

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

WROXTON ABBEY

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WROXTON ABBEY

Name: WROXTON ABBEY

County: Oxfordshire

District: Cherwell (District Authority)

Parish: Drayton

County: Oxfordshire

District: Cherwell (District Authority)

Parish: North Newington

County: Oxfordshire

District: Cherwell (District Authority)

Parish: Wroxton

label.localisation: Latitude: 52.068417
Longitude: -1.3981675
National Grid Reference: SP4135141287
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II*
List Entry Number: 1000466
Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

A C17 country house surrounded by early and mid C18 pleasure grounds, set within an C18 landscape park. Sanderson Miller advised on the mid C18 rococo scheme for part of the pleasure grounds and park. The landscape buildings of the mid C18 exhibited an early use of Gothic Revival and Chinoiserie styles.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Wroxton Priory, founded in the early C13, was dissolved in 1536, the land being sold in 1537 to Sir Thomas Pope, Treasurer of Henry VIII's Court of Augmentations and founder of Trinity College, Oxford (qv) in 1555. Pope endowed Trinity College with the manor and lands of Wroxton and nearby Balscot, obliging the college to renew the lease of the estate to the heirs of his brother John Pope. In 1618 William Pope, John's son, began to build the core of the current house, together with a parlour garden, orchards and grass plots (Batey and Lambert 1990). Later in the C17 the estate passed to the North family. Francis North, created first Baron Guilford, enlarged the house, built the stables and carried out extensive tree planting during the late C17 (Garden Hist 1986), advised by his brother Roger (?1653-1734), an influential architectural writer, who supervised the estate from his brother's death in 1685 into the early C18 and was involved with the building works. In 1727 the second Baron

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(d 1729) employed Tilleman Bobart, grandson of the first curator of Oxford Botanic Garden (qv), to construct a grand, formal terraced layout, possibly to a scheme by Henry Wise, the Royal Gardener, together with the walled garden (Batey and Lambert 1990). Bobart submitted a design for the kitchen garden in 1730 and was at work here until 1732. The third Baron, later Earl of Guilford, altered and added to the house and, from 1737 to 1751, the pleasure grounds, with advice from the amateur architect and landscape adviser Sanderson Miller who lived at nearby Radway Grange in Warwickshire (qv). Lord Guilford and Miller laid out a rococo landscape in the valley below the earlier formal features, combining gothic and Chinese buildings, this area being particularly admired and reported on by visitors. At the same time Miller may have designed several park buildings along the approach from Banbury. Little further work took place until the mid C19 when Lady Susan North extended the house and built the formal garden to the south-east. The eleventh Baron died in 1932 and the lease was surrendered to Trinity College. In 1963 the abbey and pleasure grounds were sold to Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, USA, as an overseas college, in which use they remain (1998).

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Wroxton Abbey lies at the north end of Oxfordshire, 3km west of the centre of Banbury, adjacent to the south side of the village of Wroxton. The c 125ha site is bounded largely by agricultural land and woodland, with the lane to North Newington running along the eastern boundary and the main road from Banbury along the northern park boundary. The villages of Wroxton and Drayton stand respectively at the north-west and north-east corners of the park. The boundary with Wroxton village is marked by a stone wall running along the north edge of the pleasure grounds from the main entrance east as far as the church, and extending from the entrance south into Dark Lane. The site is bisected west to east by two steep valleys which join at the Great Lake, together curving south at the east end of the pleasure grounds into the park. The setting is largely rural, with the western suburbs of Banbury prominent on the eastern skyline beyond the Drayton Arch.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance to the Abbey lies 250m north-west of the house, approached by a lane off the A422 Banbury to Stratford road running along the north edge of the village of Wroxton. The drive enters from the centre of the village between stone gate piers supporting wrought-iron gates, flanked by iron pedestrian gates set into a stone screen wall terminated by further piers (1771, the whole listed grade II*). The screen wall is set into the boundary wall which extends east along Church Street and south along Dark Lane. A single-storey stone lodge (C19, in C17 style, listed grade II*) stands west of the entrance. The tarmac drive curves south and east, flanked by informal lawns planted with mature trees, arriving at the forecourt on the west front of the house. The forecourt, defined by banks cut out of the hillsides to north and south, is laid largely to lawn, the drive opening out into a carriage sweep adjacent to the house. A C17 flight of stone steps, with side walls and two further sets of steps to the north and south, leads up to the central front door. Prominent from the drive, Sanderson Miller's 1745 crenellated, polygonal, stone dovecote stands on a high point within a field 200m south-west of the house.

A formal western approach existed in the early C18, as shown on a plan of 1729 (Garden Hist 1986; Banbury Museum). A straight double avenue flanked the drive as it entered from the village in a similar position to now (1998), turning sharply east, flanked by outer avenues, to approach the forecourt in line with the front door. The drive entered the forecourt, then enclosed by walls on three sides, centrally through the west wall, arriving at a turning circle.

