

ENGLISH HERITAGE REGISTER GRADE II

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT
THEYDON MOUNT**

HILL HALL

GD 1257

TQ 48 99

Early C20 gardens by Reginald Blomfield and Philip Tilden, retaining late C17 features, set within an C18 park for which Humphry Repton produced a Red Book in 1791.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The parish of Theydon Mount contained a dwelling called Hill Hall as early as the C15. The present Hill Hall was built by Sir Thomas Smyth between 1569 and 1575, probably on the same site, and it remained in the hands of the Smyth family until the early years of the C20. A classical Cambridge scholar who became Secretary of State to Elizabeth I and a man of wide intellectual interests who was keen on gardening, Sir Thomas created an early Elizabethan house set in elaborate formal gardens, approached by a double elm avenue along the main north drive. Sir Thomas died childless in 1577 and was succeeded by his nephew, Sir William, who continued his uncle's work. In 1611 he rebuilt the church of St Michael the Archangel which he linked to the Hall with a curving path. At the same time he removed the remains of the old Mount Hall which once stood immediately north of the church. Sir William died in 1626 and the estate passed successively to his elder son, and in 1631 to the younger son, Thomas. During his ownership a survey was drawn up of Theydon Mount and Theydon Garnon in 1657 which records the landscape of the period. Under Sir Thomas' son, Edward, the late C17 saw great alterations to the Hall, which were continued by Edward's son, also Edward, following his father's death in 1711. During this period the formal gardens were extended to the east by the addition of a curved canal and the east front of the Hall was redesigned in a Classical style. By 1770, Muilman in his History of Essex records that Sir Edward's son, Sir Charles Smyth had also made 'great alterations' to the Hall. Sir Charles was succeeded by Sir William Smyth, who in 1791 commissioned Humphry Repton (1752-1818) to produce a Red Book. While changes to the landscape did occur in this period, much of the advice contained

in the Red Book appears not to have been followed. In c 1815 Sir William changed the spelling of the family name to Smijth and through connection by marriage, Bowyer was added in 1839. Sometime during the mid C19 the park was extended to the south and alterations were made to the Hall, but by the end of the C19 the Smijths were no longer in residence and Hill Hall was let, from 1900 to 1908 to the Duc de Moro, and thereafter to Mr and Mrs Charles Hunter. In 1909 the Hunters commissioned Reginald Blomfield to make extensions and alterations to the west wing of the Hall and to develop the gardens. In 1925 the Smijth family put the estate on the market and it was sold to Sir Robert Hudson who asked Philip Tilden to make further alterations to the gardens. The Hudsons also commissioned a design from Gertrude Jekyll in 1928 although it is not known for which part of the garden it was intended (Godalming Museum). Lord Edward Hay acquired the estate sometime between 1929 and 1933. During the Second World War the Hall was used by the RAF, suffered mine damage, and was progressively neglected. It became a women's prison in 1952 and was gutted by fire in 1969. In 1980 it became responsibility of English Heritage who restored the exterior of the Hall before selling it in 1998 for conversion into private dwellings. The site remains (2000) in single corporate ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Hill Hall lies south-east of the town of Epping, adjacent to junction 27 of the M25 which cuts off the southern tip of the park. The c 50ha park is bounded to the north by the minor road out of Epping which runs between Fiddlers Hamlet and Skinners Farm, to the east and west by minor country roads, and to the south by the M25. The Hall enjoys a dramatic setting on top of a high ridge from which the grounds falls away to east, west, north-west, and south to afford distant views across the landscape. The major views are south-east to the church in the near ground and to rolling agricultural land beyond, now (2000) partially obscured by willows around the curved canal; and west over steeply falling parkland although the distant view is now marred by the motorway. To the south the mid view is now stopped by level land which drops rapidly into the motorway cutting before rising again to bring the distant horizon into view.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

Hill Hall is approached from the north along a slightly curved and rising carriage drive, lined with a young avenue of lime, which leads directly to the gates into the gravelled forecourt below the north front, enclosed to the north and east by a low brick wall and to the west by the early C20 service range. The line of the drive accords closely with that of the original drive to the C16 house shown on the 1657 map although it has been altered several times since that date: firstly in the early C19 when the north park was extended, and again in the late C19 when the northern end of the north drive was realigned to take it north-west along the

