

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

York Gate Gardens

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Name:	York Gate Gardens
District:	Leeds (Metropolitan Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 53.857669 Longitude: -1.5803036 National Grid Reference: SE2770340242 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1467139 Date first listed: 18-Aug-2020 Statutory Address 1: Back Church Lane, Adel, Leeds, LS16 8DW

## Historique de la conservation

York Gate Farm was first developed by the Arthington family in the C17 and C18. The C17 farmhouse was set in the angle of Back Church Lane, with a line of farm buildings alongside and at right angles further back on the site. A lower line of outbuildings completed a three-sided courtyard. In 1850 the farm was sold to George North Tatham, who died shortly after. In the mid-1860s Tatham's son-in-law, Edwin Eddison, built a new farmhouse away from the road to the immediate east of the rear farm buildings. The old house and outbuildings were retained, but slid into increasing decay.

The farm was then tenanted out until in 1951 Fred and Sybil Spencer bought it 'as a great adventure', intending to keep horses and raise livestock. Frederick Henry Spencer (1906-1963) was a locally born and educated member of a family firm of surveyors, Spencer, Son and Gilpin. In 1931 he married Sybil Beatrice (nee Armitage, 1908-1994), daughter of an Armley chemist and they initially settled at Batcliffe Mount, Headingley. Their only child, Robin Anthony Spencer (1934-1982) followed his father into the family business, but never married. Both men died relatively young of heart attacks.

On purchasing the property in 1951 Fred Spencer demolished the derelict C17 farmhouse, but retained the outbuildings. He remodelled the Victorian house with new windows and a rear entrance into the kitchen. Meanwhile the family acquired horses, ducks and pigs, and began to lay out the garden. In 1958 the west side of the site with the farmyard and most of the outbuildings were sold to a local builder, who demolished them and used the stone to build a large house ('The Cottage') on the footprint of the old stables, hayloft and cottage alongside the Spencers' Victorian farmhouse. The sale provided the Spencers with the means to continue the development of their garden, which by this time was taking over from their earlier interest in livestock and amateur dramatics.

Fred Spencer had laid out the bones of the garden from 1952 onwards, planting beech hedges and creating a pond in the old orchard in 1954. He also helped create the new herb garden, designed the tool shed and original greenhouse. The rest of the garden owes more to Sybil and Robin, who kept scrapbooks of pictures cut from Country Life and catalogues of garden furniture; they found solace too in gardening projects after the sudden death of Fred in 1963. Robin applied great attention to detail, also attending auctions, antique fairs and demolition sites to acquire interesting items as focal points and collecting most of the architectural salvage incorporated into the garden design. Meanwhile his mother concentrated on planting. In a recorded interview, Sybil Spencer explained that 'much of our garden is modelled on Hidcote, our favourite garden – scaled down to fit

our site'. Hidcote (Gloucestershire) was created in the early C20 by Lawrence Johnston, and in 1959 the family also visited the nearby Kiftgate Court, Gloucestershire, created by Heather Muir, helped and inspired by Jonston, her lifelong friend.

In 1968 the Spencers began to open the garden to the public as part of the National Gardens Scheme. With no one to leave the garden to following Robin's early death, in 1982 Sybil Spencer willed the garden to the Gardeners' Royal Benevolent Society, now known as Perennial. Many lead features and some stone ornaments were stolen before the Society restored the garden. It opens to the public from April to November, and is tended by three gardeners and over a hundred volunteers working in the cafe, shop and garden.

The adjoining site to the west which was sold in 1958 was reunited as part of York Gate in 2015. A programme of work is taking place over the Autumn and Winter of 2019 to 2020 to convert The Cottage to a café, with the Victorian farmhouse converted to a shop, and land to the rear of the garden providing parking. The present shop (2020) in the outbuildings will then be converted to an exhibition space with a display about the Spencer family and development of the garden.

## Details

A small private garden developed between 1951 and the 1980s by the Spencer family as a series of garden rooms in an Arts and Crafts style. The garden is unusual in being vested in a charity and open to the public.

