

St. Michael's Convent (formerly Park Hill)

County - GREATER LONDON

Name – ST MICHAEL'S CONVENT
(formerly PARK HILL)

District - LAMBETH

Grid Reference - TQ3171

Grade – II
(GD1831)

A rare example of a surviving C19 villa garden in south London. This 2ha garden was designed by J B Papworth for William Leaf in the mid C19 and improved by Robert Marnock for Sir Henry Tate in the late C19.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The villa at Park Hill was built in 1835 by J B Papworth for William Leaf. The garden is described by William Keen in 1849 and included a gothic summerhouse, a deep dell arched with massive rockwork, lawns, evergreen shrubs, and a kitchen garden with a wide range of heated glass houses. The house was modified in 1880 for Sir Henry Tate who commissioned Robert Marnock (1800-1889) to redesign the gardens. A description of the garden was published in Garden magazine in 1886.

Since 1923 Park Hill has been known as St Michael's Convent for the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. A chapel was built to the east of the villa in the mid 1920s and the land to the east was sold for redevelopment (mid 1930s) as Benhurst Court.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

St Michael's Convent is situated on a high point to the north of Streatham Common, It is separated from the common by a major road, Streatham Common North, which acts as the southern boundary. The mid 1930s development of Benhurst Court provides the east boundary, and residential development fronting Streatham Common North and the Catholic comprehensive school, Bishop Thomas Grant, the boundary to the west. Property in Belltrees Road forms the boundary to the north. The main garden lies to the west of a north/south terrace and slopes gently to the west.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The approach drive from Streatham Common North leads past the lodge house through C19 wrought-iron entrance gates (listed grade II) and curves first west and then north-west through shrubberies and lawn up to the house (listed grade II), where it passes through the porte-cochere before curving south and east to rejoin the approach drive. In 1864 the OS 1st edition shows two drives sharing the same entrance gates, one curving in an arc around the west front of the house, the second curving past the east front before joining up with the main path. In 1886 the approach was described as a broad stretch of lawn uninterrupted except by fine trees, some of which were a remarkable size.

A large part of the ground to the east was built over c1950 and trees and shrubs screen the front of the house from the road,

PRINCIPAL BUILDING

The two-storey stucco villa was built c1835 for William Leaf by J B Papworth. The protostyle porch has a classical porte-cochere added in 1880. The Conservatory that was attached to the north side of the house and housed a mid C19 Pulhamite rockwork and a fernery was damaged during the Second World War and has since been replaced by a modern building.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The pleasure grounds lie to the west side of the house and area approached from a path 10m to the west of the porte-cochere. The path leads up a flight of three steps flanked by Sphinxes to a terrace 74m long which runs north/south and is supported to the west by a mid C19 low stuccoed wall with square plinths bearing krater-shaped urns set at intervals along its length. Three flights of steps, each flanked by sphinxes on plinth, lead down from the terrace to the garden. The terrace walls, steps, and the small Doric summerhouse at the north end are all grade II listed.

A high yew hedge partially screens the late C20 domestic buildings to the north-east of the terrace, but not the mid C20 additions to the villa to the east.

Below the terrace the main lawn slopes gently to the west with mature trees, including the remains of an orchard (c1930s) divided from the main lawn by a low hedge, two Wellingtonias, and a large oak. Holm oaks and hollies thrive in the garden especially on the southern boundary. A small lake is set at the south-west corner of the lawn.

Parallel paths run east/ west to the north of the site, one through the remains of the kitchen garden on the northern boundary and one from the steps at the north end of the terrace between the kitchen garden wall and the remains of the grassed orchard. Some 20 m along the path which leads down from the north end of the terrace is a small covered oval seat set against the south wall of the kitchen wall. Below the lower of the two Wellingtonia is a set of steps leading to a smaller lower lawn. At the steps the east/west path turns to the north and meets up with the path from the kitchen garden; it then continues west until it meets with a wrought iron gate and stone wall which enclose a small compound. To the south of the path is an octagonal, castellated, Pulhamite gothic castle of the mid C19. Access to the first floor is by way of a flight of stone steps over a gothic arch. Three gothic windows look out from the first floor over the western boundary wall and into the grounds of the neighbouring school. The remaining three sides have slit openings. The ground floor has a window in the westernmost side and slits in all the others.

