

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

THE DOWNES (ST MICHAEL'S CONVENT)

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Name: THE DOWNES (ST MICHAEL'S CONVENT)

District: Cornwall (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Hayle

label.localisation: Latitude: 50.180410
Longitude: -5.4261086
National Grid Reference: SW 55496 36773
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1001305
Date first listed: 29-Dec-1994

Details

Late C19 gardens laid out by John Dando Sedding to surround a small country house designed by Edmund H Sedding.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Downes was built c 1880 on a previously undeveloped site for William John Rawlings, an antiquarian, to designs by Edmund H Sedding; John Dando Sedding FRIBA (1838-91) was responsible for the design of the gardens. J D Sedding was the author of the highly influential *Garden-Craft Old and New*, published posthumously in 1891, which included a perspective view of The Downes. The house and garden were described in *The British Architect* (1887) in an article which stressed the integral link between the house and garden:

'The most noticeable fact about 'Downes' is that you may consider the house and gardens as parts of one whole scheme of design. This is not one of those houses dropped down from the clouds into an ill-considered spot, and with no architecture or design outside the house except the garden gate. This site it is evident at the very first glance was selected for a house and then prepared for it'.

The gardens were also described in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* (1898), which commented:

'The Downes is nearly perfect ... the place will appeal as a fine example of formal gardening, which has been pursued without altogether forgetting the beauty of hardy plants naturally grouped, and of unbroken greensward'.

In 1901 the property was purchased by Miss Frances E Ellis, and the house was extended by her in 1902 for use as a convent. St Theresa's Convent, a house of the Daughters of the Cross of Liege, was founded in 1913 and the Order subsequently founded St Michael's Hospital on adjacent land which had been purchased by Miss Ellis in 1904. The house remains (2000) in use as a convent.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Downes is situated west of Treliissick Road to the south-west of the centre of Hayle. The c 2.25ha site is bounded to the north and east by drives, while to the south it adjoins domestic and other properties. To the west it adjoins open ground from which it is separated by walls, hedges, and fences. The Downes stands on a small hill commanding a fine prospect. To the north lies St Ives' Bay, while to the north-west there are views across the Hayle estuary to the church of St Uny Lelant and Knill's Monument; to the west beyond the estuary stand the granite hills, Trecrom and Trink.

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ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The Downes is approached from Foundry Hill to the east of the house. From an entrance marked by a pair of late C19 granite gate piers a drive leads c 130m west through the C20 St Michael's Hospital to reach a pair of timber carriage gates (listed grade II*) which lead to a walled courtyard on the east side of the house. An ogee-headed timber door leads from the north-east corner of this courtyard to the eastern end of the principal (north) garden terrace. Before the construction of the hospital, the land to the north and south of this drive which was purchased in 1904 formed part of the designed landscape associated with the house.

A further drive, today (2000) a track, leads south from the north-east tip of the site, parallel with the outer side of the wall which forms the eastern boundary of the garden. This drive appears to have led north and north-west from the house to join Carnsew Road c 400m to the north. This drive would have given access to Hayle and the railway station, and to the coast.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING The Downes (listed grade II*) stands at the south-east corner of the site and is a two-storey small country house constructed in stone with granite dressings under a steeply pitched, gabled slate roof and with leaded windows. The house is irregularly shaped on plan, with a lower service wing adjoining the house to the east. The house was built to designs by Edmund and John Dando Sedding c 1880, and was subsequently extended in 1902 for Miss Ellis when she wished to use the property to house a religious community; it was extended again in the early C20. A Tudor-gothic-style chapel was constructed to the south-west of the house in 1927.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Beneath the north front of the house a broad gravel terrace is bordered by a low granite wall ornamented with trefoil-headed openings (listed grade II*). As laid out, this terrace was planted with hollies and box trees set alternately in the surviving square and round beds which are edged with chamfered grey bricks; these beds are today (2000) planted with cordylines and topiary yews. At the east end of the terrace, c 10m north-east of the house, is a summerhouse (listed grade II*) constructed in granite with Tudor-gothic details including an oriel window with ornamental leaded lights set in its north facade. To the west the terrace is terminated by a low granite parapet flanked by ball finials, which affords views across the orchard. The terrace, retaining wall, and the summerhouse formed part of Sedding's scheme for the gardens.

