

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

LEIGH COURT

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Name:	LEIGH COURT
District:	North Somerset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Abbots Leigh
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.470410 Longitude: -2.6590560 National Grid Reference: ST 54319 74811 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000407 Date first listed: 01-Dec-1989

Details

C19 pleasure grounds and park around a country house for which Humphry Repton produced a Red Book.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of Leigh originally formed a part of the immense lordship of Bedminster, and was held by the Bishop of Coutances. It was given in 1148 to the monastery of St Augustine in Bristol by Robert Fitzharding who had established the order five years earlier. It remained monastic property until the Dissolution in 1536. The manor house at Leigh became the monks' rest house, from which the name Abbots Leigh is derived. Henry VIII granted Leigh to Paul Bush, his new Bishop of Bristol, on whose death it was granted to Sir George Norton in 1558. Sir George built himself a new house, shown on a parish survey of 1800, on the site of the old and this stood until 1811 when it was demolished prior to the building of the present Leigh Court nearby. Sir George Norton was succeeded by his son, George, who died without issue, the manor passing to William Trenchard of Cutteridge, Wiltshire by right of his wife, a collateral heiress of the Nortons. The Trenchards sold the manor to Philip John Miles in 1811, for whom the present building was erected by Thomas Hopper (1776-1856) between 1814 and 1818 (Rutter 1829; Cooke 1957; letter, Salmon 2002). Miles called in Humphry Repton (1752-1818) c 1814 to advise on the landscape and a Red Book was produced in that year. The Leigh Court estate was bought by private treaty, probably by Rev Harold Nelson Burden in 1916 (letter, Salmon 2002) and opened as a mental hospital in 1917. From c 1930 the estate was administered by a trust known by 1952 as the National Institutions for Persons requiring Care and Control, and as the Burden Trust in 1969 when the remainder of the estate was sold to the Secretary of State for Social Services. Parcels of land were sold from 1952 onwards culminating in the disposal of the woodland in 1974 to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and now administered by Forest Enterprise (2002). The remainder was sold to Brian Chinn in 1985 who sold it soon afterwards to St Christopher's School. The estate was sold again in 1988 when the park was split up into several ownerships, the house and part of the grounds becoming Leigh Court Business Centre in the ownership of Expandset Limited. Expandset went into receivership and the property was purchased by the present owners in 1992 (Harding 1993; letter, Salmon 2002). The land is used for forestry, agriculture, and horticulture (2002).

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Leigh Court covers 128ha and is located c 11km west of the centre of Bristol in the parish of Abbots Leigh. The park is bounded by the River Avon to the north-east, field boundaries to the

