

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

FLAXLEY ABBEY

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Name: FLAXLEY ABBEY

County: Gloucestershire

District: Forest of Dean (District Authority)

Parish: Blaisdon

label.localisation: Latitude: 51.836044
Longitude: -2.4515449
National Grid Reference: SO 68984 15367
[Map: Download a full scale map \(PDF\)](#)

label.overview: Heritage Category: Park and Garden
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1000763
Date first listed: 28-Feb-1986

Details

Formal gardens of the 1960s within a C17 framework, and an adjoining deer park, associated with a country house converted from a Cistercian abbey.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Cistercian abbey of Flaxley (or the Abbey of Dean) was founded c 1150 by Roger, Earl of Hereford. Tradition states that it marked the spot where his father Miles of Gloucester was killed hunting in 1143. Several medieval kings stayed here while hunting in the Forest of Dean. The abbey was dissolved in 1536. In 1537 the site was granted to Sir William Kingston (d 1540), whose son, Sir Anthony (d 1556), converted part of the abbey buildings to a residence, but the family seem rarely to have visited. In 1648 the estate was acquired as an investment by the brothers William and James Boeve (later Boevey), members of London's Dutch community. The estate changed hands several times within the family before passing in 1683 to William Boevey (d 1692), who began the formal garden here, shown in Kip's view of c 1712 (Atkyns 1712). They may have been completed by his widow, Catharina (d 1727), allegedly the model for the 'Perverse Widow' pursued by Addison's Sir Roger de Coverley. She shared the estate with a kinsman, Thomas Crawley, who assumed the name Crawley-Boevey. He died in 1742, and his son and heir, also Thomas (d 1769), enlarged the estate in the 1760s by purchasing land in Westbury-on-Severn. During the time of his son, a third Thomas (d 1818), who inherited a baronetcy in 1789, the house was rebuilt, the gardens landscaped and, perhaps, the deer park created. Thereafter the estate passed with the title from father to son through Thomas (d 1847), Martin (d 1862), Thomas (d 1912), and Francis (d 1928). The break up of the estate, already begun, was completed by Sir Launcelot, the son of the last-mentioned. In 1952 he sold over 200ha of woodland to the Forestry Commission, and in 1960 Flaxley Abbey and just under 80ha to a local industrialist. That property, where restoration work took place on the house and new gardens were created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, remains (1999) in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Flaxley Abbey stands in the flat valley bottom of the Westbury Brook on the north side of the unclassified road from Mitcheldean to Elton through the scattered settlement of Flaxley. This forms the south-west boundary of the site, which is otherwise defined by field boundaries. North, east, and west of the Abbey

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the ground rises and is wooded, and represents the north-east extremity of the Forest of Dean. Cinderford lies 4km to the south-west. The area here registered is c 40ha.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The Abbey, with deer park rising behind, is approached along a curving drive over the flat, lush meadows of the valley bottom, from a gateway on the minor road to its south-west. This is close to the site of the medieval abbey's gateway. A track from the south-east follows the line of a back drive. Midway along it, on its west side, is a small cottage labelled as a lodge on late C19 and early C20 OS maps.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Flaxley Abbey (listed grade I) incorporates some of the Cistercian claustral buildings; the church was apparently destroyed by fire on the eve of the Dissolution. Extensive alterations to the manor house were carried out in the late C17 by William Boevey; these included a brick extension on the east side of the main range. After Flaxley Abbey was badly damaged by fire in 1777 it was repaired and altered to designs by Anthony Keck (d 1797). The northern half of the main range, which had been destroyed, was replaced by a cross wing which matched that on the south end, while a new block was built to the south-east. The house received gothic adornments including battlements and buttresses in the earlier C19. Restoration and alteration after 1960 was assisted by a friend of the owners, the stage designer and artist Oliver Messel (d 1978).

North of the house, outside the registered area, lie the barns and other agricultural buildings of the Home Farm. Gothic detailing at the south end of a barn may form part of the late C18 work at Flaxley. The Farm may be the site of the abbey grange mentioned in 1227.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS Against the west front of the main house, in the C17 and C18 occupied by a forecourt, is a lawn. In the later C20 the north end of the Abbey was occupied as a separate dwelling. Against its west front is a flagged garden, probably of the late 1960s, around a circular basin. At the north-east corner of this garden is a brick summerhouse, also of the 1960s. The flagged garden is on the site of a parterre garden shown by Kip (Atkyns 1712), at the north-west and north-east corners of which was a pair of pavilion-like summerhouses.