The main approach from Banbury in the C18 and C19 crossed the south park from the east boundary. It entered the park north of the Drayton Arch, standing 1.2km east of the house (attrib Sanderson Miller c 1750, listed grade II*), running west across the park to cross the stream by the bridge near the Chinese-style Keeper's Lodge (now gone). The drive rose up the hillside to the obelisk (listed grade II*), standing 400m south-east of the house; erected to commemorate a visit by Frederick, Prince of Wales to Banbury races in 1739, it has panoramic views of the park and parts of the pleasure grounds. The drive then descended the hillside, passing between the two uppermost ponds before climbing uphill again past the elaborate early C18 conduit towards the octagonal gothic dovecote (Sanderson Miller 1745, listed grade II*), also with panoramic views, especially towards the obelisk and in the direction of the Drayton Arch, dropping down past the south side of the stables to the main entrance to the house on the west front (OS 1881; Garden Hist 1986). The course of this drive has largely been lost (1998), but most of the built features remain.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Wroxton Abbey (early C17, C19, listed grade I) stands towards the west end of the park and pleasure grounds. The three-storey, stone, Jacobean house was completed by Roger North in the late C17, and extended by Lady Susan North in the mid C19, completing the intended E shape by the addition of the south wing. The house overlooks the entrance drive and forecourt to the west and to the east the formal terraces, and the lawn lying adjacent to the east front. The obelisk is prominent in views south-east from the house across Lady's pond.

The U-shaped, two-storey stone stables (late C17, probably Roger North, listed grade II; now converted to college accommodation) lie close to the south wing of the house, separated by the stable yard and a stone wall on the north side of the yard. The stables are reached via a spur south-east from the main drive, also via C18 stone steps up from the forecourt, giving access from the front door of the house.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The house is skirted to the north and east by a broad, stone-flagged path overlooking, to the north and north-east, broad terraces stepping south down the valley side to the lawn adjacent to the east front. The 250m long, wooded top terrace, planted with trees and shrubs, including many yews, carries a central path, and runs parallel to two lower grass terraces. At the east end, c 150m north-east of the house, stands the earth-covered, stone icehouse (early 1720s-30s, probably Tilleman Bobart, listed grade II*). A sloping terrace leads south from the east end of the top terrace with views west towards the house, east over the parkland and beyond to the village of Drayton, and south towards the obelisk. A straight ride runs south from this terrace down the valley side through the woodland at the west end of the Great Pond, aligned with the obelisk. A straight ride runs east from the south end of the terrace through Abbey Wood (shown on the 1729 plan), parallel to the north side of the Great Pond, flanked at the east end by mature yew trees and at the west end by lime trees. The ride is terminated at the east end by the boundary between the pleasure grounds and the park, and at the west end by the main lawn and the southern arm of the top terrace above the lawn. Both rides were illustrated in the mid C18 (Booth, 1750).

A bank, planted with ornamental trees and shrubs, connects the top terrace with a narrower, 200m long grass terrace below, and from this a grass slope leads south down to a 100m long, broad grass terrace, approached directly from the stone path around the house. A path traverses the west end of the terraces, via C18 stone steps leading north up from the forecourt, to meet a winding path giving access to the church to the north via a gateway in the stone garden wall, flanked by stone gate piers surmounted by ball finials. At the bottom of the terraces an extensive informal lawn lies adjacent to the east front, bounded to the east by woodland which screens the pleasure grounds beyond.

The terraces and lawn appear to have formed the nucleus of Bobart's 1720s work (Garden Hist 1986), as shown on the 1729 map, with a 240 ft x 40 ft (c 74m x 12m) canal (VCH) on the broad, lowest terrace, together with the wooded upper terrace with a central path along its length, as now (1998).

From the east front of the house a path leads south up the side of the valley via a set of steep stone steps (C18, listed grade II) to a cross walk, terminated at the north-west end by a stone, Doric temple (C19, listed grade II), the pediment supported by four piers, standing c 25m south of the house. The path runs south-east from the temple, aligned with the obelisk in the park, through a clipped yew hedge which forms the backdrop for the formal flower garden into which the path emerges. This garden was laid out by Lady Susan North in the mid C19, following advice received from William Andrews Nesfield (Jellicoe et al 1986). The flower garden is split into two terraces, the higher one with a semicircular gravel path, backed by the yew hedge, linked to the lower one by a sloping lawn and two sets of stone steps (C18, listed grade II) standing at the ends of the path. These lead down to a cross path which opens out at the centre to enclose a small circular bed. A path continuing the line of the top path from the temple leads down a steep grass slope from the gravel circle via further stone steps (C18, listed grade II) to an open, informal lawn, enclosed to south-west and north-east by trees and bounded to the south-east by the triangular Lady's Pond lying 200m south-east of the house. A grass path runs along the south-east edge of the Pond, adjacent to which runs a raised earth terrace (now somewhat overgrown), beyond which lie the remains of the boundary ditch and stone wall separating the pleasure grounds from the park.

