

REGISTER OF PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST

CULFORD PARK

SUFFOLK

Date Registered: 01 JUN 1984

ST EDMUNDSBURY

Grade: II

NGR: TL8370

Site Reference Number: 3173

Terraced gardens, pleasure grounds and walled kitchen gardens dating from the early C19 onwards, with late C19 alterations, set in an early C19 park for which a 'T. Wright' (possibly Thomas Wright) made proposals in 1742 and Repton produced a Red Book in 1792.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

From at least 1429 the Coote family had lived at Culford and in 1524 Christopher Coote was lord of the manor. In 1540 Culford was granted by the Crown to the Bacon family and in 1591 Sir Nicholas Bacon built a red-brick hall on the same site as the present house. The estate passed to the Cornwallis family in 1660 and during the middle of the C18 'T Wright' (possibly Thomas Wright (1711(86), the nationally renowned landscape gardener) was employed. Wright produced a map of the park dated 1742 which shows a formal landscape of avenues, rides and vistas, through geometrically shaped blocks of woodland. Between 1790 and 1796 Samuel Wyatt was commissioned to remodel the house for the first Marquis Cornwallis and in 1791 Humphry Repton (1752(1818) provided advice on landscaping the park, preparing a Red Book in 1792 (Williamson 1993). The estate remained in the Cornwallis family until the second Marquis died in 1823, by which time it had been greatly extended. Culford was sold the following year to Richard Benyon de Beauvoir and an estate map of 1834 shows the major expansion of the designed landscape on all boundaries. From c 1839 the Rev Edward Benyon continued to embellish the estate. In 1889 the estate was sold again, this time to the fifth Earl Cadogan who commissioned the architect William Young to completely remodel the house in the Italian style. New stables were built, the gardens were altered and considerable additions made to the village. Following the death of the sixth Earl in 1933 the estate was sold. The core of the park, together with the house, became the home of Culford School (bought 1935) in whose hands it remain today (1998).

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Culford Park is located c 6km north of the town of Bury St Edmunds beside the B1106 Bury St Edmunds to Brandon road, enjoying a rural setting. The park covers c 210ha, of which 4ha are gardens and pleasure grounds. The boundaries to the registered site are made up of minor roads, village streets and agricultural land. To the west is agricultural land and the village of West Stow, to the south-west and south the minor road from West Stow to Fornham St Geneveve and the narrow woodland screen of South Wood, whilst to the east is Culford village. To the north the registered site is defined by a new (c 1960s) perimeter plantation. Culford Park sits on either side of a gently sloping river valley, widened to create a narrow lake through the park, cutting the site in half from west to east. The whole park is almost entirely screened from its surroundings by plantations and shelterbelts, which generally preclude views into the site. Within the park, the principal views are south from the Hall over the lake and west to the Iron Bridge. There are also minor glimpsed views of the Hall from the disused west drive.

REGISTER OF PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The principal entrance, which has gates and a lodge, is located to the north of Home Farm on the B1106 at the south end of Culford village. This entrance was created in the early C19 and the ornamental wrought-iron gates date from this period (listed grade II). The Lodge Cottage was added by the Rev Benyon c 1850 and is of flint and white brick with fluted barge boards to the gables and C20 concrete pantile roof. The drive leads north through a mixed conifer avenue between the kitchen garden on the east and the church on the west, before sweeping round to the north front of Hall which now (1998) has a tarmac forecourt. A second major drive enters from the west, through a double-lodged entrance, with brick piers and gate. The tarmac drive curves round the western end of the lake then becomes a track running east through parkland to the north front of the Hall. This western drive was created by the Rev Benyon in 1825 and the limes along it date from this time. The school uses a minor entrance on the eastern boundary, past Culford post office (part of the model village and dated 1891). This drive runs west past woodland to the north, with playing fields and the north end of the kitchen gardens to the south, before arriving at the north front of the Hall. The north drive, which ran from the Hall past the stables to the northern boundary, is lined along its southern end by an avenue of lime (late C19), the line of the drive beyond the avenue now broken by a modern (late C20) building associated with the school. North of the stables the drive has been removed. Neither of the southern drives (see below) survive.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Culford Hall (listed grade II*) stands on a level platform east of centre in the park, on the north side of the river. It is a three-storey, white-brick and stone building of irregular form, in the Italian style. The north front is topped by a stone balustrade with urns, has a large porch with Ionic columns and a tower with square copper-roofed cupola. There are large wings to east and west. The original hall at Culford was built in the late C16 for Nicholas Bacon and was rebuilt 1790 (6 for the first Marquis Cornwallis to a design by Samuel Wyatt. Wyatt's seven-bay, two-storey house was absorbed into the core of the present Hall, which was greatly enlarged by William Young for Earl Cadogan in the 1890s.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

These lie principally to the south of the Hall with further areas to west and east. The gardens are entered on the west side of the Hall through ornate iron gates (late C19, listed grade II) which lead to an upper terrace dating from the late C19 (listed grade II). This upper terrace, which wraps around the south front, is laid to grass with broad gravel paths. At the south-east end of the upper terrace is a small projecting bastion which contains a pool. This area is surrounded by box hedging with irregular clipped yew and box to the south. On the west two flights of steps lead from the upper terrace down to the lawns. A broad gravel path, bordered with clipped box and bedding, links the steps to an iron gate in the west wall. To the south of the Hall semicircular curved steps in the centre of the upper terrace lead down across the south lawn to low, wrought-iron garden gates, set on early C19 gate piers (listed grade II), which lead into the park.