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east and south, Pill Road to the south-west, and field boundaries to the west and north. The Pill Road boundary is marked by an enclosing stone wall c 2.5m high. The long former carriage drive to the house from the south-east is bounded by fences on either side. The house is located at the high point of a fairly level plateau and is sufficiently elevated to command views of the Bristol Channel and the hills of South Wales to the north-west. To the south and east of the house a broad valley narrows as it runs from south-west to north-east across the site. Beyond the valley the ground rises steeply to the village of Abbots Leigh on a parallel ridge top to the south. East of the house the valley bottom, Paradise Bottom, is wooded and further east the ground rises under the densely wooded Oak Wood. To the east, outside the area here registered, are the extensive Leigh Woods, owned by the National Trust, which run down the south bank of the Avon Gorge to the River Avon. Land to the north and west is fairly level with gentle undulations and is in agricultural production.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main approach, no longer in use except as an entrance to Leigh Woods, is the long and picturesque former south drive which passes through The Gateway (c 1814, listed grade II) on the A369, Bristol to Portishead road, 1.6km south-east of the house. The Gateway was designed by Thomas Hopper, the architect of the house, in a similarly severe Greek Revival style. It consists of a tall central arch with flanking lodges, The Gateway and West Gateway, walls and piers. The drive, now a track, continues north-east in a straight line for 600m before turning north and north-east for c 550m, to an early C20 keeper's cottage or lodge c 850m east of the house. The present (2002) track continues north for 200m where it joins a network of paths in Oak Wood and Paradise Bottom. Before its abandonment as a drive (probably mid to late C20) the route turned west for 700m then north-west for 100m to connect with the eastern arm of a drive from the south-west. A small gothic lodge, disused but recently re-roofed (2002), on the Pill Road marks the entrance to the park from the south-west. The drive passes for c 300m between 3m high double fences, between which have been planted (c 1990) a wide variety of trees which obscure views of the park to the east and west. The drive continues north-east for 200m past the south-east edge of the pleasure grounds to the west, and the premises of Brackenwood Nurseries and Karpasia Farm to the east, where it divides to east and north, offering a choice of fair- and foul-weather approaches to the house. The northern arm passes through the woodland of the pleasure grounds and approaches the house from the south-west, past a former stable block (1814, listed grade II) to the east. The east arm of the drive has ornamental planting on both sides before opening to a grassy bank to the west and the entrance to the walk to Paradise Bottom to the east, turning to the west to approach the main, south-east front of the house. Repton (1814) suggested a divided drive in order to offer a sheltered approach (the east drive) to the house in case of inclemency, and probably to emphasise his criticism of the chosen exposed situation of the house.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Leigh Court (1814, listed grade II*) is a grand country house in severe Greek Revival style, built of Bath stone ashlar, which is currently (2002) used as offices, a conference centre, and as a prestigious location for functions and is marketed as Leigh Court Business Centre. It occupies the highest part of the landscape in a central position in the park and commands wide views over the Bristol Channel and the distant hills of Wales to the north-west, and of the ornamental woodlands of Paradise Bottom and the Avon Gorge to the north-east and east. The south-west front is joined to the two-storey Hubbard Wing, formerly housing the kitchens and the male servants' rooms. A U-shaped stable block of Bath stone arranged around a yard (c 1818) is situated some 20m south-west of the Hubbard wing. The siting of the house was a matter of some regret to Repton who lamented the chosen position for its exposure to the prevailing westerly winds and Atlantic gales. In the Red Book (1814) Repton says 'Not having visited the Spot till after the Site of the House had been fixed - It becomes my duty to adapt the grounds to that Situation, rather than to express my opinion how it might have been placed with rather more advantage'. The house was altered c 1916 for use as a mental home and has been subject to ongoing restoration work since c 1993 (letter, Salmon 2002).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS To the north of the house is an open lawn studded with specimen trees and bounded to the north, north-east, north-west, and west by a C20 line of shrubs and trees, on an early C19 fence line, which partly block the previously open views to the north. The principal pleasure grounds are in areas of woodland to the south, south-west, and west of the house, between the house and the walled garden. A large part of the southern pleasure grounds is given over to a car park (c 1990), serving the Business Centre, which is screened and enclosed by a belt of ornamental trees and shrubs. The pleasure gardens to the south-west are under overgrown woodland with a network of unsurfaced paths. This area is undergoing

investigation, and restoration of the paths and replanting of trees has been ongoing since 1996. Two main paths lead roughly south-west through woodland to a comparatively open area, a square of c 30m each way, the site of a former flower garden 250m from the house in the centre of the former pleasure grounds. This area has been partially cleared (c late 1990s) revealing the remains of a pond, stumps of iron fences, and traces of paths. In the north-west corner of the pleasure grounds, c 100m west of the house is a recently planted plantation of conifers (late 1990s), replacing an early C19 group which was positioned to shelter the flower garden, while allowing views from the path to the west. Some 100m south-west of the former flower garden is the walled kitchen garden and ancillary buildings.

