

Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project



Dorton House (Ashfold School)

February 2020



Bucks Gardens Trust

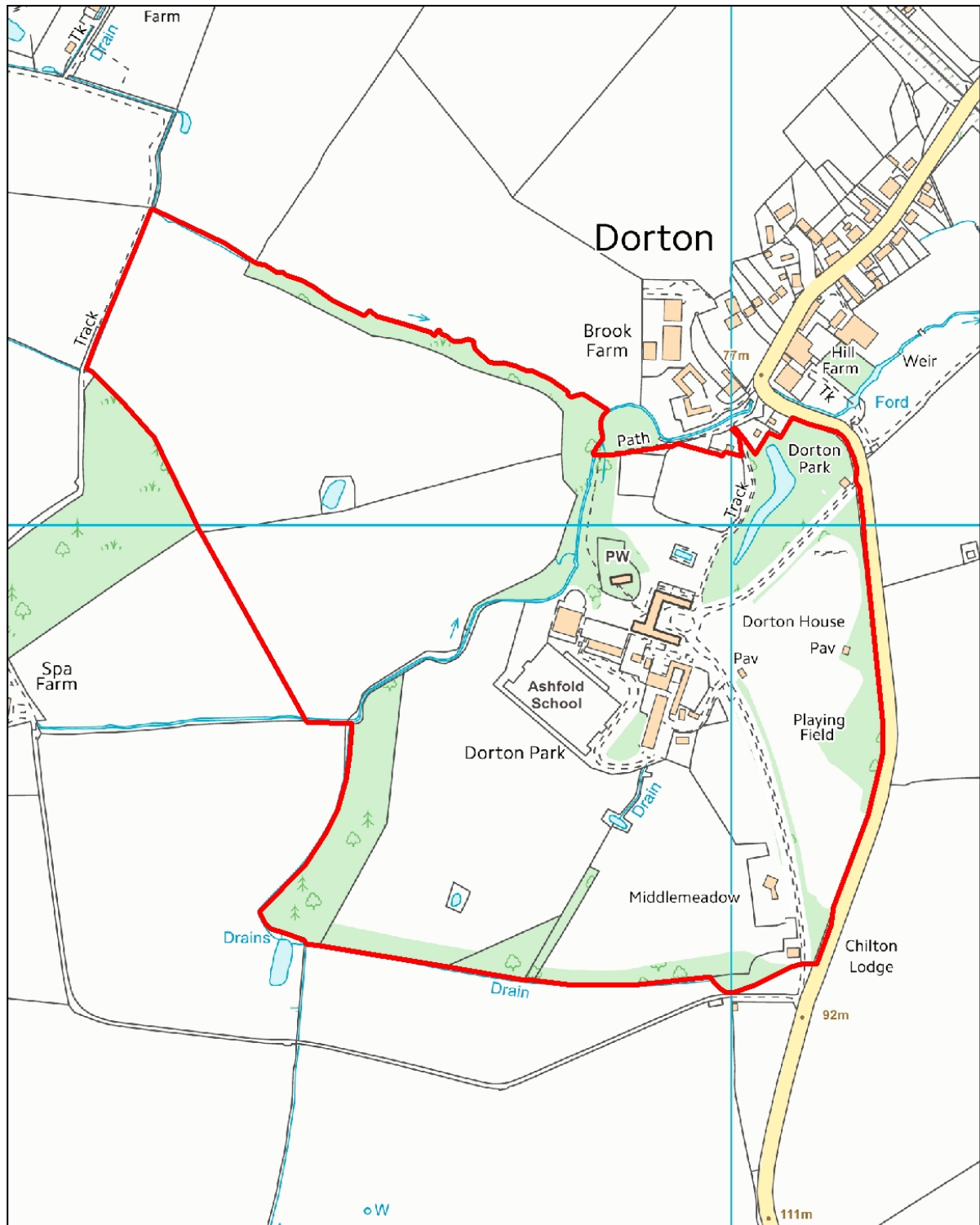


The Finnis Scott
Foundation



Roland Callingham
Foundation

HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY



Dorton House: boundary of historic designed landscape interest

Produced by the County Archaeological Service
November 2019



Scale: 1:5,135 at A4



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Dorton House: 2015 aerial photograph

