

# **Wellington Square Garden, Oxford**

**Urban/Recreational Park Project**

**Oxfordshire Gardens Trust Research & Recording Group**

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SITE NAME Wellington Square Garden  
DISTRICT Oxford City  
PARISH St Giles  
NGR SP 5101 0680

## **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

### **Overview**

Once known as 'Rats and Mice Hill', the area that became Wellington Square replaced the workhouse occupied during the 18th and 19th centuries before being developed as residential housing around a central garden in the 1870s.

### **Architectural interest**

Wellington Square was laid out by city architect E.G. Bruton in the 1870s.

### **Artistic interest**

There is a stone cartouche to the Duke of Wellington positioned high on the west wall of Rewley House, No. 3 Wellington Square.

## **HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

Wellington Square lies 150m due west of the junction of the two northern routes out of Oxford, St Giles and Banbury Road. The Square comprises university property, including the university's modern administration offices and Rewley House, the Department for Continuing Education. The garden lies at the centre of the Square.

Land in this area of north Oxford is shown on early maps to have been fields of pasture and allotments. During the civil war, the area that later became Wellington Square was part of the earthwork defences built in the 1640s. Subsequently, these earthworks are shown as fragmentary structures on maps from the early 18th century when the area became known as Rats and Mice Hill. In 1772, a workhouse designed by John Gwynn for 200 paupers was built on the five acre site. This was occupied from 1775 until 1865 but due to overcrowding, a larger workhouse was built on Cowley Road, opened in 1864 (MacCannell; VCH p. 347–8).

The original workhouse site was then purchased by John Henry Newman for his proposed Roman Catholic College but this failed due to opposition to his plans. The sub-rectangular site to the south of built-up Little Clarendon Street was then sold to the university, and Wellington Square was constructed as speculative mixed domestic housing between 1869 and 1876 (VCH p.199). The Square is a continuation northwards of St John's Street, which had been developed between 1824 and 1836 by speculative builders as plainer residences than the adjacent Beaumont Street. The Square itself was laid out by Oxford's City Architect, E.G. Bruton, who also designed Rewley House in 1872 (Tyack, p. 238). The Square is named after the Duke of Wellington (1769–1852), University Chancellor 1834–52; an ornamental stone cartouche to the duke lies towards the top of the west wall of Rewley House.

Houses at the north corner of the Square and some in Little Clarendon Street were demolished 1969–1973 and redeveloped as the university administration offices. Soon afterwards, the eight houses along the north side of the Square were demolished to make way for graduate student accommodation. An aerial photograph of 1960 shows all the houses of the Square to be intact and the garden at the centre to contain mature trees

(Picture Oxon, POX0600471). Another photograph from 1973 (Picture Oxon, POX0202529) shows the houses on the north side of the Square being demolished while the university offices were being built. The garden at the centre of the Square was planned and laid out at the same time as the surrounding buildings, in the 1870s.

## **LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES**

The 0.2ha (0.5 acre) garden lies c. 300m north of Beaumont Street and c.150m west of St Giles. In form, the garden is rounded-rectangular, slightly wider at the southern end, with all four 'corners' well rounded. The longest dimension across the garden is 55m (north to south) whereas east to west is 48m. The most northerly (rounded) corner is opposite Little Clarendon Street. The southern well-rounded edge is opposite St John's Street (where there is a George V pillar box). The rounded corners of the garden boundary walls are orientated approximately N, SE, S and NW; the flat sides face very approximately NE, SSE, WSW and NNW (but referred to here as N, E, S and W).

The surrounding boundary wall is formed of six rows of buff-coloured bricks topped by grey-black curved headers, over which sit the modern railings that are fixed in the ground inside the garden. The footings are concrete and brick.

Immediately outside the boundary are six functioning iron lamp-posts, five of which are cast and moulded and are similar to other local examples, such as in St Giles. Four of these lamp-posts were made by Dean & Son Oxford; the fifth, on the west side of the Square, was made by Lucy & Co Oxford Ltd.

