Sussex Gardens Trust

Parks and gardens of local importance in Sussex

Parks and Gardens of the Sussex Coast
Research and Recording project

FORMER CONVENT OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS



Historic England, 1920


2018

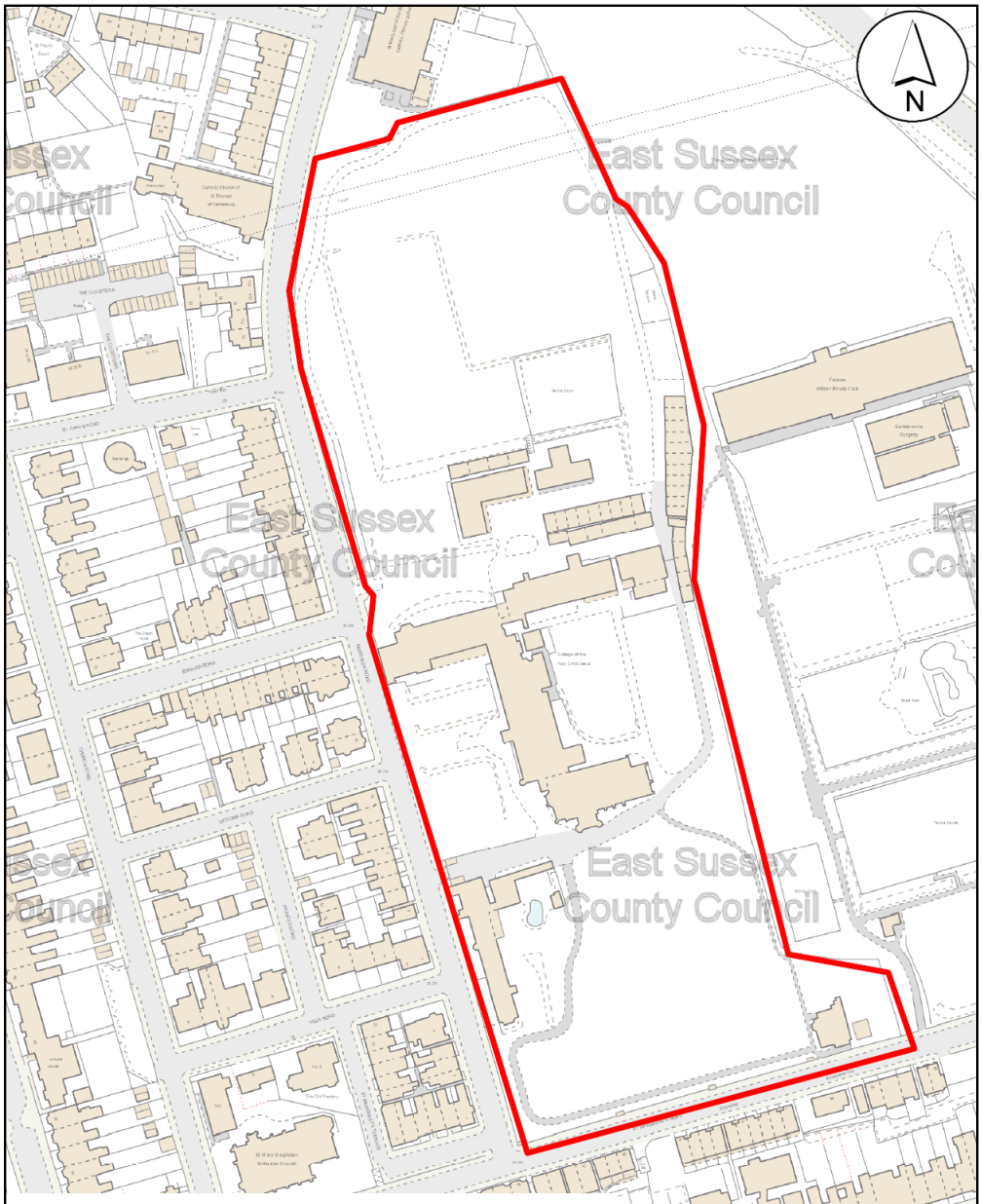
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SITE BOUNDARY (1)