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** York Gate Garden is situated in Adel, a parish on the northern boundary of the Leeds conurbation. It is part of a green corridor from Woodhouse Ridge, Headingley, to Golden Acre Park, between Adel and Bramhope, along which a connecting trail for the Dales Way which runs to link with the official starting point in Ilkley. The immediate surroundings are rural, although there are housing estates close by, and York Gate with its gardens, the church and adjacent recreation ground are within Adel-St John's Conservation Area.

The garden lies to the north of Back Church Lane, behind the C12 church at the top of the hill and its adjoining rectory on the south side of the road. The land falls slightly so that the entrance and immediate sections of the Old Orchard and Dell are below the road level. From there the land rises gently northwards. The cultivated garden occupies one acre of the six acres site, part of a former smallholding on gently rolling high ground with light, sandy loam soils over sandstone. The south boundary of the garden is formed by a drystone wall. The eastern boundary is formed by a high holly hedge and a high beech hedge curving round the Dell and continuing along the northern boundary to meet the east side of the Herb Garden summerhouse. A high beech hedge runs along the northern boundary from the west side of the summerhouse and returns along the western boundary up to the rear elevation of The Cottage. The boundary on the south side of the line of outbuildings is formed by a stone wall.

**ENTRANCES, APPROACHES AND VIEWS** Back Church Lane runs behind the C12 church of St John the Baptist, and many visitors park near the church and walk through the churchyard as a prelude to the garden across the road. The entrance lies on the north side of the road and down the hill from the church; the low drystone wall along the southern boundary with breaks in the perimeter planting allows views into parts of the garden from the road. A broad diamond-braced five bar farm gate at the south-west corner of the garden leads to a short gravel drive. A second gateway to the west, slightly back up the hill, serves The Cottage. Within the garden a gate leads from the Nut Walk into the meadow to the north (now used for educational work, plant sales and a nursery). At the north-west corner of the garden a bridge was added over the ditch or ha-ha in 2015 to ease access to the adjoining meadow. There are axial vistas through the garden, but views out are concealed by the high hedges except for the viewpoint gateways at the north end of the Nut Walk and the north-west corner, by the tall sundial. At these points there are views across the meadow to the landscape and Adel Woods beyond.

**BUILDINGS** York Gate farmhouse dates from the 1860s, and is built of local stone. The living room and hall were, in September 2019, used as a café, with the kitchen in its original location and the first floor as offices. The two-storey Gothick bay window set in the gable wall of the north side of the house was added by Robin Spencer in 1977 to give the gaunt Victorian building the impression of a summer house when viewed from a distance through the White and Silver Garden.

The line of outbuildings leading to the road incorporates earlier elements and was used by the Spencers as a garage before becoming the ticket office, shop and lavatories. It retains a metal duck weathervane attached by Sybil to its southern gable in

1960. Attached to the northern gable wall of the lavatories is another outbuilding which faces west into the adjoining site to the west (now reunited as part of York Gate) and abuts the east gable wall of The Cottage, built in 1958 on the same footprint, but four feet taller than the original buildings.

Fred Spencer adapted a C19 outbuilding close to the farmhouse into a tool shed, with a new round window, and an open-sided potting shed. On the south side of the tool shed he built a lean-to wooden greenhouse in 1952, replaced in 1962 by the present metal Hartley greenhouse. The stone summerhouse at the north end of the Herb Garden was planned in 1963, designed by Robin Spencer, and erected in 1964. It has the appearance of a shaded Palladian terrace, with two Doric columns supporting the entablature beam. A metal relief based on the forget-me-knot by James Wilkinson was added inside to the rear wall in 2017 with a plaque commemorating the Spencers set over a wooden chest made by Fred Spencer in 1930.

LANDSCAPE There are fourteen garden rooms for which Robin Spencer devised an anticlockwise route. Beginning at the entrance gate at the south-west corner of the garden, there is a large turning circle arranged as a circular maze of stone setts. This was created by Robin in 1978 to 1979 inspired by the turf maze at Hilton, Cambridgeshire (itself derived from Chartres Cathedral), and incorporating circular millstones and surrounded by golden yew buns; in the centre he added a compass in 1980 that includes the height above sea level (415ft) and his and his mother's initials. On the north-east side is a Weeping Giant Sequoia.

