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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

St Osyth's Priory

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Name:	St Osyth's Priory
County:	Essex
District:	Tendring (District Authority)
Parish:	St. Osyth
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.806213 Longitude: 1.0713462 National Grid Reference: TM 11838 16414 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1000237 Date first listed: 01-Jul-1987 Date of most recent amendment: 20-Mar-2014 Location Description: Park and Garden at St Osyth's Priory, The Bury, St Osyth, Essex, CO16 8NZ.

Historique de la conservation

The settlement now known as St Osyth is recorded as Chicc in the Domesday Book of 1086, and is said to be the location of a C7 convent founded by Acca, Bishop of Dunwich. Its first Abbess Osyth, daughter of the Mercian king Frithwald and wife to Sighere, the first Christian king of Essex, is purported to have been brutally martyred at the hands of Danish marauders in 653. Her name was later commemorated by the renaming of the village as St Osyth, although it continued to be known also as Chich into the post-medieval period. The location of the convent is unknown although Nun's Wood to the north of the Priory may be relevant. Within Nun's Wood, a possible moated site and a series of fish ponds may relate to pre- or early Priory occupation of the estate.

Archaeological finds of the C8 to C10 indicate a settlement of that date at or near to the present village. The Church of St Peter and St Paul is thought to be the site of St Peter's Minister mentioned in a document of c. 1050. The Domesday Book records that there were three Manors at Chicc in 1066.

The Priory was founded shortly after 1120 by Richard de Belmeis, Bishop of London, as a house for Augustinian canons from Holy Trinity, London. The Priory was dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul, and St Osyth and became an abbey before 1161. It is most likely that a park was associated with the abbey, possibly from 1268 when a charter was granted to the abbey allowing some hunting rights. Of the monastic buildings, the earliest remaining work is the sub-vault of the Dorter range which is of the period of the foundation; the still existing portions of the walls bounding the Cloister on the east and west are possibly also of this date. The fragmentary upstanding remains of what was probably the Kitchen are of the early C13; to the same period belong the remains of the early gatehouse. In c.1230–40 the Frater was rebuilt with the vaulted passage to the east of it; at the end of the C13 the vaults in the former west range were built. The Great Gatehouse and the ranges flanking it and projecting south from it were built in the late-C15; the eastern of these ranges incorporates the earlier gatehouse. In about 1527 extensive additions were made by Abbot Vyntoner who built the Abbot's Lodging, aligned east/west on the north side of the court, with a range running

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north-south (known as the South Wing in 2012). These abbey buildings survive to varying degrees of intactness, the most prominent today being the gatehouse and the Abbot's Lodging, both reflecting the abbey's wealth in the late medieval period. Following its dissolution in 1539 St Osyth's Priory was initially granted to Thomas Cromwell, but after his execution in 1547 it was given to Princess Mary, with reversion to Thomas Darcy. By 1553 Darcy had gained possession of St Osyth's including the 'Greate Parke and Litle Parke with deer and game and liberties' (Debois 2003). In addition to extending the Abbot's Lodging, Darcy also enclosed a new garden to the south of the Abbot's Lodging which 'at its southern end joined the original priory wall,' (McCann, 1990) probably the garden walls of the current rose garden. His son, the second Lord Darcy, entertained Queen Elizabeth there in 1561 and 1579. The third Lord Darcy was made Earl Rivers by Charles I and his heiress was made Countess Rivers, the earldom continuing through her until the fourth Earl died in 1712 without legitimate male heir. The Essex property, with St Osyth's as the main seat, was left to his natural daughter Bessy Savage, while the extensive remainder of the estate was inherited by the heirs of the Earl's legitimate daughter. Bessy married Frederick Zuytlestein de Nassau, third Earl of Rochford in 1714 but as her contested inheritance was only confirmed on her in 1721, any major building works were probably not undertaken until after that date. Debois thinks it possible that the 3rd Earl may have reworked the ponds and banks in Nun's Wood and added clumps of specimen trees. Their son, William Henry, inherited as fourth Earl in 1738 and was known as considerable amateur plantsman; he is credited with the introduction of the Lombardy poplar to Britain before 1758, following a period in Turin as British envoy, and also corresponded about trees with the Earl of Coventry at Croome Court, Worcs. An estate map of 1762 by Eyre shows the grounds of St Osyth's, including an elaborate water garden in Nun's Wood, and a hermitage and gardens around the house. Estate accounts (Essex Record Office) refer to work in Nun's Wood between 1774 and 1780 and as well as the waterworks, the Wood was extensively replanted with shrubberies, parts of which survive. The fourth Earl almost certainly reworked his father's design, perhaps influenced by Lord Petre (1713-1743) probably including the Pleasure Grounds, the mounds, the platoons, avenues in a possible goose-foot arrangement and a narrow tree belt to the north, used as a tree nursery. A new plantation followed in the late 1750s after his return from Lombardy. Account books record that a peach house was built in 1777-8; the park ha-ha was added in 1772 and a summer house was built in 1778. An ice house was first mentioned in 1779, although its location is unknown and the ponds in Nun's Wood were further realigned to create a riverine feature. Winding walks and shrubberies were added to the pleasure ground and formal gardens round the Priory. During the C18, the Great Park referred to in the C16 documentation, had become Great Park Farm, and later still was known as Park Farm. The largest oak and sweet chestnut pollards may date to this period: it is possible that the park was divided into a series of small enclosures that included some coppice woods.

