

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

MEREVALE HALL

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

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
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MEREVALE HALL

Name: MEREVALE HALL

County: Warwickshire

District: North Warwickshire (District Authority)

Parish: Atherstone

County: Warwickshire

District: North Warwickshire (District Authority)

Parish: Bentley

County: Warwickshire

District: North Warwickshire (District Authority)

Parish: Merevale

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.571841
Longitude: -1.5699553
National Grid Reference: SP2924397200
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1001190
Date first listed: 01-Feb-1986

Details

C19 formal gardens and terraces designed by W A Nesfield and C19 parkland which incorporate elements of an early C18 formal garden and a late C18 scheme by Joseph Cradock.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1148 Robert, Earl Ferrers founded a Cistercian monastery in the 'mountainous and woody Desert' of Merevale, endowing it with land in the Forest of Arden. At the Dissolution in 1536 the monastic property was purchased by Lord Ferrers of Chartley on behalf of his younger son, Sir William Devereux, who converted part of the monastery into a house (Dugdale 1730). Merevale passed to Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex in 1579, and in 1649 was sold by his daughter to Edward Stratford, a sheep farmer from Nuneaton. In the mid or late C17 a new house was constructed on the hilltop to the south-east of the monastic site, and William Devereux's C16 house was abandoned. A plan of c 1740 and a drawing of 1759 show the new house set in formal gardens. In the 1740s Francis Stratford made alterations to the new house and in 1749 built a Palladian stable block, possibly with advice from William Chambers (Tyack 1994). In the 1760s Stratford's son-in-law, Joseph Cradock (1742-1826), the author of *Village Memoir* (1774), advised on the development of the grounds at Merevale (Jacques 1983). Francis Stratford died without a male

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heir and was succeeded by his daughter, Penelope, who was married to Richard Geast Dugdale (d 1806), a descendent of the Warwickshire historian William Dugdale (1605-86). They were in turn succeeded by their son, Dugdale Stratford Dugdale. In the early C19 coal fields on the estate were developed by William Stratford Dugdale, who inherited Merevale in 1836. Between 1838 and 1844 Dugdale rebuilt Merevale to designs by Edward Blore and Henry Clutton; formal terraced gardens were laid out by W A Nesfield (1793-1881), and improvements were made in the park. W S Dugdale died in 1871 and was succeeded by his eldest son, also William Stratford, who died in 1882 as the result of injuries sustained while attempting to rescue miners trapped at his Baddesley Colliery. W S Dugdale's son, William Francis, was a minor at the time of his father's death; after coming of age in 1893 he was active in local affairs and was created a baronet in 1936. Sir William died in 1965, and today (2000) Merevale remains in private occupation.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Merevale Hall is situated c 1.25km west-south-west of the town of Atherstone and c 500m south-east of Merevale parish church. The site lies to the south-west of the A5 Watling Street, which here forms the boundary between Warwickshire and Leicestershire to the north. The c 185ha site comprises some 10ha of gardens and pleasure grounds, and c 175ha of parkland. To the north-east the site is bounded by the A5 Watling Street, while to the east and south-east it is enclosed by a high mid C19 rubble-stone wall. The southern boundary is formed by a traditional pale fence which follows the B4116 road, while to the west and north the site adjoins agricultural land with boundaries formed by fences and hedges. To the north-west the site is bounded by a minor road, Merevale Lane. A ridge of high ground extends from the south-west towards the centre of the site, where the Hall stands above steep slopes which fall to the north and west. The ground falls more gently to the east and south, with a valley to the south running into a deeper valley to the south-east which contains the mid C19 lake. A further shallow valley to the north-west contains two monastic fishponds. There are extensive views to the west, and to the north across the Leicestershire plain from the Hall, gardens and park.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The site is entered from the B4116 road to the south-west through a white-painted timber gate. The tarmac drive extends c 130m north-north-west through the park to meet a drive which approaches from a mid C20 lodge c 270m to the south-west of the junction; this lodge replaced the C19 Baxterley Lodge (OS). The present drive and entrance was constructed in the mid C20 when the area to the south-west was recovered from open-cast mining (Mr Dugdale pers comm, 2000). At the junction a drive leads c 170m north-west to Swans Wood Farm, while the main drive turns sharply north-east and proceeds for c 290m, with higher, lightly wooded ground to the north and views south across parkland which falls towards a stream. Sweeping north and north-east the drive continues for a further c 350m, with steeply rising ground to the east and wide views to the west, before turning east to approach a turning area to the south of the mid C19 stables (listed grade II*). To the south of the turning area the ground rises steeply with exposed rocks. The stable court, largely designed by Henry Clutton c 1842 in a picturesque fortress style, is entered through a gatehouse in the south facade. To the east the drive turns north to enter the forecourt through a pair of ornamental mid C19 cast-iron gates set in a screen of ornamental cast-iron railings supported on a low stone wall. The forecourt is separated from the stable court to the west by a stone screen wall, and is enclosed to the east by a similar wall which is terminated to the south by a massive pier supporting a metal lantern. The drive is flanked by rectangular panels of lawn and flower beds in the forecourt. The carriage court at the south-east corner of the Hall is separated from the forecourt by low stone walls which terminate in piers with ball finials, and is enclosed by stone walls.

