

Understanding Historic Parks and Gardens in Buckinghamshire

The Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Project



Ceeley House (Buckinghamshire County Museum)

SEPTEMBER 2020



Roland
Callingham
Foundation



HISTORIC SITE BOUNDARY



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 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 definitive 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 by BGT in appraising designed landscapes.

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 Planning Policy Framework and including an overview.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a site visit, based on the format of 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 funded by BGT, with significant grants from the Finnis Scott Foundation, the Roland Callingham Foundation, BCC (since April 2020 part of Buckinghamshire Council) and various private donors. Buckinghamshire Council also provided significant funding, and help in kind including current and historic mapping and access to the Historic Environment Record. The project is supported by The Gardens Trust.

The Trust thanks 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 | CEELEY HOUSE (BUCKS COUNTY MUSEUM) BCC HER 0240204000 |
| DISTRICT: | AYLESBURY VALE | |
| PARISH: | AYLESBURY | |
| OS REF: | SP817 138 | |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Overview

A very early town garden within the Saxon and later core of the county town, at its civic heart, and with a close relationship with the medieval church nearby. The site has been a town house garden since the mid-C16 and possibly was gardened before that, since it was attached to a religious institution building of the 1470s, itself on the site of an early medieval burial ground and Iron Age hillfort. The garden area survives largely intact, and in its present form represents the remains of a simple provincial town house garden layout. It is important to Aylesbury as one of the larger surviving garden spaces within the county town since much of the rest of the historic core was lost in the 1960s. The garden is based on a layout present in the C19, but the origin of this is unclear.

Archaeological interest

Ceeley House is particularly archaeologically sensitive, being located in the centre of the Iron Age hillfort; within the middle of the Saxon minster cemetery; and at the centre of the Saxon, Medieval and Post-Medieval town. Bronze Age, Iron Age and Saxon burials have been excavated during building works at the Museum and during landscaping work in the garden. In addition potential exists for the medieval as the guild house built in 1473 for the late medieval Fraternity of the Virgin Mary, dissolved in 1547. Considerable potential exists for evidence associated with the earliest phases of the building: the 1470s institution and C16 residential conversion, as well as previous uses particularly early medieval burials and the Iron Age hillfort. There is potential for garden features since at least the C16, and perhaps earlier, such as garden paths, service buildings, walls, glasshouses and borders.

Architectural interest

A typical C18 town house with some fine features including the brick frontage and doorway and internal decor, encasing a notable guildhall structure of the 1470s. The relationship between the house and garden has remained intact, manifested particularly in the C18 garden walls and surviving lawn and circuit path. The stable block and associated cottages form an integral part of the domestic ensemble, along with the remains of the yards.

Artistic interest

The garden is typical for such a residence with the layout reflecting a simple informal C19 design, having been gardened it seems since at least the mid-C16. The main views within and beyond the garden were established by the C18 and are associated with the immediate surroundings, including the view from the garden to the nearby church tower and to the upper levels of the more modest houses of Pebble Lane, and from the front door and stable yard to the mixed-style town houses of Church Street opposite the main frontage. The garden is an important and rare survivor within the surviving historic core of the town (much of which was lost in the 1960s) particularly its boundaries (perhaps on C15 lines), and the lawn and path (probably C19, modified in C20), although it has lost a C19 glasshouse formerly against the north-west wall and the woody specimens present in the late C19 and early C20.

Historic interest

The site is a key part of the town's historic core as one of the largest surviving gardens in the town, closely associated with the Iron Age hill fort and Saxon civic origin of the area, later medieval activity, and from the 1470s the medieval Fraternity of the Virgin Mary. It has strong associations with local notables who lived in Ceeley House from the C16-C20 and with the Bucks Archaeological Society which has cared for it for nearly 70 years.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

NB: Much of this section is based on the Buckinghamshire County Museum leaflet, 2012.

The area of Aylesbury that surrounds St Mary's Church has been occupied since the Iron Age when it lay within a pre-Roman Hillfort. An important Saxon minster church was founded near the site of the present St. Mary's medieval church (C13 and early C14). A large part of the hilltop including the site of Ceeley House to the east was occupied by a religious foundation linked to the minster church. The land remained as open sacred ground for several centuries and was used for Christian burials, probably including people from a wider area beyond Aylesbury.