On William Henry's death in 1781 the title was inherited by his nephew, but the St Osyth's estate passed to an illegitimate son, Frederick Nassau, who married Catherine Rose, Baronne de Brackel in 1797. An estate survey of 1814 shows the grounds slightly modernised, either by Frederick or by William Henry. Entries in the estate accounts books (Essex Record Office) for 1774-5 suggest that the formal water garden was reworked at this date. Frederick died in 1845 and was succeeded by his son William Frederick who committed suicide in 1857, leaving the estate in trust for his two daughters. They sold the property in 1858, which by 1863 had come into the ownership of Sir John W Johnson, who undertook large-scale restoration, extensive remodelling of the gardens, and planting in the park. It is said that 6 of the 10 acres of the garden were kitchen gardens; there were 13 glass-houses in the kitchen garden, including two vineries, a peach and a cucumber house. Johnson probably reworked the wilderness to the east of the house and by 1874, redesigned the lawn north of the Priory. The C18 ha-ha which marked the boundary between the lawn and park was replaced and the kitchen gardens to the south-west (paddock in 2012) was turned into an ornamental garden where finer fruit was also grown, known as the 'Bantan Garden'. A sunken garden was laid out to the east of the Abbot's Tower. To the north of the Priory, the lily pond and Japanese garden were established by the 1921 OS map to the north of the coach turning circle and the alignment of the ha-ha was changed again to accommodate the new pond. To the south of the Priory, the pleasure grounds focussed on the wisteria-covered pergola with topiary garden and the Rose garden, both laid out between the Darcy garden walls and divided by a tall yew hedge. The rose garden was laid out in a formal parterre design of four quarters and rose beds edged with low box. Both these gardens are maintained and survive in good condition.

Johnson radically altered the Park, felling the New Plantation and planting three strips. Nun's Wood and the splayed avenue were reconfigured and the belt and grotto grove felled and replanted.

In 1909 he was succeeded by his adopted daughter Mabel Watts, who in 1913 married Arthur Cowley. During the First World War the house was shut up and in 1920 Lady Cowley sold it to General Kincaid-Smith. The house was requisitioned by the Forces during the Second World War and in 1948 was converted into a convalescent home. The Priory estate was purchased by Somerset de Chair in 1954 although the house continued to be used as a convalescent home until 1980. De Chair allowed extensive gravel extraction in the central and west parts of the park. On the death of Somerset de Chair in 1995 the estate was put up for sale and was purchased by the Sargeant family in 1999 who have undertaken restoration work to Nun's Wood and the ponds. The site remains (2012) in single private ownership.

Details

Late-C19/early-C20 gardens, laid out within C16 garden walls beside medieval buildings, set within a park which retains possible monastic fish ponds, developed as a whole in the C18, with C19 reworking.