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Project

This site dossier has been prepared as part of The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust (BGT) Research and Recording Project, begun in 2014. This site is one of several hundred designed landscapes county-wide identified by Bucks County Council (BCC) in 1998 (including Milton Keynes District) as potentially retaining evidence of historic interest, as part of the Historic Parks and Gardens Register Review project carried out for English Heritage (now Historic England) (BCC Report No. 508). The list is not conclusive and further parks and gardens may be identified as research continues or further information comes to light.

Content

BGT has taken the Register Review list as a sound basis from which to select sites for appraisal as part of its Research and Recording Project for designed landscapes in the historic county of Bucks (pre-1974 boundaries). For each site a dossier is prepared by volunteers trained on behalf of BGT by experts in appraising designed landscapes who have worked extensively for English Heritage (now Historic England) on its Register Upgrade Project.

Each dossier includes the following for the site:

- A site boundary mapped on the current Ordnance Survey to indicate the extent of the main part of the surviving designed landscape, also a current aerial photograph.
- A statement of historic significance based on the four Interests outlined in the National Policy Planning Framework and including an overview.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a site visit, based on the format of the English Heritage/ Historic England *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd edn.
- A map showing principal views and features.

The area within the site boundary represents the significant coherent remains of the designed landscape. It does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.

NOTE: Sites are not open to the public unless advertised elsewhere.

Supporters and Acknowledgements

The project was supported by The Gardens Trust (formerly the Association of Gardens Trusts and the Garden History Society) and funded by BGT with significant grants from Bucks County Council, the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust, the Roland Callingham Foundation and the Finnis Scott Foundation. BCC generously provided current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record.

The Trust would like to thank the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much time and effort to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Further information is available from: www.bucksgardenstrust.org.uk

COUNTY:	BUCKINGHAMSHIRE	DORTON HOUSE (ASHFOLD SCHOOL) BCC HER 0168305000
DISTRICT:	AYLESBURY VALE	
PARISH:	DORTON	
OS REF:	SP680 139	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

The informal pleasure grounds and park for a fine Jacobean mansion in the Vale of Aylesbury, including half of a substantial walled garden from the early layout. In the C18 the grounds were extended east and south from the environs of the mansion, including approaches, with C19 alterations including the reduction of the area of the walled kitchen garden reusing architectural details. The pleasure grounds incorporate a system of informal water courses and water bodies including a serpentine lake. The mansion and part of the grounds have been in school use since 1939 with associated changes around the buildings including sports pitches, car parking, school buildings, etc.

Archaeological interest

Evidence survives of the original arrangement of a larger walled Jacobean kitchen garden and for earlier occupation of the mansion site. A possible deserted village may survive in the west park, with other finds of early occupation south of the mansion. The potential exists for evidence of lost garden features which may include paths, walls and other buildings and the ornamental layout of parts of the pleasure grounds including water features and structures.

Architectural interest

This is a typical ensemble of structures for the grounds of a country house in Bucks. Three wings comprise an extensive red brick Jacobean courtyard mansion, restored in the early C20 after late C18 exterior alterations. Evidence of the original layout of the courtyard and wings comes from a C17 portrait of the builder. The wings are exceptionally long for this type of half-H plan house, comparable with Cobham Hall, Kent. The C17 stable block with a late C18 exterior, and courtyard, have been adapted for school use. The C17 garden structures are of considerable note: a Gardener's Cottage incorporated into the garden walls. Wrought stonework possibly from the earlier larger structure is incorporated into the garden walls with an attached stone summer house. The medieval parish church stands in the pleasure grounds behind the Mansion. The C18 south lodge and the C19 Tudor-style north lodge mark the entrances off the public road to the main drives across the park to the forecourt below the mansion.

