

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

Sydney Gardens

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Name:	Sydney Gardens
District:	Bath and North East Somerset (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
label.localisation:	Latitude: 51.386349 Longitude: -2.3493830 National Grid Reference: ST 75784 65314 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: II List Entry Number: 1001258 Date first listed: 25-Jun-1992

Details

Late C18 commercial pleasure grounds designed by Thomas Baldwin and Charles Harcourt Masters, opened by Bath City Council as a public park in 1913.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

Sydney Gardens were laid out as commercial pleasure grounds between 1792 and 1794. The initial design was by the architect Thomas Baldwin, who, after he went bankrupt, was replaced by Charles Harcourt Masters in 1794. The Gardens were funded by the sale of shares and built on land leased from the local Pulteney family. They were opened on 11 May 1795 as the Sydney Gardens Vauxhall, and rapidly became a popular place of entertainment, providing a site for public breakfasts, promenades, and galas. Jane Austen, who came to live at 4 Sydney Place in 1801, thought highly of them and attended a gala held at Sydney Gardens on 18 June 1799. The walled pleasure grounds were surrounded by a ride or carriage drive, had bowling greens laid out on either side of a central walk, and a Labyrinth (Plan, 1795). The main building was the Tavern, also known as Sydney House (the current Holburne Museum), which stood at the west end of the central walk and contained tea and card rooms, a ballroom, a coffee room, and a public house. In c 1799 a section of the Kennet and Avon Canal, adorned with ornamental bridges and tunnels designed by John Rennie, was cut through Sydney Gardens. At the time the introduction of the Canal was seen as a novelty, adding to the 'Picturesque Beauties' for which the Gardens were known (Snaddon 2000).

During the first quarter of the C19 various new attractions were introduced in Sydney Gardens. These included a Cascade (1810), an artificial rural scene with figures and water falling down a ravine, moved by a clockwork mechanism; an Aviary (1824); a Cosmorama (c 1824), where pictures of distant places or dramatic scenes were lit and then seen through convex glass windows so as to appear life-size; a Hermit's Cot including a robed puppet figure as the hermit; a Watermill or Miller's Habitation, powered by water from one of the natural springs in the upper part of the Gardens; and a Theatre. In 1834, the Bath Horticultural and Floral Society was formed and Sydney Gardens became the venue of their annual shows. In c 1836, Sydney House, a private villa with garden, was built behind an existing loggia, marking the east end of the central walk (outside the area here registered). Subsequently, the existing tavern became known as the Pulteney Hotel (ibid).

In c 1839 work started on the section of the Great Western Railway that runs through the Gardens, effectively cutting the Gardens in half. Various garden features and buildings were destroyed including a tea house, part of the Labyrinth, the Castle, and the C18 perimeter walk. Two new bridges were built over the railway to connect the footpaths in the Gardens. In the same

year, the Horticultural Society split up following a disagreement and one section formed a separate society which purchased its own garden in Royal Victoria Park in Bath (qv), the current Botanic Garden. The other section remained at Sydney Gardens and in 1840 they introduced a new refreshment room, known as the Octagonal Rustic Pavilion (demolished c 1896). In 1842 the two societies merged again and held annual shows at Sydney Gardens and Royal Victoria Park alternately until 1853. In that year the Bath Proprietary College became the tenant of the former Pulteney Hotel and Gardens. Because of financial difficulties further land was leased out and a pair of private semi-detached villas with enclosed gardens was introduced along Sydney Road, covering the site of the former Labyrinth (outside the area here registered). By 1854, a lodge had been introduced at the north-west entrance, probably for use as a dwelling for a gardener (ibid), and a year later a fence was erected to enclose the College grounds separating it from the main Gardens. In 1861 a bandstand or orchestra was built along the central walk; this was demolished in 1950. During the late C19 a gymnasium and croquet, archery, and tennis lawns were also laid out; these were all cleared away after the Second World War.

In 1891, when the ninety-nine-year lease of Sydney Gardens expired, the site (including the College) was sold. By 1894 plans had been drawn up to replace the College building with a large hotel including seventy-five guest rooms, a dining room seating 150 people, and a Winter Garden overlooking Sydney Gardens. This plan was abandoned however and the Empire Hotel was built at Orange Grove in the centre of Bath instead (ibid).

