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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

NORTHCOURT

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Name:	NORTHCOURT
District:	Isle of Wight (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Shorwell
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.646712 Longitude: -1.3538495 National Grid Reference: SZ 45781 83202 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001666 Date first listed: 13-Feb-2003

Details

One of the earliest manor houses on the Isle of Wight, begun in 1615 for the Deputy Governor of the island, with surviving elements including a serpentine mount and walks from the C17, together with mid C18 and early C19 gardens, parkland, and ornamental woodland in the Picturesque style.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Leigh family purchased the manor of Northcourt in 1586 and in 1606 John Leigh (b 1546) was knighted. In 1615 Sir John began the construction of a new family mansion at Northcourt, which was completed by his son Barnaby who succeeded him in 1629. It is likely that gardens were laid out to complement the new house but no evidence of their layout is known. Successive generations of the family continued to improve and add to the estate. In c 1700 the house was modernised by Barnabas Leigh and then extended to the north. Barnabas was succeeded by his uncle, the last Sir John Leigh, who died in 1772 without a male heir, passing the estate to his five daughters for whom it was held in trust for twenty years. The first cartographic record of the landscape dates from this period. William Gardner's survey of 1791 shows extensive terracing to the south of the house, an ornamental woodland with central axis to the west, a large walled garden to the north-west, and park pasture to the north. Richard Bull purchased the estate in 1795, and the Bull family remained in possession of Northcourt until 1938 (although inheritance often ran through the female line, causing a change of name). It was Richard Bull and his daughter Elizabeth who made the most significant contribution to the landscape in the late C18 and early C19. Elizabeth Bull was referred to in contemporary accounts as a noted landscape gardener (Albin 1818) and in the years she lived at Northcourt (1795-1809) Elizabeth significantly added to and extended the gardens and grounds. At the beginning of the C19 many contemporary accounts describe the beauties of the landscape Elizabeth created but following her death in 1809 the property passed through several members of the family in rapid succession, leading to a decline which by 1831 resulted in what Barber described as 'piteous neglect' (Barber 1831). By 1840 the property had passed to General Willoughby Gordon, although he did not live there, the estate being let to a Mrs Bennet. Sir Willoughby was succeeded by his son Sir Henry Percy Gordon who partly restored the property. His daughter Mary inherited Northcourt in 1899 and, together with her husband General Robert Leith, made several improvements, including the addition of a new north-west wing in 1905, the replanting of the gardens, and the building of a new home farm. Mary died in 1929 after which the estate began to be divided and sold into separate ownerships. The family lost, but then regained, ownership of the house but it was finally sold again in 1962 along with 13 acres (c 5.25ha) of garden, in a very poor state. Since that time the

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house and its grounds have been restored. Northcourt House remains (2002) in private ownership and the rest of the estate is in divided private and public ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Northcourt House is situated on the north-west side of the village of Shorwell in a rural, inland part of the Isle of Wight. The B3399, which links Newport to the south-west coast road, runs through the site and the village, forming part of the south-east boundary of the gardens. Northcourt occupies c 17ha on a hilly site at the eastern end of a valley, known as Shorwell Shute, between two downs. It is bounded to east, west, and north by farmland, with the main body of the village lying to the south and south-east.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The boundary along the B3399 is formed by a low stone wall which is broken in two places, c 100m to the east of the House where the main drive exits the property, and c 100m to the north-east of the House where it enters. A single stone gate pier marks the north-east entrance. A curved gravel drive runs from here through boundary woodland planting to emerge at the gravelled forecourt below the north front of the House. A second drive runs west from the B3399 cutting across the north park to Northcourt Farm, the home farm added to the property by General Leith at the beginning of the C20 (now, 2002, in separate ownership).

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Northcourt House (listed grade II) is a large two and a half-storey country house of irregular ground plan. It is constructed of stone under a tile roof, with stone mullion windows and red-brick chimney stacks. There are entrance doors on the north front overlooking the gravel drive, and on the east front overlooking the garden terraces. The building sits near the water supplies on the footprint of a monastic residence, occupied by the nuns of Lacock Abbey. The present house was begun by Sir John Leigh in 1615 and completed in 1629 by his son Barnaby. The north-west wing, possibly designed by Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), was added in 1905 by General Robert Leith. Some 100m to the north of the House stands the stable block (listed grade II) which faces east onto the parkland. It was built in the early C19, probably for General Willoughby Gordon.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens at Northcourt lie mainly to the west, north, and east of the House, with extensive ornamental woodland occupying the land to the north-east. They contain several very mature trees including a c 500-year-old yew, and an avenue of limes dating from the mid to late C18. Below the east front lie terraced lawns which lead to a woodland garden laid out along the banks of a stream which rises at the Shor Well c 80m to the south-east of the House. The stream finds its source from a number of springs which pass through a brick-lined channel of late C19 construction, terminating in a sluice gate, designed to control the water level to create a cascade of c 7' (c 2m) (now, 2002, disused). Overlooking the east lawn, at the source of the stream, stands a domed water-house known as the Bath House (listed grade II), probably erected by Elizabeth Bull in the late C18 or early C19. Immediately below the south front of the House is a small knot garden which is set beside a long walk running along the base of the rising ground, on the footprint of an Orangery demolished in 1934. Beyond it lie a croquet lawn and tennis lawn. The walk leads into two small areas of grass pasture, and beyond this the path turns south-east, crossing a small stone bridge over the stream to link into the woodland walk along the southern boundary.