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING St Osyth's Priory is located in the village of St Osyth, close to the Essex coast and on the east side of the St Osyth and Flag Creek estuary. This is a popular holiday area, where the level ground gives long views over the flat landscape and the estuary waters. The c.76ha site is bounded by a farm track and agricultural land to the north, by the main road from Colchester to the east, and by the road known as The Bury and the village green to the south. The western boundary looks out across the flood plains of the estuary.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The Priory and its associated buildings are located in the south-east corner of the site, approached through an imposing late-C15 gatehouse of knapped flint (listed at Grade I) situated on The Bury. This is the main historic entrance which leads directly into The Green, a garden court on the south front of the Priory. From the northern boundary an early-C18 drive, altered to its present alignment in the mid-C18 and in 2012 a track, enters the park close to the Colchester Road (the late-C18 lodges were demolished in the 1960s). It follows a curving line south through the park to arrive at the stable buildings on the west side of The Green. A late-C20 drive enters the site through the buildings of Priory Farm and joins the north drive to the west of The Green. A further C18 entrance from the western boundary no longer survives. There are additional entrances from The Bury, Colchester Road, Mill Street and the creek.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING St Osyth's Priory (listed at Grade I; the whole Priory site is a scheduled ancient monument, but the designations are being reviewed in 2013) is an imposing mansion of red brick, ashlar, black diapering and septaria chequerwork, under a red-tiled roof, built in a T-plan. The entrance front faces south onto The Green, while the north front faces the garden lawn and parkland beyond. The complex structure incorporates Bishop Vyntoner's c.1527 buildings, a mid-C16 wing and the eastern Clock Tower added by Lord Darcy, mid-C18 house to the west by Lord Rochford, and a mid-C19 east service wing. All ranges were subject to later C19/C20 alterations. A red-brick wall (recommended for listing at Grade I in 2013), now a garden wall but originally part of Lord Darcy's C16 building, is attached to the south-east tip of the Priory and runs east to join the mid-C16 Darcy Tower (listed at Grade I). The octagonal tower is built of ashlar and septaria, in three stages with raised turrets at three angles. On the north side of the Tower is the Chapel (listed at Grade I) incorporating medieval work. Beyond the Chapel, c.75m to the north are the ruins of the east range (listed at Grade I) of Lord Darcy's C16 house.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The garden at St Osyth's lies to the south, east, and north of the Priory. The Green between the Gatehouse and the Priory is enclosed by a mid-C16 garden wall (listed at Grade II) to the east, running south from, and attached to, the Darcy wall, and by a range of buildings to the west, which include a listed C16 Tithe barn (listed at Grade II*), a C16 brewhouse (listed at Grade II), and a medieval barn and cottage (listed at Grade II*). The courtyard is laid to lawn set with walnut trees at the south end, and is surrounded by a gravel drive. Stone steps at the Priory end of the lawn lead onto a lower flat area, in the centre of which stood a sundial in the late-C19, the centrepiece of a small flower garden which no longer survives.

To the east of The Green, reached through a gate in the C16 garden wall, is a Topiary Lawn filled with clipped yew and edged with brick paths, divided by a brick pergola running south from the Darcy wall to a sunken bowling green. The Topiary Lawn and pergola, which date from the late C19/early C20, are enclosed to the east by a further mid-C16 garden wall (listed at Grade II). At the southern end of the bowling green, steps lead up to a gateway through a yew hedge dividing the C16 walled garden in half, into a Rose Garden laid out in a complex parterre of box-edged borders and gravel paths. The Rose Garden is also a late C19 feature, which was replanted in 2010. The south boundary wall of this compartment forms the southern boundary wall of the site. Beyond the walled garden to the north-east is a woodland walk which wraps around the eastern end of the Priory buildings. This is situated on the site of the C18 Wilderness shown schematically on both the 1762 and 1814 surveys which was substantially reworked in the mid -C19 by Sir John Johnson in the form which survives today (2012). Debois (2010) suggest that the Wilderness was the location of the Tudor grand formal garden, but the surviving configuration and planting is C19 and C20, although there may be archaeological remains of earlier garden layouts beneath. In the south-east corner of the gardens, bordered to the north by the Wilderness, is an open lawn with late-C20 herbaceous borders aligned on Darcy's Tower and leading east to a small hedged area known as the Monks Cemetery.

