

HERTFORDSHIRE GARDENS TRUST  
LOCAL LIST: **DACORUM**

Present Name of Site  
**BEECHWOOD**

Historic Name (if known)  
St Giles in the Wood

Parish/Town **Markyate**

National Grid Reference of Principal Building: TL045 145

Present Area (approximate) School 60 Acres

**Brief Description**

Country house and estate, now a school. It is situated in a valley running roughly east to west with rising ground the Cheverells, the Dower House to the north and Hill Farm to the south. The site was previously the lands of the Priory of St. Giles in the Wood (Benedictine Nuns) founded c.1120 and suppressed 1537 (the buildings of which stood some 100M to E of the present house). The first house was probably built for Sir Richard Page (d.1598) and extended and remodelled over the years. The grounds were landscaped by Brown in the 1750s, probably with those of Cheverells (q.v.). Sir William Chambers was responsible for some internal decoration in the 1760s and 70s and may have designed the Main Gates. During the 1860s formal gardens were laid out on the west front with associated terracing which were simplified before WWII. Much of the estate was sold in 1935; the Sebrights moved to Cheverells, and Beechwood was rented out. During WWII Beechwood had a Satellite Landing Ground, No 12 Beechwood, which ran for 1260 yards SW to NE across the park to the north of the house (Clements End Road towards Roe Green) and was used until March 1946. Curtis Seamewe and Stirling aircraft were stored there in the hangar and workshop at the SW end. In October 1946 there was an extensive fire and following repair the house was leased to a school, Tolmers. Sir Giles Sebright died in 1961 and the house was sold together with sixty acres to a new school, Beechwood Park School in 1964. Since then, extensive building and sports facilities have been introduced, the parkland turned to arable farming and the vista to the west blocked by industrial size barns.

**Principal Building:** The 17<sup>th</sup> century brick house was recorded by Chauncy (1700). This main range with two wings is incorporated in the present building. The open courtyard was closed with a new front block, added between 1695-1702. The 'Great Room' was added c.1744, attributed to Roger Morris, which was refitted as a Library by Thomas Cundy sixty years later. 19<sup>th</sup> century additions included remodelling the internal courtyard into a saloon and picture gallery for the collection of fine paintings designed by William Burn, with plasterwork by James Annan and doorcases by d'Angelo Barbetti. Stone surrounds to the windows were added in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The entrance front faces northeast towards Cheverells and the garden front southwest across the valley.

**Approaches:** Gates, gatepiers and flanking walls. C18 (probably c.1760 by Sir William Chambers). Wrought ironwork, Portland stone piers, red brick walls in Flemish-bond with moulded brick coping. At the centre of a concave sweep of 2M high brick walls as seen from road stand 2 widely spaced 5M tall stone piers with urns flanking a long wrought iron screen containing central double gates, standards, and side-gates with lower overthrows of scrolled ironwork. Old photographs show scrolled terminals to both of the standards and an armorial scrolled great overthrow to the central span. This now lies rusting near the school.

The **main drive** curves gently upwards from the main gates, possibly designed by Sir William Chambers, on Pickford Lane through parkland to the north west of the house. The 19<sup>th</sup> century **Peacock Lodge** lies to the north of the drive. The entrance front of the house has now been made into a staff car park.

**Kennels Lodge** is situated on the back drive near to Beechwood Farm to the north-west. It is of brick under a tiles roof but much altered and extended

The **stable block** Plum brick and hipped slate roofs to N stable court

**Pleasure grounds:** 1766 map by Dury and Andrews shows formal gardens. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the gardens had been laid out in High Victorian fashion (c.f. Ashridge) with a plan (perhaps unexecuted) for a Rosarium with a circular arrangement of dwarf, miniature, climbing and standard roses, enclosed by hedges of Portuguese Laurel and flanked by four yews. Terraced gardens in the Nesfield style were laid out below the west front in the 1860s with parterres, balustrades and urns. The parterres had been grassed over by 1938 but some paths and steps and 4 of the **urns** remain. These are identical light buff terracotta c. 1860 and stamped 'J M BLASHFIELD/MILLWALL & PADDINGTON/LONDON'..with C18 re-used Portland stone pedestals. These are very large with bowls about 1M diameter with their own square plinth and stem decorated in relief with lotus leaves. Scallop decoration with tendrils between bowl with acanthus wreathed rim. Those on E front probably installed when the line of the drive was set back from immediately outside the entrance door in 1860.