Excavations took place at the museum during the 1990s when C12 and C13 burials were found; these were not aligned to St Mary's Church but on the line of Church Street adjacent to Ceeley House (formerly Broad Street). In 2012 during renovation work in the garden five burials from the early C7 were found (HER). Four gold coins found in 1952, dating from the reign of Edward IV and dated 1469-70 are in Museum Collection.

Sometime c.1473, the Medieval Guildhall, known as The Brother House of the Fraternity of the Virgin Mary (a pious lay charitable organisation, founded in 1450) was built. This civic building was encased in the Georgian red brick of Ceeley House. The Guildhall was a richly decorated building of high status which was used for meetings and ceremonies.

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, in 1547 the fraternity was dissolved, and the Guildhall became a private house. The occupants were from a line of substantial local families who were church lawyers in the Archdeaconry Court of Buckingham. A fireplace and chimney were installed. In 1598 the Grammar School was founded by Sir Henry Lee of Quarrendon in a small chapel at the south-east corner of St. Mary's church.

Later in the C17 Richard Heywood made substantial alterations to the building. In 1720, the new grammar school opened adjacent. It faced west onto the churchyard, and was flanked by two master's houses. The headmaster's house, incorporating older houses, fronted Church Street adjacent to the former Guildhall.

In the 1750s, the front of Ceeley house was Georgianised and the timber frame was encased in brickwork and a jetty underbuilt in brick; much of the medieval rear wing was replaced. There is no record of the garden being developed but a garden was apparently present, presumably incorporating a former yard that accompanied the Guildhall. The work was carried out for Hugh Barker Bell (2nd generation Registrar to Archdeaconry Court) who married a wealthy widow Mary Thornbury in 1755 or 1756. It was probably her money that paid for the building work at the rear of the house, which included the room that is now known as the 'Baker Room' with its fine plaster ceiling. The coach house was probably constructed at this time as the same brick was used. The brick extension adjoining the house to the south east was built in 1796 as offices for the registrar. The gate piers, and service buildings and cottage were built around 1800.

A plan of the grammar school in 1852 shows a walled courtyard garden (in 1907 a new parish hall was built in the garden) directly north of the school buildings and indicates the owner of Ceeley House was Joseph Rose. A

photograph of 1905 shows boys in the school garden, the walls are covered in creeper; this garden adjoined that of Ceeley House at the end of the C19 (W.R. Mead).

In 1866, James Henry Ceeley bought the house and thereafter it became known as Ceeley House. His brother, Dr Robert Ceeley, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, also lived there and was involved in establishing the Bucks Royal Infirmary (now the Royal Bucks Hospital) in 1833. By 1885 (OS) the garden had a typical town garden layout of borders and shrubs in lawn with a lean-to glass house in the north corner against the brick boundary wall with Church Row.

By 1901 Ceeley House was the family home, surgery and dispensary of Dr John Baker. Family photographs from this period show that the garden was cultivated and included a glasshouse, a tennis court/croquet marked on the lawn and island beds and trees (*Historic Photos of Bucks*). Dr Baker died in 1924. His daughter, Cicely continued to live there. In 1944 the house was sold to The Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society. Cicely remained in residence on the first floor until 1950. Baker had joined the Archaeological Society in 1903 and in 1906 was appointed honorary curator of their museum.

In 1952, Ceeley House was extended and renovated, when 4 gold Edward IV coins struck between 1469-70 were found (BCM). In 1957 the former grammar school and Ceeley House were leased to BAS and Bucks County Council which operated it as The Buckinghamshire County Museum. In 1989 the museum closed for six years for a £4 million refurbishment and an art gallery costing £0.5m was built in the central courtyard (of the former school). It reopened in 1995. In 1996 the Roald Dahl Gallery opened in the former coach house with a major extension to the rear. The County Museum became a charitable Trust in August 2014. The site remains in use as the museum garden.