To the west of the main south walk the land rises and is contained to the south of the House by substantial castellated retaining walls at the southern end of which stands a grass-covered mount, possibly of C17 origin, accessed by a serpentine path. Above the castellated wall is an upper grass terrace walk, above which is a path, planted in the late C20 with a wide variety of flowering shrubs and trees. The path runs north back towards the House, passing a small sunken water garden, now planted (late C20) with exotic species, and a recently planted (late C20) orchard. As it reaches the House, the ground slopes down to a lawn below the west front, on the north side of which is a small sunken garden dating from the early C20. Beyond this to the north-west is the walled garden and stables, set beside the remains of an ornamental grove of limes dating from the C18.

Beyond the parkland, to the north-east of the House, is The Dell, a further ornamental woodland, linked to a plantation on the east side of the B3399 by an Alpine Bridge (restored in the 1980s). In c 1800 Richard Bull erected a mausoleum (now lost) in The Dell to the memory of his other daughter, Catherine, who died in 1795. The other surviving feature of Elizabeth's work in The Dell is the knucklebone floor of a summerhouse. A walk runs through the woods on the east side of the road to a low mound known as Mount Ararat (now mainly hidden in the undergrowth) on which stand the vestigial remains of the Temple of the Sun which was erected by Elizabeth Bull in the late C18. Indeed the main structure of the gardens which survive at

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Northcourt can be attributed to Elizabeth and her work on the gardens from 1795 to 1809, although it is likely that the terracing and the mound are much earlier. The wealth of published material from the early part of the C19 suggests that Elizabeth Bull was very highly regarded and her gardens were well known.

PARK The diminutive (c 6ha) parkland lies to the north and north-west of the House and is now partly under arable. The area is enclosed by perimeter woodland, in the north-west corner of which stands the early C20 home farm buildings (now known as Northcourt Farm). A perimeter ride, dating from the late C18/early C19, partially survives through the woodland although the ornamental dairy which formed a feature along this ride no longer survives. The area immediately north of the House was replanted with parkland trees towards the end of the C20, while that to the south of The Dell contains several very mature parkland trees.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden (listed grade II) lies c 40m to the north-west of the House, its east wall being formed by the back wall of the stable block. The high red-brick walls enclose a garden divided from north to south by a gravel path edged with box and flower borders. The ground is partially grassed, with fruit trees and bushes to the west and vegetable plots to the east. A small glasshouse stands in the north-west corner. A walled garden is shown in this position on the 1793 OS map and it is therefore likely that the garden is of C18 origin, although its exact date of construction is not presently known. The glasshouses within it are of more recent construction with remnants of the boiler house to the rear.

REFERENCES

H P Wyndham, *Picture of the Isle of Wight Delineated on the Spot in the Year 1793* (1793) Sir Henry C Engelfield, *A description of the principal picturesque beauties ... of the Isle of Wight* (1816), pp 106-8 J Albin, *A Companion to the Isle of Wight* (1818) Barber's *Picturesque Illustrations of the Isle of Wight* (1831) P Lambert, *The Landscaping of Northcourt* (unpublished report 1993) [copy on EH file] *Isle of Wight Gardens Trust Newsletter*, No 11 (1994)

Maps J Andrews, *County map of the Isle of Wight*, 1769

OS 6" to 1 mile map of the Isle of Wight, 1793 (PRO) OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1861 2nd edition published 1898 3rd edition published 1909 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1862 2nd edition published 1898

Illustrations Several illustrations of the property are held at the Isle of Wight Record Office, including: Watercolour of Northcourt, c 1760 W Angus, *North Court House in the Isle of Wight, the seat of Richard Bull Esq, 1796* Series of sketches of the landscape dated c 1812 J P Neale, *Northcourt, 1822* G Brannon, *Northcourt, the seat of Mrs Bennet, 1824*

Description written: August 2002 Amended: March 2003 Register Inspector: EMP Edited: June 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.