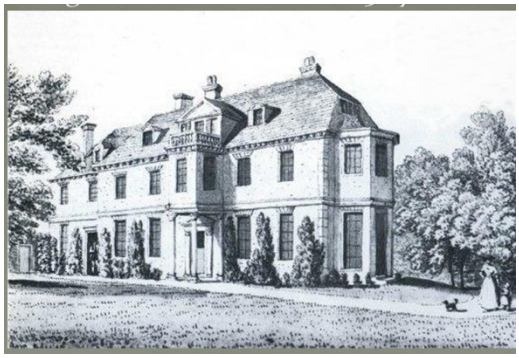
Sussex Gardens Trust

Parks and gardens of local importance in Sussex

Parks and Gardens of the Sussex Coast
Research and Recording project

MANOR GARDENS EASTBOURNE



undated



2026

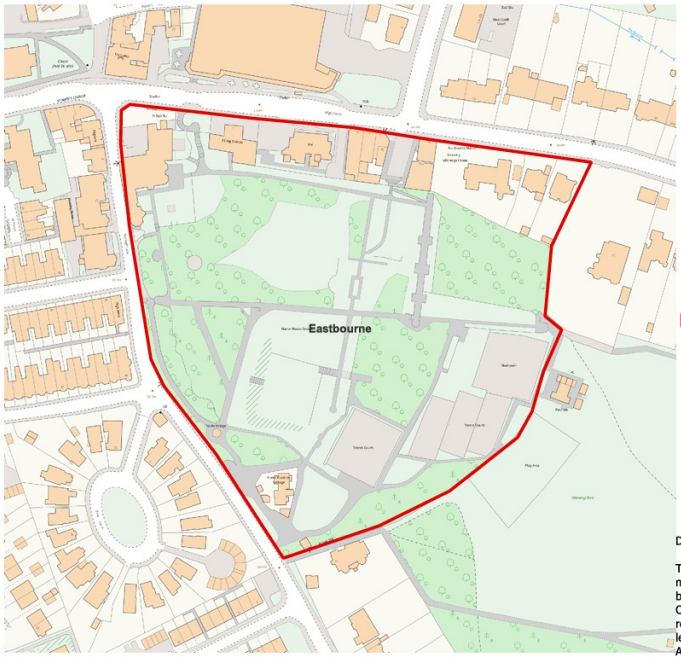
SUSSEX GARDENS TRUST

East Sussex County Council

west sussex county council

THE GARDENS TRUST

SITE BOUNDARY (1)



ESHER

HER 069/26

Manor Gardens
Eastbourne

Legend

Study_Area

Drawn by: Archaeology Team

This map is reproduced from Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office © Crown copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. AC0000808855. 2024

SITE BOUNDARY (2)



ESHER

HER 069/26

Manor Gardens
Eastbourne

Legend

Study_Area

Drawn by: Archaeology Team

This map is reproduced from Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationary Office © Crown copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. AC0000808855. 2024

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

MANOR GARDENS

COUNTY East Sussex

ESCC HER REF 138138

DISTRICT Eastbourne

OS GRID REF TV599994

OVERVIEW

Extensive public gardens created from the grounds and gardens of Gildredge Manor (formerly known as The Manor House), which were originally begun by the housebuilder, Revd Lushington and then continuously developed by the major land-owning Davies-Gilbert family until their purchase by Eastbourne Council in 1923. Much of the historic layout and many features of C18, C19 and early C20 survive including the Hermitage, Obelisk, Yew walk, rockery dell and flint-walled boundaries.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Architectural/artistic: A good example of extensive domestic gardens associated with their manor house, laid out from the late C18 onwards and with much of the layout and many of the features (including the late C18 Hermitage) surviving into present day public ownership. Although in separate ownership the Manor house is still visually part of its former gardens.

Historic interest: The gardens and Manor House were for 130 years owned by the Davies-Gilbert family who were active landowners in the development of Eastbourne. The purchase in 1923 of the house and gardens by Eastbourne Council are an example of civic efforts to provide public open space and cultural facilities, the Towner Art Gallery occupying the Manor for over 80 years.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

From c.1765 the Revd Henry Lushington bought several plots of land and properties in Old Town, Eastbourne, in an area bounded by High Street and Borough Lane. These purchases included the Crown Inn that was demolished and replaced with a grand

house built above the south side of the High Street at its junction with Borough Lane. The Revd Lushington died in 1779 when the house was referred to as 'his new erected messuage'. His son Sir Stephen Lushington sold the mansion house, its grounds and some cottages in 1792 to Charles Gilbert of Lewes; a member of the family that owned extensive lands in Eastbourne and its surrounds. The house and grounds were to stay in Davies-Gilbert family ownership until their sale in 1923 to the then County Borough of Eastbourne.

