

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

THE FORBURY GARDEN

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Name:	THE FORBURY GARDEN
District:	Reading (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.457024 Longitude: -0.96700910 National Grid Reference: SU 71868 73622 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000586 Date first listed: 22-Jul-1987

Details

Mid C19 public garden developed on the site of the former Reading Abbey precinct.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The present area of the Forbury Garden has been in use since at least AD 870 when a Viking encampment was set up on the site. In 1121 Henry I founded Reading Abbey on the site, then probably open fields, enclosing it within the Abbey precincts, divided into the Inner and Outer Courts (to east and west respectively). Part of the Abbey nave appears to have covered an area at the south-east corner of the present gardens. In 1150, during the war between King Stephen and Matilda, a castle was erected within the Abbey precinct and the present Forbury Hill on the north boundary may be part of this defence, the Hill being later used as a gun emplacement during the 1643 Siege of Reading in the Civil War. Following the Dissolution the Abbey was largely demolished, although the Outer Court, previously used for fairs, continued in this use and as a place for other public gatherings, becoming known as Forbury Green (Kemp and Nichols, 1834).

Pleasure Gardens, laid out in the Inner Court (still enclosed with the Abbey ruins in the 1830s) and on Forbury Hill, were opened on Easter Sunday 1856. The gardens were laid out by Charles Clacy, the Borough Surveyor, with the planting of shrubs and trees supervised by Suttons Seeds, who were at that time based locally. Forbury Green, the Outer Court area to the west, was bought by the Borough in 1860 and opened in August 1861, being separated from the Pleasure Gardens by a wall. The two parts were united in 1873. The Garden remains (1998) in public use.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Forbury Garden lies at the north-east corner of Reading town centre, between the C12 St Lawrence's church to the west and St James' church (Pugin 1840) to the east, overlooked by Reading Gaol to the east of this. The 2ha site is largely enclosed by a low brick and flint wall, in places still punctuated by tall piers to give a castellated effect. It is bounded to the north by the dual carriageway Ring Road, to the east by the path from Abbot's Walk to St James' church and beyond this the ruined remains of the Abbey, and to the south by Abbot's Walk at the east end, becoming at the west end The Forbury which also curves north alongside the west boundary. The landform is largely level, with the prominent raised earthwork of Forbury Hill adjacent to the north boundary. The setting is urban, with St Lawrence's churchyard to the west, and views of the west end of St James' church to the east, together with views of the rebuilt Abbey

gateway adjacent to the south. The remaining Abbey ruins stand to the south-east of the Garden. The ground around them, also laid out in the mid to late C19, runs down to the River Kennet to the south.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance approaches from the Market Place to the west, off The Forbury at the south-west corner of the Garden, past the War Memorial (Leslie Gunston 1932, constructed by Collier and Catley) and between iron double gates set back off the road, behind the War Memorial. Five further perimeter gateways give access from the surrounding roads, including the iron Victoria Gates (1897) at the centre of the south boundary, from which the main south-west to north-east path extends into the eastern half, giving access from Abbot's Walk. At the south-east corner of the Garden lies the Forbury Tunnel (mid C19, listed grade II*), a flint and stone archway incorporating many fragments from the former Abbey, which gives access from the Garden to the Abbey ruins, whilst carrying a path above giving access from Abbot's Walk to St James' church to the north.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The Forbury Garden (scheduled ancient monument) can be divided into two halves, relating to both the medieval Abbey's Inner and Outer Courts, and subsequently the mid C19 development of two separate areas overlaid on these earlier sections. The eastern half, opened in 1856 as the Pleasure Gardens, is dominated by Forbury Hill standing in the north-west corner, overlooking the rest of the former Pleasure Gardens. The area is bisected by the main path running north-east from the Victoria Gates at the south-west corner, flanked by lawns with bedding beds, encircling a central fountain within a small, circular stone pond, and terminating at the domed alcove (c 1855, listed grade II) in the north-east corner. Built of flint and brick, the alcove includes numerous fragments of the C12 Abbey, with a domed apse flanked by two projecting walls. A further cross path runs north-west from the Forbury Tunnel, encircling the fountain and pond, to ascend and encircle Forbury Hill to the north-west. This earthwork is planted with mature trees around its sides, and is surmounted by an open, level plateau, largely laid to gravel, formerly the site of C19 seats and a Russian Gun (OS 1879, now gone). From here it is possible to overlook most of the site. The ends of the paths crossing the eastern half of the Gardens are connected by a serpentine path which encircles the whole of this area. A rose garden, present in the 1870s (OS), and divided into small beds, remains at the bottom of the east side of the Hill, and to the south of the pond stands the granite Anglian Cross (1909, listed grade II), erected in memory of Henry I. Formerly some twelve small stone vases (now gone) stood close to the edges of the paths in this area (OS 1879).

The western half of the Forbury Garden was bought by the Borough in 1860 and opened in 1861, being separated from the eastern half by a wall until 1873. Largely laid to lawn with seasonal bedding beds, it is crossed by the remains of three straight paths set obliquely to each other linking the various entrances in this section, the paths being linked by a perimeter path largely bordered on the outer side by mature trees and shrubs. The south-east corner of this half is laid largely to tarmac, at the centre of which stands the octagonal timber and iron bandstand (1896), with a conical tiled roof supported by narrow, white-painted iron pillars. At the centre of the western half stands the Maiwand Memorial (George Simmonds 1886, listed grade II), a tall stone plinth supporting an enormous cast-iron statue of a lion (three times life size and in an anatomically impossible stance), erected to commemorate the Battle of Maiwand in 1880.

REFERENCES

N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Berkshire* (1966), pp 198-9, 205 B Jones, *Follies & Grottoes* (1974), pp 215, 289 Leslie Cram, *Notes on the history of the Forbury Gardens and Reading Abbey*, (draft, 19 June 1998), (Reading Museum)

Maps Coates, *Map of Reading, 1802* (Reading Local Studies Library) Kemp and Nichols, *Map of ... Reading, 1834* (Reading Local Studies Library)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1883 2nd edition published 1913 3rd edition published 1931 OS 1 to 500: 1st edition published 1879

Description written: June 1998 Register Inspector: SR Edited: March 2000

Legal

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