

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

BELAIR

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

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**BELAIR**

Name:	BELAIR
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Southwark (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.443184 Longitude: -0.091024008 National Grid Reference: TQ 32767 73305 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000791 Date first listed: 01-Oct-1987

## Details

A late C18 landscape park, used as a public park since 1947.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

John Willes, a cornfactor of Whitechapel, first leased 20ha of ground known as Home Farm from Dulwich College in 1771. A new house, College Place, was completed by 1785; it is thought that this replaced an earlier house. The house was renamed Belair by Charles Rankin, a solicitor, after he purchased it in 1829. By the time Charles W Hutton, Deputy Lieutenant for London (1868-9) took over the estate in 1848 the lake had been altered to its present design. Hutton enlarged the house and added extensive greenhouses and conservatories (now, 1998, gone). Some 10ha of ground to the west had been lost when the South Eastern and Chatham Railway was built in 1860 but proposals to develop the site for housing c 1890 failed and the lease was sold on to the last private owner, Sir Evan Spicer, the paper manufacturer. Sir Evan continued to farm the estate up until his death in 1938. During the Second World War the house was requisitioned to serve as army transport headquarters and parts of the grounds were used for allotments. In 1945 Dulwich College granted a ninety-nine-year lease to Southwark Council who opened the grounds to the residents of Southwark in 1947. Since 1965 the grounds have used as a public open space.

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Belair is situated in suburban south-east London. Dulwich Park (qv) lies c 500m to the north-east, Brockwell Park (qv) c 1km to the north-west, and West Dulwich station c 50m south of the south-west corner of the site. The 10ha park is bounded by Gallery Road to the east, Thurlow Park Road to the south, the railway line to the west, and various private sports grounds to the north. The main lawn slopes gently west of the house towards the lake, with belts of trees along most boundaries.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The main entrance is from Gallery Road where the gateway to the south is guarded by an early C19 single-storey stuccoed lodge (listed grade II). One of the pair of gate piers (listed grade II), also stuccoed, is attached to the lodge; the gates are missing. The entrance leads onto a curving approach drive to the east front of the house, meeting a similar curving approach from a second gateway c 20m to the north-east. An additional pedestrian entrance is situated in the south-west corner of the site and an entrance to a car park 100m south of the main entrance.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Built c 1785 for John Willes, Belair house (listed grade II) has in the past been erroneously attributed to Robert Adam. It is now considered (Dulwich Soc nd) more likely that Henry Holland was the architect. The house was enlarged for Charles Hutton in the mid C19 but has subsequently been reduced to near its original size. The two-storey villa stands on a high point, c 25m back from Gallery Road. The entrance front (east) has a central pediment with denticle cornice supported on two pairs of pilasters. At the rear (west) there is a round central bay with rusticated basement. The ground-floor terrace has cast-iron railings and four Ionic columns supporting a balustraded balcony on the first floor. Neglected after the Second World War, Belair house came close to being demolished before an enforcement notice in c 1947 prompted repairs and restoration. The house is now (1998) used as a restaurant.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** From the north side of the approach drive a path leads through a modern wooden gate to a perimeter path running north along the eastern boundary, screened from Gallery Road by shrubs and trees. The path, described in *Garden Life* in 1921 as the 'Chestnut Grove', runs for 150m before turning west and continuing along the boundary between the park and the adjoining sports grounds. The view south across the lawn to the house is broken by a cricket pitch and the house is partially screened by two young trees planted nearby. After a further 150m the path crosses over a concrete bridge which straddles the narrow northern end of the c 0.75ha serpentine lake.

The lake, altered to its present design by 1848, was formed from a small tributary of the River Effra (Dulwich Soc nd). The lake, at its widest opposite the house, has a small island to the south. The late C19 boathouse situated on the west bank below the house was removed mid C20 and the area is now (1998) maintained as a wild garden. From the lakeside there are views east across the lawn to the house which is fronted by low rose beds which replaced the rose arbours recorded on photographs c 1934. The tarmac lakeside path lined by mature and semi-mature trees follows along the west bank, separated from the water by waist-high iron railings. At the southern end of the lake the path turns north, with the lawn to the north-west and shrubberies which screen the boundary with Gallery Road to the east. Two mature oaks to the west of the path, probably from an old field boundary recorded on the 1st edition OS map (1867), survive in the lawn. A small C19 brick building c 100m along the path was used as a chapel by residents on the estate but is now (1998) boarded up. The path continues north towards the house, passing to the east the site of the extensive glasshouses, vinery, fernery, and kitchen gardens built by C W Hutton between 1860 and 1870 and used by Sir Evan Spicer up to 1938. The path divides c 25m south of the mansion, the northern branch continuing around the south-east side of the mansion and out to the forecourt. The eastern branch leads to the C19 coach house (listed grade II) which has an arcaded ground floor. A C19 lead pump stands at its west end. The building, converted for private occupation, is currently (1998) empty and boarded up. The path leads across the stable yard past the rear of the entrance lodge, then turns north onto the forecourt.

**OTHER LAND** The 5ha of fairly level lawns to the west of the lake run for c 100m to the railway embankment which is largely screened by poplars planted in the mid C20. Built c 1860, the line cut off 10ha of farmland from the estate. In the time of Sir Evan Spicer's ownership additional kitchen gardens and fruit trees were sited alongside the railway. The remaining land to the west of the lake is now mainly laid out as sports pitches. A children's playground is sited in the south-west corner, and tennis courts and a car park on the site of farm buildings along the southern boundary with Thurlow Road.

#### REFERENCES

*Garden Life*, (8 January 1921), pp 204-5 B Cherry and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London 2 South* (1983), p 634  
Belair, *A Short History*, (Dulwich Society nd)

Maps J Rocque, *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster and Borough of Southwark and the country near ten miles around*, surveyed 1741-5, published 1746 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1863-70 2nd edition surveyed 1894-6 3rd edition published 1913 1933 edition

Archival items Photographs, 1930s (Southwark Local Studies Library)

Description written: October 1998 Register Inspector: LCH Edited: November 2001

## Legal

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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.