The garden has remained largely unchanged in the last 150 years, being subject to a few modifications and additions including the motor house in 2005 and Roald Dahl Gallery attached to the former stable.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Location, Area, Boundaries, Landform and Setting

The ancient centre of Aylesbury, the county town, occupies a prominent position on a hill at the junction of Roman Akeman Street (A41) with the main road from Thame (16 km to the south-west) to Buckingham (27 km to the north). Bryant's map of 1824 clearly shows the crossing points of the roads. The town was built on the summit and slopes of the hill. Ceeley House stands towards the centre of this plateau, c.70m south-east of St Mary's parish church. The church stands on the highest ground in the middle of an open churchyard enclosed by houses, the west side of which was occupied by the Prebendal estate and the south by Parson's Fee (*VCH*). In the medieval period the town developed eastwards, shifting its centre to the marketplace, an open square on the sloping ground below Kingsbury. During the 1960s much of the town underwent re-development and expansion, but the area around St Mary's church, including Church Street and Church Row (now Pebble Lane) flanking Ceeley House to the south and north respectively, remained largely intact. Church Street has been called 'the best street in Aylesbury' (Pevsner).

Aylesbury lies in the Vale of Aylesbury that stretches from the Chiltern Hills to the south-east, to the ancient Bernwood Forest to the west and the Greensand Ridge to the east. The area beyond the town is primarily agricultural, with scattered rural settlements. Aylesbury lies south-east of the upper River Thame and is partly sited on the two northernmost outcrops of Portland limestone in England, these being bisected by a small stream, Bear Brook. The lower, fields and suburbs which surround the town, are on permeable Oxford Clay and Kimmeridge Clay. The central higher terrain was described by Samuel Lewis in 1848 as a "gentle eminence".

The boundaries of the 0.17ha. site are as follows: to the south-west Church Street forms the front boundary of the house; to the south-east are brick walls and the walls of neighbouring properties; a C17/C19 brick wall runs alongside Pebble Lane (formerly Church Row) to the north-east with a vehicle gateway in it towards the south-east end; to the north-west the lane St Mary's and churchyard beyond form the boundary of the complex of buildings. There are excellent views of the church spire from the garden. Church Street is made up of a number of historic properties, immediately opposite Ceeley House is the C16 Chantry, refronted in 1840 in Gothic style. The house adjacent to the north-west of Ceeley House was part of the former Grammar School (now the museum), built in 1714 by an unknown architect. It is larger and grander than Ceeley house, constructed with vitreous and red brick, with 9 bays, two storeys and arched windows. The two bay wings were master's houses and the five centre bays were the schoolroom (Pevsner).

Entrances and approaches

The main approach to Ceeley House via Church Street adjacent has remained unchanged for centuries. Church Street begins in Temple Square where Castle Street, Temple Street and George Street all converge, and offers views up to the church. The front door to the house is off the street in the centre of the five-bay C18 façade.

The principle museum entrance to Ceeley House is from the north-east side of Church Street through modern black wooden gates, where gate piers flanked by a brick wall open to the block paved former stable yard. South-east of the yard are service buildings, including former staff accommodation and coach houses (also listed as group). Pedestrian access is through a further gate set into the wall between the main gate and the house (disused). The main entrance to the museum buildings is through a contemporary glass porch on the south-east side of the building.

A service entrance from Church Row (formerly Pebble Lane) 35m north-east of the museum building in the east corner of the garden is flanked by modern wooden gates set into a c.3.5m high wall with brickwork of various dates. The wall was partially re-built and heightened in the 1960s and buttresses were added (C. Stone) in the corner. It abuts a lower wall in the north east corner, which curves down to c.2m high. This led to the coach house and stables from the rear but is now blocked by a modern wall and rear access to the extension of the Roald Dahl Gallery.

Principal Building

Ceeley House (listed Grade II*) comprises a complex of buildings, linked by glazed passages, courtyards and stairs, which have been the subject of various extensions and modernisation as a museum since the mid-C20.

The two storey house took on its present form in the first half of the C18. It is built of red brick, with five bays, one of which projects at the centre and contains the front door surrounded by a fine porch of unfluted Corinthian pillars and wall pilasters with pediment and an arched fanlight. The moulded stone cornice has egg and dart enrichment. A plastered parapet with moulding of a later date fronts a tile roof. The door is approached by two moulded stone steps. Flanking the door alongside the pavement are black cast iron railings in front of the cellar/basement.

The adjoining brick building to the south-east was built in 1796 as an office for the Registrar to the Archdeaconry Court and is now the museum shop. Beyond this to the east is the stable yard, entered off Church Street.

The coach house stands detached at the north-east end of the stable yard. It was built c.1755 as stables and storage for carriages, with a hay loft above. Around 1800 a harness room and a range of two cottages used as servant accommodation were added. This complex was extended to the north in 1994 by BCC architect's department to house the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery (C. Stone).