In 1908 Bath City Council purchased Sydney Gardens (including the former College), which were subsequently managed by the council's Parks and Cemeteries Committee. The council opened the Gardens to the public in 1913. A year earlier the council had sold the former College and its immediate grounds and following alterations and renovations by the architect Sir Reginald Blomfield in 1913-15, it reopened in 1916 as the Holburne of Menstrie Museum (later called the Holburne Museum), housing the art collection of the late Sir William Holburne.

During the early C20 and the Second World War, some features and garden buildings fell into disrepair and were subsequently demolished. Between 1952 and 1956 a series of illuminated festivals was held at Sydney Gardens, organised by the Spa Committee who also organised the Bath Assembly, a forerunner of the Bath Festival (ibid). In the late C20, a formal flower garden, tennis courts, a bowling green, a playground, and new toilet facilities were introduced.

In the early 1990s, Bath City Council commissioned a historical survey and since then proposals have been made for the restoration and renovation of Sydney Gardens. The site remains (2001) in council ownership and is open to the public.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Sydney Gardens occupy a 4ha elongated hexagon-shaped site situated in Bathwick, a residential area to the north-east side of Bath. The site is ringed by public roads: Beckford Road to the north, Sydney Place to the south and west, and Sydney Road to the east, from which the Gardens are screened by an encircling stone wall, erected c 1880.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The main entrance is situated in the north-west corner of the site on Sydney Place. It is marked by four square pillars, possibly dating from the 1880s, which formerly had gates hung between them. Immediately to the south-west of the entrance stands a ticket kiosk, introduced in the 1930s.

The site can also be entered via the entrance to the west of the Holburne Museum, situated on the junction between Great Pulteney Street and Sydney Place. This entrance is flanked by two identical late C18 watchman's boxes (listed grade II) which give access to a straight path that runs north-east to the museum, bisecting an oval-shaped lawn. The lawn was formerly surrounded by railings of which now only the stone base remains. In front of the museum runs a coach drive which sweeps around the lawn and links up with Sydney Place to the north and south. This entrance was formerly the main entrance to the Sydney Hotel and its pleasure grounds. In the late C19 a separate gate to the pleasure grounds was added immediately west of the southern branch of the carriage drive. This entrance was closed off by 1932 (OS), and now (2001) only the late C19 ticket kiosk which flanked this entrance, and marked the starting point of the former ride, remains.

There are two additional late C19 entrances, one situated to the south along Sydney Place, flanked by two square pillars, and one to the north-east along Sydney Road, from where steps lead into the Gardens.

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PRINCIPAL BUILDING The main building is the Holburne Museum of Art (listed grade I), standing in the south-west corner of the site. It was built c 1796 as a tavern, to a design by Thomas Baldwin, which was amended by Charles Harcourt Masters. The alterations of 1913-15 by Sir Reginald Blomfield were mainly carried out to the rear of the building: formerly it had a loggia with a covered balcony above, from where the orchestra could play to the audiences in the Gardens below.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS A broad walk, originating from the late C18 layout, marks the main axis of the design. It runs south-west to north-east across the site, linking the Rotunda (listed grade II), which provides the entrance from Sydney House (listed grade II) in the north-east corner of the site, to the gate piers which form the entrance in the wall separating off the gardens of the Holburne Museum. The Rotunda, which is attached to the rear of Sydney House, includes the remains of a late C18 loggia which, having become unsafe, was truncated in 1938 and re-erected as the Rotunda minus its two flanking wings. To the north side of the central walk, marking its halfway point, stands Minerva's Temple (listed grade II). This temple came from the Empire Exhibition held in the grounds of Crystal Palace (qv) in London in 1911 and was re-erected in Sydney Gardens in 1912, with a new plaque paid for by the Bath Pageant Committee. Some 40m to the west of the temple is the site of the former bandstand.

