

REGISTER OF PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST

ABBEY GARDENS AND
PRECINCTS

Date Registered: 08 JAN 2001

SUFFOLK

Grade: II

ST EDMUNDSBURY

Site Reference Number: 4680

NGR: TL8564

A public park opened at the end of the C19, originally developed by Nathaniel Hodson as a botanic garden in 1831 on the site of the medieval St Edmund's Abbey, beside a series of Town Walks dating from the early C18.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Abbey Gardens occupy the site of St Edmund's Abbey, one of the largest and most important Benedictine abbeys in medieval England. The Abbey was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539, stripped and the ruins left to become a quarry for local builders. The Abbot's Palace was converted into a private house, but was demolished by its owner Major Richardson Pack in 1720. Soon afterwards two lime avenues were planted in the Great Churchyard on the south side of the Abbey Precinct, for use as town promenades, and the ruins to the north were acquired by the Davers family who lived in Abbey House on the adjacent Angel Hill. The land thus became part of their garden, while the Great Churchyard was purchased by the town Corporation in 1798. In 1806 Abbey House and its garden were inherited by the Marquis of Bristol, whose main residence was Ickworth House, near Bury St Edmunds (qv). In 1823 the surveyor J G Lenny produced a map of the Abbey House and garden which shows that there was a kitchen garden where the cathedral building is now, and an orchard on the site of the Old English Rose Garden. There was also an icehouse, a greenhouse, and a sundial. Nathaniel Hodson first established a botanical garden in the grounds in 1821, on the east side of the Great Churchyard, but in 1831 the Marquis offered him a larger area for the garden, at the northern end of the Abbey Precinct on the site of the Great Court of the Abbey, where it remains today. Hodson rented the land together with the adjacent Alwyne House from the Marquis and the garden he laid out, which was financed by subscribers, was recorded in 1834 by R Payne on his map of the town. Originally purely scientific in nature, the planting of the circular garden with its concentric beds was widened to include ornamental plants to attract more subscribers. Hodson became Mayor of the Corporation and died in 1861.

Between 1863 and 1885 two further avenues were planted in the Great Churchyard to enhance its public appeal, while at the end of the C19 the Abbey Gardens were opened to the public, but with a high entrance fee. This led to a group of local people campaigning for them to be turned into a free public park, with the result that in 1912 the Borough Council leased the gardens from the Marquis of Bristol and the park was opened. In 1936 the concentric design of Hodson's beds in the circular garden was redesigned and replaced by the sixty-four island beds which remain today (2000). In 1953 the Borough bought the Gardens from the Marquis of Bristol and began to manage the area around the abbey ruins, thus reuniting the two main parts of the Abbey Precinct - the Abbey Gardens and the Great Churchyard - into single ownership once again. The site remains (2000) in single, public ownership

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DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

The Abbey Gardens and Great Churchyard are situated in the centre of the town of Bury St Edmunds, The Gardens covering an area of c 220m x 300m in the northern half of St Edmund's Abbey precinct which, including the Great Churchyard, extends to c 400m x 300m. The site is partly enclosed by the remains of the medieval precinct walls, bounded to the north by Mustow Street, to the west by Angel Hill and Crown Street, to the south by Honey Hill, and to the east by the River Lark. The ground is generally level but with a slight fall towards the river on the eastern boundary.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The main entrance to the Gardens (the whole of which are a scheduled ancient monument) is from the north-west via the richly decorated Abbey Gate or Great Gate (listed grade I) which was built between 1346 and 1353. It leads from Angel Hill into the Gardens on to a long walk through the centre of the circular beds (see below). Three further gates give access to the gardens: via Mustow Street to the north where the path leads to Alwyne House (built around 1830 onto a stretch of C14 walling, listed grade I) and on into the Gardens; via a footbridge over the River Lark to the east; and through a passage along the back of St James' cathedral to the south which links the Gardens to the Great Churchyard, itself crossed by several pedestrian routes. The main entrance to the Great Churchyard is off Crown Street via the Norman Tower (listed grade I) which was constructed in 1120(48).

