

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

ALTON TOWERS

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

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*  
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**ALTON TOWERS**

Name: ALTON TOWERS

County: Staffordshire

District: East Staffordshire (District Authority)

Parish: Denstone

County: Staffordshire

District: Staffordshire Moorlands (District Authority)

Parish: Farley

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 Longitude: -1.8836427  
 National Grid Reference: SK 07909 43048  
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

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 Grade: I  
 List Entry Number: 1000191  
 Date first listed: 01-Dec-1984

## Details

An early C19 valley garden with a great variety of garden buildings associated with a major early C19 country house.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Charles Talbot succeeded his uncle as fifteenth Earl of Shrewsbury in 1787. Among the family estates was a considerable acreage in north Staffordshire, run by a steward from a farm at Alton. Impressed by the natural beauty of the area, and by his family's connections with the locality, the new Earl determined to make a home there, and until his death in 1827 devoted considerable resources to the construction of a house, and to the transformation of the adjacent valley from a dry wilderness occupied by a huge rabbit colony to an extensive pleasure ground. Work on the house and landscape was completed by the sixteenth Earl. He died in 1852 (a year which also saw the death of his architect A W N Pugin), and his successor in 1856.

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The seventeenth Earl's will was contested, and in 1857 the house's contents had to be put up for sale. Although the family continued to live at the Towers until 1923 the bulk of the estate was sold in 1918; the house and the remaining lands passed to a group of local businessmen in 1924.

From 1839 the grounds of Alton Towers were opened to the public at certain times of the year. Railways boosted visitor numbers, and in the later C19 century the twentieth Earl began to promote special events on Bank Holidays. The new owners of 1924 invested heavily in the grounds, and it was a major attraction in the inter-war years. Alton Towers was acquired by the Tussauds Group (part of Pearsons PLC) in 1990, and a further phase of investment began.

#### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** Alton Towers stands on the north side of the Churnet Valley, c 1km north of the village of Alton and 6km east of Cheadle. To the south the park is bounded by the dismantled railway line and the drain to its north, which follows the north bank of the River Churnet; to the west by Farley Lane which climbs steeply north from Alton village; and to the north by Wootton Lane. Beyond the present east end of the park, c 2km from the house, the ground falls to a series of ponds and lakes, the largest of which is Brooklays Lake. The house stands near the head of a steep subsidiary valley running south-east into the Churnet Valley, the upper part of which valley was developed in the early C19 as the house's main pleasure grounds. The area here registered comprises c 135ha.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** In the 1990s the two main entrances to the complex, for the public and for trade deliveries, were off the northern part of Farley Lane which bounds the site to the west. The more southerly, trade, entrance has early C19 gate piers and iron gates (listed grade II). A hundred metres to the south is another entrance, with late C19 gates and gate piers (listed grade II) which now serves Horseshoe Wood, a private house.

The main approach from the south in the C19 was from Quixhill c 3km to the south-east, via an arched entrance with pavilions to either side of 1822 by J B Papworth. As it nears Alton Towers the Quixhill Drive runs along and outside the south side of the deer park; an early C19 pedimented milestone with an iron plaque, c 300m west of Ina's Rock, records the distance to 'Alton Abbey'. About 1848 Station, or Tudor, Lodge (listed grade II) was built 500m south of Alton Towers, near the village railway station. Designed by A W N Pugin, who called it the Gate House, the two-storey stone lodge is in the Tudor Gothic style.

Pink Lodge, 400m north of Station Lodge on the west side of Farley Lane, is a substantial mid C19 brick building, slightly Italianate in style and with two projecting towers as its most prominent elements. It stands at the entrance to Barbary Gutter, apparently a westward extension of the grounds.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** Alton Towers (listed grade II\*) is a castellated gothic building of irregular plan and form in sandstone ashlar. The north range, containing the entrance and many of the principal rooms, is linked to a parallel south range which contained picture galleries by two linking blocks, the main public route being via the more central one comprising a conservatory and octagonal orangery. On top of the west range was a viewing platform. In the later 1990s the house was semi-derelict, although parts had seen partial restoration.