Artistic interest

The informal pleasure grounds and park for a fine Jacobean country house, which survives largely intact in an attractive sheltered location between hills. Elements of the early layout include the considerable remains of a contemporary walled garden with a gardener's cottage and stone summer house and possibly terracing. The informal pleasure grounds include the complex use of watercourses and ponds, etc, with a serpentine lake east of the walled garden, and the remains of associated walks and views. There is a variety of mature trees. In the environs of the mansion some of the layout established by the early C20 has become obscured or lost to post-War school development but generally the layout survives intact and in good condition.

Historic interest

The site is a typical mid-Bucks manor dating from the turn of the C17 for a prominent and important local family.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The manor of Dorton was held by Alric before the Norman Conquest but was held by Walter Gifford in 1086 (*VCH*). After 1284 the overlordship and manor appear to have been divided and passed through various illustrious families. Part of the manor was sold to Michael Dormer by the Longvilles in 1541 (*VCH*).

Associated medieval occupation is indicated by the deserted village traces in the west park, associated with a small pond which relates to the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist 30m west of Dorton House. Nearby south-east and south-west of Dorton House are the remains of medieval and post-medieval walls and a culvert with sherds, a possible dump of medieval stone with some medieval and C16 pottery (HER).

Sir Michael Dormer settled the united manor on his second son William in 1545. In 1594, after the life interests of other parties had expired, John Dormer bought out his inheritance in Dorton (*VCH*). From 1596 Sir John Dormer began to construct a house at Dorton (Creed) which was finished by 1626. It is likely that the house had several gardens, including an enclosed courtyard laid out with four compartments, a walled garden immediately to the north and another to the south, possibly including water ("A map of the Manor of Dorton and part of Brill Parish copied from a plan in the possession of Sir John Aubrey Baronet" CBS Ma R/3/4.T, undated: the original must date from before the erection of the stables which are listed as C17 with later alterations). The north half of the walled garden survives. In c.1694 Robert Dormer's will settled the land on step-brothers and uncles, the latter including Henry Bertie. There were further unspecified dispositions in 1713. By 1738 Charles Bertie was in possession of one quarter of the holding and another part of the Bertie land had been acquired by the Mitchell family, with another part held by Sir Clement Dormer. Jefferys shows the house in the possession of 'Mitchel Esq' (Jefferys' map 1770).

Both Dormer and Mitchell portions were acquired by Sir John Aubrey Bt. (1739-1826) who had married Martha Catherine Carter (his second wife, 1765-1815) of nearby Chilton in 1783 (Aubrey Fletcher, J). The undated map copy (CBS Ma R/3/4.T) shows the house with formal gardens to north and south immediately below its north and south elevations with no other features of a designed landscape. The field east of the mansion (referred to here as the East Park) did not extend as far south as now. The main Dorton-Chilton road ran to the east on its current alignment. A cross-country route from Adingrove to the south west skirted the south boundary before joining the road from Chilton north of a small triangular plot, Green's Close. The north half of Green's Close was incorporated in the southern extension to the grounds by 1812 (OSD) so that by 1849 (Tithe Map), the field in front of the house was named as 'Roundabout and Lodge'. The rest of Greens Close survives as a separate overgrown triangular parcel to the west of the main road outside the south entrance to the School grounds. The serpentine lake west of the northern approach had appeared by 1812 (OSD), along with another serpentine lake west of the Church, and the two present approaches.

Sir John left the estates to his brother Thomas. In the early C19 Charles Spencer Ricketts became the owner by marriage to Elizabeth Sophia (1792-1873), the heiress to the Aubrey estates. (Aubrey-Fletcher, J). Ricketts from the 1830s attempted the development and promotion of the nearby Dorton Chalybeate Spring as a fashionable Spa: see separate BGT dossier on Dorton Spa.

