

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

ELTHAM PALACE

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

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Name:	ELTHAM PALACE
County:	Greater London Authority
District:	Greenwich (London Borough)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.446626 Longitude: 0.048628467 National Grid Reference: TQ 42461 73950 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1001410 Date first listed: 02-Dec-1998

Details

A medieval moated enclosure around the remains of a Royal palace, developed with new buildings and gardens in 1933-5 by the architects Seely and Paget.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Eltham became a Royal palace in 1305, when it was granted to Edward, Prince of Wales by Anthony Bek, Bishop of Durham. The estate included the moated manor house, a dovecote, a deer park, and a windmill. As King, Edward embarked on a large-scale programme of building and improvement, which his successors continued.

Edward III built part of the great wall around the moat and continued work on the grounds, adding the Middle (or Little Park) to the west of the Palace between 1367 and 1368. Richard II enclosed another park, the Great Park, to the south and east of Eltham Palace. He also laid out a new garden to the south, beyond the moat. Between 1475 and 1480 Edward IV constructed the Great Hall and laid out a third park, Home or Lee Park (to the west of Middle Park and Eltham Palace). Together the three parks contained almost 1300 acres (c 540ha). Henry VIII laid out new gardens to the south and east of the moat, with a Privy or Arbour Garden and alleys providing a private walk. He also put in a new chapel, lodgings, and in 1532, a bowling green (site not known).

Henry VIII was the last monarch to spend substantial amounts of money or time on Eltham. After over 300 years as an eminent Royal palace, favoured by Kings and courtiers as a hunting park, it was eclipsed by Greenwich Palace. Eltham Palace then declined rapidly: after the Civil War it was described as untenable and out of repair, and most of the buildings were demolished by Colonel Nathaniel Rich, who purchased the main portion of the estate after a sale in 1649. The Great Hall and Chapel were retained but left as ruins, the deer were slaughtered and the parks stripped of their trees.

In the mid C17 the owner, Sir John Shaw, built Eltham Lodge in the Great Park and lived there. For the next 200 years Eltham Palace was used as a farm and the buildings were tenanted. Middle and Home Parks do not appear to have been re-enclosed. The Palace declined into a picturesque ruin, much frequented by artists and sightseers. In the early C19 a villa was built within the moat walls and gardens and kitchen gardens laid out in the west and south moats. A campaign to save the Great Hall from demolition resulted in its restoration in 1828 but it was still used as a barn. Later in the C19 Eltham Palace became a gentleman's

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residence, and glasshouses and gardens were laid out in the west moat. By the early C19 the parkland had been reduced to two small areas of 50 acres (c 21ha) and 70 acres (c 29ha); the rest had reverted to arable or pastureland. The larger park was cleared of its parkland trees between 1808 and 1828.

The late C19 and early C20 saw continuous development around Eltham and by the 1930s the Palace site was almost completely surrounded by houses. The Great Hall was repaired by Charles Peers, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, in 1911-14, and more garden areas were planted.

In 1933 the Courtauld family obtained a lease of the Eltham Palace site from the Crown and initiated repairs to the buildings. The Courtauld Wing and a squash court were built, incorporating the Great Hall and a three-gabled building. Plans for the gardens were initially prepared by Andrew Mawson & Partners and exhibited at Chelsea Flower Show in 1935. These plans were adapted by the site architects, Seely and Paget, and then further adapted before and during implementation by the Courtaulds, in consultation with John Gilmour (the Assistant Director of Kew). Ornamental plantations, shrubberies, and specimen trees were added to the areas within, and to the south and east of the moat, and seven new garden areas were laid out.

In 1944 the Courtaulds surrendered the Crown lease and the site was taken over by the Royal Army Education Corps. The Corps remained until 1992, the grounds being used between 1975 and 1993 as the Royal Parks training facility. The site is now (2001) in the guardianship of English Heritage and is open to the public.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Eltham Palace (scheduled ancient monument) lies within the parish of Eltham, Greater London, 3.5km to the south-east of Greenwich and Blackheath. The Palace is surrounded by a moat, now partly dry, and the c 9ha of gardens lie within and beyond the moat. The site is bounded by King John's Walk to the west; by the back gardens of houses on Court Yard and Court Road to the north and east respectively; and open fields to the south. The ground within the site is on various levels: high, terraced ground around the Palace; lower ground within the moat, walled or banked on either side; and high embankments outside the moat. The surrounding land is now predominantly residential but areas of open ground still exist to the south, as fields, and to the east, as the Royal Blackheath Golf Course (previously Eltham Lodge and Great Park).