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Convent of the Holy Child Jesus Representing the boundary of the area of designed historic interest	Scale: 1:2,000	East Sussex County Council
East Sussex Historic Environment Record (ESHER) and Sussex Garden Trust working in partnership	Date: 08/11/2022	

SITE BOUNDARY (2)



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INTRODUCTION

Background to the 'Parks and Gardens of the Sussex Coast' Project

Our project aim, to research and record the parks and gardens of the Sussex coast, began in 2013 and is nearing completion. Most of the sites recorded are now in public i.e. local authority ownership where their special historic development is not necessarily recognised and therefore conserved. We hope our reports will help improve knowledge and guide their future management.

The variety and period of sites is huge, from C19 and early C20 town squares, 'Old English' and Italianate-style gardens with ponds, pergolas and seating, gardens with salt-resistant traditional bedding and C21 ecological planting, to large parks which began life as farmland owned by influential local families and aristocracy and provided the recreation and leisure space for new urban development.

The administrative areas covered are: Worthing and Adur jointly-run DC, Arun DC, Brighton and Hove City Council, Eastbourne and Lewes jointly-run DC, Rother DC and Hastings Borough. Only Brighton and Hove and Hastings hold a list of local heritage assets (see Historic England's guidance for a definition of local heritage assets and how to identify and protect them . https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/local-heritage-listing-advice-note-7/)

Brighton and Hove City Council's list is the most comprehensive (https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/content/planning/heritage/local-list-heritage-assets) so our project has not addressed their sites although we may select a few of the more major ones for a deeper level of research in the future.

Content

All research – in local and national archives and on site – is undertaken by a team of volunteers who have received training from professionals expert in appraising designed landscapes who have worked extensively for English Heritage (now Historic England) on sites on its National Heritage List for England. All reports are peer-reviewed.

Each report comprises the following:

- A site boundary map drawn on the current Ordnance Survey map.

- The area within the boundary represents the area of designed historic interest; it does not necessarily include all surviving elements of the historical landscape design, which may be fragmented. It takes no account of current ownership.
- A current aerial photograph with the boundary shown.
- An overview and statement of significance based on the guidance set out in the *National Policy Planning Framework* – the government's guidance for local planning authorities in discharging their planning responsibilities.
- A written description, derived from documentary research and a visual site survey, the format following that used by Historic England for sites on the national *Register of Parks & Gardens of special historic interest* 2nd edn.

Supporters and Acknowledgements:

The Trust would like to thank the volunteers, owners, local authority staff (especially the East and West Sussex Historic Environment Records) and the many Friends groups who have participated in this project and given time and effort to completing this challenging task.
Further information is available from: www.sussexgardenstrust.org.uk

FORMER CONVENT OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

COUNTY East Sussex

ESCC HER REF MES33580

DISTRICT Hastings

OS REF TQ 807 092

OVERVIEW

A former Roman Catholic convent and school established from 1834 and occupied between 1848 and 1974 by the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. The core of the site survives and comprises the chapel (extended and completed by Edward Welby Pugin (1834-75), the son of Augustus Welby Pugin, between 1867 and 1876), pre-1870 convent, training college and the Presbytery. The buildings, still partly (2015) in use as a language school since 1976, are enclosed by an intact sandstone boundary wall with several entrances and set in grounds which include surviving mid C19 terraced gardens, a nun's cemetery, light woodland, a perimeter walk, and extensive recreational grounds.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Architectural/Artistic: The core of the site comprising the chapel (extended and completed by Edward Welby Pugin (1834-75), the son of Augustus Welby Pugin, between 1867 and 1876), the pre-1870 convent, the training college and the Presbytery, are all of significant architectural interest and closely related in function. The chapel, a fine example of the work of Edward Welby Pugin, is substantially complete and a significant building within Sussex. The convent buildings have significant group value in relation to the chapel and retain interesting period detail.