In 1819 John Heatherley referred to the house as having 'good gardens and commanding extensive sea views'. From 1845 the property was known as The Manor House when John Davies Gilbert became Lord of the Manor of Eastbourne. An 1866 portfolio of tracings of earlier plans prepared for Hon. Mrs C. Gilbert has at item no.1 an undated plan of the 'Mansion House, Gardens, Yards, outbuildings and lands adjoining'. Land plots are numbered but no schedule is present. Along the High Street the family-owned plots were small and intermixed with those of other named owners/occupiers. Large plots forming the house's grounds extended east into what is now Gildredge Park. Those nearest the house indicated tree planting. A small, unnamed structure was recorded at the location of what is here called the summer house, but which has been known since the C20 as The Hermitage. There is some indication of a pathway running from it to the house alongside Borough Lane.

By the late C19 (OS 1st Edition, surveyed 1875-76) the house and ornamental gardens occupied a triangular piece of land running south from High Street to a tip some 270m along Borough Lane and Compton Place Road. Eastwards beyond these gardens, open parkland, with a bank running north/south across it, is planted with groups of trees and overlooked from the extreme edge of the gardens by an obelisk. At the turn of the century (OS 1898) the 'Summer House' is recorded by name as is the 'Obelisk' which now marks a crossing point for a network of paths in the ornamental garden areas. The eastern boundary of these gardens has also by now been relocated further south-east to incorporate a section of the parkland, the substantial remainder of which had been leased in 1887 to Eastbourne Borough Council for the creation of Gildredge Park (recorded as such on the 1898 OS map). An album of eight photographs, catalogued as c.1900, illustrates the house, gardens and grounds. The garden elevation of the house is shown in its immediate setting of lawn with a mature tree to either side. The house is also shown viewed from the east across rose beds in the foreground. The remaining photos show two females in various locations including beneath a pergola, in a rock garden, and in ornamental gardens with shrub and tree backgrounds. The OS plan of 1910 records the obelisk but the summer house is shown only as a small (un-named) circle. To the north-east of the gardens a linear feature comprising three pairs of seating bays or niches records a yew walk (identified as such from sales particulars of 1922).

Mixed planting is indicated around the site especially at the south-east and south-west margins and through the centre of the gardens.

Manor House passed down through Davies-Gilbert family members and at the death of Carew Davies-Gilbert in 1913 the family land holdings were split by his will between his daughters with Minnie, a spinster, receiving the house and adjoining properties. Sales particulars were issued on her behalf in 1922, but no offer was forthcoming for the house. The contents were, however, sold by auction at this time. The 1922 sales particulars briefly described the house and grounds as of some 3.4 hectares (8.5 acres). The service buildings of stables, garages, greenhouses etc. lay alongside and accessed from the High Street. The garden features were listed but mostly without further description in the text. Some were located by name on a sketch plan archived with the sales particulars. The listed features included a Briar Walk, a grass Yew Walk, Elizabeth's Mound, a paved standard lilac and Yew hedge Walk, pleached lime trees, a large Rock Garden, a stone-built Italian Pergola, a Rose Garden, wide herbaceous borders and two Tennis Courts laid out by professionals. Around the house was an old pavement with a William and Mary Garden. There was a large and productive Kitchen Garden across the east end of the grounds. Specimen trees were noted as elm, beech and horse chestnut, together with fully grown conifers and yews. In the garden was 'An Adam Summer House', also called The Hermitage, of octagonal plan with thatched roof and four shaped windows with glazed fret panels. Photographs illustrated several features including the Summer House, Rose Garden, Yew Walk, Briar Walk, and the Tennis Courts. The house and service court were also photographed.

Manor House, its grounds and gardens were purchased by the Council in 1923. Later that year the house opened as the Towner Gallery, named for Alderman John Chisholm Towner who had died in 1920 bequeathing monies and an art collection of some 22 pictures to the Council. The Gallery was here until 2005 when the collection moved to a purpose-built Gallery next to the Congress Theatre in the Devonshire quarter. The house and its immediate surrounds were sold at this time but left neglected for a few years until restored as a venue for events, weddings etc under the name Gildredge Manor. Following the 1923 purchase as public gardens, incremental changes and additions were made including eight tennis courts at the east end of the grounds (OS edition 1925) occupying a substantial part of the former kitchen garden. A number of the other formal and informal ornamental features such as the rock garden and yew walk have survived from the period of private ownership (recorded in the 1922 sales particulars).