By 1849 (Tithe Map) the two garden enclosures still flanked the Mansion. The Tithe map shows both north and south enclosures, but no other details of the layout. A thick belt of trees ran along the north boundary towards the village.

By c1880 the lake west of the north approach had gone as an area of open water (OS). The north enclosure had been reduced to its north half – as it is today. Fields north-west of the Mansion were included within the Park. Tree cover was concentrated north of the Mansion, particularly around the serpentine lake; west of the walled garden; along

the approach from the south and inside the eastern boundary (along the boundary to the main road). Screening was achieved by means of a dense scattering of specimen trees. A wooded belt of trees screened the north side of the north-west part of the Park. By 1824 (Bryant) the road from Adingrove was diverted westwards to meet the Chilton road at a more southerly location with the south boundary, apparently in its current position. Both drives approached the house from the south and north east as in the current arrangement.

Charles Spencer Ricketts died in 1868. When his son Charles Aubrey Ricketts died in 1901 without issue, Chilton and Dorton together went to descendants of his cousin Sir Henry Fletcher (Aubrey-Fletcher).

In 1904 external stucco from c1784 was removed along with a general restoration of the Mansion on behalf of Sir Henry Aubrey-Fletcher (Creed) who was then Lord of the Manor (*VCH* 1927). During this period there were few changes to the grounds, principally the loss of trees to the pleasure grounds and minor alterations to the alignment of the paths around the lake. Dorton House was sold the following year to Major Michael Beaumont, sometime Conservative MP for Aylesbury, and Deputy Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire (Creed). Major Beaumont put his Dorton and Wotton estates up for sale in September 1946: the Dorton portion of 1036 acres (approx. 419 ha) included five farms, six cottages, allotment lands and a 'site of spring' (i.e. Dorton Spa) (Map S.C.228). Dorton House was bought as a school by the Royal London Society for the Blind in 1939 (Wikipedia). In 1955 the house was bought by James Harrison for the prep school which moved in 1956 from Handcross near Haywards Heath, Sussex (Wikipedia and School website) in which use the house grounds remain today. Further changes to the grounds involve the further loss of trees, principally in the park east and south of the Mansion. School buildings have been erected and all-weather pitches have been laid out on the south side of the mansion.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING, VIEWS

This 41ha site lies 8.5 miles west of Aylesbury and 5.5 miles north of Thame. Dorton village occupies low-lying level ground below the northern end ('Dorton Hill') of the substantial ridge on which stands the village of Chilton and between the taller hills to the west and east on which Brill and Ashendon respectively sit. This is the reason for its name, 'Dorton' representing the Old English meaning 'settlement in a pass' (Ekwall). The land is chiefly clay on Kimmeridge Clay and Portland Beds (*VCH*). Dorton House faces east in the centre of the site at the south end of the village, along with the village church of St John Baptist 30m north-west. The village road bends sharply to pass to the east of the grounds. This may have passed closer to the mansion when it was built at the turn of the C17. Apart from some historic brick walling to the north bounding a public footpath, the external boundaries are of post and wire fencing. Principal views relate to the mansion: along both drives and in axis from the park in front of the house.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The principal approach ('in') is from the south. It had appeared by 1812 (OSD). The entrance off the Chilton-Dorton road lies 400m south-east of the Mansion. It is flanked by a simple brick former gate pier to the left with a modern capping and pineapple finial and, to the right, white painted fencing, Chilton Lodge on the west side of the entrance is a plain rectangular two storey house, stuccoed under a hipped slate roof, seemingly of C18 date. A deep projecting string course at the level of the first floor windows hints at an earlier origin, possibly as a detached dwelling on the former 'Greens Close' the north half of which was incorporated into the Dorton House landscape by 1824 (Bryant). The south drive continues along an avenue of Horse chestnuts (to the west) and limes (to the east). It approaches the east front of the Mansion in a gentle curve to the east of the former stables, continuing past a mature Wellingtonia to the east front of the Mansion and its forecourt now comprising a central grassed oval.