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES Eltham Palace is approached from the north through the tree-lined road known as 'Court Yard'. This passes the Tiltyard (a jousting ground) on the east side, which is surrounded by a high brick wall. The lane continues westwards to the servants' quarters and garages, which lie in the north-west corner of the site. Access to the Palace is provided by a C15 bridge (listed grade I) which leads over the north arm of the moat to the entrance court.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS The C15 Great Hall (listed grade I) is orientated west/east and lies at the centre of the moated part of the site. It is a six-bay, stone-faced building with stepped buttresses between the bays, paired two-light windows with cusped heads under four-centred arches, and a high pitched roof. There are transept-like projections at the west end to the north and south. Eltham Court (listed grade II*) lies to the north and east of the Great Hall, built for Mr and Mrs Stephen Courtauld. The building was designed in 1933-5 by Seely and Paget in the English Renaissance style. It is a two-storey building built on a butterfly plan, with the south-west wing (living rooms) extending to the Great Hall. The entrance pavilion between the wings has a loggia with a Venetian window above and a hipped roof. The garden entrance, which has a five-bay curved arcade, is on the rear, south-east elevation.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The 1930s Courtauld gardens are laid out on two levels within the framework of the medieval buildings, walls, and earthworks: on the terraces surrounding the Palace and within the moat (now partly dry) surrounding the terraces.

The Entrance Court, which lies to the immediate north of the Great Hall and north-west of Eltham Court, consists of a grass turning circle, with a lawn to the west decorated with a well-head. To the north of the circle is an area for car parking.

A garden door leads from the east side of the Courtauld wing to a garden terrace of patterned brick and stone, backed on its south side by a wisteria-clad pergola. Steps lead down through the moat walls to the east arm of the moat, the far bank being laid out with rockwork. North of this terrace, in the corner between the north-east wing of the Palace and the north-east bastion

of the retaining walls of the moat, is a chequerboard flower garden laid out with a lattice of narrow brick paths infilled with grass plats and beds for herbaceous plants.

Below the Great Hall, overlooking the south arm of the moat (dry by the early C19), is a levelled lawn, along the southern edge of which are flower beds. Steps lead down through the old walls at the south-east corner of the lawn to the herbaceous border which runs along the foot of this face of the moat wall. At the south-west corner of the lawn there is a tunnel which led to a bridge (since demolished). There are underground passages in this area and to the west which were built in Henry VIII's time principally to discharge waste from the kitchens. The south arm of the moat is crossed at its centre by a wooden bridge on C16 brick piers (listed grade I) which probably gave access to the parks to the south, west, and east of Eltham Palace.

Overlooking the west arm of the moat is a narrow terrace, below which the footings of the earlier buildings, excavated in the 1950s, have replaced the pattern of flower beds and clipped yews of the early C20.

The moat holds water on two and a half of its four sides: the east arm holds a serpentine, concrete-lined pool, bordered by a grass walk, beyond which is a Japanese-style rockery and cascade made in the 1930s from water-worn limestone; the water flows into the north arm of the moat, under the C15 north entrance bridge (listed grade I) and then into the northern part of the west moat. The water is terminated here by a square pond with a fountain, this feature marking the northern end of the formal garden laid out in the southern part of the west moat. A path leads from the square pond to the south, through a series of garden rooms enclosed by evergreen and deciduous shrubs, to a sunken garden around a rectangular pond. The axis of this sequence of gardens is closed at the southern end (in the south-west corner of the moat) by a seat backed by a box hedge. The formal garden laid out in the 1930s by the Courtaulds in the western half of the south moat has been grassed over. There is an herbaceous border along the north wall of the south moat and the south-east corner consists of lawn and trees.

Beyond the moat to the west, south, and east is a substantial grass embankment, possibly surviving from the Tudor gardens. The embankment is at its narrowest and steepest on the west side and from here there are exceptional views of the City and St Paul's Cathedral. The southern embankment is planted with trees, and the eastern embankment and north side of the moat are planted with thick belts of tree and shrubs. Many of the larger trees on the south and east sides survive from the early to mid C19 gardens in this area.

Beyond the eastern embankment are further 1930s gardens, laid out in areas of C19 pleasure ground which were formerly (C17) orchards and parkland. A tennis pavilion to the north of a pair of tennis courts was probably converted from a former stable. Nearby to the south-west is the site of a swimming pool, now filled in. The octagonal weatherboarded changing room which accompanied the pool was later moved to its present site to the south-west of the tennis courts, and in the second half of the C20 was adapted as a summerhouse. To the east of the tennis courts are the 1930s kitchen gardens, with glasshouses originally by W Richardson & Co but mostly rebuilt in the late C20 for use by the Royal Parks Department. This area is bounded to the north by the brick wall of the Tiltyard. A drive leads west from the kitchen gardens towards Court Yard, past a 1930s triangular, sun-ray garden planted with roses. To the south of the tennis courts and kitchen gardens are lawns, with scattered mature trees and shrubberies. Formal rectangular flower beds to the west of the tennis courts, and informal circular beds on the lawns, have been removed since the mid C20. The pond in the south-east corner of the site was, until the C20, two separate pieces of water (one with an island) which may have originally been fishponds.

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Archival items Country Life photographs, 1937 (Country Life Picture Library)

Description written: February 1998 Amended: February 1999 Register Inspector: CB Edited: June 2001

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.