## **ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The OS 1st edition maps (1876 & 1878) show two entrances, one as today and a second entrance opposite, on the west side. The latter has not survived and there is no evidence of its location within the brick walling or the iron railings. There is now only one entrance, through a gate in the railings on the east side, opposite No. 14 Wellington Square. This double gate, of iron railings, leads to a short concrete slope before reaching the lawn. The gate is locked at nightfall.

The roadway around the Square is one-way, clockwise, with the only public vehicle route being from St John's Street. Another, pedestrian entrance from Little Clarendon Street lies in front of the university administration offices.

## **THE GARDEN**

The garden is mainly laid to lawn and there are currently no paths. At the edges of the garden there are five curved beds of herbaceous plants; these beds run up to the railings and are separated by five narrow extensions of the lawn.

Notably, the north-east bed has a mature Wellingtonia (Giant Sequoia). Slightly to its east near the entrance is a four-stemmed Lawson Cypress. The west bed has a mature sycamore and the south-east bed has a small copper beech. There are five mature lime trees towards the middle of the garden. The one at the centre is surrounded by the other four which lie roughly opposite lawn extensions towards the railings.

The beds contain small trees and herbaceous shrubs and plants, mainly evergreens. These include aucuba, choisya, cistus, cotoneaster, currant, deutzia, euphorbia, fatsia, garria, holly, laburnum, laurel, lilac, lonerica, mahonia, sorbus, viburnum plus a few roses, grasses and ivy.

The garden is well used particularly in summer time although there is only a single 4-person wooden bench seat, plus several waste bins. A photograph shows a crowded garden party for residents celebrating V.E. Day after WWII on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 (Picture Oxon, POX0165318).

Just off-centre to the north is a 1m circle of artificial stone, of unknown purpose.

Wellington Square Garden is the property of the University Parks Service, which maintains it alongside more than 200 other sites in Oxford.

## REFERENCES

### Books

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MacCannell D (2016) *Oxford: Mapping the City*. Edinburgh, Berlinn

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Tyack G (1998) *Oxford: An Architectural Guide*. OUP

### Maps

Ordnance Survey historic maps 1876 (1st edn, County Series, 1:2500); 1878 (1st edn, Town Plan, 1:500). Digimap [Online]. © Landmark Information Group Ltd and Crown copyright 2023. Available at <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/roam/map/historic> (Accessed 14 January 2023)

### Archival material

Picture Oxon POX0165318 (1945) *V.E. Day party for residents. World War II*. Picture Oxon POX0165318. Oxfordshire County Council, [Online]. Available at [www.pictureoxon.org.uk](http://www.pictureoxon.org.uk) (Accessed 10 January 2023)

Picture Oxon POX0600471 (1960) *Aerial photograph of Jericho looking north-east from Worcester College towards Wellington Square, Oxford University Press and Radcliffe Infirmary*. Picture Oxon POX0600471. Oxfordshire County Council, [Online]. Available at [www.pictureoxon.org.uk](http://www.pictureoxon.org.uk) (Accessed 10 January 2023)

Picture Oxon POX020259 (1973) *Wellington Square demolition*. Picture Oxon POX020259, Malcolm Graham. Oxfordshire County Council, [Online]. Available at [www.pictureoxon.org.uk](http://www.pictureoxon.org.uk) (Accessed 10 January 2023)

## Appendix 1. Photographs



### Photographs of Wellington Square Garden

*Top left:* Entrance gate, view facing west. *Top right:* From St John's Street, facing north. *Centre left:* View north towards Little Clarendon St showing gate at lower right and Wellingtonia to the right. *Centre right:* View north from inside the garden, with Wellingtonia (centre left) and Lawson Cypress (centre right). *Lower left:* View north-west from inside the garden towards sycamore (central). *Lower right:* Lime trees inside the garden, view south.