The north drive ('out'), also present by 1812 (OSD), enters 215m north-east of the mansion at Dorton Lodge on its west side. No historic gateway survives. Dorton Lodge is of C19 date in Tudor style, of red brick with stone quoins and dressings under a tiled roof and has been extended to the rear, including matching Tudor chimneystacks. The front elevation to the north drive has a central door under a continuous roof taken across both flanking bay windows. The north drive runs south-west for 215m towards the mansion. It is separated from the serpentine lake on the west by mature planting, concluding with a columnar conifer before reaching the forecourt below the mansion.

PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

MANSION

The late C16 - early C17 Dorton House (listed Grade I) stands in the centre of the site and is now the focus of the school. The entrance faces east over the forecourt with the service wing to the south and principal rooms in the north wing with the garden front facing north. The central wing includes the main entrance under a C18 classical portico leading to a screens passage, with a great hall immediately to the north. The wings are 'exceptionally long' for a house with this 'half-H' plan (Pevsner). The north wing contains the spectacular main staircase and the former long gallery at first floor level, now converted to five classrooms and a corridor, retaining its plain barrel vault. The south wing houses the school kitchen and dining rooms on the ground floor, with dormitories above. The mansion was altered to suit the prevailing classical fashion c1784 including new window patterns, balustrading, the entrance portico and a coat of stucco (illustration in Lipscomb, reproduced in Pevsner, 286). Restoration at the start of the C20 revealed the original red brickwork and stone quoins but retained the portico and the Venetian windows inserted in the central block and the end gables of the wings.

A C17 painting of Sir John Dormer at Rousham, Oxon, shows him holding a plan of Dorton House (presumably of its original layout). A drawing of what can be seen of this plan indicates that the forecourt between the wings was originally closed off by a wall with a central entrance separating the 'Inner Court' from an outer or 'Base Court'. The Inner Court was laid out simply with four compartments with steps up to doors in the wings on either side. The ground floor of the south wing then contained the kitchen, a 'dye larder', pallet rooms (presumably storage for bedding) and lodgings. Part of the ground floor of the northern wing can also be seen. It was arranged with Lodgings in its inner half and an 'Open Tarrace' [sic] in the outer half with steps out near the eastern end (Sir John's hand obscures the west end of the wing).

The garden front (the exterior of the north wing) is enlivened by two canted bays at either end with a square bay in the centre, enhancing the plan of the long gallery and improving the opportunities for views from this important room over the garden. Doorways lead out to the former pleasure ground, originally to the walled garden. In contrast the exterior of the south wing is plainer with two original porches and massive chimney breasts with substantial chimney breasts with decorative stacks dividing up an impressive sequence of brick gables. The rear (west elevation) of the central block displays two large brick gables either side of further chimney breasts and stacks.

STABLE BLOCK

The C17 Clock Court (Listed Grade II) is the former stable block and stands 18m south-east of the house. The principal (north) elevation towards the mansion is symmetrical with low brick wings with hipped tiled roofs flanking a tall arch to the courtyard contained in a central stone gable under a cupola with an ogee lead roof. The courtyard elevations are mostly of stone with some brick infill and display stone arched doorways and stone cross-windows. It is in use as classrooms and as music practice accommodation.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The pleasure grounds lie the north of the mansion and comprise a lawn, a serpentine lake, and the remains of a terraced area north-west of the mansion. They probably reached their current layout after the removal of the southern half of the Jacobean walled garden in the mid-late C19.

From the north wing of the mansion two sets of steps lead to a wide paved terrace with Victorian-style lamp standards. This overlooks a lawn 80m long x 70m wide occupying the southern half of the walled garden shown on the undated parish plan and the tithe map of 1849. This lawn was skirted by a path by 1878 (OS), which has since been removed. At its centre is the School's small open-air swimming pool with two timber changing rooms within a palisaded wooden fence. A sundial stands in a circle of simple stone benches. This may have been moved from the garden to the north-west where a sundial stood, by 1878 (OS). This area is now tennis courts.