The Garden

The garden lies north-east of Ceeley House. It has probably retained its size and shape since at least the C16, before the Guildhall became a private house. It is a simple walled town garden, originating with a former medieval religious settlement. In the C16 it may have been used, typically as a physic garden in which herbs and food were grown. Today it is laid to lawn with a few borders and is a recreational space for visitors to the museum.

The brick garden walls retain the heat, offer shelter and greatly protect the garden from frosts. Fruit trees of varying age include an Aylesbury Prune, a late fruiting, culinary damson originating from wild stock in the Vale of Aylesbury in the C19, when fruit production prevailed in the area. Amongst the mature pear trees is tall culinary variety trained against Pebble Lane wall; the others are dessert varieties. A grape vine grows on the south east facing wall.

To the rear of the garden, in the north corner, stood a large lean-to glasshouse against the Pebble Lane wall (gone) (C. Stone). A lean-to conservatory on the back of house was accessed by a door now bricked up. These glasshouses may have been erected by Robert Ceeley when in the mid-C19, as his hobby was cacti which need a warm sheltered place to thrive. His main interest was in *Cereus* cacti, the fragrant night-flowering species. They flowered rarely but when they did so, he held a small gathering so that he could share the sight (BCM).

The museum photographs of 1905-30s show the garden with the Baker family. A gravel path enclosed the lawn which was used for tennis and croquet (a court was painted on the lawn). An island bed flanked by two crescent shaped beds lay near the house with a rose arch over the path. The house and garden walls were covered in creeper. The route of the path has been slightly modified due to the removal of the greenhouse and also reflects other slight changes to the layout. It is now edged with blocks.

The oak-framed motor house was built in 2005 to display the 1922 touring car made at Cubitt's car factory in Aylesbury.

Kitchen Garden

There is no kitchen garden, but during the 1960s the rear of the garden was used for vegetables (photographs in the Museum collection). An area of lawn was dug up as an allotment for the museum caretaker who lived above the former school buildings.

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Maps

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Images

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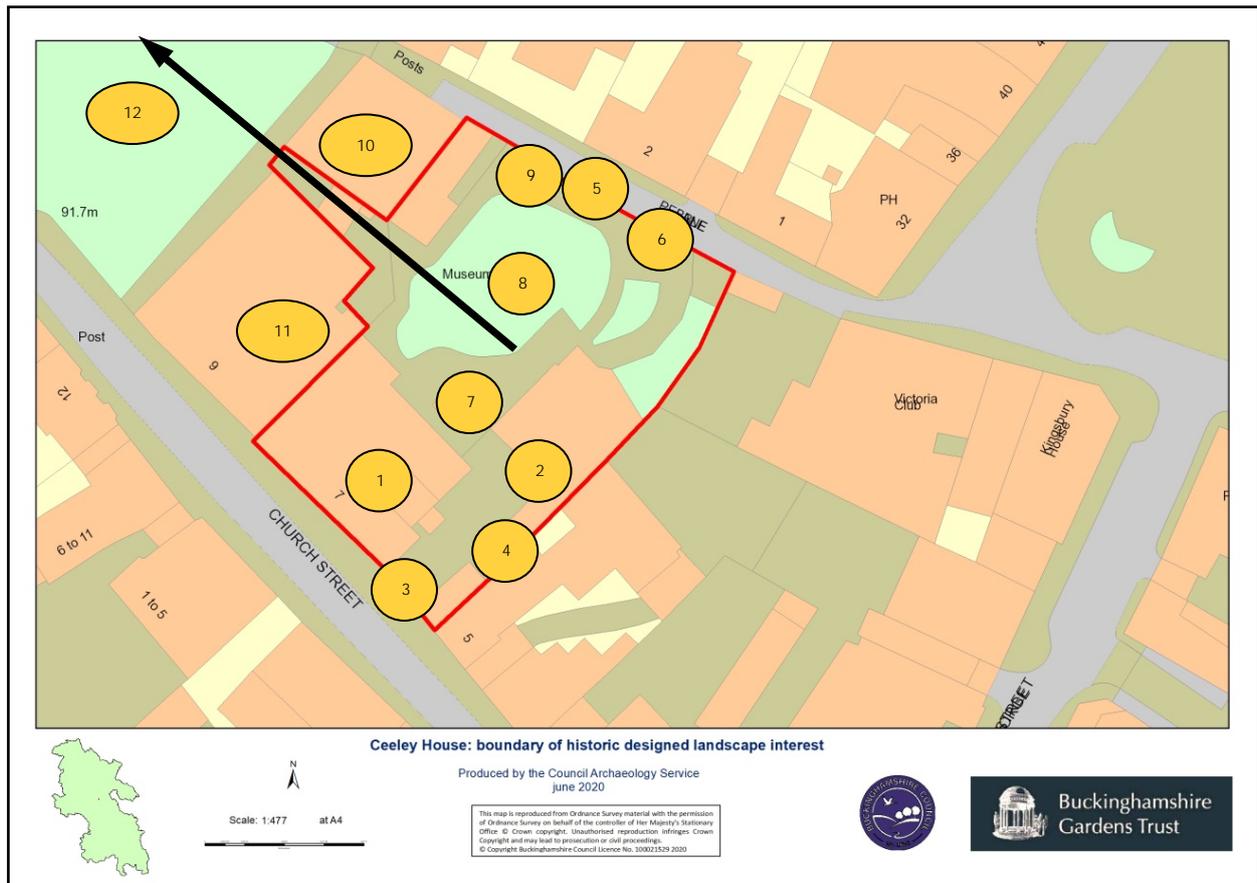
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Claire de Carle April 2020; edited SR July 20