The enclosed garden to the east and south of the Holburne Museum forms a semicircular plan and is laid to lawn, with the area to the north of the Museum in use as a car park. Some 10m south-east of the Museum stands the Gothic Tea House, a former air-raid shelter dating from the Second World War that was converted in the early 1980s by the architect David Brain. The lawn enclosing the Museum is screened by shrubs and trees to the east and closed off by a stone wall, with a central gate, reinstated in 2001, once again giving access to the public gardens. Formerly, up to the late C19, this area was open to the east and linked up with the central walk. It was covered in gravel and lined by wooden refreshment boxes (see views by Nattes, 1805; Wise, c 1820; Hollway, c 1840).

The Kennet and Avon canal cuts from north to south through the eastern half of the Gardens. It is sunk below the level of the Gardens, with an iron bridge dated 1800 (listed grade II) carrying the main walk across it, and to the south of this, a single-span iron bridge (listed grade II) supporting a lesser path. Both bridges have fine decorative railings in the Oriental style and were cast in Coalbrookdale. The Canal Company built their headquarters, called Cleveland House (outside the area here registered), just off Sydney Road on top of the canal tunnel (listed grade II). The building, the rear windows of which overlook the Gardens, forms an important focus in views from the two canal bridges in the Gardens.

The Great Western Railway (started in 1839) runs to the west of the canal and is sunk in a cutting, with low retaining walls (listed grade II*) on either side of the tracks. A walk runs along the west side of the track, separated from it by a balustraded section in the wall. The central walk across the Gardens forms a bridge (listed grade II*) over the railway, to the south of which is a second bridge (listed grade II*) with cast-iron balustrading, which carries another of the garden paths.

A series of winding paths reflecting the original layout provides walks through the gardens, which are laid out as lawn and planted with specimen trees and beds of shrubs. Remains of the perimeter ride can be seen in the south-west corner of the site, near the former late C19 entrance. The ride skirted round the Gardens providing a half-mile (c 0.8km) long circuit, twenty feet (c 6m) wide. Unlike the other paths, which were gravelled, it was macadamised from the start (Colvin and Moggeridge 1993). A tennis court, bowling greens, and a children's playground, introduced in the late C20, abut Beckford Road. At their southern end stands the former lodge (listed grade II) introduced by 1854, with immediately to its south a toilet block introduced in the late C20. Immediately south of this stands a pair of cast-iron public lavatories of c 1910 (listed grade II), now (2001) no longer used. Immediately to the east of the lodge is a flower garden covering a former tennis lawn which was again laid out on part of the perimeter ride. It is enclosed by shrubs and was laid out in the late 1960s and has subsequently been remodelled. The tennis courts along the north-west boundary were first laid out in the late C19. The bowling green and children's playground to their north-east replace a late C19 nursery established on part of the C18 ride (OS 1885). The hard tennis courts at the east end of the gardens, alongside the Sydney Road boundary, were laid out in 1924.

This list entry was subject to a Minor Amendment on 10/01/2018

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Maps Charles Harcourt Master, *Plan of Bath, showing Sydney Gardens Vauxhall, 1795* (reproduced in Snaddon 2000) *Plan of Sydney Garden Vauxhall*, nd (early C19), (private collection) *Sale plan of Sydney Gardens, 1910* (reproduced in Snaddon 2000) OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1885 2nd edition published 1904 OS 50" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1886

Illustrations J C Nattes, three aquatints showing front and rear elevations of Sydney Hotel and the bridges over the canal, 1805 (reproduced in Snaddon 2000) G Wise, three aquatints showing Sydney Hotel from Sydney Gardens, and views of the canal looking north and south, c 1820 (reproduced in Snaddon 2000) J Hollway, two lithographs showing front of Sydney Hotel and the open area near the hotel towards the loggia, c 1840 (reproduced in Snaddon 2000) J Kerr, *A map of the Labyrinth with in the corners depictions of the Water Mill, Sham Castle, Hermitage and entrance to the grotto*, 1825 (in Kerr 1825) W Everitt, *view of the railway through Sydney Gardens, 1844* (reproduced in Snaddon 2000)

Archival items Photograph of the bandstand in Sydney Gardens, c 1894 (reproduced in Snaddon 2000)

Description rewritten: July 2000 Amended: May 2001, November 2003 Register Inspector: FDM Edited: January 2004

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.