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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

BLAISE CASTLE AND HAMLET

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Name:	BLAISE CASTLE AND HAMLET
District:	City of Bristol (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.503422 Longitude: -2.6388000 National Grid Reference: ST5575878470, ST5598678888 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II* List Entry Number: 1001426 Date first listed: 15-May-1987

Details

Mid C18 landscape garden overlaid by late C18 landscape park, laid out largely in accordance with Humphry Repton's suggestions, with further early C19 additions and structures by John Nash and G S Repton. Since 1949 used as a public park.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Domesday refers to a wood one mile square in the manor of Henbury, held by the bishops of Worcester. There are traces of ancient woodland on the estate, with ridge and furrow and old field boundaries in the parkland south of Blaise Castle House and the remains of an Iron Age hillfort on Blaise Hill. After the Dissolution, and the seizure of the estate by the Crown, Henbury was granted to Sir Ralph Sadlier, of Standon in Hertfordshire. Henbury was sub-let by the Sadliers until they sold it in lots in 1675. A substantial part was purchased by Sir Samuel Astry, whose father-in-law, George Morse had built a house, known as Henbury Great House, on land in the village purchased from the Sadliers some ten years earlier. After Morse's death in 1688, Astry took over and enlarged the house and made formal gardens to the north, and planted a double avenue to a summerhouse on the top of Blaise Hill. The whole layout is depicted in an engraving by Kip published in 1712 (Atkyns 1712).

After Astry's death, the manor passed via the Earl of Suffolk who had married one of Astry's daughters, to the Smyths of Ashton Court, Avon (qv). Although they held the estate until 1760, they sold the Great House in 1730 and it was finally demolished in the 1830s. In 1762, Thomas Farr, a wealthy Bristol sugar-merchant, bought 110 acres (c 45ha) of the estate, comprising the old Manor House, then a gabled farmhouse (depicted in one of Repton's Red Book paintings), Blaise Hill, the land between the Hill and the village of Henbury, and Hazel Brook in its spectacular gorge. Farr was responsible for commissioning the London architect Robert Mylne (1733-1811) in 1766 to design Blaise Castle, a triangular prospect tower, designed to command views of the shipping in the Severn and the Avon. Farr created an elaborate pleasure garden, inspired by that of his friend Valentine Morris at Piercefield near Chepstow, designed to capitalise on the sublime qualities of the topography, with bastions, wooden cannon, and look-outs on Blaise Hill overlooking the gorge. He made cascades and pools in the brook, with a steam-engine designed to raise water to supply water-features in the gorge in which he built a bath-house and a root-house. Farr went bankrupt in 1778 as a result of the blockade of shipping in the American War of Independence. The property was purchased by Dr Denham Skeet, who in turn sold it to the Bristol banker and Quaker, John Scandrett Harford, in 1789. Harford augmented the estate with further land purchases, including the east side of the gorge, and in 1795 commissioned a design for a new house, Blaise Castle House, from the Bristol architect, William Paty (1758-1800). At the same time, Harford invited Humphry Repton