A path leading south-east from the south-east corner of the house, along the south side of the main lawn, crosses the earth bank forming the Lady's Pond dam at its north-east end, joining the path from the south-east side of the Pond. The path continues east into the woodland which surrounds the Great Pond, as part of the informal, largely serpentine path which encircles the

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Pond. To the south of the Pond the ditch, with the remains of the stone wall, continues east, marking the boundary between pleasure grounds and park. Roger North was particularly interested in fishponds. In his *Discourse on Fishponds* (1713) he says that he had been making them for over twenty years. He saw their potential for natural landscaping, and the Great Pond, later incorporated in the mid C18 rococo layout, was very probably of his doing. His comment that 'Pondheads must be made large and firm for then you have not only a more secure Bank, but a more beautiful walk' seems to refer to the pondhead walk from which the Grand Cascade now (1998) flows.

The east end of the Great Pond is retained by a large, grass-covered earth bank, at the centre of which stands the Grand Cascade (rebuilt late C20), c 550m east of the house. The water, carried down four long, shallow steps, suddenly drops 6m, from the top of a large, stone retaining wall, to a basin below. The wall contains a central arched recess with a stone seat, situated immediately behind the projected sheet of falling water and reached via a stone ledge connecting the flanking banks. The basin, flanked by two earth mounds which may originally have been encased in masonry (sketch by Mrs Delaney c 1740, in guidebook 1993), is bounded on the east side by a cascade of small steps, over which the water runs down to a broad serpentine course bounded to the north by a raised broad, grass, serpentine terrace. Two paths continue east from the north and south banks of the dam, with views of the cascade and serpentine river. Some 100m east of the Grand Cascade stands the Little Cascade, east of which a small, three-arched stone bridge (formerly with Chinese-style hand rails) crosses the serpentine, joining the south and north paths from the dam. Adjacent to the north side of the Little Cascade stands the Mount, an C18, circular earth mound, c 6(7m high with steep sides and a small level platform at the top, reached from the north path via an embanked spur. The Gothic Temple on the Mount (Sanderson Miller 1750(1) formerly stood here (sketch by Mrs Delaney c 1740, in guidebook 1993), enjoying the views which extend north-east towards the village of Drayton, south-east towards the Drayton Arch and west back towards the Grand Cascade, this being the only point at which the whole cascade and the lake behind are visible.

East of the bridge the serpentine narrows to a stream, running along the north side of a peninsula of land, at the east end of which stood the Chinese House (the foundations remain). Here the stream joins an artificial cutting running through the north park, to the west of and parallel with the Sor Brook. The Brook, which feeds the cutting, enters the park at its north boundary, 450m to the north, beneath a stone bridge carrying the Banbury road. The head of the artificial cutting, where it splits from the Brook, lies close to the road, and was formerly marked by a Chinese seat standing on a small mound, overlooking the valley below, together with a small gothic bridge which still straddles a small waterfall amongst the undergrowth. Elements of this linear northern pleasure ground still exist along the course of the cutting, now largely dry, and it formerly extended some way further north across the Banbury road. At its confluence with the serpentine stream, the cutting turns south-west to bound the south side of the Chinese House peninsula, continuing south along the valley as a linear southern arm of the pleasure ground. Passing through a narrow belt of woodland, it then flows over the remains of a cascade and continues past the site of the former Keeper's Lodge (demolished C20), which had a Chinese-style facade and stood in the park close to the Banbury drive. The cutting and Sor Brook rejoin at this point, continuing south beneath the Banbury drive to leave the park south of this (Booth, 1750).

Lady's Pond and the Great Pond were present, in slightly different form, in the 1720s (1729 plan), but it was the area to the east of the Great Pond which was developed as a rococo pleasure ground by the third Baron Guilford, later the first Earl, from 1737 to 1751, with advice from Sanderson Miller. Apparently all the early garden structures (largely gone, 1998) were in Chinese style, including three garden buildings and two bridges.

PARK The park encloses the gardens and pleasure grounds. Largely under arable cultivation, there are some areas of pasture, including clumps of trees, and several small copses. The northern half contains the walled garden, approached from the church to the west via a lime avenue, together with the mid C18 north arm of the pleasure grounds. The southern half, through which the Banbury drive formerly ran, contains various ornamental buildings, visible from various parts of the pleasure grounds, as well as the southern arm of the pleasure grounds.

Adjacent to the west of Lady's Pond lies an upper, triangular lake, also with a straight retaining bank at its lower, north-east end, across which the drive ran, with views east over the lower lake (now partially obscured). The upper lake is partly fed by a conduit on the hillside to the north, where a concrete-lined pond now lies, with the earthwork remains of further features running down the hillside to the lake (formerly a formal series of semicircular ponds; Booth, 1750). At the top of this hillside

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stands the remains of a beech avenue, aligned west/east and planted either side of a former drive leading from the house to the Wroxton to North Newington road.

KITCHEN GARDEN The c 1.5ha stone-walled kitchen garden (C18, possibly Tilleman Bobart, 1730s) is approached from the west via a path flanked by a mature lime avenue. The garden stands in the north park close to the top of the south-facing hillside above the pleasure grounds, with a stone gardener's house at the south-west corner.

REFERENCES

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OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1881(2 2nd edition published 1901 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1880

A T Jones (CPRE), Wroxton Abbey Park, 1995 (copy on EH file)

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