

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

FLETE

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

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Name:	FLETE
County:	Devon
District:	South Hams (District Authority)
Parish:	Holbeton
County:	Devon
District:	South Hams (District Authority)
Parish:	Kingston
County:	Devon
District:	South Hams (District Authority)
Parish:	Modbury
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.321545 Longitude: -3.9337535 National Grid Reference: SX 62437 48634 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000692 Date first listed: 12-Aug-1987

Details

Late C19 and early C20 gardens and pleasure grounds with an early C20 water and rock garden by Russell Page surrounding a late C19 house rebuilt by R Norman Shaw. The house and pleasure grounds are set within wider late C18 parkland with an extended wooded carriage drive on the east bank of the River Erme.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Flete, also known as Flete Damerell, is said to have taken its name from Robert de Albamara who owned land here in C11. By the C16 Flete belonged to the Hele family, who built the gabled manor house which survives as part of the west facade of the late C19 house. The family continued to own the estate until 1716 when James Hele died a minor. Under his father's will the property went to James Bulteel of Lyneham. In the C18 the Bulteels built a new stuccoed wing to the east of the C16 manor house, and in 1793 the Rev John Swete noted the 'beautiful grounds and uncommonly fine and extensive woods', a grove behind the house and a lawn 'dotted with groups of oak and other forest trees'. Swete also reported that an 'observatory' had been built on the hill east of the Erme, 'whence the views were uncommonly varied and extensive' across the 'pleasing and picturesque' landscape (quoted in Gray 1995). The late C18 house and landscape is recorded in watercolours by J Swete and W Payne, and

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in 1806 R Polwhele remarked on great improvements 'lately made both in the house and grounds'. The C18 additions to the house were remodelled in a Gothic style for J C Bulteel c 1835, and the mid C19 layout of the grounds is shown on the Tithe map of 1842. The cost of this work, and subsequent speculative losses forced the sale of the 5000 acre (c 2080ha) estate to a former Australian sheep-farmer, Mr Splatt, in 1863. When the estate was offered for sale again in 1876 it was bought by Henry Bingham Mildmay, a partner in Messrs Baring Brothers and husband of Georgiana Bulteel, whose brother, John Bulteel, had retained Pamflete c 2km south of Flete in 1863. Henry Mildmay had already bought the Mothecombe estate in 1873, and the eventual amalgamation of these properties created the present estate.

Richard Norman Shaw remodelled Flete between 1878 and 1881, retaining the C16 house and much of the ground plan of the early C19 house. Norman Shaw also rebuilt the stables and made garden terraces adjacent to the house. Flete Lodge was built, and the carriage drive on the east bank of the Erme, and another on the west bank which leads to the Pamflete and Mothecombe properties, also appear to have been developed at this time. A crisis in the Baring banking house in 1892 led to Flete being offered for sale, but no purchaser was found. During the First World War part of the house was used as a soldiers' convalescence home, while from 1941 to 1956 the Plymouth maternity hospital was evacuated to Flete. During this time the gardens underwent a period of neglect, and after the departure of the hospital, the late C19 west wing was demolished by Mrs John Mildmay-White, who had inherited the estate on her brother's death in 1950. The house remained unoccupied and in 1961 was let to Mutual Households who rebuilt the demolished wing and converted the house into retirement apartments. The house, gardens and pleasure grounds continue to be let to the Country Houses Association, while the remainder of the estate, including the parkland, remains (1999) private property.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Flete is situated c 2km south-west of the village of Ermington, to the south of the A379 Kingsbridge to Plymouth road, some 3km west of Modbury. The 190ha site comprises c 10ha of formal gardens and pleasure grounds, c 130ha of parkland and c 50ha of woodland. It lies at the tidal limit of the River Erme which flows through a wooded valley estuary to the sea, c 5km to the south. The site is bounded to the north-east by the A379, and to the south-west by a minor track. Elsewhere park and woodland merge with a surrounding landscape of similar character. A finger of woodland extends c 2km south along the east side of the Erme estuary. The west bank, which beyond Flete Mill Cottage c 390m south-south-east of the house forms the Pamflete and Mothecombe estates, has a similar wooded character.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The site is entered from the A379 at a point 600m north-east of the house adjacent to Flete Lodge (listed grade II*) which was designed by J D Sedding in 1889. Concave stone wing walls flank two pairs of stone gate piers with ball finials, which carry wrought-iron carriage gates and pedestrian gates to east and west (all listed grade II). The tarmac drive continues 370m south-south-west through the park before turning and ascending west-south-west to reach the carriage court to the north-east of the house. Enclosed by low coped stone walls to north and east, the carriage court is entered between tall stone gate piers with ball finials, which support wrought-iron gates and an elaborate wrought-iron overthrow. To the east a four-centred arch between stone piers with ball finials contains a further wrought-iron pedestrian gate leading to the east terrace (all listed grade I). The Tithe map shows that the present north drive, and the system of drives through the park to the west and south were established by 1842. The Western Lodge c 1.4km north-west of the house is a single-storey Tudor-gothic cottage which appears to date from c 1835 (listed grade II).