The lower garden lawns are divided from the park by a low retaining wall, built to include three bastions, one to the centre west which contains a large plane and one each in the south-west and south-east corners. The south-west bastion is planted with a horse chestnut. This division between gardens and park dates from the early C19 but the wall itself was reconstructed and slightly realigned at the end of the C19. The principal features of the South Lawns are the perimeter walk lined by clipped Irish yew on the west and south sides and the specimen trees and shrubs, including a mulberry planted by Queen Alexandra in 1904. There is an herbaceous border at the base of the upper terrace wall and lead statues in the south-west and south-east corners in front of the bastions. A hard tennis court (C20) has been placed in the south-east corner of the gardens.

On the south-east corner of the Hall is the Headmaster's Lodge (late C20). To the east of the gardens is a walk between the remains of a pleached lime avenue which links the gardens to the church of St Mary (listed grade II). The pleasure grounds extend beyond the church to the kitchen garden and consist of shrubbery and woodland walks, with a mixed woodland plantation including specimen cedars. South of the kitchen garden wall is a new (late C20) bungalow.

REGISTER OF PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST

PARK

The Hall is located in the north-east quarter of the park. To the north-east of the Hall a number of large, modern (C20) school buildings are concentrated, resulting in a loss of parkland character. The late C19 stables are located 400m north-east of the Hall, amongst a range of new school buildings, and have themselves been extended. The church of St Mary sits 100m off the south-east corner of the Hall and was rebuilt for the Rev Benyon in 1856. Approximately 60m east of this are the Widows' Cottages (listed grade II), a row of picturesque almshouses built of flint and brick with fish-scale tiles, also dated 1856. To the east of the kitchen gardens, some 350m from the Hall, the area has been converted to school sports pitches and is devoid of any parkland trees. North and west of the Hall the park is well treed with a mixture of mature oak, horse chestnut, sycamore, lime and beech, some possibly dating from the mid C18. School sports pitches set within parkland lie to the north and to the west of the stables. The park is bisected by a river which was widened in the late C18 or early C19 to create a narrow sinuous lake, a proposal made by Repton in the Red Book but not executed as he suggested (Williamson 1993). The western end is expanded to create the Round Pond with central island. The Lake is crossed by the Iron Bridge (listed grade I) c 400m west of the Hall. Designed by Samuel Wyatt c 1803 for the second Marquis Cornwallis, with granite abutments, stone balustrades and marble urns, the bridge is of exceptional interest as one of the earliest bridges with an unmodified cast-iron structure to survive. The north bank of the lake at the western end has a dense belt of young trees with mature trees within. The south park, beyond the lake, has a thin strip of rank grass along the water's edge but is otherwise covered with coniferous plantation on rising ground all the way to the southern boundary. The main body of planting is known as Dixon's Covert and contains a Bronze Age round barrow (scheduled ancient monument). At the west end of Dixon's Covert is an arable field, and in the south-east corner is a tree belt, all that remains of South Wood.

Comparison of surveys dated 1793 and 1834 show the extent of change in the landscape during this period and also the extent to which Repton's proposals were undertaken. His main suggestions were the extension of the water to create the lake (undertaken but not in the form he proposed); a large new clump in the north park (planted but no longer present); implementation of pleasure grounds to the east of the Hall (implemented later by the Benyon family to their own design), and replacement of Culford village street with a new road (undertaken) (Red Book and Williamson 1993). Up until 1792 when the Red Book was produced, the boundary of the south park ran along the northern edge of Dixon's Covert. Repton suggested a possible extension of the park here and certainly by 1817 more land from the heath had been taken in and the boundary moved to its present line. A drive was created from the Iron Bridge to a lodge at the south-west corner (called Newmarket Lodge; drive and lodge removed by 1881). A drive also ran from the south-east corner towards the Hall but this no longer (1998) exists.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The kitchen garden of c 2.5ha lies c 200m east of the Hall, and has high gault-brick walls with clay and concrete coping. The kitchen gardens are now (1998) much reduced from those shown on the 1904 OS 25" map. There are three main compartments, with the remains of a fourth to the south-west converted to private garden use. The main compartment contains a large, modern (late C20) sports hall on the west side, with hard courts to the south, while the east side is laid to grass, with the remains of a raised terrace and lean-to brick building on the south face of the north wall. The southern compartment is completely laid to grass. The northern compartment contains school maintenance buildings and car parking. These gardens date from the early years of the C19 but they were substantially extended by the Benyon family between the years 1839 and 1881 and during that time became famous under the direction of the head gardener Peter Grieve.

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REGISTER OF PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST

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G Carter et al, Humphry Repton (1982)
Tom Williamson, Report on the history of the landscape at Culford, (UEA 1993)
C Paine (ed), The Culford Estate 1780(1935 (1993)

Maps
[all held in West Suffolk Record Office]
T Wright, A Plan of Culford Park in Suffolk, 1742 (E8/1/10)
J Hodskinson, The County of Suffolk, 1783
Survey of Marquis Cornwallis estate, 1793 (P720/1)
J Lenny and G Croft, Plan of Culford Park and lands and plantations, 1834 (P720/2)
Tithe map, 1840 (T120/1 & 2)

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1882
2nd edition published 1905
OS 25" to 1 mile: 2nd edition published 1904

Archival items
Repton, Red Book for Culford (private collection)
The Cornwallis papers are held at the West Suffolk Record Office, along with other material about the estate.

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