Remnants of a formal mid C19 garden survive as grassed terraces with a few trees, these originally more extensively ornamented, and are associated with the adjacent loggia. These and the perimeter walks are significant as features of C19 domestic garden layouts and of convent recreational activity. The soft sandstone boundary wall, as the most visible and earliest feature of the landscape, is typical of property boundaries constructed in St. Leonards in the first half of the C19; the wall along St Margaret's road (southern boundary) appears to survive at its original height, offering views into the site to the Presbytery and the chapel which contribute significantly to the quality of the streetscape.

Long views eastwards over adjacent White Rock pleasure grounds' open grass to the sea and across Hastings contribute to the townscape through the prominence of the chapel although the view into the site is compromised by the equal prominence and visually-isolated nature of the detracting New Building.

Historic: The site is associated with the Reverend John Jones who began building and with Cornelia Connelly who continued it and for whom the buildings and landscape - which largely survive today – were her life's work. She is linked, via her correspondence and work, with many of the major figures of the C19 Catholic Church, such as Cardinal Wiseman and Bishop Grant, his successor in 1851. Edward Welby Pugin was a significant figure in C19 Catholic Church architecture as were, though of less national importance, the architects Jones and Connelly employed, Charles Parker and William Wardell.

The surviving nuns' burial ground has associations with C19 lay figures, including Emily Honoria Patmore, a former novitiate and the daughter of the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore, who is buried there. The family is associated with Hastings old town, Patmore contributing to the erection costs of the Roman Catholic Church of St Mary Star of the Sea in the old town.

The site is significant in the development of St Leonards as the land was part of the Eversfield Estate, only broken up after James Burton bought a substantial area for developing his new town. Magdalen and St. Margaret's Roads preserve the line of the new roads being laid out at this time and the east wall of the site preserves the boundary of the Estate.

The site has evidential significance in its surviving structures and extensive archive of unpublished primary sources. It also has potential for archaeology in the garden area, in particular the former farmyard and walled kitchen garden.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The Convent building was begun in 1834, soon after the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 lifted an injunction on convents that had been in place since the Reformation (Life of Cornelia Connelly, Raedegunde Flaxman, 1991). The Reverend John Jones, a Roman Catholic priest, bought 14 acres from Wastel Brisco Esq., owner of the Eversfield estate, with a legacy of £10,000 inherited from Barbara, Lady Stanley of Puddington, whom he had served as chaplain (*College of the Holy Child Jesus, Archaeological and Historic Building Desktop Study, ACTA, 2008 para.*3.5.1). He was granted a licence for religious purposes in 1837. Lady Stanley was devoted to works of charity and lived in Devonshire Place in London after the death of her husband, St William Stanley of Hooton, Cheshire. She had her own private chapel and left some of the contents of this to the St Leonards site including the altar (ACTA, biography of Lady Stanley) although current research indicates that a new altar was designed for the chapel by E W Pugin and Cornelia Connelly (ACTA Study para.5.6).

The Eversfield estate comprised a vast tract of land in Hastings, a substantial part of which was sold to James Burton for the development of the new town of St Leonards on Sea in 1827. There is no mention of any buildings on the site as sold to the Reverend John Jones. His first construction was the wall of sandstone, two metres in height, probably quarried locally (its lower courses are very similar to contemporary work in Burton's St Leonards *(*ACTA Study 3.4.1) which surrounds the whole site to protect it from local anti-Catholic activity. Examples of this include a demonstration and a procession with an effigy of the Pope on 6th January 1851 when Archbishop (later Cardinal) Wiseman was staying in the priest's house in adjacent Magdalen Road. A further demonstration occurred in 1882 during a speech at the Hastings Bonfire dinner (Life and Times of Kindred Spirits, Tony Streeter). The first buildings were the house and convent, originally the work of architect Charles Parker, built from 1834 and ending sometime before 1847; from 1848 onwards the architect was William Wardell.