(Blashfield (1830-1870) bought some of Coade's moulds in 1836 and opened a terracotta works, supplying urns for the Royal Palaces and the Royal Mausoleum at Windsor as well as statues and architectural ornaments)

The **sundial** is early C19. Portland stone about 1.5 m high with engraved bronze dial plate signed 'CARY. LONDON' with a gnomon arm. It is no longer in its original position.

**Walled Kitchen Garden:** 4M high red brick C17 and C18 garden walls extend from S part of house to form a polygonal enclosure to SW with 2 similar cross-walls within.

**The South Gate.** C18. Wrought iron gate between iron standards and red brick piers with stone coping slabs, Portland stone steps and threshold. The ironwork of the gate and overthrow in poor condition.

**The West Gate** to walled garden. Early C18. Wrought iron gates between red brick piers with stone copings and moulded stone steps. The overthrow here is rectangular with scrolled tops to the screen panels either side. The ironwork here is in better condition than the south gate. The walled gardens now contain various school buildings surrounded by lawns.

**Park:** The survey made by Lancelot Brown in 1753 shows the existing layout of the park and gardens. The main axis was east to west, with the park enclosed and well wooded. Two areas of wilderness flanked the westerly vista into the park. There were two entrances to the park, north and south of the house, with a keeper's lodge beside the southern entrance, which was replaced in 19<sup>th</sup> century by Peacock Lodge (unlisted) on the opposite side of the drive. A substantial avenue lead towards the house. Walled gardens lay to the south of the house, and four small ponds were noted, and at least one remains in the park. Brown is credited with work to the house in the 1750s as well as his contribution to the park and gardens. The grounds measured as 190 acres, gardens 6 acres. Brown's plan for the park and gardens at Beechwood is dated 1754. He thinned out trees rather than planted on any extensive scale. The plan shows the angles softened and the introduction of more clumps and outliers. The wildernesses were made less formal and remain as woodland today, with a number of very mature trees and stumps, which may date to this time. A tree survey could determine the full extent. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arthur Young recorded that he had *rarely seen finer trees than at ...Beechwood: it has the name in strict propriety, for the number of stately beeches is great; but the soil agrees with all sorts of trees; the cedars are immense; the oaks very large; the ash straight and beautiful; the larch spruce, and Scotch fir equally fine, but the beech uncommon.*

Brown proposed to embellish the park not only with a more sophisticated planting scheme but showed sites for a **ha-ha**, a temple, a barn with an ornamental front, a seat and an unspecified object in the park in front of the house. Drawings for a gothic folly (RCHM 9BB93/9022) and icehouse are also attributed to him.

**Views** over the park are now obscured, but would have extended to Cheverells, the dower house and the 'folly' at Hill Farm. The **park** is now largely in agricultural use, with the school having the core of the site. Some historic trees still exist in the park such as Cedar of Lebanon and Black Pine

**Ice House:** C18 (maybe c.1754 by Brown who designed one to be built in the cellar of the Old Farm House). It is of redbrick in English bond with numerous purple bricks and buried in an earth mound. The circular conical well is 5 m in diameter with a domed top. The two-metre entrance passage with tunnel vault is now largely destroyed. There are recesses for wooden floor about 7m below east facing entrance.

Brown also designed a Gothick folly in the form of the west end of a church, said to have been a bath-house. The plan is inscribed 'This front to stand obliquely in order to show its side in perspective to the windows of the House', but it is not known whether it was built.

<p><b>Important people associated with site:</b>  <b>Residents:</b> Sebright family  <b>Architect:</b> William Chambers, Roger Morris (attrib), Lancelot Brown and Matthew Brettingham (unexecuted plans)  <b>Landscape Designer:</b> Lancelot Brown</p>
<p><b>Assessment of significance:</b> Although much compromised by school buildings and changes in agriculture, this remains an important 18<sup>th</sup> century designed landscape with remnants of one of 'Capability' Brown's earliest work, incorporating the dower house at Cheverells and the Eyecatcher at Hill Farm. <b>It has previously been recommended for inclusion on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest (Phibbs &amp; Owen 2000). It still warrants inclusion and the protection that such status can confer.</b></p>
<p><b>Principal Uses:</b> School and agriculture</p>
<p><b>Public Access/Rights of Way:</b> Hertfordshire Way</p>
<p><b>Designations:</b> (e.g. Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Conservation Area, Listed Buildings, EH Register of Historic Parks &amp; Gardens, Tree Preservation Orders, SSSIs, Nature Reserve, National Trust, County Wildlife Site, etc)  <b>Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty</b>  <b>Listed Buildings:</b> House I; Walled Garden walls I; Gates, Gatepiers and Walls II*; Gate, piers, and steps at South gate and at West gate to walled garden II;  <b>SAM:</b>  <b>Landscape Conservation Area</b>  <b>Landscape Characterisation Area:</b> 125 Beechwood Estate</p>
<p><b>Sources of information:</b> Report available from HGT Conservation Group</p>
<p><b>Site visited by:</b> Hertfordshire Gardens Trust Date: 2009</p>