From the north side of the terrace, opposite the garden entrance from the house, a flight of granite steps descends to a lawn which is the site of Sedding's 'geometrical garden' (terrace walls and steps listed grade II*). A broad central walk flanked to east and west by a late C20 box-edged parterre divides this lawn into two main divisions. To the north an herbaceous border is divided by buttresses of clipped *escalonias*. In the original design each division of the geometrical garden was set out with a series of thirty-nine brick-edged geometric flower beds, the plan of which was influenced by the garden laid out in 1623 by Salomon de Caus (c 1576-1626) at Heidelberg, Germany (British Architect 1887). The design of this garden was supervised on the spot by Sedding (*ibid*), and the planting schemes for the beds, which were planted out twice a year, were submitted to Sedding for his approval. Here Sedding and his client experimented with the colour theories recommended by the Egyptologist Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797-1875) in *On Colour* (1858) (Ottewill 1989). The flower beds were formerly surrounded by a border of ornamental shrubs and a high bay hedge (British Architect 1887).

At the west end of the geometrical garden terrace, steps descend to an area of winding paths leading through mature trees. As laid out by Sedding, this was a garden of small beds arranged in a regular pattern and edged with box (*ibid*); it has been relandscaped in the C20 and is planted with pines and shrubs, which surround a monumental C20 timber crucifix. To the north and west of this terrace and the geometrical garden is an area of less formal terraced areas comprising an orchard, and fruit and flower gardens, with a small mid C20 nuns' cemetery c 100m west of the house. The cemetery is simply laid out and enclosed by hedges and metal railings.

The central axis of the geometrical garden is projected northwards by a flight of eleven stone steps which descends to an avenue of Irish yews flanked by level lawns, beyond which are balancing areas of shrubbery to east and west. A third flight of stone steps on the central axis leads to a cross-walk between yew and clipped conifer hedges which divides the flower gardens from the terraced fruit and vegetable gardens beyond. The central axis is terminated to the north by a stone arbour (listed grade II*) which comprises an arcaded south facade with arched openings to the east and west; the gabled slate roof is supported by granite Tuscan columns. Sedding's design for the arbour was inspired by St Germoe's Chair which stands in the churchyard of St Germochus in Germoe (British Architect 1887; Pett 1998).

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To the west of the house is a square, level lawn which was originally separated from the terrace walk by a holly hedge. The west side is supported by a low granite terrace wall, from the north-west corner of which steps lead down to an orchard; this area was planted by Sedding with 'rare and beautiful shrubs' (British Architect 1887). There are views from the gravelled west terrace walk across the orchard.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden is enclosed to the north and east by stone walls c 3.5m high. Two doors lead through the east wall, one being an original late C19, ornamentally braced painted timber door. To the west and east of the stone arbour which terminated the northern axis of the gardens are the remains of late C19 or early C20 peach houses which stood against the high walls which forms the north and east boundaries of the site. The north-east wall is planted with apricots and peaches within the foundations of a lean-to glasshouse. On the outer side of the north wall a series of stone and brick bothies, sheds, and boiler houses survive. The area to the east of the northern axial walk is partly planted with soft fruit, while that to the west is mainly laid to grass.

A large late C20 glasshouse occupies the north-west corner of the kitchen garden, while a further range of late C19 or early C20 timber-framed glasshouses stands against the garden wall immediately to the north-west. These glasshouses lead west to attached potting sheds and stores. The north-facing slope to the south of the glasshouses is mainly laid to grass (2000); a walk ascending the slope is planted with an avenue of eucalyptus.

A timber gate in a hedge c 5m west of the late C20 glasshouse gives access to a service drive which leads north to join the drive running parallel to and outside the north wall of the kitchen garden. In a recess in the walls outside the north-west corner of the kitchen garden are two early C20 single-storey bothies, while to the west of the drive is a walled service area. The service drive also leads south, ascending the north-facing slope and separating the kitchen garden from the fruit and flower gardens and orchard which form a rectangular block adjacent to the western boundary of the site. The service drive leads to a flight of stone steps at the western end of the north terrace c 80m north-west of the house.

REFERENCES

The British Architect, (16 December 1887), pp 282, 480-1 J D Sedding, Garden-Craft Old and New (1891) Gardeners' Chronicle, i (1898), pp 217, 219-20 B Elliott, Victorian Gardens (1986), p 164 D Ottewill, The Edwardian Garden (1989), pp 32-4 The Cornish Garden, (1994), p 66 J Cornwall Garden Trust, (1996), p 19 D E Pett, The Parks and Gardens of Cornwall (1998), pp 62-3

Illustrations T Raffles Davison, The geometrical garden (published in British Architect (1887), pl 16) Engraving, View from the Lower Garden (published in British Architect (1887), pl 16) J D Sedding, perspective view of the central axis of the gardens (published in Sedding 1891)

Description written: September 2000 Amended: October 2000 Register Inspector: JML Edited: October 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.