Jones' aspirations for the convent, summarised in a letter from him in 1834, give an idea of how the site was to be laid out and used: "The Convent is to be built on a scale to afford accommodation for about forty persons. By way of giving a clearer insight into my notions but without any fixed or determined plan, I have further sketched out the following particulars. It is proposed to plant the Church on a table spot of the acclivity in the centre between the eastern boundary and the western road and about 350 feet from the frontage road. The front I presume may be laid down in grass for cowes, of which it will be profitable to have as many as the land will keep. This field may have a border round, with a gravel walk, and a fence to keep the cowes within, or it may be left entirely for their range.

Behind the Church, at the North, ground is to be assigned for a cemetery – and to the north of the cemetery the kitchen garden – the rest of the ground is to be laid out with a border and walk all round, with an inner fence to keep the cowes within. There is no tree upon the ground…"

Although originally intended for the Irish Sisters of Charity, they and several other orders turned the site down. The Reverend John Jones eventually offered the convent to Reverend Mother Cornelia Connelly of the Convent of the Holy Child in Derby, through the auspices of Bishop Wiseman, who, on the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850 became Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

In a letter to Cornelia Connelly Bishop (later Cardinal) Wiseman of 30th August 1848 describes the buildings at that time: "The house is solidly built and very large; one part is now occupied by Mr Jones, and consists of two large rooms, offices, etc., communicating with the priest's rooms. Beyond and below is the convent, the largest room of which now forms the public chapel (with a separate entrance etc.) but even so , very extensive. The buildings, though spacious and convenient are not in good architectural taste; but all that is now being built, being under the direction of Mr Wardell, is quite correct. The foundations of the church are laid, and the contract signed. The church and new schools are estimated at £13,000, with the finishing of the convent. The church consists of three aisles with a distinct stalled conventual chapel,

from which the three other chapels can be seen through screens, and which joins the convent by a pretty cloister. The whole is to be thoroughly warmed."

He also describes the grounds saying "the ground consists of fourteen acres completely walled round in stone; the gardens are large with plenty of trees, vegetables and even a hot-house. The house is solidly built and very large, one part of it now occupied by Mr Jones. Beyond and below is the convent, the largest room of which now forms the public chapel (with a separate entrance)". Cornelia accepted the offer and arrived in St Leonards on Sea with a group of nuns and children on December 21st 1848.

By this date (1848) the buildings seem to have comprised the convent's West End, incorporating Reverend Jones' house and a south-facing loggia, the convent's south end and a chapel immediately to the south of the convent buildings. An infirmary and chaplain's house are described as being to the north of the chapel, with plans also showing as in place the terraced gardens (south of the loggia) an orchard, walled gardens against the inside of the eastern boundary wall (Old St. Leonards, unpublished manuscript, Sister M Matthew Hueffer, c1981 quoted in ACTA Study para.3.24). The architect of this phase was Charles Parker. How much of the chapel, then dedicated to All Souls, had been completed by this date is unclear although it occupied a longer but otherwise similar footprint to the present one. There is some uncertainty over the involvement of A W N Pugin in the initial 1846 design and construction phase; although "The Builder" magazine of 1850 refers to Pugin's "St Leonard's College chapel rood screen" drawing exhibited at the RA in 1850 (listed building entry), and Cornelia Connelly certainly knew A W N Pugin, having met him at Alton Towers, the home of the Earl of Shrewsbury (Life of Cornelia Connelly, Raedegunde Flaxman), ACTA's Assessment of the History and Significance 2005 (p18 para.3.25) notes that "despite assertions that this building was by A W N Pugin, Rosemary Hill has been unable to find any connection with him and points to the low standard of construction of this phase as work he would not have tolerated".