A further drive approaches the Hall from the A5 Watling Street to the north. This entrance is flanked by a pair of mid C19 single-storey pedimented lodges (listed grade II). Designed by Edward Blore, the lodges adjoin a panelled screen wall which flanks a pair of rendered stone gate piers surmounted by carved stone vase finials, which in turn support a pair of open-work timber gates. The tarmac drive runs c 500m south through a lime avenue, before turning south-west and climbing gently for c 270m to reach a white-painted timber gate adjacent to a group of mid C19 cedars. Passing through the gate the drive continues to climb south-west through the park for c 400m, with views south-east to the mid C19 lake, and west to trees in the pleasure grounds. Sweeping north-west the drive runs parallel to the C19 metal fence which encloses the pleasure grounds to the north for c 270m to arrive at the entrance to the forecourt.

The Church Drive approaches the Hall from Merevale Lane to the north-west where a monumental mid C19 gothic stone gatehouse (listed grade II) designed by Clutton in 1848(9) marks the entrance adjacent to the medieval parish church of Our Lady (listed grade I). The gatehouse has a gabled north facade with a single large gothic arch which leads through to a carriage arch flanked by a pedestrian door to the east set in the matching south facade. An east/west range contains accommodation. The gatehouse is based on a medieval example at nearby Maxstoke Priory, and was intended to recall the monastic origins of the site. To the south of the gatehouse the gravelled drive is separated from the churchyard to the east by a stone wall. To the west lawns and shrubs separate the drive from the carriage court and drive of The Gate House (listed grade II), a mid C19 house designed by Clutton as a rectory. Some 50m south-east of the gatehouse the drive passes through a simple gateway and continues for c 130m south-east across the dam which retains the monastic Black Pool. There are views north-east through trees and evergreen shrubs to a further monastic pool, Abbey Pool, which lies at a lower level. The drive, today (2000) a track, sweeps south-east and south through the park for c 670m, passing Rose Cottages (listed grade II), a pair of mid C19 Tudor-gothic stone cottages by Clutton c 670m south-east of the entrance. The drive climbs south-east through an area of scattered trees to join the present principal approach from the south-west.