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

The major structures within the Abbey Precinct are the ruins of the Abbey (many individually listed grade I), the Abbey Gate, and the Norman Tower. St James' cathedral, midway along the western boundary of the site, has a nave by John Wastell, architect of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, which dates from 1503, and a chancel added by the architect Stephen Dykes Bower in the 1960s. The principal buildings relating to the Gardens are Abbey House (listed grade II*) and Alwyne House. Abbey House, situated on the south side of Abbey Gate, has a C19 front facing Angel Hill with an C18 back facing the Gardens and was built by the Davers family in c 1720; they created a kitchen garden on the site of a bowling green (now, 2000, site of the cathedral cloister and car park). Alwyne House is situated within the Gardens, towards the centre of the northern boundary, and was built for Nathaniel Hodson to live in while he developed his botanical garden. It has its own small enclosed garden area and is now (2000) used as a tea room.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The Abbey Gardens have been developed as a series of enclosed spaces which occupy elements of the abbey ruins. The main axial path from the Abbey Gates runs east, flanked by lawns planted with trees before entering the circular garden, which is enclosed by yew hedges and laid out with sixty-four island beds planted with annual bedding. The path continues east to leave this area and enters the less formal eastern section of the Gardens, where the ruins of the Abbey sit in lawns scattered with individual trees. From the Abbey Gate two further paths turn north and south to skirt the circular garden, that to the north passing a series of small formal gardens, the ice-cream kiosk (a C19 garden house built in the Regency Gothic style, listed grade II), and the mid C20 aviary, all laid out along the northern boundary. The path then turns south-east along the border of the gardens attached to Alwyne House to rejoin the central axial path east of the circular garden. The southern path from the Gate passes Abbey House, with a small formal herb garden below its east front, and leads past an obelisk to a raised bowling green situated on the south side of the circular garden. The mid C20 bowling green pavilion, on the east side of the green, has a glass back which gives views into an enclosed water garden with a formal central canal. A shrub border on the south side of the bowling green leads to a garden of old species of roses at its east end, planted on the site of the monk's refectory. Beyond the shrub walk to the south is a further compartment, enclosed by yew hedges and laid out as an Old English Rose Garden. A sunken area of grass, bordered to the west by the Old English Rose Garden and to the north by the monk's refectory represents the site of the abbey cloister. Surrounding this to the south and east is the main concentration of the abbey ruins, all set in grass. Between the ruins and the river are tennis courts and children's play areas. The remaining north-east quarter of the Gardens is mainly laid to grass and contains the C14 octagonal dovecote (listed grade I).

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The Abbey Gardens are divided from the Great Churchyard in the southern half of the precinct by a range of buildings which include St James' cathedral, a range of houses containing the west front of the Abbey Church, and the Provost's House. The Great Churchyard comprises a large area of grass containing c 1200 burial monuments, cut through by a series of tree-lined paths. It was established at the same time as the Norman Tower and was regularly used as a public gathering place. In the early C18 two public houses backed onto the churchyard which by this time was widely used for public recreation and promenading, prompting the town Corporation in 1732 to plant two lime avenues to line the main walks, both radiating from the Norman Tower. One focused on Nottingham Porch and the other on the Shire Hall (Management Plan 1996). The churchyard was closed as a burial site by the mid C19 when two further lime avenues were planted at the eastern end of the site. At this time a 'Beadle of the Churchyard' was appointed to keep it in good order. During the C20 the area has continued to be used as a public open space.

REFERENCES

Archaeol J 108, (1957), pp 168(89)
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The Great Churchyard, Bury St Edmunds, Historical guide, (St Edmundsbury Borough Council 1996)
The Abbey Gardens, Bury St Edmunds, Management Plan, (St Edmundsbury Borough Council Report 1997)
Visitor's guide to St Edmundsbury Cathedral (1998)
Bury St Edmunds Abbey, guidebook, (English Heritage 1999 reprint)
The Abbey Gardens. History and bedding schemes, information leaflet, (St Edmundsbury Borough Council 2000)

Maps

A Downing, Map of Bury St Edmunds, 1740 (St Edmundsbury Museums Service)
T Warren, Map of Bury St Edmunds, 1747 (Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds)
J G Lenny, Map of Bury St Edmunds, 1823 (Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds)
J G Lenny, Survey of the Abbey House and grounds, 1823 (Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds)
R Payne, Map of Bury St Edmunds, 1834 (Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds)

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1886
2nd edition published 1904
3rd edition published 1926

Archival items

St Edmundsbury Museums Service hold a large collection of historic prints, paintings, and photographs of the Abbey Gardens and the Great Churchyard, including a series of lithographs from the 1830s by J G Strutt.

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