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Flete (listed grade I) stands on a level platform with extensive views north, north-east, and south-east along the Erme estuary. The remnants of a five-gabled, two-storey C16 house which was remodelled c 1620 survives as the recessed west facade of the late C19 house, with a projecting C16 wing, originally the great hall, to the south-west. C18 additions to the north and east of the C16 house were remodelled in a castellated gothic style in 1835, possibly with John Crocker Bulteel acting as his own architect. This house was extensively remodelled and extended between 1878 and 1881 by Richard Norman Shaw to create a crenellated Tudor-gothic mansion built in rock-faced coursed limestone with asymmetrical elevations. To the north a five-storey turreted tower with a two-storey oriel window stands above the entrance, while other elevations are of three storeys with a four-storey square tower standing at the south-east corner. Semicircular and canted bays and oriels are used throughout together with large mullioned windows to create varied facades. The recess between the south-

west and north-west wings below the west facade is enclosed by a low stone arched balustrade, and is cobbled with coloured pebbles laid between stone flags to form a C16 style fretwork pattern. The rubble-stone stable range 30m north-west of the house was built by Norman Shaw in 1878, with a slate-hung clock tower above the east wing, and a groom's house in the west wing. A castellated stone arch and similar flanking walls immediately west of the stables may date from the 1835 remodelling (all listed grade II).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Formal and informal gardens and pleasure grounds lie to the east and south of the house. The east terrace (listed grade I), c 80m in length, is retained by buttressed stone walls planted with camellias, with two recesses containing seats. The gravel terrace walk is terminated to the south by a flight of wide flagged steps ascending to a late C19 carved semicircular stone seat on a stone-paved base in a clipped yew recess, and to the north by a pair of low wrought-iron gates leading to the park. A double flight of stone steps ascends to the carriage court, while further stone steps descend to two tennis lawns on the lower terrace. At the south-east corner of the house is a formal rose garden.

From the east terrace a sweeping gravel circuit walk which encloses the pleasure grounds ascends to a level terrace immediately north-east of the kitchen garden, c 100m south-west of the house. A stone-faced ha-ha forms the eastern boundary of the pleasure grounds, allowing tree-framed views south-east across parkland and the wooded Erme valley. Some 150m south of the house a rock and water garden was designed and constructed by Russell Page in 1925 (restored in 1996). A rocky stream bordered by Japanese maples, shrubs and herbaceous plants, descends the east-facing slope from a group of mature conifers to a pool. The garden is enclosed by shrubs and beech hedges, and has areas of lawn contrasting with the rockwork. Page noted that it was conceived as an autumn garden, and that many of the original plants came from Dartington Hall (qv) and Paignton Botanical Gardens. T E Lawrence, a regular visitor to Flete, commented on the evolving design (Page 1962). The grass terrace adjacent to the kitchen garden is bounded to the south-west by an herbaceous border below the kitchen garden walls, and to the north-east at a lower level by the Paved Garden, a formal garden created c 1930 by Lady Mildmay and her mother Mrs Seymour Grenfell (Wright 1998). The garden is laid out with stone crazy-paved paths which surround geometric beds, while the central path and circular lily pool are placed axially to fine late C19 wrought-iron gates and stone gate piers which allow an extended vista into the kitchen garden. Twelve regularly spaced Irish yews stand on the north-east boundary of the Paved Garden, and further Irish yews flank the central path. Yew topiary representing card suits are placed on the south-west boundary of the garden which is also decorated by early C20 moulded concrete seats. Below the Paved Garden lawns with scattered specimen trees descend east and north-east to the house. A cob and thatch gardener's bothy c 60m west-north-west of the house is believed to be C19 (ibid), and stands in a late C20 cottage-style garden.