Portions of the C18 Alveton Lodge survive in the area east of the Banqueting Hall. Transformation of the Lodge into Alton Towers was the responsibility of several architects. Thomas Hopper (d 1856) and William Hollins (d 1843) were involved in the first main phase of work from c 1810, but the creation of 'Alton Abbey' as a crenellated house with a grand entrance facing the lake was principally the work of Thomas Allason (d 1852). Though there is no direct evidence for attributing any of the work at Alton to James Wyatt, the influence of Wyatt on other architects is evident in such features as the great galleries linked by a central Octagon, clearly derived from Wyatt's contemporary work at Fonthill Abbey (Wilts). Allason's principal successor as architect was Uttoxeter-based Thomas Fradgley (d 1883) who was responsible for the West Wing and, along with Joseph Potter of Lichfield, the Chapel. After 1831 Alton was the family's main home, and the sixteenth Earl, who like his three immediate predecessors was a Roman Catholic, brought in A W N Pugin (himself a recent convert to Catholicism) to replace Fradgley. Pugin's most significant contributions included alterations to the Octagon and the Talbot Gallery, making the Banqueting Hall, the rooms over the Great Drawing Room, and internal furnishings and decorations including those of the chapel.

After the Second World War the house became derelict. Restoration work began in the early 1990s.

**GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS** Two gardens lie within the Alton Towers house complex. West of the conservatory is the Star Garden, now (1997) lawn, named after its star-shaped fountain basin. East of the conservatory and south of the chapel is Her Ladyship's Garden; a raised walk at its east end overlooks a lawn with fountain (listed grade II), clipped yews, and statuary.

Attached to the east side of the house's gatehouse is a roughly square, sandstone ashlar, walled garden (listed grade II), overgrown but containing mature specimen conifers. Within the garden is a mount, on top of which is The Dovecote (listed grade II), an early C19 octagonal, arcaded, timber gazebo on a sandstone base. The weather vane is of 1848 and by Pugin. Dense and tall vegetation now obscures the views originally enjoyed from the top of the mound, notably that east to the conservatory. In the south-east corner is a small oratory with a floriated cross on the gable, by Pugin and of c 1848.

Lawns with specimen conifers lie to the north of the house, with beyond (c 200m from the entrance) the Boating Lake. That is bounded, to the north, by a crenellated wall with turret-like projections (listed grade II). To the east the Lake is retained by a low, arcaded, 100m long stone wall (listed grade II), apparently a bridge when viewed from the west. It was probably designed by J B Papworth c 1820. The causeway formed by the wall carries a drive from the north front of the house to the early C19 Ingestre Stables Courtyard (listed grade II) c 400m to the north-east of the house.

The Italian Garden, the first component of the main valley garden, is entered under the early C19 White Bridge (listed grade II) which carries the drive to the Stables Courtyard and stands c 100m south of the south end of the Boating Lake causeway. Running off to either side of the bridge, and defining the end of the Italian Garden, is a tall sandstone ashlar retaining wall with a lobed top (listed grade II; several other retaining walls in the valley, not hereunder noted, are also listed), this wall continuing east around the whole of the north side of the garden. Statues and urns which stood between the lobes had been removed for safe storage in 1997. The Italian garden, laid to lawns with flower beds, contains the Choragic Monument (listed grade II\*), raised c 1830 to the memory of the fifteenth Earl.

From this garden there are views east, down and along the valley garden which is densely planted with a very wide variety of specimen trees and shrubs (particularly heaths, azaleas, Japanese maples, rhododendrons and dwarf conifers), many of the former presumably dating from the earlier C19. Down the centre of the valley is a series of four pools. The first, westernmost, is the Canal. This is crossed by the Miniature Bridge, an early C19 cast-iron footbridge (listed grade II), while north of the east end of the pool is a 1920s bandstand. Rising from the third pool, and forming one of the main foci within the garden, is Robert Abraham's tall Pagoda Fountain (listed grade II\*) of c 1831. Of green and red painted cast-iron and three main stages, the fountain is a copy of the To-ho pagoda in Canton.

Most of the buildings and structures within the valley garden stand along the upper part of its north side. About 140m north-east of the White Bridge is the Orangery (listed grade II), of c 1824 and probably by Robert Abraham, a semi-derelict (1997) ashlar structure with one (of two) surviving cast-iron dome. On the terrace to its immediate south are features including an early C19 pool and fountain (listed grade II), urns, statuary and a sundial, mostly early C19 (listed grade II). On the rising ground behind (north of) the Orangery is Stonehenge (listed grade II), an early C19 megalithic construction of three bays with a two-tier central bay; the overall effect is of an oriental arch rather than a European prehistoric structure.

About 30m east of the terrace south of the Orangery is arguably the most impressive feature of the gardens, Robert Abraham's Conservatory (listed grade II\*) of c 1824, a long, single-storey ashlar and cast-iron structure surmounted with seven glazed domes, the central one considerably larger than the rest. On the terrace at the east end of the Conservatory is an early C19 circular stone summerhouse (listed grade II) with an east-facing basement grotto.

