the north side of the Berkshire Downs, c 12km east of Swindon and 3km south of the village of Ashbury. The c 140ha site is bounded by agricultural downland and is largely enclosed by a sarsen drystone wall, the boundary also marked in places around the southern Upper Wood by the earthwork remains of the medieval park pale. The site slopes gently down to west and east to valleys at the foot of Kingstone and

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Swinley Downs respectively. The setting is agricultural and wooded, with views to a distant, encircling ring of hills, particularly prominent from the roof of the House which was probably used as a viewing platform during hunting activities. A weathercock stands 650m east of the House, on a tall pole at the top of Weathercock Hill, apparently first erected in the C18 or C19 and aligned on the centre of the east front. Swinley Copse lies c 800m west of the House, terminating the view along the west avenue and across agricultural land, with Swinley Down hillside rising above it. The mound of Alfred's Castle, a Saxon or earlier circular earthwork, stands 500m north-west of the House, visible in the views from the parterre and west front.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Ashdown House is approached off the B4000 Ashbury to Lambourn lane running parallel to the site to the east, at the foot of Kingstone Down. A spur west off this lane, 350m south-east of the House, leads 400m west to Ashdown hamlet; the south drive spurs north off this lane 300m south of the House. The south drive enters the park through late C20 wooden gates and railings, running north along the south avenue, flanked by woodland to the east (formerly open parkland, OS 1883, 1900) and parkland to the west. Some 80m south of the House the drive turns east, curving north before turning west 80m east of the House in line with the east, entrance front. The drive passes between two detached pavilions lying c 20m east of the House, entering the gravelled forecourt. A short flight of stone steps leads up to the front door in the centre of the east front. A serpentine spur north-west off the main drive, 80m south-east of the House, gives direct access to the south side of the forecourt, entering past the south pavilion. In the late C19 this gave access to an enclosed service yard adjacent to the south pavilion.

A second drive enters the site c 350m north-east of the House, off the Ashbury lane, curving west and south through the park to join the south drive where it turns west to approach the House.

This drive system was in place by the late C19 (OS 1880), the south drive having been present by 1716 when Knyff and Kip show a carriage on it, at which time the drive currently aligned on the east front may have extended to the east boundary of the park, gates being shown at the west and east ends of the east avenue.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Ashdown House (probably William Wynde and/or Sir Balthasar Gerbier, 1660s, listed grade I) stands at the centre of the surrounding park and woodland, facing the four cardinal points. A tall, narrow, square building of four storeys with a viewing platform and cupola on the roof, it was built as a hunting lodge for the first Earl of Craven of chalk ashlar with Bath stone dressings and stacks. The grand wooden staircase takes up the whole of the north-east quarter of the House, leading to the cupola and the roof. Stone steps lead from central doors on the east front down to the forecourt, and on the west front (this flight being higher and balustraded) to the garden.

Two rectangular pavilions (1660s-80s, listed grade I) stand 20m east of the House, each of a single storey with attic windows, the walls rendered with limestone dressings. Both pavilions have two very tall chimneys at the north and south ends. In the 1860s-70s the pavilions were linked to the main house by quadrants and attached blocks in similar style, flanking the forecourt to north and south. These were removed during the 1950s restoration, together with a stone screen which formed the east boundary of the forecourt, linking the two pavilions.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The garden lies adjacent to the west front, from which stone steps lead down to a gravel parterre with four box-hedged knots separated by cruciform paths, designed in 1956 by A H Brookholding-Jones. To the north, west and south of this a level lawn, extending to the north and south fronts, is largely surrounded by a clipped yew hedge, with a broad opening on the west side giving views of the west avenue, into which the lawn extends. The hedge is broken opposite the north and south fronts, allowing views across informal lawns to the avenues beyond.

The 1950s' design is a simplified form of the garden which existed in the late C19 (NMR plan), when the garden was enclosed by hedges, with an elaborate apsidal parterre filled with scrolled patterns set into the lawn, flanked to north and south by long, narrow features. In the early C19 the garden seems to have been enlarged to the west from the small, C17 enclosure, forming a larger rectangle in which the House and pavilions stood at the east end (NT, History of Ashdown House). By the late C19 (OS 1883) the formal parterre had been laid out, possibly coinciding with the planting of the surrounding park.