To the north of the Priory is a large open lawn set with mature cedar of Lebanon, and bounded to the north by a ha-ha. A small, informal lily pond c.100m north of the house, is surrounded by mixed shrub planting. By 1874 Sir John Johnson had reworked this area, which had been the C18 pleasure ground, incorporating some of the park to the north into the north lawn to make a new boundary which would accommodate the creation of the lily pond, all that remains of his Japanese Garden. In 2012, the lily pond no longer holds water.

PARK The large park at St Osyth's lies to the north of the Priory buildings. It is retained under grass and is crossed by avenues and thin belts of mixed species trees, with several oak pollards of great antiquity. The open park immediately to the north of the Priory has been devoid of trees since the storms of the late 1980s and was labelled as the 'Mowing Ground' on the 1814 plan, prior to which it contained a mount (estate map, 1762). By contrast, in the south-west section, known as Priory Park, many mature individuals survive. The central section of the park, known as Deer House Park, is covered with old and modern gravel extraction pits, those from the C19 having been re-colonised by vegetation, while some of the C20 pits are filled with water and, in 2012, were being cleared of vegetation. In the centre of the western boundary is a hummock on which is planted a copse, known as Grotto Grove, which contains the remains of a flint shell house, ruinous following a fire which destroyed the roof in the late-C20. Close by are the foundations of a second flint building known as The Kitchen. These two buildings are first shown on the 1762 plan, labelled 'Hermitage', and are part of the work undertaken by the fourth Earl of Rochford.

To the north of the gravel extraction area is the dense Nun's Wood containing a string of ponds. Debois (2010) consider that the ponds in Nun's Wood have medieval antecedents and probably formed a monastic fishery, subsequently remodelled into water features in the C18. In 2012, the ponds were being cleared of vegetation and silt and the self-sown trees and scrub were being removed from the woodland. A ruinous brick and flint building at the north edge of the wood is noted as 'Nuns Hall' in the 1874 OS map. Debois (2010) suggest a C18 date, and note that it was used as a conduit, but its origins and early form are not clear. Beyond Nun's Wood is a further area of open parkland, known as Lodge Piece, with few surviving individual trees but an extensive perimeter plantation called The Belt which runs all along the eastern boundary. This was described as a nursery on the 1762 plan, which also shows a drive running through it. During the late C20 the plantation has been partly replanted and deepened.

The park is crossed by two large avenues of trees and a thin mixed belt in the south-west corner of the park known as the West Strip, planted on a bank which represents the position of the C18 West Avenue. The strip radiates from the same point c 200m north-west of the Priory as the Nun's Wood Avenue, which is aligned on the centre of Nun's Wood. It is crossed by the Chestnut Avenue which runs east/west through the park from the north drive to the western boundary just south of Grotto Grove and is shown in this position on the 1762 plan. It is possibly a survivor from an earlier formal layout (Debois 2003, 2010).

KITCHEN GARDEN The walled kitchen garden lies c.110m to the north-east of the Priory, reached via the woodland walks through the Wilderness. It is divided into two by a central walk and contains a perimeter gravel path edged by box borders. The ground is partly laid to grass and partly cultivated for vegetables. Beyond the northern boundary wall is a late-C20 wild garden.

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
St Osyth's Priory

The kitchen garden was probably built in this position by the fourth Earl of Rochford in the mid-C18, although an early-C19 date has been suggested by Debois (2010) and is being assessed for listing in 2013.

Summary

A Park and Garden with monastic origins, remodelled in the C18, C19 and C20.

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.

Reasons for Designation

The Park and Garden at St Osyth's Priory is registered at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

* Historic interest: the designed landscape reflects the multi-phased history of the Priory and its estate, contributing to the national historic importance of this site; * Landscape design: the designed landscape is predominantly C19 in character but retains elements of monastic, post-Reformation and C18 arrangements. Of these The Green, Nun's Wood and formal gardens to the south and east of the Abbot's tower and Darcy House ruins are particularly significant; * Group value: the Park and Garden has strong group value with, and provides an important setting to, the St Osyth's Priory Scheduled Ancient Monument and numerous listed buildings on the site most of which are of exceptional architectural and historic interest.

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Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England
Inventory of Great Britain
St Osyth's Priory

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