Leading east from the east end of the Conservatory is a series of yew arches, the lobed wall continuing parallel and to the immediate north. On the terrace below (south of) the east end of the Conservatory is an early C19 single-storey loggia (listed grade II) of nine bays. Immediately east of the loggia is Le Refuge (listed grade II), an early C19 ashlar summerhouse built into the retaining terrace wall. In front of Le Refuge is The Roman Bath (listed grade II), an oval pool with a Coade stone statue of a merboy dated 1819.

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Some 100m east of the Conservatory is the Corkscrew Fountain (listed grade II), an unusual early C19 structure comprising four tiers of squat spiral fluted pillars diminishing in size upwards. North-east of this are two ponds, fed from the Boating Lake, which supply the various fountains and water features in the valley.

Sixty metres south-east of the Corkscrew Fountain is the Prospect Tower (listed grade II\*; sometimes called the Gothic Temple), an octagonal, gothic, three-stage cast-iron observation tower of c 1824 by Robert Abraham. The main view from the tower is roughly west, up the valley garden and to Alton Towers. A tunnel-like cave is cut into the mound on which the tower stands. High on the south side of the valley garden, and looking across it, is Swiss Cottage (now the Garden Terrace Restaurant; listed grade II, as is the retaining wall 20m to the north ), a two-storey brick building of 1835 by Thomas Fradgley with elaborate bargeboards. The house was also known as Harper's Cottage, initially being the residence of a blind harper whose music contributed to the elysian ambience.

The first phase of the gardens' creation (c 1814-27) was variously the responsibility of the fifteenth Earl, and of two professional designers, Robert Abraham (1774-1850) and Thomas Allason (1790-1852). The intention was to produce gardens filled with sounds and fragrances evoking fabled times and enchanted places. Water was brought two miles to the site to the new lake in front of the house, from which the various other lakes and water features were supplied. Landscaping of the valley was completed by the sixteenth Earl, who saw through various building schemes as well as introducing many imported shrubs and trees. In 1822 J C Loudon (whose own scheme for Alton had been rejected) opined of Alton 'We consider the greater part of it in excessively bad taste, or rather, perhaps the work of a morbid imagination joined to the command of unlimited resources' (Encyclopaedia of Gardening, 327-35). W A Nesfield (d 1881) was called in to lay out parterres at Alton before 1857. **PARK** The outer landscape of Alton Towers comprised two main elements: the deer park extending c 1km to the east of the house, and the wooded walks around the west and south sides of the rocky slopes below this. The deer park has now (late 1990s) been almost wholly subsumed under the buildings and car parks of the leisure park. The low, stone, deer park wall and its inner ditch, however, which border the park to the south, survive. The wooded walks, which lie south of the deer park wall, remain in good condition, although the views out to the south across the Churnet Valley to Alton, Alton Abbey and the countryside beyond are now largely obscured by dense, mature trees. The walks are terraced and retained with stone walls, and run for over 2km from west of Alton Towers, passing beneath the Flag Tower (listed grade II), a substantial four-storey crenellated stone tower c 250m south-west of Alton Towers. They then pass through Abbey Wood to the south of the house, continuing east of the main valley garden as Rock Walk and Park Banks. The walks pass several massive sandstone outcrops, several of which have C19 structures associated with them. Cuckoo Rock, at the east end of Abbey Wood, forms a major viewpoint. Beneath it is an arch and trilithon-type structure, the remains of a seat. Ina's Rock, towards the east end of the walks, also has a seat beneath it, a small cave with a stone-flagged floor. Early C19 plaques were inset into the sandstone to either side; that to the east survives, and records the distance from the Rock to the house.

**KITCHEN GARDEN** The kitchen garden lay north-east of the Ingestre Courtyard. It was removed before the 1990s. The mid C19 stone gardener's house stands c 100m north of the Conservatory.

**REFERENCES** J C Loudon, Encyclopaedia of Gardening (1822 edn), pp 327-35 Country Life, 3 (18 June 1898), pp 754-7; (25 June 1898), pp 788-91; 10 (28 December 1901), pp 838-9; 127 (2 June 1960), pp 1246-9; (9 June 1960), p 1305 R Sidwell, West Midland Gardens (1981), pp 161-5 M Batey and D Lambert, The English Garden Tour (1990), pp 270-5 M J Fisher, Alton Towers Past and Present (1997)

Archival items Design for Quixhill entrance by J B Papworth, 1822 (at Alton Towers)

Description written: 1997 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: September 1999

## 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.