By the late 1930s the house is recorded as 'Art Gallery' while the service buildings alongside the High Street, to the immediate east of the house, had been cleared (OS

edition surveyed c.1938). Adjoining the vehicle access from Compton Place Road the two-storey Manor Gardens Cottage dates from c.1960.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Location, Area, Boundaries, Landform, Setting

Manor Gardens lie to the south of the High Street/The Goffs (A259) at the centre of Eastbourne's Old Town, about 1 kilometre (0.6 miles) north-west of Eastbourne Railway Station. Contiguous with Gildredge Park to the east it sits within a wider area of mostly residential development of mixed age and character. The broadly triangular site of some 3.6 ha (9 acres) has Gildredge Manor House at its western apex. The site slopes down from west to east with a further slight tilt towards the north. Some areas have been levelled for ornamental purposes such as at the east end for tennis courts. The northern boundary abuts commercial and residential properties fronting the High Street and The Goffs. Retaining walls defining the property boundaries are cut into the slope and are topped at the west end by flint walls with brick cappings. The eastern boundary, shared with Gildredge Park, is lightly wooded with 1.5m high metal railings with hoop tops. The west/south-western boundary follows the curving line of Compton Place Road and Borough Lane with a 2+m high, flint wall, the nodular flints laid in courses.

Entrances and Approaches

On the northern boundary a pedestrian access from the High Street adjoining Gildredge Manor House is formed of two curving flights of steps created following the1930s clearance of the service buildings. There is a small area of ornamental flower beds at street level. Further east, between No. 1 High Street and No. 35 The Goffs, another pedestrian access is built into the flint-faced retaining wall. A shallow flight of steps leads up to a central, gated archway in decorative brickwork which is surmounted by a later brick pediment. Additional access ramps with low brick walls have been added both outside and inside the Gardens.

Along the western boundary there are two pedestrian entrances each comprising a gated brick archway in the flint wall and located approx. 75m and 105m south of the Borough Lane junction with High Street. The northernmost one gives pedestrian access to the main path that runs eastwards across the whole site. Running parallel to a stretch of Borough Lane at its northern end an unmade path runs between the tall, outer, flint-faced boundary wall and a lower flint wall battered to support raised ground to east. This path formerly ran from the main house to The Hermitage/summer House but is now truncated at its north end. An access for service vehicles is at the south corner

from Compton Place Road; this also serves as a pedestrian access. There are pedestrian links to and from Gildredge Park at each end of the shared east boundary. The Gardens are criss-crossed by an irregular network of paved and unpaved paths. The main paved path runs west-east following the slope of the grounds from the Borough Lane gate. A north-south path runs from the accessible entrance adjacent to No 1 High Street.

Principal building

Gildredge Manor, formerly known as The Manor House (listed grade II under that name), or the Gilbert or Gildredge Manor House, stands at the extreme western tip of the Gardens. Built in 1743, it comprises 2 storeys with an attic, 7 windows and 3 dormers. Its brickwork is of grey headers with red brick dressings. The main front faces the garden on the south side and comprises a large bay of 3 windows on the 1st floor supported by Doric columns below. Housing the Towner Art gallery and Museum from 1923 to 2005 it is now a commercial events venue (without access to or from the public gardens). The house has a private garden space enclosed by metal rail fencing and trimmed yew hedges. Its lawn has a small ornamental square with the quarters bordered with low-clipped yew.

Gardens and Pleasure Grounds

The following description commences at the western pedestrian entrance off the High Street and locates features to the north and south of the main west-east path. An art installation of c.2010 entitled *4,000 Tides* by David Nash is located in an open area some 20m south of Gildredge Manor's private garden. Some 20m further south of the Manor's garden is the northern end of a raised bank, covered with yew shrubbery, that runs south inside the Borough Lane boundary wall. The bank's sides are supported by flint-faced walls. The bank is cut by the main west-east path through the Gardens and ends alongside The Hermitage.

The west section of the Gardens, from Borough Lane north-eastwards across to the High Street entrance, is mostly open grass with mixed tree planting of varied age. It is partly bordered, some 80m to the east, with clipped hedges. Lime trees were planted in 1988 close to the entrance. A nearby plaque, in the planted border at its west end, records this as a response to tree losses in 'The Great Storm of 16 October 1987'. Alongside the northern boundary a paved path runs some 175m eastwards, parallel to the High Street, to terminate at the north end of the Yew Walk. This walk, running southwards for some 60m, incorporates three pairs of bays for seats on either side, the bays revealed by recent cutting back of the yews and overgrown trees. Its northern end is marked by a large stone block with the inscription 'Granite January 1 1886', while it terminates at the southern end with a semi-circular stone seat. The walk is first shown on the OS map revised 1908 and is named in the 1922 sales particulars.

