

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

*Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England*

**Inventory of Great Britain**

CIVIC SQUARE, PLYMOUTH

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Name:	CIVIC SQUARE, PLYMOUTH
District:	City of Plymouth (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 50.369471 Longitude: -4.1427610 National Grid Reference: SX 47713 54370 <a href="#">Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)</a>
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001425 Date first listed: 09-Apr-1999

## Details

A public square of 1957-62 designed by Geoffrey Jellicoe and established as part of the civic layout of Plymouth planned in 1956 by the city architect H J W Stirling and based on Patrick Abercrombie and J Paton Watson's post-war plan for Plymouth of 1943.

### HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Civic Square (formerly called the Great Square) was first envisaged by Stirling in his plan for the civic layout of Plymouth. The plan proposed a pedestrian square on the line of the Armada Way, the north/south axis of the city terminating at the Hoe which had formed part of the earlier Abercrombie plan. A large public square was planned between the existing C19 Guildhall (restored and re-opened in 1959) and the new Civic Centre by Jellicoe, Ballantyne & Coleridge (1957-62).

The main aim of Stirling's plan was 'to draw these various parts of the area into one unit', and 'to show that the Great Square is virtually the centre and indicates that the space design must become a link between the Guildhall and the municipal buildings whose shapes, dispositions and characters are in opposition; the square must also, indirectly, allow for the classical lines of the Armada Way to pass sympathetically through the precinct' (Architect's Journal 1962).

According to Jellicoe, his plan for the Great Square in Plymouth called for 'dignity and frivolity', and 'a civic amenity to be enjoyed by townspeople at all times' (Jellicoe 1970). He conceived the square primarily as a pedestrian precinct, with traffic diverted away from the areas reserved for pedestrians. This allowed for the creation of a garden with water, planting, and decorative hard landscaping, using a wide variety of materials such as reinforced concrete, granite, pebbles and Plymouth limestone, which technique 'raised many interesting points' (Official Architecture and Planning 1963).

In the 1970s, Plymouth altered the northern part of the square by building a subway to allow pedestrians to cross beneath the busy Royal Parade and the pedestrian walkway surrounding the square was opened to cars. In the late 1980s a small cafe was built in the centre of the square and the post-top lanterns were removed. Currently (1998) Plymouth City Council is preparing proposals for improving the square.

### DESCRIPTION

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING** The square is situated in the centre of Plymouth and occupies an area of 2.1ha on the axis of Armada Way north of the Hoe. It forms one of the series of urban open green spaces along Armada Way, which is designed to create a long vista between the Hoe and the town centre.

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The square, now (1998) largely obscured by overgrown trees and shrubs, is bounded to the north by Royal Parade, to the south by Princess Street, and to the east by the Guildhall and the Crown Court. The western part of the square is occupied by the Civic Centre and the council offices.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACH** The square can be approached by pedestrians from the south along Princess Street and from the north through the subway. Since the 1970s traffic has been allowed full access to the square, and cars may be parked along the east and west sides, except in front of the Civic Centre.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** The principal building, forming part of the design for the square, is the Civic Centre designed by Jellicoe, Ballantyne & Coleridge and finished in 1961. The building, which covers the western part of the site, consists of three parts: a fourteen-storey rectangular tower containing council offices and a restaurant on the top floor offering fine views over the square and the town centre, a two-storey range of offices surrounding the base of the tower and enclosing a paved courtyard, and the two-storey Council House at the south side of the two-storey block. The Council House has on the first floor a large reception room with a balcony resting on pilotis which overlooks the square through large windows, and which includes the Lord Mayor's suite.

The decorative use of materials in the building's facades is reflected in the hard landscaping of the square. The north and south walls of the tall block, which are blank except for a central vertical strip of windows, are faced with slabs of Cornish granite. The east and west faces have green granite panels between the rows of windows, varying in tone according to a geometrical pattern. The lower blocks are faced with riven slate on the ground floor, while the blank walls above are faced with precast panels with an exposed aggregate of pink and grey Plymouth limestone. The precast columns are made of reconstructed Portland stone and the window frames of hardwood, aluminium or steel.