Next to the entrance is the Old Orchard, bounded by the stone wall to the road on the south side with a second pre-existing stone wall running along the north side. It contains a pond created by Fred and Robin Spencer in 1954-1956 to celebrate the Spencers' Silver Wedding anniversary, intercepting the culvert from the rectory pond up the hill on the other side of the road. In the centre is a 6ft Victorian cast-iron urn acquired from a York antique shop in 1972 and set on a stone plinth designed by Robin Spencer. A stone horse trough with a semi-circular trough in front is set against the south boundary wall and holds water brought from under the road. A lead dolphin mask set on a semi-circular stone as a fountain head was stolen after 2007 (a non-lead replacement mask is planned). Robin also made a stone seat out of a broken trough in the late 1950s, which stands in front of the north wall. A wooden circular seat wraps round an apple tree and was made by Paul Drysdale for Sybil Spencer in 1989, and at the east end is a curved stone seat made to Fred's design, for Sybil to sit and view the Old Orchard. Fred thought it echoed the curve of Sybil's back when weeding and he and Robin called it 'Mother's Tomb'. It is backed by a copper beech hedge that divides the Old Orchard from the adjacent Pinetum to the east. Adjacent to the hedge is a tall stone lantern acquired by Robin Spencer in 1971 (a smaller lantern was stolen). On the north side is an opening to a gravel path running north with a stone gate post on the east side against which a small, semi-circular seat is set, supported by a salvaged fragment of a church spire. Sybil planted a Corkscrew Hazel alongside. In the north-east corner is a gateway through to the Pinetum with two square, stone gate piers and a wrought-iron gate designed by Robin from a screen he had seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Originally in the Paved Garden and then in storage, Sybil set it here after Robin's death in 1982.

Linking the Old Orchard and Pinetum on the south side is the Arbour, a circular walk-through folly created next to the road out of timber posts and curved trusses set on four stone pillars. The timbers came from the roof of an upholsterer's shop, previously a chapel, salvaged by Robin Spencer in 1970 following a fire. A circular, patterned floor is made with pink granite setts and recycled blue slates set on edge.

The Pinetum is on the site of a duck pond and duck run first established in 1952. After the ducks were stolen, the area was remodelled in 1961 as a pinetum of needle bearing, small growing conifers to which Robin added a dry stream bed of pebbles. In the south-east corner he set three stone seats against a curved back. A fossilised tree root from Scotland, acquired from the Harrogate Spring Show in 1976, marks the boundary between the Old Orchard and Pinetum. On the north side Sybil planted a *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca' against the existing drystone wall in 1974, training it sideways with horizontal branches to each side, which are clipped each year. More conifers were planted in the flagged paving area at its base.

There is more water at the eastern edge of the garden where a stream enters the garden from under the road. The stream makes a loop through the Dell garden before heading out into the field to the north-east, crossed by a timber bridge that Robin Spencer created in 1969. The Dell was planted in 1956 with silver birches (another Silver Wedding present) and mountain ash. A Root House of old trees made in 1993 was removed as unsafe, but its date stone remains. The Dell ends in the Nut Walk, a covered

walk inspired by Hidcote, created in 1962 from 24 hazel trees leading to a gate into the meadow. The centre of a series of vistas at this point is The Folly, a hexagonal timber structure with a cedar shingle roof created in 1970, with a boss carved with the initials SBS and RAS around a Yorkshire rose and a floor of a millstone and granite setts. The main vista through the Folly from the potting shed terminates in a white painted pump at the easternmost point of the garden in the Dell.

The area to the west of the Nut Walk was previously a kitchen garden, remodelled by Sybil Spencer following her son's death, aided by a young gardener, Brian Noble. The awkwardly sloping site was levelled with a central pond and there was a seat in the far corner, which was stolen in 1989 and replaced by a Yorkshire stone seat with a Yorkshire rose carved on the backrest, designed by Sybil to seat three people (the seat is at present in the meadow). She explained that having so many seats in the garden enabled her to continue gardening into her eighties. This garden was redesigned again as 'Sybil's Garden' in 2004 to 2005 by Alistair Baldwin and replanted by Shanet Alexander with a new fountain in 2015. A stone sculpture of pigs acquired by Sybil in the 1980s was relocated to the kitchen garden by the potting shed.