After Cornelia Connelly's arrival building works to the convent and school continued, with the architect William Wardell replacing Charles Parker. The foundation stone for the first school was laid in 1849. The Reverend Jones died in 1851 leaving the property to Colonel Towneley, a nephew of Lady Stanley (the family retained the site's freehold). During the 1850s and 60s, buildings were added and altered extensively including the addition of further storeys. A presbytery was built in 1854 in the south-west corner of the site for the chaplain to the Society. Cornelia Connelly obtained permission to build a training college; this, designed largely by William Wardell, took over the school (by the main west gate) which was greatly expanded southwards – to its present (2014) footprint.

The plans of this period also showed a cow-shed, cow-house, stable, pig sties and an aviary amongst other farm buildings and a rainwater tank which was present at the south edge of the terraced garden in 1873 (ACTA Study 3.5.20).

Tensions between the sisters and the local laity over the use of the convent's chapel by both parties resulted, in 1864, in the construction of a new parish church outside the site on its present site on the opposite side of Magdalen Road. Designed by architect George Goldie (1828-1887) and consecrated in 1866, it paved the way for the building of a chapel on the convent site on top of the ruins of the original chapel begun in 1846, designs by William Wardell and Goldie, to whom William Wilkinson Wardell sold his practice, being rejected. The appointment of Edward Welby Pugin (1834-1875), A W N Pugin's eldest son, was probably secured through his previous work for the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. The church, known as St Michael's, was consecrated in 1868.

Cornelia Connelly died in 1879; at about this date the convent grounds were at their most extensive. The terraced gardens to the west and south of the main convent buildings and extending to the western boundary wall were laid out on three descending levels with a central diamond-patterned parterre at the lowest level, the whole set with trees and a network of paths. East of the buildings was an orchard and east again a walled garden divided into three compartments by paths lined with trees. North of the convent on the rising terraced slopes were a summerhouse and an east/west tree-lined walk, while north of the orchard and kitchen garden was a range of farm buildings. The northern third of the site was uncultivated open ground with a small graveyard occupying an enclosure against the east boundary wall. The southern quarter (south of the convent buildings and chapel) was laid to a large open lawn with tree-lined walks running along inside the eastern and southern boundary walls (1st edition OS map 1873).

After the completion of the chapel, and up until the 1970s, there was a succession of modifications to the buildings and the construction of additional ones. In 1883 an underground tunnel was built to link the former training college, (by this date the junior school) with the school premises to the north of the convent. In 1885-9 a large building known as the New Building, to house a gym, concert room and bedrooms was erected on the site of the farm buildings. It was substantially altered or possibly rebuilt in the 1920s or 1930s to its current (2014) form.

In 1863 a Mr Regali came from London to teach the nuns how to make statues and paint them. They made a dozen small statues and one or two of St Aloysius which were two feet high. The attempt was eventually abandoned as the work was too heavy for the nuns.

After World War I, ex-army huts were erected to serve as new classrooms roughly on the site of the present (2014) ones while after World War II there were some additions to the buildings: a new gym, science room and trunk room in 1987 and a one storey building on the lower tennis courts in 1972 (ACTA Study paras.6.10, 6.11). To the north, land was given to the diocese in 1955 to build the present Star of the Sea primary school. In 1974 the Society moved the school to Mayfield and the non-teaching staff to the former St John's Nursing Home in Hastings. In 1976 the site was bought for use as a summer language school and remains in private ownership for that use.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Location, Area, Boundaries, Landform Setting

The site lies to the west of the main A21 north/south road into Hastings, immediately west of the White Rock Pleasure Grounds. To its south is a row of terraced houses on the cliff top and, 30 metres below, a row of shops and houses, the main A259 trunk road, the promenade and beach. Magdalen Road runs along its west side. At its southern end the site is 157.5 metres wide and is bordered by St Margaret's Road. The northern end of the site abuts the brick wall and weldmesh-fenced boundary of St Mary Star of the Sea Roman Catholic primary school.