A serpentine path leads south away from the castle, separated from the western boundary wall by evergreen trees and shrubs. This path is paved with stone slabs, some of them obviously reused. Part way along the path divides around a small bed and then continues until the scheme changes with Pulhamite rocks (mid C19) made to resemble a gorge, topped with a pretty wrought-iron bridge to the east. An unpaved path leads from the main lawn to the east, under the bridge, the path bordered to the south by stone-edged rills. The artificial stonework continues to the south with a small cave and a niche on the west side.

The serpentine path passes through the rockwork and continues to the south where it runs along the side of an irregular piece of water (mid C19) bordered with bamboo. To the south-west of the water the path, which is edged with industrial slag or furnace blocks, leads to a mound from which there is a fine view of the house and the rockwork to the north-west. Shortly after leaving the mound, the serpentine path turns east and continues parallel with the adjacent road, Streatham Common North. Much of the boundary planting of evergreen trees and shrubs to the west and south,

which were described in the *Garden* in 1886, remains and help to screen the garden from the school and the road. As the path nears the house it branches to the north where it circles round a bed with an interesting collection of ornamental trees and shrubs before continuing east to join up with the south path and the main drive.

KITCHEN GARDEN

To the north-east of the terrace and north of the house are the remains of the walled kitchen garden but the Vineries and Hot Houses described in 1849 and 1886 (Keane: *Garden*) have been replaced with modern domestic buildings.

REFERENCES

W Keane, *The Beauties of Surrey* (1849), pp81-4
Garden 29, (1886), pp568-9
Garden History 16, no 1 (Speing 1988), pp96-7

Maps

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1865
1933 edition
OS 25" to 1 mile 2nd edition published 1891.

Description written: February 1997
Amended: May 1998
Register Inspector: LCH
Edited: July 2001

NOTES

This is from the register of gardens and parks of special historic interest which has been compiled by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, who are required by statute to send copies of all entries to owners and occupiers, to the relevant local planning authorities and to the Secretary of State.

The register is produced to draw attention to important historic gardens and parks as an essential part of the nation's heritage. If their existence is not widely known enough, they could all too easily be overlooked, for example in plans for new development. The Commission believe that the register will be helpful both to owners, and to planners, developers, statutory bodies and indeed, to all those concerned to protect the heritage.

No new controls apply to gardens in parks in the register, nor area existing planning or listed building controls affect it in any way. Some of the gardens contain or are associated with buildings that are in the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Neither the statutory listing of these buildings nor the planning controls that apply to them are affected by the fact that the same buildings are mentioned in the register of gardens.

The fact that a garden is included in the register does not mean that there is any public right of access, other than along public rights of way or unless the property is separately advertised by the owner as being open to the public.

Only gardens and parks with historic features dating from 1939 or earlier are included on this register. Additions since that date have not been extensively described in the register, nor have such additions been taken in to account in the selection and

grading of the gardens, since the register indicates the gardens' special historic interest.

Headings in the register are made up as follows;

County; Name of Site; District; Civil Parish or Town: National Grid Reference for the site or for its central part; Grade (I, II* or II) .

The Notes are arranged wherever possible as follows:

Type of site, area in hectares (0ha) dates and designers of key surviving elements of the site (including the house, if appropriate); surviving features of the garden or park; other interesting aspects – e.g. historic associations; main published references.

The Gradings. The same symbols (I, II* or II) have been used as are employed for statutorily listed buildings, and have been allocated to indicate the following qualities:

Grade I – parks and gardens which by reason of their historic layout, features and architectural ornaments considered together make them of exceptional interest.

Grade II* - Parks and gardens which by reasons of their historic layout, features and architectural ornaments considered together make them if not of exceptional interest nevertheless of great quality.

Grade II – Parks and gardens which by reason of their historic layout, features and architectural ornaments considered together make them of special interest.

These gradings reflect the importance of the garden or park concerned, in comparison with other gardens or parks in England as a whole. If there is a listed building within the limits of a registered park or garden, the grade may not necessarily be the same, since the building and the garden or park are not always of equal importance.

While every effort has been made to ensure that entries in the register are accurate, the Commission will be pleased to receive further information both about gardens in the register and about other historic gardens that may have been overlooked. Revised or additional entries will be issued from time to time.

Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission
English Heritage

January 1988.