**A surviving portion of the ha-ha and nineteenth century steps in the background**



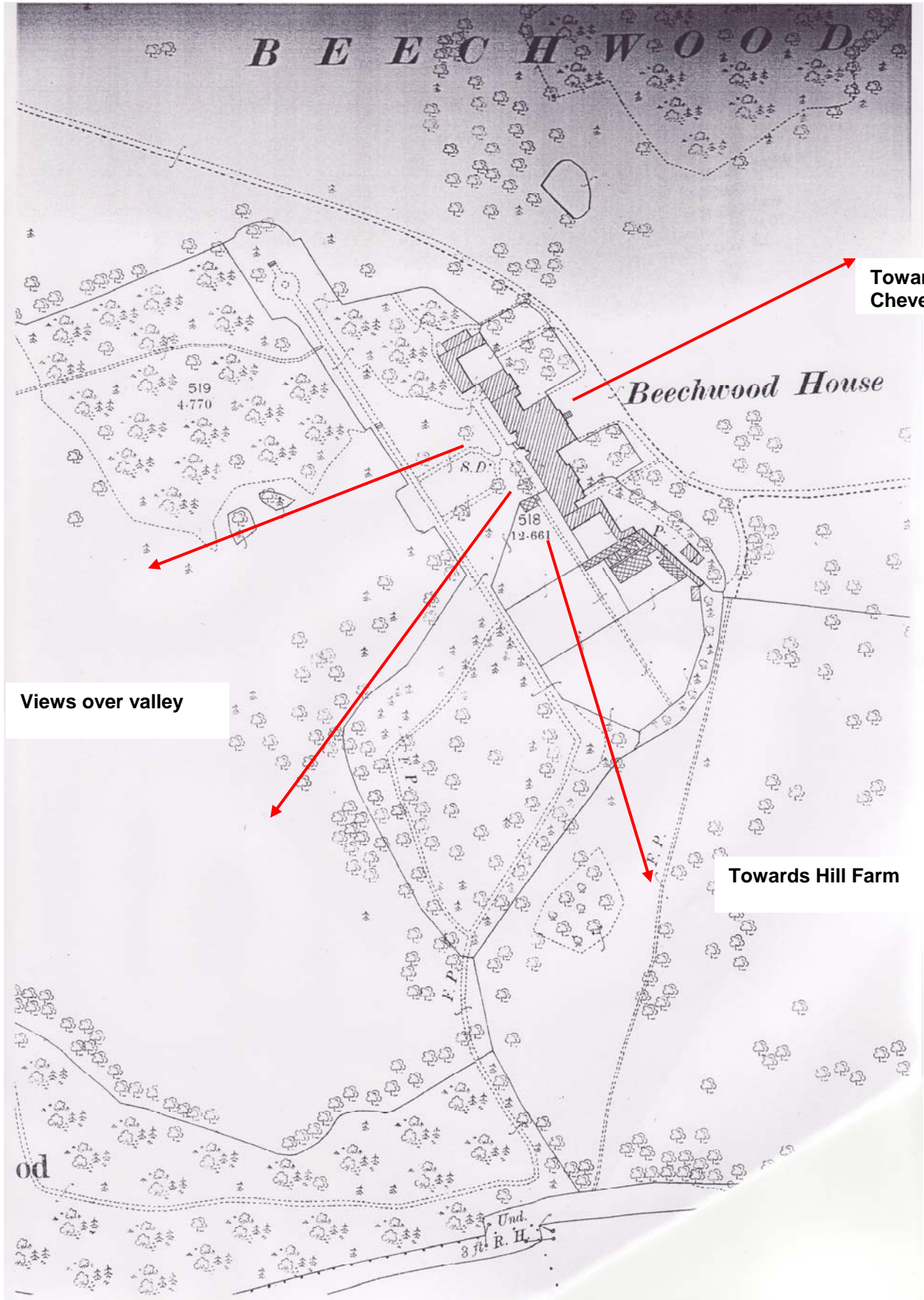
**Gates to south of the walled garden showing Sundial removed from its original position damaged ironwork**



Photographed 2009



Ordnance Survey 1st Edition Sheet XXVI, 1883/4 Scale 6": 1 mile



Views over valley

Towards Cheverells

Towards Hill Farm

Ordnance Survey 2nd Edition 1901. Sheet XXVI. 7, Scale 25": 1 mile