

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

PRIOR PARK

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Name:	PRIOR PARK
District:	Bath and North East Somerset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.364823 Longitude: -2.3431719 National Grid Reference: ST 76205 62918 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: I List Entry Number: 1000144 Date first listed: 30-Apr-1987

Details

Landscape park, laid out in C18 with advice from Alexander Pope and Lancelot Brown, around a country house.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Prior Park originated as part of a deer park owned by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, laid out by the Norman bishop, John of Tours, who moved from Wells to Bath after he was granted the Abbey and City of Bath in 1091 by William Rufus. The western half of the park was granted to the Prior of Bath in the C13, and a grange and other buildings near the fishponds at the northern end of the area here registered constituted the Prior's county seat. The grange was reached from Church Lane on the line of an ancient track from Bath to Limpley Stoke, following the Saxon boundary of Widcombe. In the C14 and C15 the Priory suffered as a result in the decline of the woollen industry, and when Leland visited in the 1530s he found that the park walls were ruinous and that there were no deer (Bond 1998). After the Dissolution in 1534-9, the park and other priory lands were subdivided between several owners and continued in agricultural use for the next two hundred years.

In 1726 Ralph Allen purchased part of an estate between Widcombe and Combe Down, including the old priory lands. Allen was by then a leading citizen in Bath, with interests in the postal service and in the Bath stone quarries on Combe Down from which he built a railway down what is now Ralph Allen Drive to his wharf on the River Avon. In 1728 he purchased further lands including the Prior's park. Later that year he commissioned designs for a new house from John Wood the Elder (1704-54), who was already leading the renaissance of Bath as a fashionable spa town.

Between 1734 and c 1740, with advice from Alexander Pope (1688-1744) as well as Wood, Allen developed a formal landscape north of and below the house and a rococo wilderness to the north-west, with a triangular lawn north of the house descending to a formal pond and a boundary wall. The design featured a grotto, the serpentine river with a sham bridge and cascade, a statue of Moses, and the green 'cabinet' at the foot of the cascade with arti-natural winding paths around it. Wood's employment ended in 1748 before the house was complete, and Richard Jones, Allen's clerk of works at Prior Park, took over. In a second phase of works in the 1750s, the landscape was extended northwards and a Palladian bridge and a central cascade were introduced. Finally, a third phase can be identified after c 1760-4 when Allen employed Lancelot Brown (1716-83), who suggested removing the central cascade to make the whole of the combe a single sweep. Allen died in 1764 and his wife in 1766, after which the estate had a succession of owners, and over the next sixty-five years little was done to alter the designed landscape.

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In 1828 the estate was purchased by Bishop Baines, who founded a seminary in the house. Works were carried out to the house to designs by H E Goodridge in 1834. In 1836 there was a serious fire, and restoration costs crippled the seminary, which closed in 1856. After a period of neglect, it was bought by Bishop Clifford to found a Roman Catholic Grammar School. Works to the landscape were carried out in the 1880s. The school closed in 1904 and it was occupied by the army during the First World War and then by a series of tenants until, in 1921, the Christian Brothers took it over and founded a boys' boarding school in 1924. The school, Prior Park College, has continued to occupy the house, but in 1993 11.3ha of the park and pleasure grounds were acquired by the National Trust and have been the subject of a detailed restoration programme.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Prior Park is situated on the edge of Combe Down, a sandstone ridge that runs east/west, c 2km south of Bath. The house is located prominently, designed both to see and be seen from the city. The surviving historic landscape comprises some 22ha, and is divided between former parkland, now playing fields, to the south of the house, and the steeply sloping combe to the north, which runs down from the house to three fishponds in Widcombe at the northern extremity of the landscape.

To the west the park is bounded by Ralph Allen Drive, a public highway, formerly a private carriage drive to the house, with a wall c 1.5m high. To the south it is bounded by a stone wall c 4.5m high along the A3062. The eastern boundary follows the edge of the Free Fields, around the north side of The Priory, then follows the edge of the flanking woods of the combe northwards to the north end of the ponds.

Few trees survive of Allen's extensive planting of pines over the neighbouring downs. The ridings he laid out around his extensive holdings on Combe Down totalled some 10 miles (c 16km) in length, but only a few fragments have survived C20 building development. A rustic bridge 250m south-west of the house, which stands over the lane now known as Pope's Walk, used to carry one such drive west from the house. Some 2km to the north-east, Sham Castle (1762, listed grade II*) was built as an eyecatcher from Allen's town house in Bath.

The setting is dominated by the unspoilt view between the flanking woods to the Palladian Bridge and north over Bath.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approach runs c 100m eastward from the southern end of Ralph Allen Drive, past a lodge designed by Wood the Elder (listed grade II) and through two stone gate piers topped with ornamental carved finials (C18, listed grade II), to the north front of the house.

Some 600m north-north-west, at the junction of Ralph Allen Drive and Church Street in Widcombe (outside the area here registered), is a second lodge by Wood (pre 1742, listed grade II) and gate piers (C18, listed grade II), which related to Ralph Allen Drive before it was made a public highway. By 1759, a new approach had been brought from Ralph Allen Drive, roughly halfway between these two lodges, that led via the Rock or Chinese Gate, southwards round the south side of the ponds, still clearly visible, then via a hairpin bend northwards up to the house along the eastern side of the combe. This was probably constructed by Richard Jones, as a means of bringing stone down to the ponds for the construction of the Palladian Bridge.

