

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

THE ROOF GARDEN, 99 HIGH ST, KENSINGTON

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

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**THE ROOF GARDEN, 99 HIGH ST, KENSINGTON**

Name: THE ROOF GARDEN, 99 HIGH ST, KENSINGTON

County: Greater London Authority

District: Kensington and Chelsea (London Borough)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.500437

Longitude: -0.19186577

National Grid Reference: TQ 25602 79494

[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden

Grade: II

List Entry Number: 1001406

Date first listed: 06-Oct-1998

## Details

Roof garden of 1936-8 by Ralph Hancock on top of the former Derry and Toms department store in Kensington High Street and forming part of the design concept of the building.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

After John Barker and Company took over Derry and Toms in 1920 it was decided to build a new store, constructed in 1929-31. Five years later the roof garden was created by Ralph Hancock, and opened in May 1938 by the Earl of Athlone. The design of the roof garden shows strong similarities with Hancock's earlier 'Garden of the Nations' of 1933-5 which was laid out on the eleventh floor of the RCA building at the Rockefeller Center in New York, USA (Hancock 1936). Like the famous RCA building, the Derry and Toms store also had an Art Deco 'Rainbow Room' restaurant.

The roof garden in Kensington reflects the same design elements as the 'Garden of the Nations' in New York, but on a much smaller scale. It was added to the Derry and Toms department store at the particular behest of Trevor Bowen, Chairman of Barkers, the building having been constructed to allow for its future creation. Roof gardens, usually in conjunction with tea rooms or restaurants, had been popular in English stores since the Edwardian period, and were influenced by early American skyscraper architecture. Selfridges had been the pioneer, while an earlier Barkers' store in Kensington had a roof garden from 1921 (neither still exists). The Derry and Toms roof garden was planned to outdo all such others.

In the late 1960s, the House of Fraser purchased John Barker and Company. From 1973 to 1975 the store and roof garden became Biba's department store, managed by Barbara Hulanicki. Under the supervision of Peter Trotter, the interior of the former Derry and Toms store was transformed by Markwell Associates, a design firm specialising in theatre and television work. Having opened in September 1973, Biba went bankrupt only two years later and a more sober conversion ensued. The building was subsequently leased to Rama Superstores. In 1978 the sun pavilion in the roof garden was extended and converted into a restaurant which covered part of the woodland garden. At present (1998), Marks and Spencer and British Home Stores share the ground floor, with other businesses above. The roof garden has since the early 1980s been in use as a private club and restaurant.

### DESCRIPTION

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**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** The Derry and Toms building is situated on the south side of Kensington High Street. The building, which faces north-north-west, is bounded to the south-west by Derry Street, to the north-west by Young Street, and to the south-east by yards and the backs of houses on Kensington Square.

The roof garden covers the entire roof of the building. The garden and its viewing platforms (no longer open to the public for safety reasons) offers extensive views over the roofscape of the densely built-up urban area of Kensington, Chelsea, and further beyond.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** The roof garden is reached through the main building's side entrance on Young Street, where from the lobby, lifts travel via five floors up to the roof. The lifts are situated today on the south-east side of the Roof Garden restaurant; these were installed in 1978 as part of the extension and conversion of the sun pavilion to a restaurant and replace the two lifts from the 1936-8 design which were situated on the east and west sides of the former sun pavilion. Additionally, there are four sets of stairs situated in each corner of the garden, now (1998) no longer used, with two additional stairways incorporated into the restaurant.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** The Derry and Toms building (listed grade II\*), constructed of Portland stone, glass and metal, is six storeys high and nine bays wide. Fluted pilasters rise between the windows from the first to the fourth storeys. The top storey, with the roof garden, has a decorative frieze with sculptured reliefs between, and the window frames are of decorative metalwork. The building was designed by Bernard George (d 1964), who was Barkers' chief architect from 1928 until 1962. The managing director of Barkers, Trevor Bowen, had a great admiration for the planning and administration of American department stores, and as a result the Chicago architect C A Wheeler was appointed to design the floor layouts and equipment. The building became one of the first London stores to be planned on the American 'horizontal' system, whereby each floor was made as open as possible. The roof garden, including its garden buildings by Ralph Hancock (listed grade II\*), is laid out on a bitumastic base, topped by a layer of loose brick and rubble incorporating a fan-shaped system of drains leading to a single main drain. On top is a thin, 60cm layer of soil, watered regularly from artesian wells beneath the building.

