

**TL 537 387**

Public park designed by Stephen Dykes Bower and opened to the public in 1938 to celebrate the coronation of King George VI.

**HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT**

On the occasion of his marriage, Francis Gibson (of Bridge End Gardens fame) moved into The Close, the building on the corner of Castle Street and the High Street. The Close, built originally in the C15, had a large extension, which had been added in the mid C16. Francis Gibson encased this extension in brick in 1854 and it was this part of the house that was demolished in 1934. It revealed Tudor origins beneath the C19 brick and was subsequently restored and removed to Sussex. The removal of this part of the house opened up an attractive, and previously unseen, view of the western end of the church from the High Street. Following correspondence in the paper, a public subscription raised the money to purchase the site in order to create a public garden. The Gardens were opened to the public in September 1938 by Mrs. Butler (wife of 'Rab' Butler) to commemorate the coronation of King George VI. The design was by S.E. Dykes Bower A.R.I.B.A., who had worked on, amongst others, the re-ordering of the east end of St. Paul's Cathedral; College Chapel, Lancing; and St. Peter ad Vincula in Coggeshall. A copy of the design for Close Gardens is housed in Saffron Walden Library. Mrs. F.J.O. Montagu of Shortgrove presented a wellhead to the Council in 1937 to be displayed as a central feature for the garden.

Renovation work to the garden, including repair to the walls, shelter and its iron gates, was carried out when the garden was handed over from the District to the Town Council.

**SITE DESCRIPTION**

**LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM AND SETTING**

Close Gardens is situated at the northern end of Saffron Walden High Street. It is bounded by the gardens of The Close to the NW, by the churchyard to the NE, and by a public path from High Street to churchyard on the SE. The site is level, apart from a shallow raised terrace on the NE side and a marked bank on the SE side. There is a substantial retaining wall to the NE, ground level in the churchyard being 2-3m above that of the garden. The site has clearly been levelled at some time in the past. From the High street there is a fine view of the tower and spire of the parish church.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES**

The main entrance is from the High Street through a wrought iron gate near the SE corner. The second entrance, between brick piers with no evidence of Gate hinges, is near the SE corner from the footpath to the church.

## PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS

There is a plain, single-storey, open fronted shelter with a hipped plain tile roof. It is built of red brick, with a partially concealed gutter, and is centrally placed against the boundary wall on the NW side. Internally, it is plastered and ceiled, and the open side facing the gardens is closed with recently installed railings, whose design is a simplified version of the wrought iron gate at the High Street entrance. It has been recently refurbished and is in good condition.

## GARDEN

The garden is bounded by walls. On the NW side is a yellow/blue wall, separating the private part of The Close from the public gardens, and presumably contemporary with the formation of the latter. To the NE the churchyard retaining wall is in uncoursed flint, with substantial areas of rebuilding and repair in red brick of various periods. It is surmounted by an open-work balustrade (formed of diagonally placed red bricks) between brick piers, capped with two courses of horizontal plain tiles. On the churchyard side, there is evidence of recent trenching to install a waterproof membrane, and new brick piers have been built behind the originals to strengthen the wall. On the SE side is a much repaired red brick wall, capped with angled plain tiles. On the High Street side, much of the original boundary wall (of two different thicknesses, and also of red brick) has been reduced in height to improve the view from the road. There is no break in the brick bond to suggest blocked openings. There are two substantial trees (a beech, and a heavily pruned horse chestnut) immediately inside the wall which rises to its original level in the SE corner where a tie rod and "S" plate were noted. The garden is approximately square, with shrubs planted along the NW, NE and SE sides. A gravelled path runs around the four sides of the central square lawn, in the middle of which is an Italian well head, donated by Mrs Montagu of Shortgrove in 1937. The basin, and the base and capitals of the two columns, are of stone, but the columns themselves are of artificial stone or fine concrete. All have been much repaired. The paths are edged in places with broken paving slabs on edge. There is a small area of red and yellow square clay tiles just inside the main entrance, and there are York stone steps up to the raised terrace at the NE corner. At the NW corner, similar steps wind round the base of the yew tree. On the SE side there is a low retaining wall (with an indent for a bench) built of broken pieces of concrete, with a similarly constructed quadrant wall on the lawn side of the yew tree. Some crudely constructed steps (of kerb stones and reused York stone slabs, two of which have slots for iron cramps and may be table tomb tops) lead up to the entrance from the churchyard path. There is a row of 2 metre high red brick piers, hidden in the shrubbery on each side of the garden shelter. Each pier is capped in the same way as the balustrade, and has two slots on each face, presumably for horizontal pergola poles. Wood is still visible in some of these slots. There are no corresponding slots, or other evidence of fixing, in the side walls of the shelter itself. There is a large lime and a sycamore near the NE corner within the shrubbery.

## REFERENCES

White, M., 1991 *Saffron Walden's History*

Brightwen Rowntree, C., 1951 *Saffron Walden- Then and Now*

Proposed design by Dukes Bower: Saffron Walden Library scrapbook ref. 1/77

Photograph of well head: Saffron Walden Library scrapbook ref: 5/87

Photograph entitled: 'The Close Garden, Well head given by Mrs F J O Montagu of Shortgrove': Saffron Walden Library scrapbook ref. 3/157

**Maps**

OS 125" to 1 mile surveyed 1877

Researchers: John & Gloria Hammond. Site visit: John & Gloria Hammond, & Michael Leach on 9 September 2005