

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

MERTON COLLEGE

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Name: MERTON COLLEGE

County: Oxfordshire

District: Oxford (District Authority)

Parish: Non Civil Parish

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.751038
Longitude: -1.2513175
National Grid Reference: SP 51780 06081
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1001099
Date first listed: 01-Jun-1984

Details

College quadrangles and gardens, laid out C16-C20.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Walter de Merton, Chancellor of England in 1261, founded the college in 1264 when he was Bishop of Rochester, buying up land in Oxford from 1266, and moving the college to Oxford in 1274. Mob Quad, the first of all university college quadrangles, was built between 1308 and 1378, after the chapel chancel, and college building continued during the C15 and C16, with Fellows' Quad built by Sir Henry Savile, Warden, in the early C17. Agas' map (1578) shows several enclosed compartments on the site of the college garden, three of which were planted with trees and the rest blank. By 1675 (Loggan) formal garden features had been laid out east of the buildings, most of which were replaced by rows of trees by 1797 (Davis). During the C19 and early C20 the individual compartments, including the Warden's Garden, were gradually amalgamated with the Fellows' Garden, much as it remains today, with its informal lawns. The site remains (1997) in college use.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Merton lies at the centre of Oxford, 150m south of the High Street, on level ground raised c 3-4m above the level of Merton Field to the south. The c 2ha college is bounded to the north by Merton Street, to the east and south by the city wall, and to the west by Corpus Christi College (qv). Merton College is set within a group of other city centre colleges, the closest of which are Corpus Christi and University to the north across Merton Street, together with the University Botanic Garden (qv) adjacent to the east and Merton Field and Christ Church Meadow (qv) to the south.

ENTRANCES, APPROACHES AND QUADRANGLES The college is approached from the north, off Merton Street, through a gateway beneath the central tower in the north range of Front Quad. This entrance quadrangle is dominated by the east end of the college chapel (C13, listed grade I) on the west side, and the Hall on the south side, together with the range of C15-C16 stone buildings enclosing the remainder of the paved (late C20), rectangular quadrangle. From Front Quad a path beneath the Fitzjames Gateway (c 1500, listed grade I) at the south-east corner leads into the square, grassed (C20) Fellows' Quad (1608-10, listed grade I) surrounded by a stone path, to a passage through the centre of the south range which gives onto the city wall to

the south. At this point stands the Water Gate, a delicate, ornamental wrought-iron gate flanked by a stone gateway (probably C18) set into the lowered city wall, standing at the bottom of a flight of steps adjacent to Deadman's Walk which runs along the bottom of the wall, with views revealed over Merton Field and Christ Church Meadow to the south.

A passage from the north-east corner of Front Quad leads into the Tudor-style St Alban's Quad (rebuilt on three sides by Basil Champneys 1904-10), enclosing a square of lawn surrounded by a paved and cobbled path. This Quad, open on the south side, is separated from the Fellows' Garden to the south by a ceremonial iron screen (Basil Champneys 1907, listed grade II) with iron gates and gate piers, set on a low, stone retaining wall and reached from the Fellows' Garden below by a short flight of stone steps. A passage in the north-east corner of St Alban's Quad leads into the north-west corner of the Fellows' Garden.

Merton Grove, an open lawn set with mature trees, runs along the length of the west boundary with Corpus Christi. It contains a serpentine path set in lawn, which connects Merton Field and Christ Church Meadow to the south with Merton Street to the north. Iron gates and screens (the northern one early C20, listed grade II) mark both ends, and the path is separated from the rest of the lawn by an iron fence. The area is overlooked by the west end of the chapel, and Grove Building (William Butterfield C19, remodelled 1930) at the south-east corner of the Grove, and on the west boundary by the tall, east range of Corpus Christi buildings, and that college's high garden wall. The Grove is also reached from Front Quad via Mob Quad (C14), a small, stone quad enclosing a square lawn (C20) surrounded by a stone perimeter path, entered from Front Quad at the north-east corner, with a further passageway at the north-west corner giving access to the chapel and the Grove lawns.

