



YORKSHIRE GARDENS TRUST

Watton Abbey garden

Statement of Significance

This statement of significance for Watton Abbey garden, created by the Yorkshire Gardens Trust, is derived from research carried out as part of the East Riding Historic Designed Landscapes project.

1. Heritage Values Summary

The 19th-century country mansion, known as Watton Abbey (listed Grade I), incorporates earlier building phases and lies on the site of an important Gilbertine priory (scheduled monument). The post-Reformation history of the site represents a familiar one across England, changing from monastic to private ownership with a redesign of the gardens and landscape, altering the medieval footprint. The complex of buildings and earthworks retains elements from the medieval and post medieval periods. In contrast to some of the larger estates, like Fountains Abbey, Watton is an example of a relatively small garden landscape, maintaining the character of its predecessor in providing a sequestered setting for the former priory and its remaining outbuildings (listed Grade II*). A formal tree avenue linking the gardens to the Beverley Road was planted in the 19th century. The military interventions of the Civil War and Second World War have added further elements to its layered history.

2. Historical Value ('Narrative')

Following the Reformation and dissolution of the monasteries Watton Priory surrendered to the Crown in 1539, then passed to private owners, who aspired to use the site as their residence. Following the fashions of time they incorporated the monastic earthworks and ruins into the design of their house and gardens. Elements of the spring fed, monastic water management systems became ornamental garden features. Much of the chalk stone from the extensive ranges of monastic buildings was burnt for lime. The better quality ashlar stone was removed and reused elsewhere, some in other ecclesiastical buildings such as Beverley Minster.

In the 18th century the Watton estate passed to the Bethall family, who were considerable landowners in Holderness, holding amongst others the Rise estate and therefore only resided at the house part of the time. They held a prominent role in county affairs, holding public office, serving as politicians and were benefactors for many local communities, including Watton village and church.

Watton was a garrison for Royalists troops during the English Civil War from 1642-46, who reputedly built earthwork defences. In its later history it was also used during the Second World War, housing a hospital and army camps and together with Watton village became home to many RAF airmen and women. Watton Abbey therefore continued the monastic traditions of hospitality and healing the sick.



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3. Evidential Value ('Research')

The scheduled site at Watton Priory has a complex history and there is potential to discover elements of the former monastic gardens that were transformed in later periods of garden design. Excavations in the early 1890s established a plan of the monastic buildings, within the inner precinct, which may have disturbed some areas of the post medieval gardens. A high resolution topographic survey and digital landscape modelling, also within the inner precinct, highlighted the complexity of the site. It revealed a more extensive plan of above and below ground features, which offers opportunities for further interpretation.

The complex history of the site provides opportunities to examine the stratigraphy, particularly to establish the sequence of construction of the walled garden enclosure with its substantial embanked terrace and circular mound/ tower (Butt Hill) in the southeast corner. This may determine if these features were an original garden feature, or if they had earlier origins as Civil War defences, which were then remodelled into the garden design. The retention and incorporation of monastic elements into the 18th century garden design have yet to be fully established.

The site lies adjacent to Watton Beck on the River Hull floodplain and extensive water management systems were an integral part of the monastic site, feeding the precinct boundary ditches and fishponds. Watercourses run through the gardens and a bridge dated 1723 crosses one branch running under the house. Water features extend north of the house in the monastic outer precinct, formerly named Lear Garth, then Lair Garth. Here there is much potential to reveal elements of the designed landscape, not previously recognised. An embanked walk overlooks a complex area of earthworks, including ponds and demolished buildings and there is a potential swannery further north.

4. Aesthetic Value ('Emotion')

The gardens provide the setting for the 19th century mansion house (listed Grade I), which incorporates parts of the medieval prior's lodge. The garden retains architectural fragments of monastic stonework, which are incorporated into garden walls and other structures, emphasising the link to its past history.

The grounds maintain a tranquil, cloistral feel, enclosed and sheltered by the surrounding trees, particularly the mature trees along the field boundaries, which is in stark contrast to the open, flat arable landscape beyond. The undisturbed grassland is a good habitat for great crested newts and other wildlife, whilst the ruined buildings provide a home to bats and barn owls.

The tree-lined avenue, designed in the late 19th century to provide a grandeur approach to the house from the main road and village, now provides a quiet pathway linking the village to St Mary's Church (listed Grade I). However, a line of mature trees screens views from the church to the house.



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5. Communal Value ('Togetherness')

Public footpaths pass in close proximity to Watton Abbey and its outbuildings and through the complex of former monastic and garden earthworks. Although a private dwelling, locals and visitors value access to this landscape and take an interest in it.

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