East of the house is a gravel sweep. This opens to the west onto a lawn. The main garden is east of the house, in a compartment c 80m square. This garden was largely created in the 1960s within a framework surviving from the late C17 gardens shown by Kip. To the west and north it is bounded by brick walls of various dates but including, to either side of the Orangery (listed grade II), sections broadly contemporary with it. The Orangery, aligned east/west at the north-west corner of the garden on the site of the abbey's north cloister walk, is of brick with a stone rear wall (part of the church's south wall) and a hipped slate roof. It was probably built for William Boevey. The front has seven windows (late C18 or early C19 sashes), the middle one a French door. It looks out onto a stone-flagged terrace which has a central rectangular pool with apsidal ends surrounded by box-edged beds. East of this is the principal lawn (the site of the main parterre garden in Kip's view) with a large central pool divided by a grass causeway across its centre. Another pool, with balustrading along its east side, lies to its east. To the north the lawn is bounded by a raised walk alongside the north wall, and to the east and south by canals dug in the 1960s, the latter replicating one shown on Kip's view of c 1712. Catalpa trees run down the north and south sides of the lawn.

Immediately east of the garden the ground slopes uphill into the former deer park. The axial line of the garden is carried on by a mature avenue of limes, c 150m long, running from west to east. This narrows markedly as it proceeds uphill to the skyline, intended to give the illusion of a longer avenue. The avenue provides access between the Home Farm and the park, and the hillslope within the line of the avenue is ramped to ease vehicular access.

The formal gardens depicted by Kip (Atkyns 1712) were begun by William Boevey who inherited Flaxley in 1683 and died in 1692, and were completed by his wife Catharina, d 1727. As already noted, these included, to the east a large formal parterre bounded by raised walks to the north and east, and a canal to the south. Three enclosed forecourts ran in line west of the house. The most northerly was the small formal garden with corner pavilions. South of this was the small entrance forecourt. The most southerly compartment may have been a lawn. By the end of the C18, and presumably as part of the post-1777 alterations, these gardens had been removed and replaced by informal lawns. The formal gardens created in the late 1960s and early 1970s were designed by Oliver Messel.

PARK A deer park occupied the south-facing spur of hill which rises immediately north-east of the Abbey's garden. It extended c 600m north/south by 400m east/west, and is still largely surrounded by C19 deer rails, mostly in a dilapidated condition. The

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south boundary runs east/west c 50m north of the lodge on the back drive. From the spine-like crest of the hill there are panoramic views both westward over the wooded hills of the Forest of Dean, and eastward over the River Severn and its floodplain. A belt of woodland runs north/south down the centre of the park. To the west much of the park is under arable cultivation, while to the east is permanent pasture. On the south-east slope of the park is a block of Blaisdon Red plum trees, planted c 1960.

There is apparently no mention of a park in medieval records. Kip's view of Flaxley, published in 1712 (Atkyns) indicates the whole of the hill north of the avenue was wooded, but not imparked. The park's creation may have been part of the improvements at Flaxley in the late C18, and was apparently present by 1802. The date, in the C20, when deer ceased to be kept, is not known. Kip's view shows an iron works near the southern boundary of the deer park, one of several such enterprises in the vicinity in the C17 and C18. Industrial remains set into the hillside c 60m east of the lodge on the back drive, are presumably associated with the iron works.

In the late C18 or early C19 the valley bottom south and west of the Abbey was landscaped to give open views to St Mary's church (founded c 1253 near the abbey gate; rebuilt in 1856 a little west of its earlier site) to the south-west. Some mature specimen trees survive, notably where the park borders the road. An orchard of Blaisdon Red plums, planted c 1960, lies c 100m west of the Abbey.

KITCHEN GARDEN Kip's view of c 1712 shows what appears to be a small kitchen garden immediately south-west of the south canal. In the late C18 a new kitchen garden (not extant) was laid out north-west of the Home Farm.

REFERENCES

R Atkyns, *The Ancient and Present State of Gloucestershire* (1712), pl after p 436 *Victoria History of the County of Gloucestershire VI*, (1965), pp 140-7 *Country Life*, 153 (29 March 1973), pp 842-5; (5 April 1973), pp 908-11; (12 April 1973), pp 980-4 D Verey, *The Buildings of England: Gloucestershire The Vale and the Forest of Dean* (2nd edn 1976, reprinted 1980), pp 185-7 N Kingsley, *The Country Houses of Gloucestershire, Volume Two, 1660-1830* (1992), pp 141-3 J Harris, *The Artist and the Country House from the 15th century to the present day*, (exhibition catalogue 1995), p 53

Maps Flaxley, 1802 (D4543 4/1), (Gloucestershire Record Office)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1878, published 1891 OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition surveyed 1878-9, published 1880

Description written: February 1999 Register Inspector: PAS Edited: April 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.