The ground steps down slightly towards the north side of the lawn to a row of yews, possibly early C17 planting across the centre of the early C17 walled garden, latterly the kitchen garden. The lawn flows round the south west corner of the kitchen garden to the modern tennis courts to the west. This area was more densely treed in 1878 (OS). The north side is bounded by a wall with traces of a greenhouse against its inner face present by 1878 (OS).

This part of the pleasure ground is bounded to the west by mature trees (including many yews) forming a belt on the west boundary, around a raised causeway containing the public access for villagers to the church. There are scant remains of former terracing constructed of stone rubble. The most substantial stretch of walling features an arched opening leading to a short arched cavity of unknown purpose. There is no defined school boundary between the public access and the School grounds. A stream runs along the west side of the informal public access route.

East of the walled garden a track leads between it and a serpentine lake, past houses on the north boundary to a pedestrian entrance from the public footpath flanked by substantial brick piers supporting metal gates with decorative dog bars, in poor condition. The banks of the lake are less thickly planted now than in the late C19 (OS). A mature yew tree stands prominently, with other planting mostly of limes and horse chestnuts. There is further mature planting between the lake and the northern approach.

PARK

The park extends east, south and west of the mansion, covering some 41 ha in all, reaching its greatest extent at the end of the C19 and the early C20 (OS). Most of the park south of the Mansion is now in divided and separate ownership. The west area was park by the late C19 (OS), with sporadic specimen trees. The internal boundaries of the parcels of land involved have changed since this time.

The east park east of the mansion is flanked by the north and south approaches. It had been laid out by the early C19. It is now playing fields, and many of the scattered specimen trees present in the late C19 and early C20 (OS) have gone except for those against the east boundary to the Chilton-Dorton road. This belt is of varying depth with an informal edge towards the playing fields: the thickest parts are on axis with the mansion and again shortly to the south. This area was grass, presumably pasture, by 1849 (tithe map), distinguished from the 'Mansion and grounds' which included the pleasure grounds to north and south and treed areas to the north-west (the former terraced area noted above) and along the north boundary towards Dorton. A plain wide strip of grass runs west of the south approach, with a wooden fence separating it from part of the south park.

SCHOOL ACCOMMODATION SOUTH OF MANSION

A strip of former parkland roughly 175m x 35m adjacent to the south side of the Mansion contains school buildings, either in older converted buildings such as the former stables ('Clock Court'), and the classrooms in the simple 'Shippon' which first appears around 1947: (RAF AP 1947) and probably provided classrooms from the early days of the Blind School, or in more modern buildings including a Sports Hall, the Art and Design Centre and the single-storey Pre-Prep building. The grassed space between the Mansion and the Art and Design Centre is enclosed by hedges as a sitting-out area. A small secluded hedged garden has been created between the mansion, these new buildings and the church. All-weather pitches with lights and fencing occupy the outer side of this strip of buildings. The Sports Hall stands separately from this strip, south of Clock Court.

SOUTH PARK

The south park was present by 1824 (Bryant). A smaller eastern portion of it has been sold along with 'Middlemeadow'. A house has recently replaced a former staff house standing 70m north of Chilton Lodge. In the late C19/early C20 (OS) both this and the larger field to the west featured specimen planting with little if any boundary planting, but the planting had almost entirely disappeared by the mid-1970s (1976 AP) and substantial boundary belts have been planted to the south and west.

