

**LEICESTERSHIRE**

**STAUNTON HAROLD HALL**

**NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE  
STAUNTON HAROLD  
SK3821**

**GD1966  
II\***

### **SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST**

A landscape park of 1760s associated with a contemporary country house; park incorporates some elements of extensive formal gardens laid out in later C17.

### **HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

The Shirley family held Staunton from the C15 to 1940. They acquired it in 1423, when Ralph Shirley married Margaret, heiress of John de Staunton, whose family had held the manor since the C12. In 1653 Sir Robert Shirley, fourth baronet Ferrers, who had inherited the estate in 1646, built a chapel next to the Hall. Shirley was a royalist, and it has been argued that its construction was an act of political and religious defiance, rather than a purely practical measure intended to avoid the 8km journey to the parish church at Breedon on the Hill. It is one of only a handful of ecclesiastical buildings new-built during the Commonwealth. Shirley's second son, created Baron Ferrers in 1677 and Earl Ferrers in 1711, added a new north-east front to the Hall and laid out extensive formal gardens around it. A contemporary described him as 'a great improver of gardening and parking' (CL 1913, 526). Thereafter, for sixty years, there were few changes; the second and third Earls died as minors, while the fourth Earl 'led a dissolute life, drank heavily and neglected his estates' (quoted unsourced, in Chris Burnett Assocs. 1995) before being hanged for the murder of his steward in 1760. In the years after 1763 the fifth Earl, formerly Admiral Washington Shirley, added the eleven-bay Palladian east front to the Hall and the projecting wings which enclose the Lion court. At the same time the formal gardens were swept away and canals made into Lakes.

The Hall was requisitioned by the army in 1940. Its contents were sold in 1949, and in 1954 the Hall and estate lands were sold to different owners and the church given to the National Trust. The Hall became a Cheshire Home in 1954, and in 1985 was sold to the Ryder-Cheshire Mission which remains the owner (1998).

### **DESCRIPTION**

#### **LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING**

Staunton Harold Hall stands in a small valley 5km north-east of Ashby de la Zouch. To the east the park is partly bounded by the B587 road from Ashby to Melbourne, and to the south-west by a track. Otherwise the boundary follows field edges. The area here registered is c. 90ha.

#### **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The principal, and most scenic, approach is from the north-east, via an entry to the park adjoining the Melbourne Lodge, a two-storey brick lodge of the mid C19. This was probably also the main approach in the C17. From here a drive runs south, downhill, before turning a right-angle to begin a straight approach to the Golden Gates (listed grade II\*), an ornate stone structure in the Baroque manner of the late C17, with late C18 pedestrian archways to either side. Surmounting it are the Shirley supporters of a hound and stag. The Gates, moved here at an unknown date from what Country Life (1913, 526) claimed was the entrance to the bowling green, lie at the east end of a brick causeway bridge (also grade II\* listed) across the north end of Church Pool, from which there is a fine view across the water to the south-east front of the Hall and the chapel. The drive now continues north of the Hall to link up with that from the west, although the main historic destination was a gavel turning circle (no longer extant) before the south-east front.

Another approach is from the south-east, via the kilometre-long drive from the entrance adjoining the early C19, single storey, Ashby Lodge (listed grade II). Some 200m north-west of this, on the west side of the drive is the C18 Coach Road Cottage (listed grade II). This drive runs along the east side of Church Pool, giving a view across it to the Hall, before joining the drive from Melbourne Lodge east of the Golden Gates.

The third main approach is from the west, via an 800m long tree-lined drive from Heath End which approaches the rear, west side of the Hall between on the one (south) side the kitchen gardens and on the other the stables and Home Farm.

A deep and wide hollow way cut in the steep hillside east of the right-angle turn in the drive east of Golden Gates marks the line of a drive formerly carried via a straight elm-lined avenue east from north of Hilltop House (outside the registered area) for 1.5km.

## PRINCIPAL BUILDING

Staunton Harold Hall (listed grade I) is a two-storey brick building, low, wide-spreading and ranged around a quadrangle, largely the product of a building campaign begun in 1763 although incorporating a Jacobean house altered c. 1700. It is uncertain how much of the remodelling of 1763 should be attributed to the fifth Earl, and how much to his clerk of works William Henderson (or Anderson) of Loughborough, who lived at Staunton from 1762-72. The north-east front, of c. 1700, is of five bays, that to the south-east (1763 and later) of eleven, the centre three of ashlar under a pediment, while to the south-west projecting wings embrace the Lion Court. This takes its name from the figure of a lion on its facade, one of several sculptures with which the exterior is adorned.

A late C18 brick stables complex (listed grade II) stands c. 100m north-west of the Hall, slightly uphill and effectively behind it. West of this is the impressive C18 Home Farm.

The chapel of the Holy Trinity (listed grade I) of 1653 stands on the shore of the Church Pool 50m south-east of the Hall, with a tall stone wall (listed grade II). Of stone and in the gothic style, the chapel comprises west tower, nave, chancel and aisles.

## GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The Lion Court is occupied by a formal garden completed in 1990 with box hedges and brick-edged beds. South-west of this, extending to a walled ditch, is a lawn. This is terraced along its north-west side, presumably as part of the improvements to this part of the grounds undertaken between 1828-9 (see below). Specimen trees around its edge may also be early C19. A bridge crossed the ditch to a low-lying area of woodland and shrubs, bounded to the south-west by a yew-edged path, again probably part of the work of 1828-9, which runs north before turning along the outside of the south-east wall of the kitchen gardens. There are also lawns south-east and north-east of the Hall which run down to Church Pool and the Fish Pond. On the north-west side of the Hall is a car park.

