

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

ROYAL HOSPITAL, CHELSEA and RANELAGH GARDENS

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Name:	ROYAL HOSPITAL, CHELSEA and RANELAGH GARDENS
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Kensington and Chelsea (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.486947 Longitude: -0.15654873 National Grid Reference: TQ 28091 78055 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000353 Date first listed: 01-Oct-1987

## Details

The site of C17 formal gardens laid out around Sir Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital, Chelsea by George London and Henry Wise. Ranelagh Gardens, to the east, were developed as public pleasure gardens in the mid C18 but reverted to the Royal Hospital in the early C19. Both areas underwent major remodelling in the mid C19 and retain this form in the C20.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The foundation stone of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, 'a hospital or infirmary for such land soldiers that were lame and infirm in the service of the Crown' (CL 1910), was laid by King Charles II in 1682 but it was another ten years before the Hospital was opened. The planning of the enterprise was largely due to Sir Stephen Fox (1627-1716), Paymaster to the Army, John Evelyn, and Sir Christopher Wren. While Evelyn and Fox worked on the organisation of the Hospital, Sir Christopher Wren had accepted the position of architect and produced the plans.

Work on the gardens began in 1687 and took five years to complete. It involved the construction of great lengths of brick walling with large amounts of soil being excavated on the south side of the site where the contours were remodelled. To the north of the hospital building, enclosed within a brick wall, was Burton's Court, the Great Court which corresponded in width with the hospital building. Wren reserved his most ambitious efforts however for the south side of the Royal Hospital where the commanding position of the buildings afforded scope for the exercise of his architectural skills. Here the chief feature was a broad elevated terrace which extended the full length of the South Front, supported by a massive buttressed wall (Nicholls engraving, c 1700). In effect the terrace served as a plinth on which the buildings were set. The central south-east axis which emanated from the terrace consisted of a wide elevated causeway running for c 24m to the riverside. The causeway was set between two formal canals, each c 12m long, which in turn were flanked by twin avenues. Almost immediately after they were completed two further arms of water were added to the east and west of the canals, making them L-shaped. Regularly spaced swan houses were set along the canals and an obelisk in the centre. In 1689/90 a landing stage was made along the bank of the Thames, with steps leading down from the causeway to the river, and in the following year a pair of summerhouses 6m square were built at either side of the landing stage. To east and west of the canals lay the kitchen gardens, those to the west supplying the Hospital kitchen while those to the east acted as a kitchen garden for Lord Ranelagh, the Hospital Treasurer. From 1688

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to 1696 the horticultural works were supervised by George London (d 1714) and Henry Wise (1653-1738), the last five years of their contract including maintenance of the grounds.

In 1688, Richard Jones, first Earl Ranelagh started to build Ranelagh House. This was intended as the official residence of the Hospital Treasurer and although Lord Ranelagh claimed to have built the house at his own expense this is thought to be unlikely as initially the land on which the house was built was not owned by him (Dean 1949). He later obtained a long lease on c 3ha of land which included ground around the house. Lord Ranelagh died a bankrupt in 1712. In 1741 Ranelagh House and gardens, having fallen into decay through thirty years of neglect, was leased to a syndicate for development as a public pleasure garden. The architect William Jones was commissioned to redesign the entire garden. Jones was probably primarily interested in his Amphitheatrical Building or Rotunda and saw the gardens mainly as a setting for it (Jones, 1742). When the Ranelagh pleasure gardens were opened however in 1742 they included many and varying features: a canal, pond, lime avenue, Chinese bridge, and temples. Although dominated by the Rotunda, the gardens were equally important as a place of promenade, being made with wide, well-lit gravel walks as well as some more discrete serpentine ones. The gardens were closed in 1803, Ranelagh House and the Rotunda demolished two years later, and the grounds reverted to the Royal Hospital.

In the mid C19 the construction of the Chelsea Embankment and other local improvements had an adverse effect on the amenities of the Royal Hospital. In 1845 Royal Hospital Road was driven across Burton's Court, separating it from the main body of the Hospital grounds. The position of Clerk of Works to the Hospital was abolished in 1837 and the responsibility for the upkeep of the Hospital grounds was transferred to the Board of Works. The Director of that Department advised the Chelsea Board that, because of the changes the forthcoming construction of the Chelsea Embankment would make, the grounds of the Hospital, including Ranelagh Gardens, should be laid out afresh and in 1849 the remodelled gardens and pleasure grounds were opened to the public. The Chelsea Embankment was completed in 1874, thereby separating the gardens from the Thames. In 1888 the Chelsea Board allotted Burton's Court to the London garrison who at the time had no playing fields.

Since 1913 the lawns to the south of the Royal Hospital have been used as the site for the Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show held annually in May. The site remains (2000) the property of the Crown with the gardens immediately to the south of the Hospital maintained largely for use by the residents. The lawns below are open to the public on a daily basis whereas Ranelagh Gardens is available to the public by arrangement with the Hospital.

#### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** The Royal Hospital, Chelsea is situated in south-west London on the north bank of the River Thames, c 1km south-west of Victoria station. Battersea Park (qv) lies c 500m to the south, on the south bank of the River Thames. The c 21ha site is bounded to the north-east by Chelsea Bridge Road, to the south by Chelsea Embankment, and to the west by C19 service building and gardens belonging to the Hospital and the backs of houses in Embankment Gardens. To the north-west Royal Hospital Road cuts through the site, separating the Hospital grounds from Burton Court. Ranelagh Gardens is separated from the main body of the Hospital grounds by East Road, a private road within the Hospital complex which runs north-west/south-east for c 500m between Royal Hospital Road and Chelsea Embankment. Burton's Court, an area of grass of c 1ha, lies to the north-west of Royal Hospital Road, being bounded by Franklin's Row to the north-east, Ormonde Gate to the south-west, and St Leonard's Terrace to the north-west. Leading north-west from St Leonard's Terrace is Royal Avenue. The c 200m tarmacked road is bounded to the south-west and north-east by terraced houses. A central reservation which runs the length of the Avenue is covered with gravel and lined with lime trees, the whole being enclosed within low, white-painted iron railings. The Royal Avenue was planned at the same time as Burton's Court to link the Royal Hospital with the King's Road, then (late C17) a private thoroughfare. Royal Avenue was intended for the use of visiting royalty but it was not until c 1875 that it acquired its present name. Prior to this it was known variously as College Walk, White Style Walk, or White Styles.

To the north of the Hospital buildings the site is largely level while to the south the ground slopes generally southwards towards the River Thames. The main body of Ranelagh Gardens to the east, which is lower than the surrounding railings, undulates, with mounded beds and shrubberies. The site is largely enclosed within iron railings set on low brick walls.

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**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main entrance to the grounds of the Royal Hospital is currently (2000) from Chelsea Embankment to the south. The tarmacked road leads from the Embankment around a central paved island to the entrance gates (listed grade II). The double wrought-iron gates, c 1850, are hung on stone piers and flanked by single wrought-iron gates. A lesser wrought-iron gate, c 100m to the east of the main entrance, guards a path which slopes down from Chelsea Embankment to East Road. To the north of the site there are two entrances from Royal Hospital Road; these entrances are guarded by single-storey lodges. To the north-east is London Gate with, to the west, London Gate Lodge which is built of brown brick (c 1700, listed grade II). Some 250m to the south-west is Chelsea Gate with, to the east, Chelsea Lodge which is built of yellow brick (early C19, listed grade II). Both entrances have wrought-iron gates hung between brick piers with stone caps (1682-1702, listed grade II). The London and Chelsea Gates lead onto the tarmacked East and West Roads respectively. The former main entrance from Royal Avenue to the north survives on the northern boundary of Burton's Court. Here two single-storey lodges of brown brick (c 1682-1702) sit on either side of wrought-iron gates hung between stone piers mounted by trophies (the whole being listed grade I). From these gates a wide gravel path leads south on the main axis of the Hospital.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** The main Hospital building (listed grade I) is situated in the centre of the site, above two grassed terraces to the south and level lawns, part of the former Great Court, to the north. Built of dark-brown brick with red-brick dressings, stone quoins at angles, and moulded cornices, it has a slate roof with regularly spaced dormers. The building is made up from seven three-storey connecting blocks disposed to form three courtyards: Light Horse Court (to the east), Figure Court (in the centre), and College Court (to the west). The centre block has a stone Roman Doric pedimented portico front and back surmounted by a cupola and single-storey colonnades which face into the courtyards. The north-east and south-west blocks have stone pedimented central features; the pavilion blocks have pedimented centres. Figure Court, which looks south over the private gardens, is paved and decorated with a centrally placed statue of Charles II (listed grade II). The battery of guns standing to the south of the statue includes guns captured at the Battle of Waterloo (1815).

The original buildings were designed by Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) for Charles II and built between 1682 and 1702. Later additions (mainly to the interiors) were by Robert Adam (1728-92) while he was serving as Clerk of Works in 1762-92, and by Sir John Soane (1753-1837) who held the same position between 1807 and 1837. Soane was responsible for most of the service buildings now standing on East Road. He also rebuilt the stables alongside the West Road and an Infirmary (the site of all these buildings lies outside the registered area). Constructed on the site of Sir Robert Walpole's house in the north-west corner of the grounds, the Infirmary was destroyed by enemy action in 1941 and the National Army Museum was built on the site. A new Infirmary of mid C20 design was built to the north-east on the site of the C19 staff gardens. It was opened in 1961 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** The c 2ha gardens and pleasure grounds immediately to the south-east of the main Hospital buildings are separated from the South Lawns by wrought-iron railings screened by ornamental trees and shrubs. The gardens are made on two grassed terraces divided by a wide gravel path running east/west between East and West Roads from which it is separated by wrought-iron railings and gates (c 1700, listed grade II). Access between the terraces is by way of flights of stone steps. The top terrace is laid to grass bordered by a gravel path against the building while the lawns of the second terrace are decorated with rose beds. A lawn which slopes from the second terrace to an herbaceous border in front of the ornamental shrubs beds has, on the west side, a C20 hard tennis court.