WEST PARK

By the end of the C19 (OS) it consisted of a single large triangular plot (formerly named 'Dovehouse Close' on the undated Manor plan, CBS Ma R/3/4.T) crossed by two paths reached from the public footpath on the north side of the School's current ownership, with parkland planting and a boundary belt on its north side. A small pool, fringed with trees, sat in the centre. Since then the trees have gone, excepting those around the pool and those marking the north boundary. The two footpaths now lead into separate fields: only the east half of the south field is included in the historic landscape reflecting the earlier field boundaries and the parkland indication of the early OS mapping.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The kitchen garden is located 80m north of the mansion. Many elements are probably early C17, contemporary with the mansion. The enclosure represents the northern half of a formerly larger walled enclosure with eight compartments (undated Parish map) stretching northward from the mansion north façade. The south wall of the enclosure (immediately north of yews, possibly surviving planting originally across the centre of the larger earlier garden) is later, probably mid to late C19 century, crossing what was the middle of the former enclosure. It is of rubble stone with a dressed stone coping and a central arched stone doorway. The panel of wall containing the doorway is thinner than the rest with no coping, suggesting re-use of the doorway from elsewhere. The south section of the surviving enclosure is raised above the remainder, possibly another survival from an earlier layout of terracing down the slope. The enclosure is laid to grass and is largely used for sports, with the outline of a former central north-south path evident in dry weather.

The C16- early C17 Gardener's Cottage (listed Grade II) straddles the north wall. The original use is unclear. The Cottage is of two storeys with an attic under a tiled roof. It is constructed in narrow, early brick, with stone mullioned windows, a stone arched doorway on its southern façade to the kitchen garden, and a rubble stone plinth matching the flanking garden walls.

The walled enclosure (a fragment of the C16/C17 layout) measures c.88m east-west and 83m north-south. The brick walls (listed Grade II) are c. 3.5m high with curved corners, with brick facings and shallow brick pilasters to the interior except for the inserted south wall. The south and west sides are straight: the east side curves outwards while

the north side has a dog-legged plan either side of Gardener's Cottage near its east end. Against the north wall west of the Cottage are the markings of former lean-to glass houses, probably of C19 origin.

The north and east walls have a stone rubble plinth. Simple doorways with segmental brick heads are spaced around the enclosure with a large gap for works vehicles at the south-east corner. Close to this, projecting from the east end of the south wall, is a stone-gabled summer house (listed Grade II as attached to the listed garden walls: of uncertain date using C17 materials: list description) with a window with a stone frame overlooking the walled enclosure. It has wide moulded stone arches in its exterior south and west elevations. The floor contains a representation of the Zodiac in mosaic. A ceramic plaque records that its tiled roof was restored in 1958 with money from a gentleman whose three sons attended Ashfold School.

REFERENCES

Books and articles

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Creed, Lewis G., *Dorton House, a history and guide* (2nd Edn. 1962).
Ekwall, E., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names* (4th Edition 1987).
Pevsner, N. and Williamson, E., *The Buildings of England - Buckinghamshire* (1994), 249-251.
Victoria County History, *Buckinghamshire Vol 4* (1927), 45-48.

Maps

1770 Jefferys' map of Buckinghamshire
1825 Bryant's map of Buckinghamshire
A map of the Manor of Dorton and part of Brill Parish... (CBS Ma R/3/4.T) (Copy, undated)
1849 Tithe map and 1848 Schedule (CBS Map Dorton 134)