PARK The open landscape park lies at the centre of the site, formed in the C19 from woodland which formerly surrounded the House (NT, History of Ashdown House). It is bounded to the north partly by a ha-ha marking the division from Middle Wood beyond, and to the south by Ashdown lane and hamlet and beyond this Upper Wood. The west half of the park is largely open,

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that to the east containing many park trees and naturally occurring sarsen stones set in rough pasture. A lime avenue runs along parts of the east boundary, extending south through the park from a point in Middle Wood c 600m north-east of the House. Four vistas are aligned on the fronts of the House: the west, flanked by a mature lime avenue extends from the west end of the garden to the west boundary, aligned on Swinley Copse. Many of the limes have been re-erected and cut back following a storm in 1990. The south avenue flanks the south drive, terminating at the south gateway, and is aligned on a rising paddock, to the south of Ashdown lane, leading to Upper Wood. The broad north avenue within the park forms the southern end of the Great Avenue running north through Middle and Hailey Woods. The east vista is largely marked by mown grass, flanked by two lime trees where the north-east and south drives meet, and at the east boundary by a gap in the north/south boundary lime avenue, where the stone boundary wall is sunk to form a ha-ha. Beyond the ha-ha lies a field of sarsen stones leading to the B4000 and beyond this the vista extends up Weathercock Hill to the weathercock. These axial vistas have existed since at least the early C18 (Knyff and Kip, c 1716), when seemingly they cut through dense woodland, terminating at ornamental iron gateways standing in the boundary walls.

Adjacent to the north of the park lies Middle Wood, and beyond this Hailey Wood, the two of mixed woodland cut through by lateral rides and connected by the Great Avenue. This latter gradually narrows as it extends 1.5 km from the north front of the House to the north tip of Hailey Wood. The House is visible along the Great Avenue from a point on the Ashbury lane some 2km to the north.

South of Ashdown lane lies the hamlet of Ashdown, consisting of Ashdown Farm, where the stables for the House may have been, and several associated cottages. The hamlet lies at the north end of Upper Wood, the site of the medieval deer park which overlies pre-Conquest field systems. The early extent of the park is marked by the earthwork park pale. A strip of parkland largely divides the mixed woodland bounded by the stone park wall from the pale.

In the early C18 the whole area surrounding the House, beyond the walled enclosure which the House stood in, appears to have been thickly wooded (Knyff and Kip, c 1716), although Upper Wood south of Ashdown lane was not shown. In the mid C18 (Rocque 1761) the House still lay within the small enclosure, with avenues extending from the four fronts through woodland, except to the west which avenue ran through open, cultivated ground as far as Swinley Copse. The southern avenue extended up the hillside south of Ashdown lane, running as far as Upper Wood beyond.

By the late C19 (OS 1883) the area between Middle and Upper Woods had been considerably thinned of trees to become parkland, the western half largely devoid of trees, the eastern half containing parkland trees and an informal open area east of the House leading to the boundary. The north and west avenues were present, together with the avenue along the east boundary. A fence or wall divided the lawns to north and south of the yew-hedged garden from the rest of the park. The woodland areas appeared much as they do today.

KITCHEN GARDEN The remains of the kitchen garden stand c 400m south-west of the House, south of Ashdown lane. The area is now laid to pasture. Formerly an irregular rectangle (OS 1883), only part of the north-west brick wall remains standing, marked with the remains of whitewash on the south side indicating the position of former glasshouses.

REFERENCES

L Knyff and J Kip, *Britannia illustrata ...* (1714) *Country Life*, 33 (29 March 1913), pp 454-62 *Victoria History of the County of Berkshire* 4, (1924), pp 503-4 N Pevsner and J Sherwood, *The Buildings of England: Berkshire* (1966), pp 72-3 *Ashdown House, guidebook*, (National Trust 1991) *History of Ashdown Park*, (unpublished research paper for National Trust, nd)

Maps J Rocque, *A topographical survey of the county of Berks ...*, 1761 C and J Greenwood, *Map of the county of Berks ...*, surveyed 1822-3, published 1824

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1883 2nd edition published 1900 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1880

Archival items *Plan of Ashdown House and Gardens*, nd (late C19/early C20), (NMR)

Description written: March 1998 Amended: April 1999 Register Inspector: SR Edited: January 2000

Legal

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