In 1968 a fern border was planted by the north side of the dry stone wall separating the northern side of the garden from the Pinetum to the south. This was largely replaced in 1973 by a raised canal forty feet long and four feet wide, modelled on that at Hidcote, and set against the dry stone wall, forming a centrepiece for the garden. A stone dolphin bought in York in 1972 was set into the raised pond as a fountain, and replicated after the original was stolen in 2003. The ferns were replanted as a border beyond a tall yew hedge resembling six triangular sails, each one formed from seven trees planted in 1959. The triangle of land north of the raised pond was planted with phlox and fritillaries, bounded to the north by a carpet path laid out in granite setts in 1980 and linking the Folly and an Istrian wellhead (given to the family by a friend, George Knight, in 1971) in the gap between the yew sails and the Herb Garden.

The rectangular Herb Garden was laid out in 1956 with a central path running north-south, tapered to give an illusion of distance and lined with gold box globes. The gravel path was edged with setts and the central section features a large millstone. Yew hedges were planted in 1959. The open summerhouse with Doric columns and lion masks was added to close the northern vista in 1964.

Across the top of the garden an allee leads between beech hedges from the west side of the summerhouse to a tall sundial with a Solomonic column topped by a ball 'shot' through with a bronze arrow in the north-west corner. It was modelled by Robin Spencer on that at Hidcote and added in 1968, with another curved seat and a ha-ha behind it later shielded by railings and now by a gate and bridge, giving views and access into the meadow beyond. At right angles is the White and Silver Garden originally planted as herbaceous borders in 1966 and replanted with white, silver and grey flowering plants by Sybil and Robin in 1968. At its south end the garden is angled on the kitchen window, augmented by a double-height bay in 1977. The central path has seventeen grindstones sunk into the stone-edged gravel. On its east side is the one remaining Kitchen Garden, with a wicker-backed seat from the 1980s. The potting shed stands at its south end.

In 1963 Fred and Sybil Spencer paved the lower part of the front garden. Robin then remodelled the Paved Garden after his father's death with steps leading from the new greenhouse, with pedestals and stone sinks for Sybil's bonsai trees, griffin (one survivor of the original four), urns, raised millstones, 'bird baths' and small troughs or dishes with succulents and a planted scree slope. Seats were formed from stone slabs. The mullion windows removed from the Victorian farmhouse in 1952 were used to form an open framework on top of the low stone wall along the boundary of the fern border. Sybil trained a twelve-branched pyracantha against the east gable wall of the Victorian farmhouse. The lawn in front of the house is now used for serving teas.

## Summary

A small private garden developed between 1951 and the 1980s by the Spencer family as a series of garden rooms in an Arts and Crafts style. The garden is unusual in being vested in a charity and open to the public.

## 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.

## Reasons for Designation

York Gate Garden, Adel, designed by Frederick and Sybil Spencer and their son Robin and created between 1951 and the 1980s, is registered at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

Design interest:

\* York Gate Garden was influenced by the great Arts and Crafts gardens, notably Hidcote, being consummately designed by the Spencers in a scaled-down Arts and Crafts style for a small suburban setting; \* the garden comprises a series of fourteen structured garden spaces, each with their own character but interconnected by deliberate vistas and paths of differing materials, the whole forming an intricate and rich tapestry with a feast of details throughout; \* added interest is provided by the quirky, eye-catching and pleasingly shaped structures and objects acquired, constructed or designed by Robin Spencer and carefully placed in vistas or within particular gardens.

Historic interest:

\* the opening of York Gate Garden to the public as part of the National Gardens Scheme made it easily accessible and inspirational to those of more moderate means looking for ideas in garden design and planting which could be transposed into their smaller, post-war suburban gardens.

## Bibliographie

### **Books and journals**

Crompton, Val, *Heritage of York Gate*, (2017)