The principal National Trust approach enters the grounds 200m north-west of the house via gate piers (1830s, listed grade II). The drive was constructed in the 1830s for Bishop Baines and leads to the front of the house, although a gate 10m south of the grotto now separates the school property from the National Trust land.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING The house at Prior Park was built 1735-43 for Ralph Allen, to designs by John Wood the Elder. It is located at the southern end of a steep combe leading down and north to the village of Widcombe. The house is constructed of Bath stone ashlar with a slate roof and is composed of a central corps de logis, connected by two curving galleries to a west and east pavilion. According to Pevsner (1958), it comprises 'the most ambitious and the most complete re-creation of Palladio's villas on English soil'. Under Wood, only the eastern part was completed and the finishing of the house was left to Richard Jones. A massive central staircase from the north door to the drive dates from c 1836 when it was built for Bishop Baines to designs by H E Goodridge, who also carried out other alterations to the structure of the mansion. In the west range is the church of St Paul (1844, listed grade I), designed by Joseph Scoles (1798-1863). On the south side of the playing fields, 250m south of the house is the Gymnasium (c 1830-40, listed grade II*). In 1991, the house suffered a second major fire; it was restored by the college in 1995.

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GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS A woodland garden, formerly the Wilderness, developed 1734-40 as the first phase of Allen's landscape garden, lies 200m north-west of the house. In the south of this area is the Sham Bridge (1730s-40s, listed grade II), a stone-built structure by a circular pond 100m north-west of the house, which is all that remains of the Serpentine Lake. This originally ran along the contours westward from the pond but proved structurally unsound; it was filled in in the mid C19, probably after the new approach was constructed in 1836. The terrace on which this was constructed is clearly visible, and halfway along it an outflow feeds the Cascade which descends north into an area of woodland with some notable eighteenth-century yews, formerly a cabinet vert in the Wilderness, before being culverted to run to the top of the central cascade in the main vista. East of this area are the foundations of a gothic temple built c 1754, but demolished in 1921 and rebuilt in the grounds of Rainbow Wood House 800m north-east of the house. On the west side of the Wilderness, some 100m south of the entrance are the remains of Mrs Allen's grotto (listed grade II), inspired by Pope's grotto at Twickenham (qv Pope's Garden, Greater London), and constructed in the early 1740s. The grotto, which was cut off from the rest of the Wilderness by Bishop Baines's approach constructed in 1836, is in a ruinous condition; of the three tufa arches in its facade one remains, together with the rear retaining wall. It contained the remains of a favourite dog, given to the Allens by Pope and memorialised with an epitaph on a slab on the floor.

East of the Sham Bridge, the National Trust footpath follows the contours into an open combe north of and below the house, along an early C21 fence separating mown lawn on the school side from rougher grazing in the Trust property. By a group of C18 yews, this path turns northwards down the eastern woodland, which is bounded by a wall and ha-ha on its eastern side; a similar belt of yews marks the northern end of this woodland south-east of the dam between the middle and northern ponds. An open-sided Arts and Crafts-style summerhouse, constructed 1910, is situated c 180m north of the house, and remnants of a Victorian rock garden exist west of The Priory, a gothic house designed by Richard Jones for the head gardener in 1740 (listed grade II*). The Jubilee Walk, a short circuit walk constructed by the National Trust, loops eastwards off the main path through the boundary wall onto the open downland to the east.

The Palladian Bridge (c 1755, listed grade I) crosses the dam between the southern and middle lakes 500m north of the house, with a cascade beneath it. This formed the centrepiece of the second phase of works in the 1750s, after Wood's employment had ended in 1748. There are three linked ponds in the combe, the northernmost c 600m north of the house, immediately to the north of which is the site of the former Gibbs Mill and millpond, which were removed in 1840. A circular icehouse (built by 1781, listed grade II) is situated 10m to the west of the Bridge. A flight of steps, introduced by the National Trust, leads down from the mid C18 drive on the west side to the Bridge, which does not appear to have been on a pedestrian or carriage circuit in the C18. A footpath leads back along the western boundary from a Chinese Gate just inside the western boundary to the 1836 entrance and the National Trust car park.

PARK The former parkland to the south of the house is now used as playing fields by the college; tennis courts, hockey pitches, and a cricket square have been levelled here. At the top of the sharp slope that rises southward from the house, there are remnants of C19 tree planting, including horse chestnut, beech, oak, and lime. Sixty head of deer are recorded as stock in the park here and eastward at the time of Allen's death in 1764, and these seem to have been enclosed in the park to the south of the house. A medieval hunting lodge stood on Lodge Field to the east of the house until it was demolished in 1953. Traces of the medieval boundary walls appear to survive along Pope's Lane and below Rainbow Wood; the boundary as a whole is well defined along roads and existing field boundaries.

The present appearance of the combe north of the house owes much to the third phase in the C18 development of the landscape. Allen employed Lancelot Brown, who advised removing the central cascade and creating the dramatic sweep of grassland down the combe, overlooking the Bridge and the city beyond, flanked by informal planting. The National Trust has reintroduced grazing of the slopes between the school boundary to the south and their late C20 fence around the ponds.

KITCHEN GARDEN No kitchen garden now survives; Allen's was built to the west of the house across Ralph Allen Drive, subsequently developed as Prior Park Farm.

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Description written: October 2002 Amended: July 2003 Register Inspector: DAL Edited: September 2003

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.