**GARDEN** The garden, surrounded by a 2.5m high brick wall serving both as a windbreak and safety barrier, follows the square-shaped floor plan of the building and is divided into three different theme gardens, showing very similar features to Hancock's 'Garden of the Nations' for the RCA building in New York. To the south and east is the Woodland Garden, in the west quarter the English Garden, and in the north quarter the Spanish Garden. The English Garden and Spanish Garden are separated by the large oval-shaped roof of the former Rainbow Room restaurant on the floor below, reglazed in the late C20. To the south, the oval roof is connected with the lifts and service area and restaurant (ie former sun pavilion). Water tanks situated to the west of the oval roof and the restaurant, outside the garden wall, feed the irrigation pipes situated between the wall and the perimeter of the building. In the far west corner is the plant nursery with a small greenhouse. Raised viewing platforms situated in the south and east corners formerly gave access to the staircases to the lower floors.

The Spanish Garden in the north quarter is a rectangular-shaped formal design, with four raised flower beds which were grassed over in the late C20 to reduce maintenance. The beds are surrounded by stone paving. In the centre is an octagonal fountain surrounded by four palm trees. The spire of St Mary Abbott, situated to the north of the Derry and Toms building, forms an important feature in the view from this part of the garden. The white-washed fountain and edging of the raised beds are decorated with coloured Mediterranean tiles. To the north-east is a grass lawn with a narrow water canal connecting five small fountains which are surrounded by shrubs and flowers. On the south-west side, the garden is screened by a raised covered walk, currently (1998) out of use and boarded up. To the south-east of the garden is a further covered walk with arches, known as the Cloister Walk. On the north-west side of the garden stands a Moorish-style white-washed folly with a tower. Its central doors, flanked by two palm trees, give access to one of the six staircases leading to the lower floors of the building. To the north-east of the tower is a small cobbled courtyard, with two elms and a well, entered from the garden through a series of arches with twisted columns. The English Garden in the west quarter can be reached by the Tudor Walk to the north of the restaurant. The Tudor Walk incorporates brick walls and various stone arches which are very similar to those used for Hancock's roof garden in New York. The trellis with planting on the south-east side of the Tudor Walk was removed in 1978 with the introduction of an additional chiller room and cooling tower. The English Garden is divided into three small courtyards paved in brick and natural stone. The

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first courtyard has a garden shelter on the south-east side, overlooking a central sundial which is situated on the axis of the central arch giving access to the second, triangular-shaped courtyard. The second courtyard is surrounded by a brick wall covered in climbers and has raised beds on both sides mainly planted with lime trees. The square-shaped brick water feature in the centre dates from the late 1970s. The third, northernmost courtyard gives access to the staircase and the nursery in the west corner. A stream meanders through the Woodland Garden to the south and east of the restaurant, crossed by two bridges, one at each corner. In the south corner is a small lake with flamingoes, first introduced to the garden in the 1950s. The eastern corner of the garden originally contained a third bridge and a small pond, both replaced by the lifts installed in 1978. The Woodland Garden contains a variety of ornamental and fruit trees which form sizeable specimens. On the garden wall to the south, next to the viewing platform, hangs a commemoration plaque, showing in relief the head of Trevor Bowen and reading "Trevor A Bowen DL, JP 1878(1964, Chairman of the Company 1941(1957, who inspired this "Garden in the Sky"".

#### REFERENCES

Ralph Hancock, *When I make a Garden ...* (1936) D W Peel, *A Garden in the Sky. The Story of Barkers of Kensington 1870-1957* (1960) Article by Stephen Scrivens, 'Derry & Toms' (1976) [copy on EH file] RCHME, *Survey of London* (1983), pp 93-7 B Cherry and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London 3 North West* (1991), p 502 K Wilkie, *The Roof Gardens, 99-121 Kensington High Street: Initial Landscape Assessment* (1991) 'The Very Height of Delight', *The Independent on Sunday*, 10 May 1992 *The Garden* 118, No 10 (October 1993) Landscape Institute, *A Visitor's Guide to Twentieth Century British Landscape Design* (1994), p 39

Maps Plan of the roof garden in 1953 (in RCHME 1983, fig 32) Plan accompanying article by Stephen Scrivens

Illustrations Postcards and guidebooks, 1950s-60s (private collection) R Hancock, Perspective drawing of Derry and Toms roof garden (private collection)

Description written: February 1999 Register Inspector: FDM Edited: January 2002

This list entry was subject to a Minor Amendment on 22 April 2022 to reformat the text to current standards

## 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.