

The Gardens at Wantage, No. 1 Castle Hill, Kenilworth

The house known as Wantage was completed in 1901 to the designs of Buckland and Farmer. The Architect Herbert Tudor Buckland (1869-1951) was known for his arts and craft houses particularly in Birmingham and the Élan Valley Model Village and educational buildings such as the Royal Hospital School, Suffolk and St. Hugh's College, Oxford. His own house at 21 Yateley Road, Edgbaston was built in 1899 and is a Grade I Listed Building alongside other Grade II buildings also designed by Buckland and Farmer. The significance of The Wantage was recognised when the property was spot listed on the 6th September 2004. The property consists of a medium sized villa with an asymmetrical window arrangement, roughcast walls and other detailing of the arts and craft movement.

The house is within a significant plot of land which forms a garden around it. The plot originally formed part of the Kenilworth Abbey Grounds with the wall of the original Abbey running through the site. Towards the end of the 19th Century the Abbey Fields were put up for sale by the Earl of Clarendon and a syndicate was formed to purchase the greater part of the Abbey Field for public use raising funds by the sale of a series of plots along what is now known as Castle Hill. The land occupied by Wantage consists of two and a half plots; the central plot now occupied by the house was purchased first with the western plot being purchased in 1901 and the eastern plot which also included number 85 Castle Hill (an existing cottage) in 1913. There has been debate as to whether the western plot was originally intended to form part of the site with the central plot. However, when considering the design of the house and its location on the central plot it is difficult to understand how the western elevation of the building would have worked with what could have been a substantial property adjacent to it. The eastern plot was most likely purchased as being undevelopable for a single dwelling as it contained an existing cottage; its ownership gave additional privacy to the service end of Wantage.

The 1905 ordnance survey shows the footprint of Wantage occupying the northern part of the central plot. A series of garden enclosures had been laid out behind it that is to the south of the house. The site is steeply sloping and flights of steps link the gardens. On the plot to the west of Wantage in 1905 the boundary forming the south west terrace of Wantage continues right across the plot with an orchard has been planted on the western plot. Also noted on the ordnance map is a small structure between The Wantage plot and the west plot which may be a flight of steps. There is clearly a flight of steps leading from the terrace into the west plot occupied by the orchard. These indicators would seem to confirm that the western plot was always to be incorporated as garden to the main house. By the 1925 ordnance plan a new garden compartment to the south had been created between the main plot and the western plot.

The layout of the gardens at Wantage takes the form of a series of essentially rectilinear garden compartments, each of which would have had a different function. It is characteristic of arts and crafts gardens that the various functions, ornamental, sporting, productive, are integrated into one whole together as with Thomas Mawson's 1904 design for Wood in Devon, where a series of compartments enclose ornamental gardens (as at Wantage) a tennis court (as at Wantage) and an orchard (as at Wantage).

At the front of the property is a rose garden, this together with the orchard plot are enclosed from the frontage of Castle Hill by a high wall, designed with arts and crafts detailing to match the house.

The rear garden takes advantage of the steep fall in the land towards the boundary with Abbey Fields with the creation of terracing with significant retaining walls with the tennis court being at the lower level. The upper terrace forms an intimate formal garden separated from the service area of the house by a high holly hedge. Between the upper terrace and the lower terrace lawn which culminates in the tennis court is a further area of terraced garden through which a long flight of steps passes. To the west is the orchard which is linked to the main terrace around the house by a flight of steps, a hedge separates the orchard area from a vegetable area which forms a gradual slope down to the tennis lawn.

Between the main terrace and the basement yard is a retaining wall and at the top of the series of steps is a sundial with inscription '*To serve thy God as I serve thee I stand to serve thee with goodwill as careful then be sure thee be abuse me not and I will do no ill*'.

The garden as a whole forms an interesting arts and crafts garden clearly designed at an early stage around the house with the intention of including both the plot on which the house is built and the western plot, albeit separately to the main house plot. By no means grand the Wantage is a substantial and quietly accomplished well detailed dwelling, the presence of which is enhanced by the garden designed around the house.