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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

PORT LYMPNE

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Name:	PORT LYMPNE
County:	Kent
District:	Folkestone and Hythe (District Authority)
Parish:	Lympne
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.074555 Longitude: 1.0009890 National Grid Reference: TR 10323 34865 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1000939 Date first listed: 01-May-1986

Details

An early C20 formal terraced garden laid out by Sir Philip Sassoon and the architect Philip Tilden and with later planting by Russell Page.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Sir Philip Albert Gustave David Sassoon, MP for Hythe from 1912 and, later in his career, Private Secretary to Lloyd George and Under-Secretary for Air, bought the estate land at Port Lympne and built the present house between 1911 and 1913 and laid out the gardens immediately after the end of the First World War. A British politician, art collector and connoisseur of the decorative arts, Sassoon belonged to the internationally famous Baghdadi Jewish business dynasty, known to contemporaries as 'the Rothschilds of the East'. His contemporaries regularly described him as 'oriental' – a stereotype he embraced in this deliberately exotic mansion and gardens. After his death in 1939, Port Lympne passed to a cousin, Hannah Gubbay but was commandeered by the RAF in 1942. After the Second World War it was owned by Colonel and Mrs Waite and then by a property company for a time. It lay empty for many years until bought by Mr John Aspinall in 1973 for use as a centre and park for wild animals. It remains (1997) in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Port Lympne lies on the south side of the B2067, 1km west of the village of Lympne. The registered site of 23ha, which comprises 6ha of formal gardens set within c 17ha of woodland, occupies the summit and steep, 1km long south-facing slope of a cliff which rises c 100m above the levels of Romney Marsh. The site is bounded to the north by the B2067 and is enclosed from the road and the level farmland beyond by chain-link fencing and internal woodland belts. To the west, the fenced boundary abuts Aldergate Wood and open arable farmland while to the east and south the site is bounded by the paddocks and tree belts of the wild animal park and beyond them, to the south, by the Royal Military Canal and the arable landscape of Romney Marsh.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The present public entrance is reached by a footbridge over the B2067 from a public car park on the north side of the road. A path from the ramped footbridge (completed in 1997) leads south-westwards through woodland planted between 1913 and the 1930s (aerial photographs and OS revised edition of 1939) and now (1997) containing

mesh-walled animal enclosures. The path continues through conifer woodland, planted in the 1920s and now housing further animal enclosures, to reach the north end of a 110m long avenue, lined with pine trees and wide hydrangea borders. The avenue, formerly enclosed by tall clipped hedges (aerial photograph early 1930s, guidebook), is punctuated at its north end by a large urn on a plinth and at the south end opens into an hexagonal hedged enclosure with a central well-head, from which there are extensive views over the distant landscape to the sea and from which the descent to the terraced gardens below begins via the Trojan Staircase.

Some 80m east of the footbridge, the present vehicular entrance is marked by a small stone-built lodge on the east side, the drive then following the former service route to the north side of the house. The original formal drive to the house, of almost 1km, entered the estate from the B2067 opposite the junction with Otterpool Lane (north of the B2067) and ran westwards, parallel to the main road and passing between the extended red-brick wing walls and gate piers of North and South Lodge (c 1912, listed grade II), 470m north-east of the house. The drive, now (1997) forming part of the public circulation route, continues on a south-westerly route through a belt of woodland containing animal enclosures to a circular turning area, now in use for outdoor restaurant seating, adjacent to the entrance forecourt on the west front of the house.

The forecourt, laid out with a central octagonal lily pond and surrounded by lawn and a wide flagged perimeter path, is enclosed to the north, east, and south by tall, clipped yew hedges with thirteen alcoves containing terms brought from Stowe, Bucks (qv) in 1921 (guidebook). Along the south side, three windows cut in the yew hedge offer views over the landscape and a doorway in a wing wall in the south-west corner gives access through a loggia to the south terrace and the gardens.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Port Lympne (listed grade I) stands on a terrace cut into the cliff just below its crest. The house, H-shaped in plan with a double-height central range running east/west and constructed of red brick with a tiled roof, was built between 1911 and 1913 by Sir Herbert Baker (1862-1946) in his 'Cape Dutch manner' (Newman 1969), largely for Sassoon's political and artistic weekend house parties. From c 1918, Sassoon commissioned the architect Philip Tilden (1887-1956) to make significant additions to the house. In collaboration with Sassoon, Tilden added the bronze-studded front door, the internal Moorish courtyard with a fountain basin and cruciform rills, and the colonnaded quadrant wings framing the entrance forecourt and the south terrace. The wing on the north side of the forecourt (converted to shop use in 1997), which contains an octagonal library, connects the house to the garage court (now, 1997, in use as a restaurant), its principal, two-storey section on the north side topped by a cupola with a bell and clock and its courtyard covered with a late C20 glazed roof. Several rooms in the house were painted for Sassoon by famous artists, of which the Tent Room, decorated by Rex Whistler in c 1933 and including a trompe l'oeil map of the gardens, survives.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS These lie principally to the south and west of the house on a series of terraces stepping down the slope of the cliff. They were planned by Sassoon in collaboration with Philip Tilden from c 1918 to c 1920 but significant alterations and additions continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

