

Fenton House – Heritage Asset Assessment

A house in the country, rather than a country house, Fenton was built as a rural retreat from the City of London. Today its principal significance lies in its architectural merit, its collections, and in visitors' appreciation of the garden setting against the backdrop of Hampstead village. Construction began around twenty years after the Great Fire of London, c.1686; it is one of the earliest brick houses to be built and a rare survival of a gentry home. For three hundred years it was occupied by a succession of merchant families with City connections who valued the country air and view of the River Thames and Port of London. Its modest grandeur and shifting pattern of ownership lends the house a particularly modern appeal, encouraging the feeling that Fenton House belongs to all who enter it.

When Fenton House was built Hampstead was still a rural village, attracting visitors up the hill to enjoy the clear air of the heathland, views of London and iron-rich water from local wells. Since then it has drawn writers such as Keats, Coleridge and Galsworthy, and artists as diverse as John Constable, Kate Greenaway and Ben Nicholson. Hampstead is now a densely populated urban environment but Fenton House remains, as it was always intended to be, a sanctuary from the city.

Architecture

The survival of Fenton House in an area of developmental pressure makes its architectural importance exceptional (it is Grade I listed). Built c.1686 as a speculative build by a master-bricklayer, rather than a professional architect, the house was tenanted for much of its history and remains little altered in consequence. The overall layout follows a standard four-room square plan but there are idiosyncratic features of architectural interest such as the tall central window in the north front, the placement of the chimney stacks, and the asymmetrical roof with two small wings to the east with balustrade terraces. The house is an unusual mixture of the functional, the fashionable and the experimental, indicative of its creation by master builders and craftsmen without the oversight and direction of a specialist designer.

The principal South side of the house displays many of its characteristic features, including a brownish brick with rubbed red brick dressings to the windows and quoins, and a boldly carved wooden cornice under widely projecting eaves. This latter feature is repeated in other, later, houses in Hampstead for which Fenton may have been an inspiration. Also notable to the south is the wrought iron entrance gate which is in the style of the ironworker Jean Tijou (fl. 1689-1712), the designer of gates for Hampton Court and St Paul's Cathedral. The gate bears the initials 'JAG', presumably for Joshua and Anne Gee who lived in the house from 1706-1750. Fenton is built on a hill and magnificent sweeping views from the east can be gained from the rooftop balcony, whose unique panorama of London's ever-changing skyline - from the completion of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in 1708 to the erection of the Shard in 2010 - continues to encourage a meditation on the relationship between town and country. The views are of considerable significance for an understanding of Fenton House, which has remained neither wholly rural nor become fully urban.

Garden

Of outstanding significance to Fenton in communal terms is the garden of 1½ acres. It is the feature for which the house is best known and is of particular significance for some of the local community as well to visitors from farther afield. Despite the original village environment the land around the house was laid out on the model of a town garden. Described in sale particulars from 1756 as 'pleasant...well planted with Fruit-Trees, and a

Kitchen-Garden, all inclos'd with a substantial Brick Wall', it was created on three levels and mostly used to grow fruit and vegetables for the house. The footprint remains relatively unchanged today, the orchard and kitchen garden balancing the more formal walks of the terrace above. The lead statue of a shepherd is by the British sculptor John Cheere and was cast in 1735, the sole survivor of a group of four that once graced the garden. The southern garden gates, the railings, garden walls and lead sculpture are all Grade II listed, as is a cistern in the grounds.

When Fenton House came to the National Trust in the 1950s the garden was over-grown and over-mature. Without sufficient records to attempt a restoration or re-creation, the Trust has instead used the existing structure and changes of level to plant a traditional 'old English garden' evocative of the Edwardian partnership of Lutyens and Jekyll. Since the 1980s new features, such as the sunken rose garden, and imaginative planting has created a garden of timeless appeal that is rewarding to visit at any time of year. The original underlying structure is considered of exceptional significance for its date, size, level of investment and survival.

ASSESSMENT

Early garden - there is scant record of the garden but it seems to have remained largely the same from late 1600 to mid-twentieth century - some two hundred and fifty years. It was fully walled to the north and arranged on three levels: an upper narrow terrace with flower border. A middle level - function unknown early but described as a tennis lawn from late nineteenth century; and the lowest level being orchard and vegetable garden. The South garden has always had large trees (although not clear if these were always within the garden or in the street outside) and was fairly simple with clipped hedging and lawn.

By the 1980's, some thirty years after being taken on by the National Trust, the garden was described as over-mature and dull. The Trust, in consultation with the Gardens Panel, decided to start again and to re-create a relaxed 'Old English Style' garden evoking the Edwardian period (1900 - 1910). Paul Miles, garden designer, drew up plans in 1977 (refined following discussions in 1978) showing how structure could be created using hedges, topiary, formal borders, etc. This was not a restoration and seems to be Miles' response to the spirit of place, architecture of the house and his acute sense of scale. Minor alterations were made to parts of the plans but the garden structure today should be attributed to him.

One part of the garden that works exceptionally well in adding interest and completing a circuit walk so visitors do not need to double back on themselves is the sunken rose garden that was added between 1983 - 1986 to designs by Dick Jeffcoate and Mike Calnan. This also creates mystery and gives more satisfying proportion to the north lawn.

LAYOUT AND STRUCTURE

The style of the new garden is variously described in the internal NT memoranda, Garden Panel comments and recollections of how the process evolved. The following descriptions are used:

- **TRADITIONAL OR OLD ENGLISH GARDEN STYLE.** This suggests the sort of gardens Ernest Law created at Kensington Gardens and Hampton Court where he referenced early engravings, book plates and written descriptions to make gardens that were reflective of the style of the time. Another source for the Old English Garden Style would be 'Formal Gardens in England' 1892 by Reginald Blomfield.
- **COMPARTMENTED:** e.g. Hidcote and Sissinghurst.

- EDWARDIAN: - this is a more general idea of an idealised English garden and is not particularly time specific - used loosely to include the nineteen twenties. A typical reference might be: 'Gardens of a Golden Afternoon' by Jane Brown.

What seems to be being said is that the garden should evoke a mood that makes it fit with the house and that 'feels right'.

The garden is a new design from the 1980's that builds on the bare bones of the existing walls and changes in level, but adds new features and planting. It has no basis in the historical garden at Fenton because the records are insufficient to work on restoration or re-creation. The decision to start again has resulted in a delightful garden which most visitors will read as 'having been there for ever' - a tribute to the success of the national Trust's decision and to the confident design by Paul Miles.

PHOTOGRAPHS



The upper garden at the rear of Fenton House, with a tennis court (Print 454, W.H.A, Fincham, 1911)



The upper garden at the rear as it looks currently (National Trust, 2017)