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(1752-1818) to visit. Repton made two further visits in 1796 and a Red Book was completed the same year. After Paty's death in 1800, Repton's partner, the architect John Nash (1752-1835) became involved, designing an ornamental Dairy in c 1804, an Orangery in 1806, and picturesque cottages at Blaise Hamlet, completed in 1812. Repton's sons George Stanley Repton (1786-1858) and John Adey Repton (1775-1860) appear to have assisted Nash on these commissions. After Harford's death in 1812, the estate was inherited by his son, John Scandrett Harford Jnr. G S Repton may also have given advice on the park and gardens in the period 1812-20. Charles Robert Cockerell (1788-1863) was commissioned in 1832-3 to work on the House and immediate surroundings. Further ornamental planting continued during Harford Jnr's lifetime. J S Harford Jnr died in 1866, after which Blaise Castle ceased to be the family's principal seat. In 1926, the estate was purchased by the Bristol Corporation, excluding Blaise Hamlet which was bought by the National Trust in 1943. The Corporation opened the estate as a public park, and in 1949 the House as a museum. Under the Corporation's ownership, Blaise has served as a public park but with little alteration to its picturesque qualities. DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING The Blaise Castle estate of c 100ha abuts the southern edge of the village of Henbury, now part of the north Bristol suburbs, c 5km north-west of the city centre. Its south-west boundary is formed by properties in the residential area known as Coombe Dingle; directly west it abuts the Kings Weston estate (qv) on Kings Weston Hill. The north-west boundary is formed by Kings Weston Road and properties in the village of Henbury. To the north-east the boundary runs behind C20 properties and a playing field on Henbury Hill but includes a Repton lodge towards the southern end of Henbury Hill, c 750m south-east of Blaise Castle House. To the south, the boundary runs along the north side of Coombe Hill including the higher, more wooded parts of a golf course, and around the rear of properties in the suburb of Coombe Dingle, abutting Kings Weston, Avon (qv) east of Henbury Lodge, c 1.7km south-west of the Blaise Castle House. Topographically, the site is dominated by Blaise Hill, at the eastern end of a ridge which rises some 2.2km to the south-west as Kings Weston Hill. Hazel Brook enters the estate at the north-east, 200m north-east of the House, and runs south-west through a gorge bounded on either side by high ridges with limestone outcrops. From Blaise Castle there are spectacular views south-west towards the Avon, while from the ridge of Kings Weston Hill there are northward views to the Severn and the Welsh hills. Blaise Hamlet (c 0.8ha) is now separated from the rest of the estate by suburban development but occupies a clearly defined enclave c 300m north-west of the House.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES A service drive c 50m long, now the main vehicular approach to Blaise Castle House, approaches the House from the north-west, past a stable courtyard designed by William Paty (1801, listed grade II), arriving at a forecourt on the north-west front. A long, winding drive enters the estate from Henbury Hill, 750m south-east of the House. The entrance is marked by a castellated lodge designed by H Repton (1798-9, listed grade II*) but built as a mirror image of the drawing in the Red Book. Some 380m west-north-west of the Gothic Lodge the approach passes Timber Lodge (early-mid C19, listed grade II*), a thatch-roofed cottage naturelle clad in bark and ivy thrums, and after a further 200m passes Woodman's Cottage (1798, listed grade II) which was depicted in the Red Book. Beyond this, the drive zig-zags down the steep east side of the gorge, crossing Hazel Brook by a stone bridge 350m south of the House (c 1798, listed grade II) before turning northwards along the west bank of the brook and through a cutting between lawns to the House. Part of this drive was diverted c 1820, or possibly by G S Repton when he was working at Blaise Hamlet in 1812, from H Repton's designed approach c 200m inside the entrance gate, running c 20m south of it before rejoining it north of the Woodman's Cottage. Repton describes the construction of his approach in the Red Book for Burley-on-the-Hill (1796):

'At Blaise Castle... I have lately finished one of the finest approaches in the kingdom; altho' for many hundred yards the sides of the hills were so steep, that I had to be let down by ropes to mark the line of the road'. (Humphry Repton 1796)

The line of this earlier approach is still traceable as low earthworks and is marked by plantings of beech and lime with northward views framed by Scots pine and yew trees. A second approach, now a footpath but formerly a carriage drive (c 1812), runs along Coombe Dingle, entering the estate outside the land here registered some 1.5km south of Blaise Castle House, and following Hazel Brook along the rear of early C20 properties in Pitchcombe Gardens for c 300m before entering the gorge.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Blaise Castle House (1795-9, listed grade II*) was built for John Scandrett Harford by the Bristol architect, William Paty. It is situated just a few metres north-east of the site of the old manor house occupied by Thomas Farr,