The eastern boundary of the square is defined by the C19 Guildhall (listed grade II) designed by Norman & Hine and re-opened after restoration in 1959, and the Crown Court of 1961 designed by the city architect H J W Stirling.

**THE SQUARE** The square is laid out as a formal garden with elements of hard and soft landscaping. The central part of the square comprises an L-shaped pond, containing a circular island with a tree and along its west side a series of fountains (now, 1998, out of order). To the east the pond is bounded by a rectangular lawn with trees, and to the north by several mature chestnuts and lime trees standing on a grass mount. The trees stood already on the site and were incorporated in the 1960s layout. Five new *Ulmus glabra* trees were planted as eventual replacements for the existing trees. Most of the area north of the pond is paved with 2" Plymouth limestone cut to 18" widths and laid out in random lengths interspersed with bands of natural slate at 10' intervals. The aim was to create different effects depending on the weather: when the paving is dry the slate bands register strongly, when wet, the limestone dominates. Within the paved area are five reinforced concrete circular seats, each 15' (c 4.5m) in diameter and set on five supports with ring-beam foundations. Some of the seats contain trees deliberately situated off-centre, to give a "'hoop-la" swing to the circular seats' (Jellicoe 1970). To the east of the seats stands a white tent-like circular-shaped cafe with outdoor seating.

The south end of the square is characterised by two raised biomorphic beds of in situ reinforced concrete with reconstructed stone copings. The larger one is laid out as a lawn, described by Jellicoe as 'the baroque lawn ... suggestive of the city's sea environment' (ibid). The lawn is planted with trees and shrubs. The smaller bed is planted with mixed bedding plants and *Phormium cookianum* to provide colour and texture. The shape of the beds is reflected in the interlocking curving shapes of the surrounding paving, which is of pink and grey precast Plymouth limestone with an exposed aggregate surface paving.

The Council House on the west side of the square is supported by circular columns faced with red glass mosaic, creating an open courtyard containing a rectangular pond, in contrast with 'the stone Guildhall, planted firmly on the ground' (Official Architecture and Planning 1963). The pond is largely surrounded by limestone paving and in part by a band of pebbles set in concrete. The south-east corner of the pond has a rectangular bed with mixed planting. The courtyard offers fine views into the main garden square and westwards to the car park beyond the Civic Centre (closed off by a fence). The small garden to the west of the Council House is laid out with a lawn with shrubs and flowers planted in hexagonal boxes placed on the surrounding paving.

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To the west of the Guildhall is a triangular parking area marked with concrete bollards. The area is paved over with black triangles of asphalt set into a reinforced concrete surface, in a geometrical pattern. Because of the need to retain this area as a carriageway (formerly Guildhall Road), it was 'heavily patterned to destroy the sense of traffic and to resolve by their geometry the angle of the facade of the Guildhall with Royal Parade and Armada Way' (ibid).

At the north end of the square a two-pronged ramp gives access to the subway with the space between them containing a flagpole flanked by concrete raised beds with shrubs and trees. This area was laid out in the 1970s when the subway was built. Formerly, the flagpole stood on a circular paved area surrounded by a lawn planted with trees.

#### REFERENCES

Architect's Journal, (25 July 1962), p 202 Official Architecture and Planning, (April 1963), pp 310-11 Plymouth the New City, (special issue of BICC Bulletin), (British Insulated Calenders Cables Ltd 1964) G A Jellicoe, Studies in Landscape Design III, (1970), pp 111-12. M Spens, The Complete Landscape Designs and Gardens of Geoffrey Jellicoe (1994), p 84  
Description written: February 1999 Register Inspector: FDM Edited: February 2001

#### 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.