PARK Lying to the north-west, north, east and south-east of the house, the park incorporates an area believed to be a C16 deer park c 100m east-south-east of the house on the east bank of the Erme (Mr Mildmay-White pers comm, 1999). Planted with trees in the 1940s, this area now merges with the woodland to the south, but traces of the boundary bank and ditch survive. Parkland to the north and west of the house follows a valley running north-west from the Erme, and is enclosed by woodland which follows a ridge to the south and south-west, while the western boundary is screened by Flete Wood, much of which is managed as commercial woodland. To the north undulating parkland with scattered trees merges with the agricultural landscape beyond. A drive leading from the house to Western Lodge c 1km to the north-west passes through the park with a C19 lodge and former kennels 100m south of the drive at a point 600m west of the house, and a cricket ground and wooden pavilion c 900m west of the house. The park remains pasture with scattered groups of trees, which are more concentrated adjacent to the principal drive north-east of the house. South-east and north-east of the house the park falls to level pasture bordering the Erme. Groups of trees on the slopes below the house are significant for framing views south-east along the river valley from the pleasure grounds. Further drives lead south 400m to Flete Mill Cottage and, beyond the site, to Pamflete and Mothecombe, and east to the riverside carriage drive which lies within the registered site.

KITCHEN GARDEN Enclosed by rubble-stone walls c 3m high, the kitchen garden occupies a north-east-facing slope c 100m south-west of the house, and is now (1998) let as a Christmas tree nursery. The Tithe map (1842) shows the kitchen garden established in its present position. Cruciform late C19 or early C20 crazy-paved stone paths partly flanked by box edging and espaliered fruit trees survive, together with a brick and timber lean-to greenhouse against the north-west wall. The east/west

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path is aligned on C19 wrought-iron gates and stone gate piers to the east which lead to the pleasure grounds and allow a vista to the house, park and wider landscape; to the west the path is terminated by a stone-flagged recess between banded stone piers. This appears to have contained climbing plants and a seat. An octagonal stone pillar stands on a stepped base at the centre of the garden. To the south-east of the main garden a further walled enclosure contains five restored early C20 brick and timber glasshouses which correspond to the arrangement shown on the 1906 OS map. Outside the walled gardens stand the late C19 gardener's cottage (20m south) and a further estate cottage (95m south-east). A crenellated C19 stone arch c 30m south-east of the kitchen garden gives access to the pleasure grounds. Other structures adjoining the kitchen garden include the engine house (30m west-north-west) and the game larder (50m north), both now (1998) converted to offices.

OTHER LAND The system of park carriage drives is extended south through a belt of mixed woodland for c 10km on the east bank of the Erme. Developed in the late C19 as a carriage drive leading to a minor lane 0.75km west of Kingston, this feature allows extensive views south-west down the estuary, and north-west to the house and parkland. The principally deciduous woodland is shown on Payne's late C18 view of Flete, and appears to have been managed as mixed commercial woodland since the C19. It is significant in framing views from the house, east terrace and pleasure grounds. A programme of felling and re-planting continues in the late C20.

REFERENCES

R Polewhele, *The History of Devonshire III*, (1793-1806), p 456 *Gardener's Magazine* 18, (1842), p 542 *Country Life*, 38 (20 November 1915), pp 680-8; 89 (15 March 1941), pp 232-5 *Landscape and Garden* 2, no 3 (1935), p 90 R Page, *The Education of a Gardener* (1962), pp 20-1 T Gray, *The Garden History of Devon An Illustrated Guide to Sources* (1995), pp 103-4 T Wright, *The Gardens of Flete House, Ermington, Devonshire, Planting and Management Guidelines for the Present and Future* (1998) *Flete, Devon, guidebook*, (Mutual Households nd)

Maps J W Adams, Tithe map for Holbeton parish, 3 chains to 1", 1842 (Devon Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1885, published 1889 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1886, published 1887 2nd edition revised 1904-5, published 1906

Illustrations J Swete, *View of Flete*, watercolour, 1793 (564M, F5,7), (Devon Record Office) W Payne, *Views of Flete*, watercolour drawings, c 1795 (private collection)

Description written: October 1998 Amended: May 1999 Register Inspector: JML Edited: July 2000

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.