

**UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL
SAFFRON WALDEN**

BRIDGE END

TL 535 388

GRADE II*

An early Victorian town garden which was leased by the Borough Council in 1918 and opened as a public pleasure ground.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

When Atkinson Francis Gibson married Elizabeth Wyatt in 1789 she brought as part of her dowry, the Bridge End homestead and surrounding fields on the edge of Saffron Walden. The Gibsons lived in the centre of the town, on the corner of High Street and Castle Street where they had only a small garden. Thus despite its detachment from their house, they began to lay out a garden at Bridge End, evidence for which is shown on two maps dated 1828 and 1829 (town survey; town plan). Atkinson Francis Gibson died in 1829 and was succeeded by his son, Francis Gibson, who was greatly interested in aesthetic principles and architecture. Having completed a garden design for his sister and having agreed to give a lecture to the local horticultural society on garden styles, he turned his attention to the Bridge End site and from 1838 onwards designed and laid out there a new garden in collaboration with William Chater, a local nursery man and garden designer. By 1856 both men were members of the Committee of Management for the Saffron Walden Horticultural Society. When Francis died in 1858 he was succeeded by his son, Francis Edward (Frank), who himself died, unmarried, in 1862. The property then passed to Frank's sister who was married to Lewis Fry and was living in Bristol. An agent was employed to manage the gardens and from 1867 onwards Bridge End Gardens became one of four venues used by the Horticultural Society for their summer and autumn shows. By 1902 Lewis Fry had opened the gardens to the public as a pleasure ground and in 1918 he leased the site to the Borough Council who took over responsibility for its management. Uttlesford District Council have continued to lease the gardens and since 1982 have undertaken a comprehensive restoration scheme. The site remains (2000) a public pleasure ground.

SITE DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM & SETTING

Bridge End Gardens are set on the north-west edge of the town of Saffron Walden. They cover an area of c. 3ha, bounded to the north-east and north-west by farmland, to the south-east by playing fields and the football club, and to the south-west by allotments and town buildings which sit on Bridge street. The generally level site has a slight fall to the south-east towards the course of the Slade stream which flows close to the south-east boundary.

ENTRANCES & APPROACHES

There are two main entrances to Bridge End Gardens. From a passage off Castle Street, a path leads north-west across the Borough Meadow into the Gardens where it meets a second path leading into the Gardens from a gate in the brick wall running along Bridge Street. Beside the junction of the two paths is a set of ornamental iron gates (listed Grade II), set on square red brick piers surmounted by eagles.

GARDENS & PLEASURE GROUNDS

The Bridge End Gardens are divided by walls (partly listed Grade II) or hedges into five main compartments, each with a different character: the Dutch Garden, the Summerhouse Lawn, the Rose Garden, the Maze and the Kitchen Garden. The walls bear several plaques and inscriptions, dated 1794, 1814, 1818, and 1840 although the origins of some of these is not clear (Liz Lake Associates 1999)

The two paths into the Gardens merge and run through a shrubbery along the south-west boundary, past a circular brick structure known as Jacob's Well, set on higher ground adjacent to the Rose Garden and shown in this position on the 1877 OS map. The gateway at the junction of the two entrance paths leads into the Dutch Garden, underneath which the Slade stream is culverted. It is enclosed to the north-west by a high red brick garden wall with the gravel Pavilion Path at its base. The Path is terminated at its south-west end by a square brick pavilion (erected c. 1845, listed Grade II), on the north side of which is a tiny enclosure called Poets' Corner, laid in a box knot. The south-east boundary of the Dutch Garden is marked by a low balustraded wall, beyond which is a ha-ha, the Garden itself laid out in a formal arrangement with yew topiary and box-edged borders focussed on a central circular fountain basin. The main central path runs from the basin south-west, terminating in a shrubbery, and north-east, leading to a raised viewing platform edged with iron rails, beyond which lies a small brick grotto in an area known as the Wilderness.

Beyond the north-west wall of the Dutch Garden lies the Summerhouse Lawn, comprising an open expanse of lawn bordered by gravel paths and shrubberies. At the western end of the lawn is an octagonal summerhouse (c. 1840, listed Grade II) built of grey gault brick under a lead domed roof; beyond it to the south-west lies a circular yew-hedged rose garden, bordered by iron rose hoops. An arched gateway through the dividing wall with the Dutch Garden is focussed on the centre of the Rose Garden, which is thought to be one of the oldest parts of the Garden (ibid). Beyond the north-west boundary of the Summerhouse Lawn lies the walled kitchen Garden (see below), while a gateway engraved 'FEG 1840' (listed Grade II) at the northern tip leads to a hedged enclosure in which a mature yew maze is situated. The gateway dates the planting of the Maze, which at the time was surrounded by a shrubbery with a pleached alley, the remains of which survive. In the C19 the maze had a central viewing platform which no longer survives and excavations of the Maze during the 1982 restoration revealed the footings of a building within it, the exact form of which is not known.

PARK

The Gardens are enclosed to the south-east and north-east by areas of grass edged with plantations. Beyond the ha-ha below the Dutch Garden is the Borough Meadow which has a plantation of mature trees along the southern edge beside the path into the Gardens, all that remains of a more extensive

plantation which ran around three sides of the Meadow. Beyond the Maze to the north-east are two further areas of grass, now (2000) used partly as a cricket ground and partly as the Anglo-American Playing Fields, with mature trees surviving along the banks of the Slade. Plantations to the north-east and north-west no longer survive (2000). The area beyond the dressed ground was laid out as he laid out the Gardens and was planted as a parkland setting for the more formal areas of ground.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The walled Kitchen garden (listed Grade II) has a plaque dating its construction to 1840. It is walled on three sides, the south-east boundary being hedged and fenced. The ground is laid to grass with gravel paths running around the perimeter. Further paths, edged with box and planted with new (late C20) trees, divide the ground into quarters, and lead to a central circular fountain pool.

REFERENCES

Gardeners' Chronicle, August 1885, 155

Country Life, 11 January 1913, 58-61

Jekyll, G., & Weaver, L., 1913 *Gardens for Small Country Houses*, 33-36

Matthews, W H., 1970 *Mazes and Labyrinths*, 138 & plates 121,122

Knight, C. J., & Scaife, R. F., 1983 'Report on Bridge End Gardens for Uttlesford DC'

Liz Lake Associates, 1999 'Historic landscape survey & restoration management plan'

Maps

Survey of Saffron Walden, 1828: ERO T/M 141

Draft town plan of Saffron Walden, 1829: ERO D/DQy 25

Tithe map for Saffron Walden parish, 1842: ERO D/CT 378

OS 1st edition 1:500 scale, 1877

OS 6" to 1 mile, 1st edition published 1877, 2nd edition 1896

OS 25" to 1 mile, 1st edition published 1877, 2nd edition 1897

Archive Items

A small collection of materials relating to Bridge End Gardens is held at ERO

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