Ordnance Survey

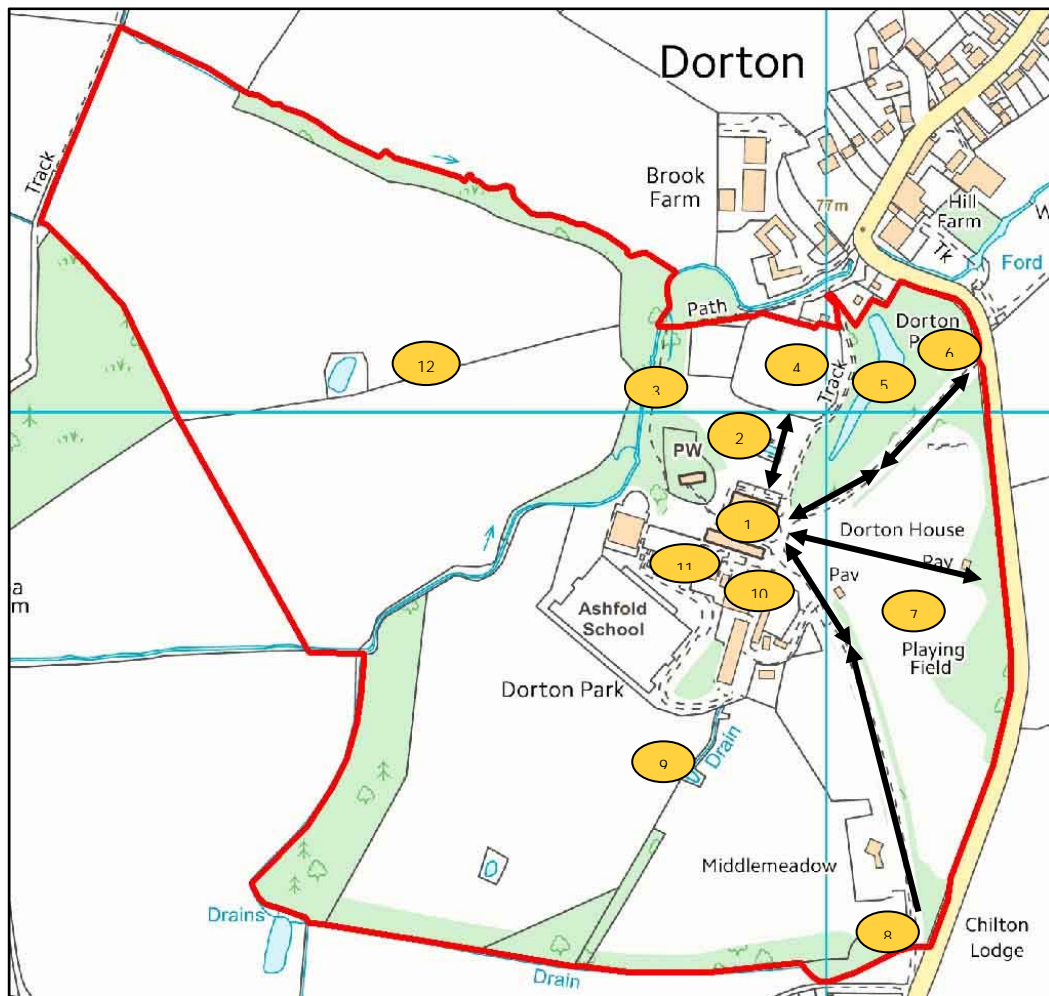
1813 Surveyor's draft
1st Edition 25" published 1878
1st Edition 6" 1885
2nd Edition 6" 1900

Photographs

RAF AP1947
AP 1976

G Huntingford; edited SR December 2019. Finalised 01 February 2020.

KEY FEATURES & VIEWS



Key to numbered features

1. Mansion	2. Pleasure grounds
3. Remains of terracing with public route to Parish Church	4. Kitchen garden
5. Serpentine lake	6. Dorton Lodge to north drive
7 East Park	8. Chilton Lodge to south drive
9. South Park	10. Former stable block
11. School outbuildings	12. West Park and probable site of deserted village

CURRENT IMAGES



Dorton House from SE (left) and former stable block from N (right)



North lawn (former pleasure ground) from SE (left) and north wing of Dorton House from NE (right)



Pavilion at SE corner of walled garden (left) and view N across walled garden towards Gardener's Cottage (right)



Serpentine lake looking NE (left) and northern approach looking N (right)



Dorton Lodge from SE (left) and Chilton Lodge from NE (right)



S approach looking N (left) and Stable courtyard looking NW (right)



'Shippon' classrooms (L) and Pre-prep (R) from NE (left) and South park from N (right)



South wing of Dorton House and adjacent gardens with Art and Design Centre on right (left) and West Park from E (right)