The grounds to the south-east of the private gardens and pleasure grounds, the South Lawns, are now (2000) largely laid to grass divided into two by a wide gravel path. Some 20m inside the main entrance on the Chelsea Embankment the path divides. Lesser paths run to the south-west and north-east around the perimeter of the lawns to join up with the central path to the south of the railings and shrubbery dividing the private gardens from the public area. The main axial path continues north-west for c 75m, flanked by rectangular lawns, to where it divides around a granite obelisk (listed grade II). The obelisk, made by C R Cockerell, architect, was erected in 1853 in memory of the casualties at the Battle of Chillianwallah. The path continues for a further c 100m to the boundary with the private gardens and pleasure grounds. Much of the lawn to the west is taken up with recreational facilities, tennis courts, football pitches, and a children's playground, while that to the east is divided by the perimeter path into two unequal pieces, with the East Road running between the lesser strip and Ranelagh Gardens. The

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perimeter path to the east is lined with young lime trees while East Road is flanked by mature plane trees. The ground to the east of the main entrance is mounded against the Embankment railings.

The South Lawns and the private pleasure grounds and gardens largely reflect the alterations made in the mid C19 when the Chelsea Embankment was constructed and the formal garden made by London and Wise removed. The South Terrace was still intact in 1844 (Dean 1949), but about six years later the old buttressed retaining wall was pulled down and the terrace reduced to its present (2000) width. As a counterpart to the destruction of the terrace the Water Gardens were first modified but eventually the canals and ditches were filled in and the whole area raised by c 1.5m with spoil bought from the excavations for the London Docks, Wren's causeway being replaced by a wide gravel path.

To the east of the East Road, separated from it by low iron railings and screened by shrubs and ornamental trees, is Ranelagh Gardens, the entrance being from East Road, c 150m south of London Gate. A low wrought-iron gate leads onto a tarmacked path which runs east for c 120m before dividing, the northern branch leading through iron railings to the C20 Infirmary, the southern branch joining up with a perimeter path running alongside the boundary with Chelsea Bridge Road. Largely set below the level of East Road and Chelsea Bridge Road, Ranelagh Gardens reflects the garden made in the mid C19, with undulating ground, mounded in places and divided by meandering tarmacked paths. The mounds, some of which are grassed over, are largely planted with shrubs and trees. Open lawns set within mounded shrubberies are situated to the north and south of the garden. Between 1859 and 1866 the C17 public pleasure gardens designed by William Jones were remodelled by the landscape architect John Gibson, a protégé of Sir Joseph Paxton (Elliot 1986). Gibson had previously advised on planting schemes at Victoria Park (qv) and Battersea Park (qv). To the north of Ranelagh Gardens, near the site of Ranelagh House, are greenhouses and gardens which are the responsibility of the residents and staff.

To the north of the principal Hospital building the ground is largely laid to grass with a wide gravel path running south-west/north-east along the north front of the building. Herbaceous beds, shrubs, and ornamental trees are planted against the wrought-iron boundary railings which separate it from Royal Hospital Road.

**OTHER LAND** To the north-west of Royal Hospital Road is a rectangular piece of land known as Burton's Court. Laid to grass and used mainly for sports, the area is divided into two by a wide gravel path lined with immature plane trees. The path, which runs north-west/south-east for 150m, links Royal Hospital Road with Royal Avenue and King's Road, Chelsea. Made as part of Wren's grand design, Burton's Court was originally the Great Court and provided the setting for the main entrance to the Royal Hospital. The greater portion of Burton's Court was divided by avenues of lime trees and horse chestnuts into three areas which corresponded in width with the three buildings constituting the north front of the Royal Hospital (Kip and Knyff, 1692). The land appears to have acquired the name of Burton's Court by c 1719, although there is a reference to 'two lodges at Burtons' in 1702 (Dean 1949). After it was separated from the Hospital grounds by Royal Hospital Road in the early C19 the public had free access to the area. In 1888 the Chelsea Board allotted Burton's Court to the London Garrison for playing fields. In the ensuing replanning a row of plane trees was planted either side of the main walk, obscuring Wren's intended vista from the north. The C19 trees having been replaced in the late C20.

To the east of London Gate is the Burial Ground. This c 25m wide strip of ground which runs east between East Road and Chelsea Bridge Road is enclosed within iron railings and is largely laid to grass with the tomb stones concentrated towards the west end. Included as part of the original Wren design (Sturt engraving, 1692), the Burial Ground has been disused since the mid C19 (OS 1867).

#### REFERENCES

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Illustrations Kip and Kniff, The Royal Hospital Chelsea a view from the north-west, 1692 (in Dean 1949) S Nicholls (engraver),  
The Royal Hospital Chelsea, View from the south-east, c 1700 (in Dean 1949)  
Description written: August 2000 Register Inspector: LCH Edited: January 2002

## 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.