On the north side of the main west-east path, at the south-east end of the Yew Walk, is the 'Horse Mound', a grass-covered conical mound topped with a stone toadstool or staddle stone. It has a diameter of some 8m and a height of 3+m. Probably dating from the early C20, it was noted in the 1922 sales particulars as 'Elizabeth's Mound' and features in an etching of 1928 by the artist Eric Ravilious. A restoration of 2013 is recorded on a memorial plaque. Immediately across the main path to the south are the substantial remains of a rockery dell, some 20m square, the rocks bedded into the slope of the ground. The dell has an entrance on its north side while stone blocks randomly enclose the other three sides. It is overshadowed by mature yew shrubbery and other trees.

At the far eastern end of the Gardens is a series of 5 tennis courts, a basketball court and a skateboard ramp occupying the early C20 kitchen garden area. They are generally enclosed by trees and shrubs. A lime hedge, pleached above 2m and supported on tall metal poles and wires, runs between the tennis courts at their southern end. Some 65m north-west of the tennis courts is the late C18, Gothic-style summer house (listed grade II) known as The Hermitage. It was restored in 1990 and re-thatched and re-painted in 2023. To the north-east of The Hermitage is a 35m square, ornamental garden cut into the sloping ground with stone steps leading down from the centre of the west side. The west and south slopes are shown on the OS plan revised 1925. Ornamental sensory plants are arranged in a symmetrical pattern of beds within lawns and there are seats on the outer margins.

Adjoining at the north-east corner of the square garden are two sections of pergola with stone pillars and wooden beams crossing the south end of a central paved path with planted borders on either side. The pergola was referred to in the 1922 sales particulars, and the ground plan is shown on the OS plan revised 1925. A small rose garden lies to the east of the borders and pergola. The paved path runs north across the main west-east path to a small, raised, mid/late C20, rectangular lily pond and then continues towards the accessible pedestrian entrance on the High Street.

REFERENCES

Books, articles and publications

Cannadine, David, *Lords and Landlords: the Aristocracy and the Towns 1774 - 1967*,

(Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1980)

Chris Blandford Associates, 'Eastbourne Landscape Character Assessment' (2010)

Crook, Richard, *Eastbourne in Detail* (London: D. G. Publishing, 2015)

Elleray, D Robert, *Eastbourne: a pictorial history* (London: Phillimore, 1995)

Gordon, Kevin, *Eastbourne Through Time*, (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2010)

Historic England Listing descriptions for Gildredge Manor and the Summer House

Sussex Gardens Trust – Gildredge Park report by Kate Ibbotson, 2022

Archive material

East Sussex Record Office – Davies-Gilbert family records, especially:

- Catalogue introduction to Davies-Gilbert collection – GIL/1/25
- Sales Particulars, 1922 – GIL/3/6/128/1
- Sale to EBC 1923 – GIL/3/208/439

Maps

Map of Eastbourne from *A Description of Eastbourne and its Environs* by John Heatherley

(1819), reproduced in Elleray (1995)

Ordnance Survey Maps – Sussex LXXX, 6 inch/mile viewed online at www.maps.nls.uk:

- Surveyed 1875-78, published 1879
- Revised 1898, published 1900
- Revised 1908, published 1910
- Revised 1925, published 1927
- Revised 1930 and with Additions to 1938, published 1938
- Surveyed c.1938, published 1947

Ordnance Survey Maps – Sussex LXXX 9, 25 inch/mile viewed online at www.maps.nls.uk:

- Revised 1908, published 1910
- Revised 1925, published 1925
- Revised 1930, published 1933

Images

Historic England aerial photographs – RAF flight of April 16 1946, ref. raf 3g tud uk v 5076.

Ravilious, Eric, artist. See artuk.org website for the following:

- wood engraving of 1927, *Manor Gardens*, including depiction of the Horse Mound
- watercolour triptych of 1930, *Tennis*, said to be based on Manor Gardens

Websites

Eastbourne Borough Council – www.lewes-eastbourne.gov.uk/article/1457/Gildredge-Park-and-Manor-Gardens

Friends of Manor Gardens and Gildredge Park - www.friendsofmanorgardensandgildredgepark.co.uk

Gildredge Manor – www.gildredgemanor.co.uk

Research: Don Josey	**Completed:** February 2023	**Editor:** Virginia Hinze & Barbara Simms