internal edge of the north park, where a lodge was built c 900m to the north-north-west of the Hall. The late C19 drive survives as earthworks close to the present drive, the rest being lost in an early C20 block of woodland. A second drive enters the south-east corner of the site and winds up past the western boundary of the churchyard before curving west to approach the north front of the Hall. This drive was laid out in the mid C19 when the south park was extended but is today (2000) reduced to a track.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Hill Hall (listed grade I) sits in the centre of the site on high ground. Built of brick with rendered terracotta and cut-brick dressings, the two-storey north front has bays and mullioned windows, with a central C16 entrance arch underneath a Tuscan portico which was added in 1789. The two-storey south, garden front has nine bays, the outer two built as projecting three-storey towers. On the east front, which was remodelled in 1714, are four giant half columns, with a pediment over the three central bays carrying the Smyth family coat of arms. Hill Hall was built by Sir Thomas Smyth between 1569 and 1575. Successive members of the Smyth family made numerous later alterations and additions yet the original Elizabethan layout and many of its features remain, most notably the north and south fronts and the internal faces of the courtyard (Pevsner and Radcliffe 1979). Alterations were made to the west front in 1844; this was altered again in 1909 when the architect Reginald Blomfield added a new western range, offices, stables, and working buildings (listed grade II) for Mr and Mrs Charles Hunter.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The gardens lies to the east, south, and west of the Hall. A late C19 flagstone terrace beside borders of lavender runs below the east front which looks over two very mature holm oak set in an open lawn, affording views to St Michael's church c 380m to the south-east of the Hall. At the eastern end of the lawn, c 100m from the Hall stands the curved canal aligned on the centre of the building, all that remains of the C17 formal garden. Now (2000) obscured by self-set willow, it is bordered at its northern end by a clump of trees, including mature trees possibly dating from the C17 together with C20 cypress trees. The recessed central section of the south front, between the flanking wings, opens onto a late C19 upper terrace of flagstones with tile detail, enclosed by brick walls with central steps leading down to a wide flagstone path. Beyond the path lies the open south lawn, set with mature cedars and bordered to the south and west by canals. These survive from the late C17 formal gardens, contrary to Repton's proposal to remove them, and an impression in the grass on the eastern boundary of the lawn marks the position of a third canal, which survived until sometime between 1872 and 1931 (OS). The canal c 100m south of the Hall has central steps aligned on the main terrace. At its western end sits the hexagonal brick and tile 'Fisherman's Hut' (listed grade II), a garden building added by Reginald Blomfield in 1909. The canal on the western boundary of the south lawn, c 50m south-south-west of the Hall, was converted into a swimming pool

by Philip Tilden in the 1920s. He added a classical bathing house (listed grade II) at the southern end. Below the west front are a series of brick and stone terraces (listed grade II), now (2000) laid to grass but filled with planting at the beginning of the C20 when originally laid out by Reginald Blomfield. Irish yews mark the returns on steps linking the third and fourth terraces, framing the view of the west park beyond the ha-ha ditch.

Extending southwards from the south-east corner of the garden is a narrow band of pleasure ground which is first shown on the estate map of 1838. Within its boundary lies a redundant tennis court, beside a sunken garden entered through brick gate piers and retained by low brick walls. Sets of curved steps lead down to a central area now (2000) laid to grass but originally designed by Philip Tilden in the 1920s as a rose garden for Sir Robert and Lady Hudson.

PARK

The main areas of park lie to the north and west of the Hall and are retained under grass although divided into fields with post-and-wire fences. Significant numbers of parkland trees, mostly oak, remain in the west park, as does the perimeter Long Plantation which is shown on a parish map dated 1838 to have been strengthened much as Humphry Repton had suggested in his Red Book. The steeply rising ground from the north park, which was extended to its present size in the early C19 following Repton's advice, is densely covered in hawthorn of varying age while the late C18 Icehouse Plantation runs along the eastern boundary.

Most of the south park has lost its trees and has been substantially altered by the construction of the M25 motorway although beyond the motorway it is possible to discern the C19 park boundary. The landform has been altered by the spoil from the motorway construction and the majority of its parkland trees have been lost although a few remain on both sides of the motorway. The south park does however retain its C19 drive and the church of St Michael the Archangel (listed grade I) built by Sir William Smith in c 1614 which continues to afford strong visual links with the Hall and is still linked to it by the C17 track. At the south-east tip, hidden by trees, the natural pool plotted on the 1757 map still exists and is currently managed as a fishing pond. Of the proposals made by Humphry Repton in the Hill Hall Red Book, his advice was taken on the moving of the public road to the eastern boundary of the churchyard although the drive remained a secondary entrance to the site and the extension of the south park was not recorded until the OS 1st edition 25" map published in 1872.

KITCHEN GARDEN

The kitchen garden (listed grade II) lies c 300m north-north-east of the Hall on an east-facing sloping site, immediately to the east of the main north drive. Built of red brick in Flemish bond with a brick coping, it dates from the early C19, replacing the C18 one which lay further south-west, closer to the Hall. The 3.5m high walls remain intact apart from a breach in the west

wall, but no glasshouses or working buildings remain. The kitchen garden is laid to grass with a central ornamental circular dipping pool with tile-on-edge surround (mid C19, OS 1838, 1872). In the centre of the eastern wall is an ornamental iron gateway which leads to the early C19 Garden Cottage beyond. To the south of the walled garden lies a strip of orchard ground which retains a few mature fruit trees.

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OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1872 2nd edition published 1896

Illustrations

- Engraving, in Muilman 1771
Engraving after Sandby, in Watts 1779

Archival items

- Gertrude Jekyll notebooks: plans 1920-9 (Godalming Museum)

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