An early C19, picturesque, octagonal thatched-roofed lodge, Beehive Cottage (listed grade II), stands on the B4116 Coleshill Road c 750m south-south-east of the Hall. A white-painted timber gate flanked to the east by a similar pedestrian gate leads to a track which passes for c 190m through an area of mixed woodland, the Outwoods, to join further tracks which lead west for c 270m to reach the park, and east for c 190m to reach a track on the west bank of the lake. A plan of 1829, predating the construction of the lake, shows a drive leading to a further entrance from the Coleshill Road; this had been removed by 1886 (OS). A plan of c 1740 shows the principal approach ascending to a carriage circle on the east side to the Hall from a road to the north. The course of this road is today marked by Old Lane Spinney c 350m north of the Hall; it then followed the line of the C19 Church Drive south to join the present south-west drive c 670m south-west of the Hall. The road is recorded by Yates (1793), and was removed in the mid C19 as part of W S Dugdale's improvements to the estate.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Merevale Hall (listed grade II*) stands on a level terrace to the north of, and below, the summit of a steep hill, with wide views to the west, north and east. The present mansion was constructed in a Jacobean style for William Stratford Dugdale in 1838-42 by Edward Blore and was completed with some alterations by Henry Clutton in 1842-4; it replaced a C17 and C18 house on the same site. As planned the Hall was to be entered through a central door in the east facade, in approximately the position of the front door of the earlier house. For reasons of convenience the entrance was transferred to a single-storey porch at the south-east corner of the Hall, this alteration leading to a breach with Blore and his replacement by Clutton (Mr Dugdale pers comm, 2000). The three-storey house is constructed in Hollington stone ashlar over a brick core with a square tower with chamfered corners at the north-west corner of the building. The parapets are enlivened with pinnacles and finials, while a further square tower rises above the service quarters to the south-west. The symmetrical east facade, designed as the entrance but since 1842 the garden facade, has a pair of two-storey square bays set below ogee gables flanked by tall turrets, which flank a centrepiece with an arched entrance set below an oriel window. The west facade has regularly spaced canted bay windows. The two-storey stables and domestic offices, designed by Clutton c 1842 (listed grade II*), lie to the south-west of the Hall; a square clock tower rises adjacent to the arched gatehouse which is set in the south facade.

William Stratford Dugdale recorded progress with the rebuilding of the Hall in his diary (WCRO). The antiquarian William Hamper and the Leamington Spa architect C S Smith were consulted on minor changes in 1825, and when Blore was instructed in 1838 the intention was a modest remodelling of the C17 house. Extensive rot and deterioration of the fabric of the earlier house led to complete rebuilding at a cost of more than £35,000 rather than the original estimate of £5000.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The formal terraced gardens lie to the east of the Hall, with areas of informal pleasure ground beyond, and to the north. Wide, stone-flagged steps descend from the central door in the east facade of the Hall to the gravelled upper terrace which is laid out with a geometric, stone-kerbed parterre (all listed grade II) which was designed by W A Nesfield in 1842 (W S Dugdale, diary). The upper terrace is retained to the east by a stone wall, the parapet of which is ornamented with a group of mid C19 stone urns (listed grade II) which were brought from Drayton Manor, Staffordshire c 1926. The symmetrical parterre is divided into two groups of beds divided by a central gravel walk leading east from the Hall

to an axially placed flight of stone steps descending to the lower terraces. The outer beds form grass panels with circular tiered topiary yew shapes at each corner. There are further grass panels and topiary yews below the walls of the Hall. The inner beds are planted with roses and clipped box and lavender. The gravelled terrace returns along the north facade of the Hall where it is retained by a stone crenellated parapet (listed grade II). A centrally placed double stone staircase (listed grade II) with Jacobean-style arcaded balustrades descends to an area of informal pleasure ground planted with specimen trees, shrubs and conifers. There are views from the north terrace north-east across the kitchen garden. The gravelled terrace returns below the west facade of the Hall, where it is terminated to the south by a triple-arched stone loggia which is approached by a flight of stone steps. The loggia is surmounted by a stone strapwork balustrade. The west terrace is laid out with narrow, stone-kerbed panels of grass below the Hall and to the west of a central gravel walk. The stone crenellated balustrade to the west (listed grade II) has a lower central section which is flanked by a pair of square-section stone piers which support a further pair of stone urns from Drayton Manor (listed grade II). A centrally placed shallow flight of stone steps descends from the gravel walk to the viewpoint, from which there are extensive views west across the park and to the parish church and gatehouse. This view was illustrated by Blore and Clutton in their proposal for the gatehouse in 1840 (WCRO).