GARDENS The Fellows' Garden, the main college garden, lies on the east side of the main group of college buildings, bounded to the west by Fellows' and St Alban's Quads, to the south and east by the city wall, and to the north by a further tall, stone wall separating the garden from Merton Street. Fellows' Garden is divided into two by a low stone wall running south from the east range of St Alban's Quad, this being the remains of a wall (reduced C19) which divided the former Warden's Garden to the west from the Fellows' Garden to the east. The two gardens have retained individual identities, although visually united since the C19. The west compartment, south of St Alban's Quad, is largely laid to lawn, with several specimen trees, a gravel path running along the east and south sides, and a stone sundial (sited c 1830) in the south-east corner of the lawn, next to an old mulberry tree. The gravel path continues east between the south front of Fellows' Quad and the lowered city wall, passing the Water Gate, emerging at the south-east corner of Chestnut Lawn, an open lawn with a large horse chestnut on the south side, bounded to the south by the lowered city wall, to the west by Grove Buildings and to the north by the south, library wing of Mob Quad. The main, east compartment of the Fellows' Garden is laid largely to lawn with groups of trees and specimens, dominated by a raised viewing terrace running along the inner sides of the city wall on the south and east boundaries. A flight of broad stone steps gives access from the south-west corner of the garden to the southern arm of the terrace, at the top giving onto a broad, gravel path running along its length with a row of semi-mature trees along the north edge, bounded to the south by the city wall parapet. The south arm slopes steeply down to lawn to the north, the slope being sharply defined and turfed; at the west end a semicircular bastion set within the city wall has been incorporated into the structure of the terrace, with broad views over Merton Field and the meadows beyond. The east arm of the terrace, again bounded on the outer, east side by the city wall forming the parapet, also has a straight gravel path, focused at the north end on the stone-built Fellows' Summerhouse (1706-7, listed grade II), now used as a music room. The two-storey, south-facing Summerhouse is reached by a flight of curved stone steps with delicate iron hand rails on the south side, up to its central door, flanked by large windows. A small stone balcony on the south side is bounded by a continuation of the iron hand rails. A clipped yew hedge bounds the west side of the path leading to the Summerhouse, and below this the southern half of the terrace slope has been re-graded (possibly C19/C20) to a shallower gradient and planted with shrubs. A flight of stone steps towards the north end of the terrace leads down to the lawn. A straight path from the Summerhouse leads west along the buttressed north wall (medieval, listed grade II), the path set on a low terrace with a stone retaining wall by the main lawn, terminating at the garden entrance from St Alban's Quad.

Merton acquired much of the area occupied by the Fellows' Garden during the C15, and in 1444 the land was acquired for the Warden's Garden to the west. A strip of land owned by Balliol College however separated the two areas until the C18. By 1675 (Loggan) both gardens had been laid out formally with rectangular beds. The Fellows' Garden contained four hedged compartments and had acquired the raised terrace along the east wall, with a look-out in a bastion (now gone) at the south-east

corner of the city wall, and two sets of steps down to the west, the southernmost set being aligned on an avenue of small trees running away to the west boundary (probably the precursor of the lime avenue removed from the same place in 1995). In the early C18 the south arm of the terrace was constructed, together with the elegant Fellows' Summerhouse, and the north wall was largely rebuilt; the Water Gate seems to have been constructed around this time. The lime avenue (removed 1995), running west to east on approximately the line of the avenue shown in Loggan's map of 1675, was probably re-planted during the early to mid C18. The formality of the Garden was gradually lessened during the C18, and by 1850 (Hoggar), although the east and south terraces remained, together with the lime avenue, the Fellows' Garden was laid to lawn with several large shrubberies and serpentine paths between them. The dividing wall between Fellows' and the Warden's Gardens had gone too by the mid C19, and the latter garden appears to have been laid out with specimen trees and shrubs on an open lawn much as is seen today.

REFERENCES

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Maps Agas/Bereblock, *Map of Oxford*, engraved 1728 from 1578 original Hollar, *Map of Oxford*, 1643 Loggan, *Map of Oxford*, 1675 Faden, *Plan of Oxford*, 1789 R Davis, *A New Map of the County of Oxford ...*, 1797 A Bryant, *Map of the County of Oxford ...*, surveyed 1823 Hoggar, *Map of Oxford*, 1850

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1881(2 2nd edition published 1901 1926 edition OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1880 OS 1:500 1st edition published 1878

Description written: November 1997 Amended: March 1999 Register Inspector: SR Edited: March 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.