The site, which is slightly undulating and slopes quite steeply from north to south, is situated in an elevated position on the cliff top with extensive views both into the site from the adjacent White Rock Pleasure Grounds and outwards to the sea and eastwards towards Hastings Castle. The roughly rectangular site tapers at its northern end and is completely surrounded by a sandstone wall, built as one of the first structures after 1834 by the Rev Jones. The southern section (with buttresses) formed part of the work of the reclamation of St Margaret's Road from the sea cliffs in the 1830s (ACTA volume 2 Draft Figures, Appendix and Gazetteer, 2008, gazetteer item 5). Of local sandstone, it is approximately two metres in height. Some of the wall, particularly the west side, has been unsympathetically repaired with additional railings in places to heighten it. A section in the centre of the eastern side is in poor repair.

Entrances and Approaches

The main entrance (listed grade II) lies on the west side in Magdalen Road, 95 metres north of the junction with St Margaret's Road. Set back from both the road and the perimeter wall it comprises a central archway flanked by stepped buttresses with a pedestrian entrance on either side, all three hung with timber gates. The stonework is stepped over the central gateway with a stone eagle and cross above. It is built of sandstone though possibly not a local one and is dressed with Bath stone (ACTA *volume 2* Draft Figures, Appendix and Gazetteer, 2008, gazetteer item 4). It was designed by William Wilkinson Wardell in 1854.

From the gateway a path leads westwards, flanked on its northern side by a low sandstone wall possibly dating from the mid C19 (structure shown here on OS 1st edition of 1873) topped with nine reconstituted-stone urns set on brickwork plinths of an unknown but probably later date and, alongside the wall, iron benches with iron refuse bins. The main entrance porch to the convent buildings, now known as St Joseph's porch (formerly St Edmund's) is reached by a path running c40 metres northwards from the main path, along the eastern side of the formal terraced gardens.

On the west side of the site there several other entrance points. There is a blocked-up pedestrian entrance 10 metres south of the main entrance, a blocked-up gate 40 metres north of the main entrance and a further, now (2014) unused, access 110 metres

north of the main entrance. On the eastern side of the site there is one blocked-up entrance 200 metres from the southern boundary. On the frontage to St Margaret's Road, 20 metres from the east boundary, there is an entrance to the side of the presbytery which is boarded up and overgrown with shrubbery.

Principal buildings

The main complex comprises the chapel (listed grade II*) and, extending immediately to its north and west to form an L shape, the convent buildings (listed grade II). Dedicated to St Michael the chapel is built in the Gothic style of coursed rubble with ashlar dressings and a slate roof. The north aisle has been rendered. Its plan comprises a five bay nave with bellcote and apsidal end, north and south aisles, a large south porch and lower four bay choir with a north chapel of two bays to the north and a four bay vestry to the south (listed building entry, National Heritage List).

A Gothic style church was commenced c1846 but only the outer walls, to the top of the aisle windows, plus buttresses and the entrance of the south porch, were completed. It remained in an uncompleted form from c1850 until Edward Welby Pugin completed it in 1869.
The former convent comprises a roughly L-shaped, Italianate-style building of two to three storeys, rendered and with a slate roof and mainly sash windows. Built in 1846-8 in a modified scheme from that drawn up by the architect Charles Parker c1834 it was completed by William Wilkinson Wardell. A new refectory was added in 1890 and the kitchen extended in 1894. A library was added to the northwest in 1909-10. In 1895 an east dormitory wing was added, then replaced by a larger building in the early C20 including a gym, concert and assembly hall, studio and bedrooms; this wing, subsequently extended or rebuilt in the 1920s or 1930s is known as the New Building (and is not included in the listing).

West of the chapel and convent complex, on the western boundary with Magdalen road, is the former convent's school and training college (listed grade II). Built in the Gothic style of coursed stone rubble with ashlar dressings and a slate roof it is mainly of two storeys and attics, part of three storeys and attics, with 14 windows in all. The northern part may have been built circa 1849 as part of a Girls Poor School and the south part added in 1856 as a purpose-built training college, by William Wilkinson Wardell. Some 30 metres north of the former convent are a series of further outbuildings mainly of mid to late C20 comprising single storey, flat roofed buildings now (2014) used by the language school as classrooms.