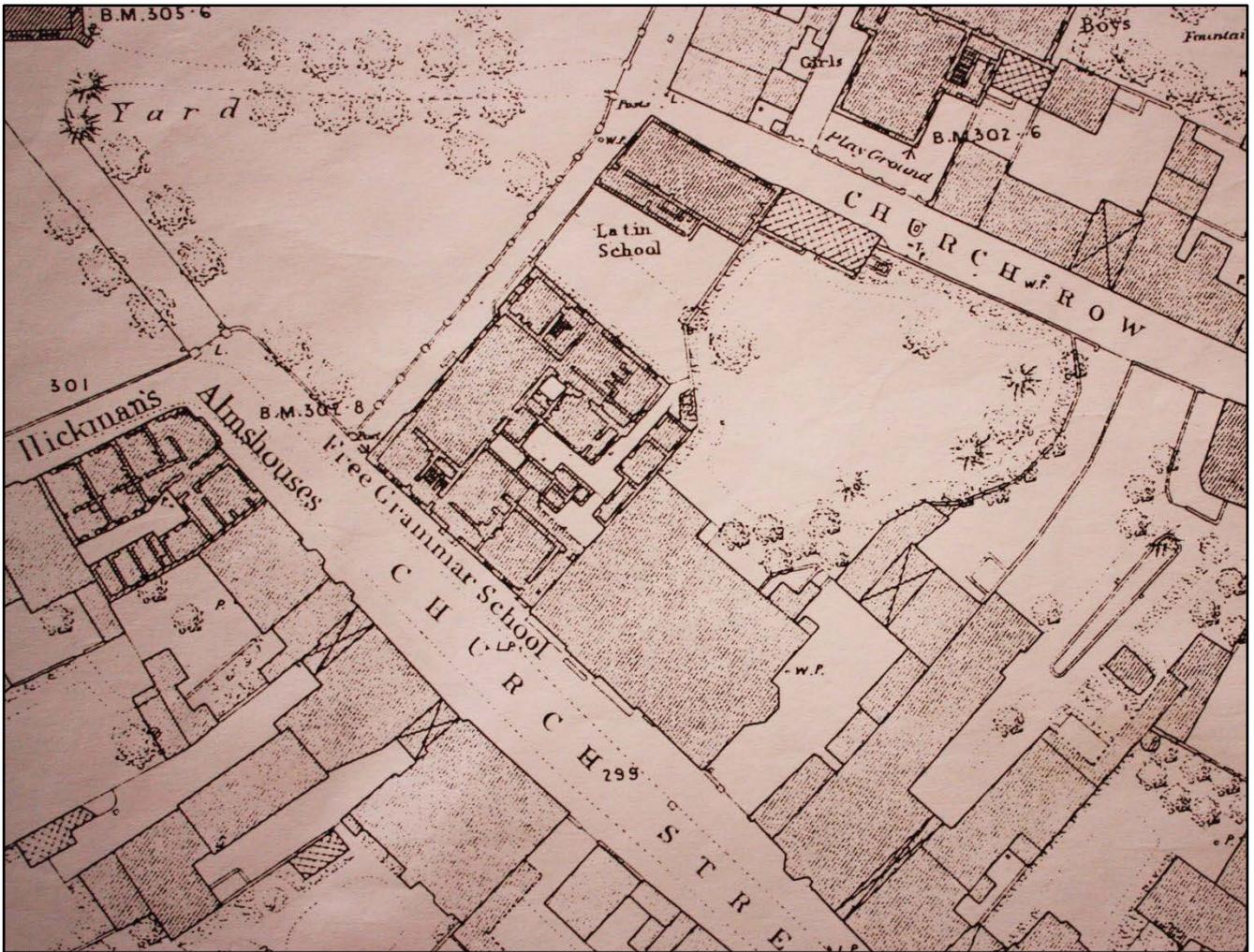
KEY FEATURES & VIEWS



Key to numbered features

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. House | 2. Stable block |
| 3. Front vehicle gateway | 4. C18 cottages |
| 5. C18 brick wall | 6. Rear vehicle gateway |
| 7. Modern motor house | 8. Lawn |
| 9. Site of former glasshouse | 10. C19 halls (now part of museum) |
| 11. Former Grammar School (now part of museum) | 12. Churchyard in St Mary's Square |

HISTORIC MAP: OS 1:500, 1870S



CURRENT IMAGES



The 3 buildings that comprise the museum, 7 Church Street

Rear of museum and garden 2020



Garden and rear of former Grammar school

Rear wall and service entrance onto Church Row



Rear wall of garden and pear tree