The south or garden front of the house opens onto a stone-paved terrace inset with two rectangular sunken parterres of dwarf box and enclosed at the east and west ends by curved, hip-roofed loggias and along the south side by a wisteria-covered balustrade wall (both listed grade II). Either side of the central axis, stone steps descend against the terrace wall to a semicircular platform containing a circular pool partly recessed beneath a quarter-spherical hood (terrace and pool listed grade II). A further curved, segmental flight leads on down to a broad terrace with a central, 14m square, stone-edged pool set within lawns and enclosed by massive, sculpted yew hedges. Built in 1923 as a bathing pool and originally with balustraded small pools to east and west and tiered stone seating quadrants against the southern yew hedge (CL 1923), the pool was reduced to its present form by 1929 and the seating removed in the 1970s following ground subsidence. East and west of the lawn and on the same level, two further yew-hedged enclosures contain displays of bedding: on the west side to a chess-board pattern and on the east in parallel stripes, both areas laid out to these designs in the mid 1930s (CL 1936).

Southwards from the lawn and on the central axis, a long flight of stone steps (formerly of grass) flanked by walls of clipped Leyland cypress, descends the steep slope. Either side of the staircase the slope is cut into a series of narrow, curved terraces, planted as a vineyard on the west side (laid out after 1929 and replanted in the late 1970s) and as a fig garden on the east side. The staircase terminates at a clairvoie (listed grade II) in the form of a central platform enclosed on the south side by a wrought-

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iron screen and with brick steps leading down from its east and west ends to a vaulted brick loggia beneath the platform. The clairvoie overlooks three level areas enclosed by tall, clipped cypress hedges; the two to the south and south-west, now used for functions, are the former morning and evening tennis courts while that to the south-east is laid out in alternating segments of lawn and rose beds with a central sundial. This was a zinnia garden in 1936 (CL 1936).

A paved path leads both east and west from the clairvoie. Some 40m to the west and passing along the foot of the vineyard terraces, the path enters the Herbaceous Walk, a wide grassed walk running 115m due south from the house terrace and terminating in a wrought-iron screen (by the firm of Bainbridge Reynolds). The walk is flanked by 6m wide parallel mixed borders enclosed by tall, clipped cypress hedges, laid out in the early 1920s and replanted with advice from Russell Page (1906-85) in c 1974. West of the Walk the slope is cut into a further series of three grassed terraces, created c 1933 (CL 1936). These, which increase in width as they descend, are linked by descending flights of stone steps on each side and are retained by ragstone walls, the lowest wall extending southwards in a central bastion and each wall with a wide flower border at the base. The lowest level of lawn is enclosed by cypress hedging which also projects southwards in a bastion, beyond which the continuing slope is informally planted with trees and serves as a picnic area.

East of the clairvoie the path runs 45m eastwards along the foot of the fig garden terrace and then turns north to return to the entrance forecourt of the house by way of a 60m ascending flight of shallow stone steps, flanked on the east side by a line of mature chestnut trees and by an orchard shown established by 1939 (OS). East of the steps and south of the orchard is a further series of three shallow, grassed terraces built in 1937 (Landscape Design 1983) and retained by random ragstone walls, the highest terrace being enclosed on the north side by a high ragstone wall with a central, semicircular recess.

On its west side, the house opens from a loggia onto a paved patio and, beyond a pair of yew cones framing the axis, into the West Garden which is laid out with a central lily pool surrounded by stone flags (replacing grass in the late 1970s) and enclosed by yew hedging; the viewing windows shown cut in the south hedge in 1923 (CL) are now (1997) closed up. West of the garden a grass path on the axis of the door from the house leads c 90m along a lime avenue. Some 20m south of the lime avenue a path from the south terrace of the house leads westwards along a magnolia walk, largely replanted in the late 1970s. Northwards from the West Garden, the 125 stone steps of the Trojan Staircase (listed grade II) ascend to the top of the cliff to meet the avenue forming part of the present public entrance route. The staircase is flanked to east and west by rusticated stone rampart walls topped by tiers of high, clipped cypress hedges, at the base of which are service access routes to the house. Towards the upper end of the flight are the bases of flanking twin temples, built by Tilden with the staircase c 1920 but removed soon after on the advice of Sir Herbert Baker (CL 1923).

OTHER LAND To the west and south the gardens are enclosed by the mature mixed woodland of Hill Hurst Wood (shown on Mudge's map of Kent of 1801) which is cut by a series of hard-surfaced allées leading to vista points on the woodland boundary, some oriented southwards towards the sea and shown established by 1939 (OS). The woodland now (1997) contains a number of largely mesh-walled animal enclosures.

REFERENCES

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Maps OS 6" to 1 mile: 3rd edition published 1908 1938 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 3rd edition published 1907 1939 edition

Archival items Aerial photos (reproduced in CL 1929; Landscape Design 1983)

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This list entry was subject to a Minor Enhancement on 15/07/2020

Legal

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