From the east terrace a central flight of stone steps (listed grade II) descends to the second terrace which is laid out with lawns flanking a central gravel walk. To each side of the walk three long narrow beds planted with standard and shrub roses are cut in the lawns; ornamental shrubs are planted below the wall retaining the upper terrace. Further stone steps (listed grade II) descend from the second terrace to a narrow third terrace comprising a gravel walk set with painted timber bench seats. Stone steps flanked by a pair of mid C19 stone urns (listed grade II) descend a tall grass bank in two flights to the lowest level of the formal gardens. The axial gravel walk extends east to a circular stone-kerbed mid C19 pool, which lies at the centre of a partially sunken lawn. The lawn is enclosed to the south by a grass bank planted with specimen trees and shrubs, which rises to a formal gravel walk which extends c 200m south-east from the south-east corner of the upper terrace, while to the north it is enclosed by evergreen shrubs. To the east, the lawn is enclosed by a ridge of higher ground which is planted with deciduous trees, C19 conifers and ornamental shrubbery known as The Wilderness. The central gravel walk encircles the pool, the circumference of this central feature being marked by four stone urns set on tall stone pedestals (listed grade II). The walk continues east, ascending the ridge beyond the lawn where it is flanked by mature yews and specimen trees and shrubs. The Wilderness is laid out with a cruciform arrangement of gravel walks, the central crossing of which lies on the crest of the ridge. The axial walk extending from the Hall drops below the crest of the ridge and is terminated to the east by a flight of stone steps which descends to a further north/south walk. Below the steps a vista (re-cut 1999) allows a view through the surrounding woodland to the park and lake. A north/south walk runs along the crest of the ridge and is terminated to the north by a C19, semicircular, green-painted timber alcove seat set on a stone-flagged base; to the south the walk is aligned on a small urn set on a stone pedestal. A walk returns north-west from The Wilderness towards the Hall. Overlooking the sunken lawn and the lower terraces to the north, the walk is bordered to the south by lawns and ornamental trees and shrubs. An early C20 tennis lawn lies c 140m south-east of the Hall, while a late C20 swimming pool has been constructed c 50m south-east of the Hall.

The mid C19 terraces and pleasure grounds replaced formal gardens which are shown on a survey of c 1740. The C17 house is shown with terraces to the east, north and west, with a pair of pavilions on the west terrace. Below the east terrace a circular carriage court lay to the west of a square, tree-enclosed lawn with a semicircular east side which led to an eastern axial walk which passed through a wilderness. The east terrace and carriage court are also shown in a drawing of 1759, and in the early C18 Aylesford Collection watercolour. The c 1740 plan shows a cruciform path pattern in the wilderness which corresponds closely to the surviving walks (2000); the network of geometric paths with a *patte d'oie* to the north does not survive and had been removed by 1886 (OS). The mid C18 formal gardens were altered by Joseph Cradock in the late C18 (Jacques 1983), but the outline of the early C18 wilderness, lawn and terraces survive within Nesfield's mid C19 scheme.

PARK The park encircles the Hall and gardens on all sides. Today (2000) the majority of the park remains pasture, with areas of woodland concentrated to the south and south-east. Some land to the west and north is in arable cultivation, while there are boundary plantations to the north, west and south-west. To the east and south-east the park is enclosed by a rubble-stone wall with a rustic stone coping. Some 800m east-south-east of the Hall a three-storey circular prospect tower is built into the wall.

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Lit by slit windows, the tapered tower has a crenellated parapet. To the north of the tower the park wall is partly screened by a plantation of limes known as Wall Plantation. The wall and tower were built for W S Dugdale in 1838-9 by Mr Sinclair at a cost of £2000 (W S Dugdale, diary). Some 500m south-east of the Hall an irregular-shaped mid C19 lake is retained to the north by a high earth dam faced with a curved 3m high wall of purple brick (listed grade II) incorporating three round-arched openings. A C19 ram which pumped water up to the Hall and gardens is situated to the north-west of the dam. The lake is not shown on the 1" OS map (1835), and was constructed c 1840 as part of William Stratford Dugdale's improvements. To the south of the Hall a ridge of lightly wooded high ground, Park Hill, extends to the south-west boundary of the site, and is bounded to the north-west by the drive. Some 450m south of the Hall, Parkhill Wood drops into a valley running west from the lake. Deciduous woodland, the Outwoods, lies to the south of Parkhill and to the east of the lake. The generally level ground below and to the west of the Hall and drive has scattered trees and a plantation, Plumtree Spinney, c 320m west-south-west of the Hall; there is a further plantation at the south-west end of Black Pool c 480m west of the Hall. An icehouse is cut into the steep slope below the west terrace adjacent to the C19 kennels.