Extension to the Coach house, rear of Roald Dahl Gallery



The Roald Dahl gallery in the former coach house



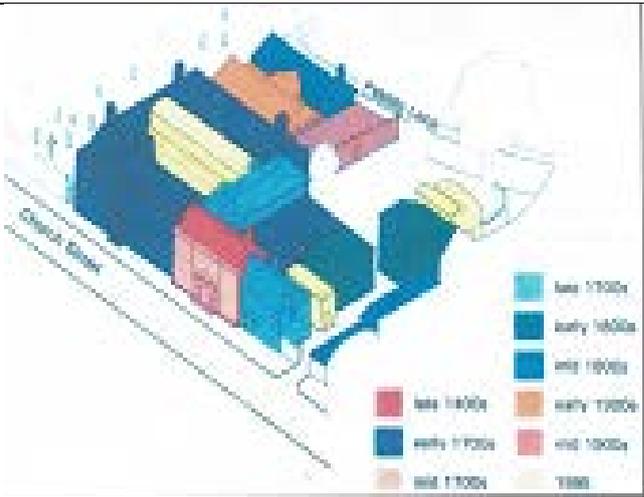
Former Cottage in the stable yard



Entrance from Church Street, gate piers and gates



The museum entrance, looking across the stable yard to Church Street



The museum buildings in 2020 (Bucks County Museum)



View of the St Mary's church spire from the museum garden

HISTORIC IMAGES

All historic images from BCC Historic Photographs of Buckinghamshire collection



Entrance to stable yard 1935



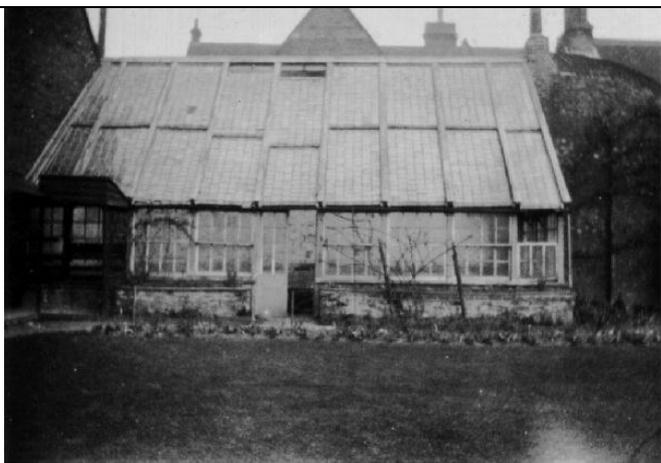
The stable yard in front of the Coach house 1912



Island beds in the garden c.1908



Rear of the house with lawn marked out for tennis 1905



Glasshouse 1929



Garden borders 1930