Adjoining the south-west side of the Chapel yard wall is a stone gateway (The Gate to Nowhere) of 1681 (listed grade II\*) in the baroque manner, the rectangular panel above the doorway being carved with foliate swags, eagles and cornucopia buttresses. This is surmounted by a pediment with urn. The gateway originally stood on the north-west edge of the main formal gardens, and was presumably moved here when they were swept away in the 1760s.

Those formal gardens, shown on painting of c. 1702 attributed to Leonard Knyff and on a view of 1706 by Kip and Knyff (Harris 1995; Cantor and Squires 1997), were laid out by Baron Ferrers c. 1680. There is no record of who was responsible for their design. The main garden, terraces ranged either side of a broad axial path and with a canal across the bottom, lay north-east of the

Hall. A summerhouse at the east end of the main cross axis adjoined the west end of a predecessor of the present causeway bridge, to the south of which, past the chapel, extended the rectangular Church Pool. West of the southern part of the Pool was a roughly square block of woodland, possibly a wilderness, although that name is not associated with the area until the Ordnance Survey map of 1887. Further pools lay along the valley bottom north of the Hall and gardens. Woolley, in 1711 (171), notes the gardens as 'well watered with fountains and canals, very good aviaries and a decoy and a great many exotic waterfowls. The gardens lie on the north-west (sic) of the house, consisting of several parterres of easy descent from the house, which add a gracefulness to the one and the other.'

The fifth Earl Ferrers may have ordered the removal of the formal gardens soon after inheriting the estate, and a painting of Staunton Harold attributed to Thomas Smith (d. 1767) (Harris 1979) shows the landscape much as now. Perhaps the main change, other than the removal of the formal gardens, was the creation of the present Fish Pond north of the causeway bridge.

In 1828-9 a new pleasure ground was laid out in the area between Hall, Chapel and Wilderness under the direction of Christopher Chamberlain. Among the elements were a parterre and a gothick conservatory. These were largely removed in the early C20.

## PARK

The Hall lies in the southern part of a landscape park, presumably created c. 1763 about the time the old formal landscape around the Hall was swept away. The park comprises a one kilometre long section of a valley whose bottom is largely occupied by two sheets of water: Church Pool, and to its north the longer Fish Pond, the latter fed with water via a weir at its southern extremity. The pools form the key elements of the two main views from the Hall. The first is from its south-east front, past the chapel, across Church Pool to the lush grassland rising beyond. Midway up the hillside is a stone conduit house (listed grade II), probably C17. The second view, much longer, is from the north-east front, north along the valley and Fish Pond. The west side of the valley is pasture ground and fairly open, while the east bank of the pool and the valley side is well wooded. A stone wall bounds the north-east side of the park, and can be seen from the Hall running along the skyline. A second length of stone wall adjoins Heath End on the west side of the park.

The conduit house, 250m east of the Hall, stands amidst a complex pattern of earthworks. Some of the earthworks are likely to be associated with the later C17 formal gardens, while others, including hollow ways and some ridge and furrow, may represent the site of the medieval village of Andrewskirk. Contour paths running around the slight spur 150m east of the conduit house may indicate the line of a walk intended to enjoy the fine view west to the Hall and chapel. North of the conduit house is a stone cistern.

There was a deer park at Staunton by 1324, and later two, the Little Park and the Great Park. The Little Park is believed (Chris Burnett Assocs. 1995 para 2.10) to have occupied the present parkland area. Nichols (1804) reports that the fifth Earl disparked it c. 1763 but that the pale was reinstated at the beginning of the C19. The Great Park (disparked 1623) lay east of the registered area, centred on Staunton Lodge.

Major changes followed the break up of the estate in 1954. The avenues approaching the Hall were felled in the late 1950s, as were beeches on the horizon line adjoining the park wall. By 1960 The Wilderness had been felled and replaced by a poplar plantation.

## KITCHEN GARDEN

The brick-walled garden kitchen gardens, 130m east/west by 90m north/south, are now occupied by a garden centre. They lie 200m west of the Hall and south of the stables and Home Farm. No glasshouses survive. Some of the walling is probably C18, while other stretches probably date from the 1820s and 1830s when major improvements to the kitchen garden area documented. Outside, and north-west of the garden, is a pair of estate cottages of c. 1900.

The gardens presumably replaced the unwalled productive gardens, which Kip and Knyff's view of 1706 shows immediately north-east of the east end of the causeway bridge. It would seem likely that the productive gardens were removed c. 1763, and certainly there is no sign of them on Smith's view of the mid 1760s.

## REFERENCES

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*Country Life*, 33 (5 April 1913), pp490-8; (12 April 1913), pp526-30; 107 (24 February 1950), pp516-9  
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## Maps

- OS 6" to 1 mile:                    Leicestershire sheet 9 SW, 1st edition published 1887  
    Leicestershire sheet 9 SW, 2nd edition published 1901  
    Leicestershire sheet 9 SW, 1924 edition  
    Leicestershire sheet 16 NW, 1st edition published 1887  
    Leicestershire sheet 16 NW, 2nd edition published 1904  
    Leicestershire sheet 16 NW, 1927 edition  
OS 25" to 1 mile:                Leicestershire sheet 16.2, 1st edition published 1881

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