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in the north-east corner of the site. It is located on the south side of the village of Henbury and commands open views into the park to the south-west of Blaise Hill and its foreground, and to the south of the valley of the Hazel Brook. Former views to parkland south-east of the House are largely obscured by self-sown trees in the valley of Hazel Brook. H Repton advised on the siting of the new house, which is in accordance with the Red Book (1796). Paty's design for J S Harford was a two-storey box in a plain, Classical style with only a six-column Ionic porch on the north-east side as relief. Nash added a curved orangery (1806, listed grade II) to the east of the House. Work by Cockerell was largely to the House interior but included a link from the House to the orangery, as well as a terrace, balustrade, and Coade stone urns south and west of the House (1831-2, listed grade II).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Immediately east of Blaise Castle House, and overlooked by the orangery, stands a thatched dairy (Nash c 1804, listed grade II*) with a small pool in front, in a C19 garden enclosure. Some 40m north-west of the House is a stone seat (Cockerell 1832, listed grade II) constructed to look along a double elm avenue planted by Sir Samuel Astry (late C17), of which survivors were still standing as late as the 1970s. Part of this avenue has been replanted (late 1990s) with lime trees as part of a restoration programme. The pleasure grounds, as defined by the walk shown on Repton's plan in the Red Book, are laid out between the House and Blaise Hill. Some 200m south of the House the ground falls sharply to the Hazel Brook and footpaths follow the remains of a compact network of terraced walks and viewpoints, overlooking the brook. Approximately 120m due south of the House, is the levelled site of a root-house built for Thomas Farr. The prospect tower, Blaise Castle, 450m south-west of the House, is approached via two walks, one leading round the north side of the Hill, the other around the south side overlooking the gorge. The latter passes Robber's Cave (listed grade II) and a viewpoint, Lover's Leap, 500m south-west of the House, constructed after the demolition of Farr's bastions as part of Repton's improvements in the late 1790s. The former, known as the Vista Walk, runs c 400m along the north side of the Hill before turning and climbing south-east and east to approach the Castle (1766, listed grade II*) from the west, via another of Farr's bastions, and following the line of a substantial rampart of the Iron Age hillfort. On the summit of the Hill, in a lawn fringed with Scots pine, Corsican pine, and oak trees, stands the Castle which is now a shell but in 1919 was furnished on the first floor as a dining room for excursions from the House. The Castle was designed as an eyecatcher in views around the landscape and as a prospect tower from which Farr and his guests could watch the shipping in the Bristol Channel.

The pleasure grounds also include a walk south along Hazel Brook to a circular bath-house, c 600m south of the House, the foundations of which survive and are known locally as the Giant's Soap Dish. The brook contains remnants of Farr's ornamental stonework, including small cascades and footbridges. Some 30m north of the carriage bridge which carries the Repton approach over the brook, stands Stratford Mill (listed grade II), re-erected here from the Chew Valley in Somerset when the valley was flooded for a reservoir in the 1950s. Both sides of the gorge feature extensive hanging woods, predominantly of beech trees, and on the east side the high ground is characterised by limestone outcrops, the largest of which, Goram's Chair, is a feature of the sublime and picturesque views from Blaise Hill. Some 700m south-west of the House is Arbutus Walk, laid out in the mid C19, which runs north/south along the east slope of Kings Weston Hill. On the north-facing slope of a ridge to the east of Hazel Brook is Rhododendron Walk (c mid C19), c 450m south of the House.

PARK Fairly level and open parkland lies north and west of Blaise Hill, south of Kings Weston Road, and to the south-east of the House, east of Hazel Brook. The latter is known as the Royals and was an important middle ground in views from Repton's approach; in it there are vestiges of early C19 planting. There is more open parkland c 600m south of the House, now partly used as a golf course, which climbs a hillside to the boundary of the site here registered at the summit of Coombe Hill. Footpaths follow former carriage drives to the south-west, connecting the Blaise and Kings Weston estates via Echo Gate, 700m south-west of the House. The park is dotted with occasional specimen trees, including a Wellingtonia, cedars of Lebanon, an Atlantic cedar, and a holm oak.

KITCHEN GARDEN A brick-built kitchen garden (c 1800, listed grade II) stands c 50m north-east of the House. A large number of mid C20 glasshouses, built as part of Bristol City Council's nursery system, are mostly derelict although some are still in use by Cannington College.

OTHER LAND Blaise Hamlet, which Pevsner (1979) described as 'the ne plus ultra of picturesque layout and design' is located some 300m north-west of Blaise Castle House, and is now approached from Hallen Road. A footpath leads from the gate in

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the east boundary wall up six steps and through a shrubbery belt to the Hamlet's central green. To the south it is contained by a wall of 1812 (listed grade II). The Hamlet, which extends to approximately 0.8ha, was laid out and built in 1812 to designs by Nash in response to a commission from J S Harford to build nine estate cottages for former estate workers and employees. Each cottage (all listed grade I) is different, but with common design motifs, such as the tall chimneys, dormer windows, and overhanging eaves. A terraced walk runs past and links each cottage. The cottages are irregularly spaced around the undulating green which has a sundial and pump in the middle (1815, listed grade I). Nash's scheme included planting proposals to clothe the walls and porches of the cottages.

REFERENCES

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Maps Tithe map for Henbury parish, 1840 (Bristol Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1904 3rd edition published 1921 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1881

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Archival items H Repton, *Red Book for Blaise Castle, 1796* (Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery) H Repton, *Red Book for Burley-on-the-Hill, 1796* (private collection) Harford Papers (Bristol Record Office)

Description written: October 2002 Register Inspector: DAL Edited: September 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.