Gardens and pleasure grounds

Grassed terraces on three descending levels are laid out to the west of the chapel and convent, extending west to the site's western boundary wall. These survive from their mid C19 origin as terraced gardens with a central diamond-patterned parterre at the lowest level, with a further lawn and ornamental flower beds, the whole set with trees and a network of paths (OS 1st edition map 1875). The western side of the terraces is

screened with trees and shrubberies and is overlooked on the north side by an open loggia; 70 metres north of the main buildings and 17 metres from the western boundary wall is a statue of the Madonna. A shrine to St Joseph, taken from the temporary chapel after the consecration of the new chapel (ACTA , Assessment of the History and Significance, volume 2, 2005) stands against the western wall amongst shrubbery. A number of other statues scattered around the grounds, all now weathered, may be survivors of the nuns' enterprise of making statues for sale to raise money for the convent.

On the eastern side of the building complex the boundary wall forms the site of the former walled garden of which nothing now (2014) survives. The east wall with its buttresses had roses and pear trees growing along it, some of which survive; the garden was bounded on the north side by farm buildings, now converted to classrooms, and was planted with specimen trees and laid out with paths along the side walls and between some of the trees (OS 1st edition 1873). To the west of the walled garden site, an open grassed space was the site of a mid C19 orchard now (2014) gone.

A summerhouse, lately in use as a dog kennel and in poor condition, is situated in a group of trees up against the eastern boundary wall, 100 metres north of St Margaret's Road. The summerhouse, in place by 1873 (OS map) was moved from its original site - in a group of trees north of the main building 60 metres from the western wall - between 1910 and 1938.

Some 40 metres north of the main building complex, against the east boundary wall is the burial ground. The first burial was in 1855 after the Public Health Act approved cemeteries other than Church of England, and about 100 people including children are buried there. The replica, red-painted iron railings surrounding the site on three sides were erected in 1996 and the headstones were stacked against the fourth, perimeter wall side. Emily Honoria Patmore, who entered the convent as a novitiate in 1873 was buried here in 1882. She was the daughter of the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore who lived in the old town of Hastings for some years and partly paid for the erection of the Roman Catholic Church of St Mary Star of the Sea in the old town of Hastings in memory of his wife. The burial ground was doubled in size between 1910 and 1938 (OS maps)

At the north end of the site, abutting the grounds of St Mary Star of the Sea primary school, is a line of shrubbery south of which is a path on top of a bank which gently slopes southwards to a playing field. Further south, immediately west of the burial ground, are two hard tennis courts, one of which is in a dilapidated state. On the western side of the tennis courts are clumps of trees, mainly Quercus ilex (holm oak) and Quercus robur (pedunculate oak) through which passes a section of a mid C19 circuit walk (OS 1st edition map) around much of the site's perimeter. The grounds in 2014 are used mainly for recreational purposes for students.

To the south of the tennis courts and up against the east boundary wall are groups of C20 school buildings. South of the chapel the ground slopes gently to the south end of

the site with a line of poplar trees along the southern boundary. (ACTA Study 7.3.4) A further surviving section of the mid C19 circuit walk follows the line of the southern boundary wall, passing beneath an avenue of trees.

In the extreme south-east corner of the site, in a hollow, is the presbytery (listed grade II) built in 1856 by the architect William Wilkinson Wardell to house priests serving the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus. It is now (2014) unoccupied and has not been used for its original purpose since 1974 when the order moved the school to Mayfield. The house is built in Gothic Revival style of red brick in Flemish bond with polychrome brick relieving arches and diaper motifs, stone window dressings, tiled roof and four end brick chimney stacks. It is an asymmetrical house of two storeys with a projecting bay to the south east and northwest. Adjacent to the presbytery is a circle of stone blocks which may mark the site of a well.

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