Recent research (Debois 1991, 1992, 1993) suggests that the pleasure grounds lost most of their ornamental trees in the storms of 1987 and 1990 but that they once had a more elaborate layout than that shown on the OS 25" map of 1882, which depicts only the main paths through the woodland gardens. This map shows that the kitchen gardens were protected from the north and west by a shelter belt, of which only a few beech trees survive. Field evidence (Debois 1991) indicates that the western path runs on a natural terrace, lined in part by yew trees with the greatest number on the north-east edge of the former flower garden. The main path emerges from the woodland at the north-east corner of the walled garden, from which one path proceeds east to join with the eastern parallel path, completing a circuit, and another skirts the eastern edge of the walled garden and proceeds south-east towards the remains of the formal garden, close to the site of the earlier manor house, c 450m south-west of the house. Immediately east of the walled garden is an extensive one-storey building of the Freeways Trust (2001) and, 20m further south, an icehouse built into a bank and the back of the former gardener's house, now Myrtle Cottage, one of two private residences on the north-west side of the main drive. A path leads c 100m south-west bordered by a c 4m high stone retaining wall to the south-east, on the other side of which is the site of the former manor house and garden. The path joins a track 520m south-west of the house at the western corner of the former formal garden site. A c 2m high retaining wall runs along the south-west edge of the former formal garden terrace with an access track in front which leads around the pleasure grounds to arrive at the north of the walled garden from the west. The flat but elevated platform of c 0.5ha thus formed contains an abandoned rectangular canal, some 40m long and partly infilled, with ruined summerhouses at either end. Little else survives of the pre-1814 landscape apart from a small area of ridge and furrow south of the present walled gardens and a few veteran lime pollards in the woods of Paradise Bottom. The 1800 parish survey shows Old Leigh Court facing formal gardens to the south and a series of small buildings and enclosures to the north and west, the whole surrounded by rectangular fields suggestive of Parliamentary enclosures. This survey also shows the former outlying houses and plots of the village of Abbots Leigh, along a road which ran c 550m from where the current drive divides, south-westwards to the ridge on which stands the present village of Abbots Leigh. These properties were removed (c 1810-16) as part of the landscape improvements.

In the opposite direction from the pleasure grounds, c 100m south-east of the house is the entrance to a walk to Paradise Bottom which occupies a steep-sided ravine leading down towards the River Avon to the north-east. The flanking woods contain a wide range of ornamental planting which has been considerably opened out in the last few years (late C20) by Forest Enterprise under a restoration scheme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Clearance work has uncovered the course of a stream with a series of stone weirs and pools, ornamented with cascades running down the valley. Walks lead to a stone seat cut from the rock, c 800m east of the house, from which there are views north and east to the River Avon.

As with other aspects of the Leigh Court landscape, Repton's Red Book recommendations for the pleasure grounds were largely ignored or adopted only in their general principles and adapted by Miles. This may have been due, at least in part, to the mis-orientation of the landscape in the Red Book by Repton who admitted to drawing his plans 'from memory', resulting in gardens proposed for the sheltered south actually being exposed to the east and, therefore, impracticable.

PARK The parkland extends in a horseshoe shape to the north, west, and south of the house and pleasure grounds. To the south, high double fences, between which have been planted (c 1990) indigenous trees and shrubs, have compartmentalised much of the parkland and block views to east and west from the main drive and to the south-west of the old manor site. Extensive planting of predominantly exotic species c 400m south of the house, associated with Brackenwood Nursery, has filled a large part of the valley running from south-west to north-east to the south of the house. A further part of this valley, c 250m south of the house, has been extensively raised and levelled by landfill operations to accommodate large farm buildings for Karpasia

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Farm. A bungalow and detached double garage (2002) have been built in the grounds of Brackenwood Nursery c 400m south-west of the house, to the south-east of the main drive and c 100m east of the ruined summerhouse and canal. Parkland to the west is in agricultural use and has lost most of the trees shown on the OS map of 1882.

KITCHEN GARDEN The brick-walled garden, c 400m south-west of the house, covers almost 1ha, with a similarly sized sheltered area to the south. The walled garden is oriented due north/south and there is evidence of extensive former glasshouses on the interior and exterior south-facing walls. The north wall is of double-skin construction with heating vents and six boiler-houses on the exterior to provide the heat. To the north and west were more free-standing glasshouses, cold frames, and pigsties. The main walled area is used for the commercial production of organic produce, trading as Leigh Court Farm. The boiler-houses, pigsties, and other associated buildings are derelict (2002).

REFERENCES

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Maps Parish survey, c 1800 (Somerset Record Office) Map of Abbots Leigh prepared for diversion of footpath through P Miles Land, Midsummer 1818 (Somerset Record Office) Greenwood, Map of Somerset, 1822

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Description written: November 2002 Amended: February 2003 Register Inspector: SH Edited: February 2003

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.