A park belonging to the Earl of Essex existed at Merevale by the early C17 (Shirley 1867). A plan of c 1740 indicates that the park was concentrated to the south of the Hall on Park Hill, with an avenue leading north-east towards a further enclosure and woodland on Galloper Hill; the avenue corresponds to the western end of the C19 Atherstone drive. Land to the north and west of the Hall was laid out in a series of meadow enclosures, with ornamental groups of trees on Well House Plain immediately below and to the west of the Hall. The park was extended to its present boundaries in the mid C19 by William Stratford Dugdale, and in 1841 deer were reintroduced from Bordesley Park (W S Dugdale, diary). In the late C18 and early C19 Merevale park was noted for its fine oak trees (Byng 1934).

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden lies c 50m north-east of the Hall below and to the north of the terraced gardens. The garden is approximately square on plan with rounded corners, and is enclosed by brick walls with stone coping. The south wall is lower than that to the west and north, allowing views into the garden from the north terrace. There are timber gates set in each wall. Today (2000) the garden is largely laid to lawn with late C20 avenues of fruit trees dividing the area into quarters. A late C20 ogee-arched tunnel arbour leads south from a slightly sunken central circular lawn to a late C20 metal arbour. Against the north wall a vinery and a peach house of late C19 date flank a late C20 lean-to glasshouse and the site of a further C19 glasshouse. A range of sheds, heating chambers and bothies remain to the north of the kitchen garden. The kitchen garden occupies the site of a rectangular enclosure with a semicircular extension on its eastern side enclosed by trees or hedges which is shown on the plan of c 1740.

OTHER LAND The gardens of The Gate House, a mid C19 house designed as a rectory by Clutton (listed grade II) c 670m north-west of the Hall are included in the site here registered. Two terraces descend to the south-east of the house, the upper terrace separated from the deeper lower terrace by a bank. The lower terrace, today (2000) laid to grass, is retained by a stone wall with centrally placed semicircular stone steps descending to an area of paddock. To the west and north-east of the house there are areas of shrubbery, with a mid C19 coach house by Clutton (listed grade II) to the north. The terraced gardens of The Gate House were laid out by W A Nesfield for W S Dugdale in 1842 (Evans 1994).

The churchyard associated with the parish church of Our Lady lies c 600m north-west of the Hall (within the area here registered). Separated from the park to the south and east by a stone ha-ha, a mature yew stands at the south-east corner of the churchyard. To the north of the church the churchyard is separated from the gravelled area south of the mid C19 gatehouse by a stone wall, while to the south it is enclosed by a C19 ornamental wrought-iron fence. The C13 church was the chapel ante portas of the Cistercian abbey (Pevsner and Wedgewood 1966), remains of which stand c 130m north-east (immediately outside the site here registered), adjacent to Abbey Farm.

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Illustrations Drawing, *Merevale Hall from the south-east, 1759* (private collection) [reproduced in *Country Life*, 145 (20 March 1969), p 662] Watercolour, *Merevale Hall from the north-east, early C19* (Aylesford Collection, Birmingham City Reference Library Archive) J Buckler, *Drawings of Merevale Abbey and Hall, early C19* (British Library Add MS 36390) [copies at WCRO] E Blore, *Sketches of Maxstoke Priory, Merevale Abbey and Hall, early C19* (British Library Add MS 42027) [copies at WCRO] E Blore, *Working drawings for Merevale Hall, 1838* (8714 A1-157), (Victoria and Albert Museum)

Archival items Dugdale family papers (private collection) W S Dugdale, *diary c 1825 (c 1860* (private collection) [copy in WCRO: MI313]

Description written: March 2000 Amended: May 2000 Register Inspector: JML Edited: January 2001

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.