

The Elizabethan  
Garden at  
Kenilworth Castle

Graham Brown



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## The Elizabethan Garden at Kenilworth Castle

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## Introduction

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An analytical earthwork survey of the Tudor garden at Kenilworth Castle was carried out in October 2004. The survey, which forms part of the Elizabethan Garden Project (Kerr 2004), was carried out as a level 2 survey at a scale of 1:500 (RCHME 1999) by the Archaeological Survey and Investigation team at Swindon, and provides a basic descriptive and interpretative record. The report focuses on an analysis of the garden alone and there has been no attempt to put the garden in its wider landscape context as this is outside the remit of the survey.

## Brief historical background<sup>1</sup>

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The garden, which lies on the north side of the castle, was created between 1563 and 1575 by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, as part of a modernisation programme in advance of a 19-day visit by Queen Elizabeth I during 1575. The modernisation within the castle included the building of a lodging (today known as Leicester's Building, which adjoins the south-eastern side of the Inner Court) for the Queen's use; a new gatehouse (Leicester's Gatehouse) for her formal entry; and a pleasure garden. Beyond the castle, the mere and Pleasurance formed part of a grand stage, a designed landscape, where pageants were enacted.

An indication of the garden is given in a letter from Robert Laneham, in which he details the entertainment given by the Earl of Leicester for the Queen. From the letter it is clear that the garden was impressive, with arbours, jewelled bird cages, obelisks, a fountain, statuary, flowers and fruit trees.

A copy of a fresco painting dating to 1712 purports to show the garden as it was in the 1620s. In it, the garden is shown as a lawn with a marble fountain at its centre. In 1649, Sir William Dugdale made a plan and sketches of the castle to illustrate his publication on the 'Antiquities of Warwickshire'. Despite the doubt about the accuracy of the plan, it nevertheless shows a garden. A year after Dugdale's work, the castle was slighted by Parliamentary forces during the English Civil War. The mere was also drained at this time and Leicester's Gatehouse became a dwelling.

From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was in the ownership of the Earl of Clarendon, and following the publication of Sir Walter Scott's 'Kenilworth', the site was regarded as a picturesque ruin.

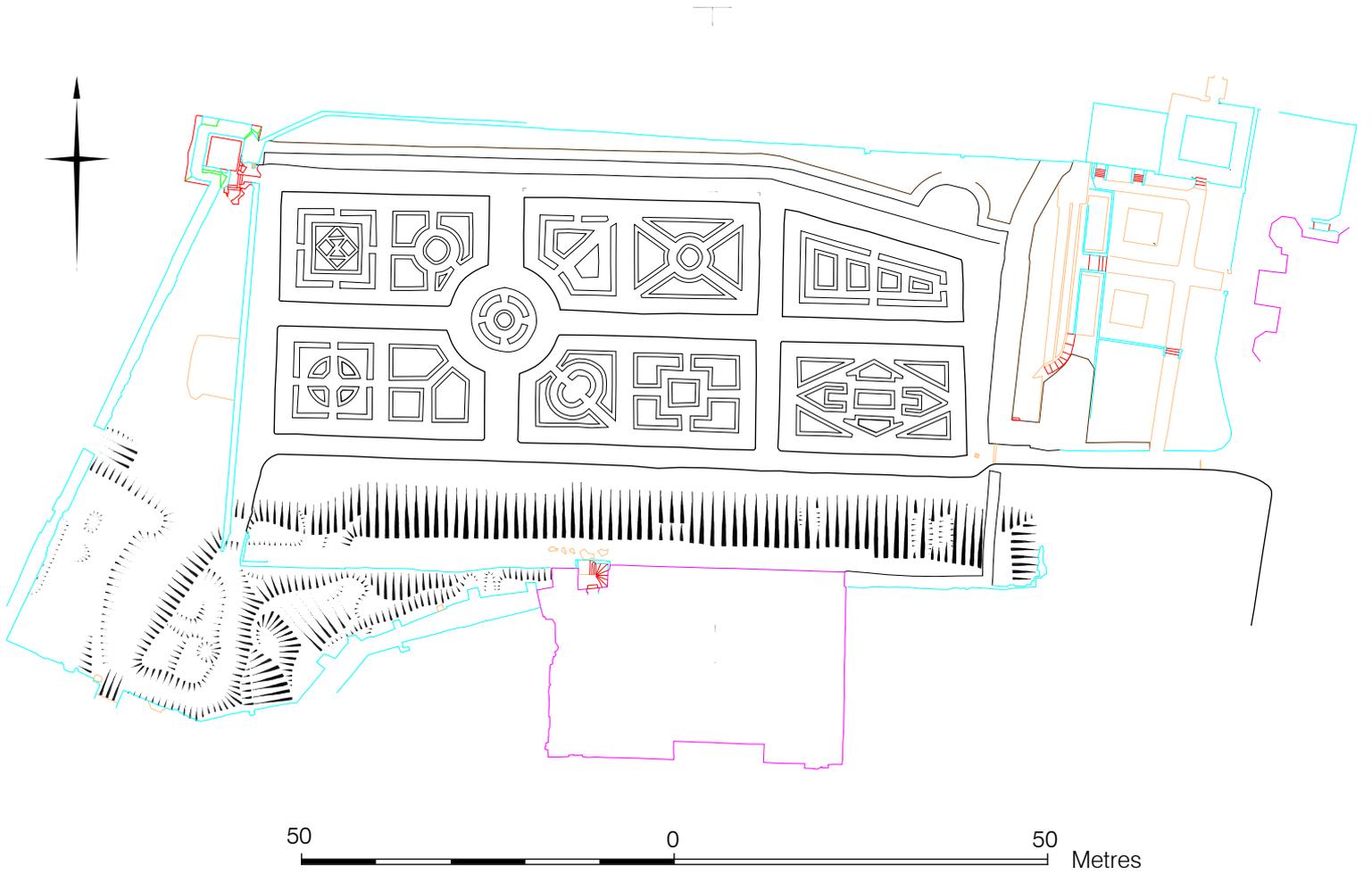
## **Survey and Interpretation (Fig 1)**

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The surviving earthworks of the Elizabethan garden at Kenilworth Castle lie along the northern side of the curtain wall and are contained between Leicester's Gatehouse in the east and the Swan Tower in the west. The southern side of the garden is marked by a terrace along side the Norman keep. The earthworks, some of which relate to the garden, cover an area of c0.9ha and for descriptive purposes are divided into three distinct areas: an 'eastern garden', the 'central garden', and the 'Swan Tower' area.

The 'eastern garden' is a small, rectilinear enclosed garden bordering Leicester's Gatehouse. No earthworks were observed here since it is covered in planting and walks.

The largest garden is the 'central garden', which lies immediately to the north of the Norman Keep (Fig 2) and covers an area of c0.6ha. The majority of the garden is taken up by six parterres that are separated by gravel walks, and a circular feature placed centrally between the western four parterres. Surrounding the garden on the north, east and west sides is a hedge, the northern side of which apparently follows the course of the medieval curtain wall. The garden itself is bounded in the south by a grass terrace, which extends for 97m along the side of the Keep; it is up to 2m high and 2m wide and slopes steeply towards a path. Towards the western end, the terrace scarp narrows. This narrowing is in line with a 'step' along the top of the terrace and, together with cuts in the scarp, may indicate steps to the garden here. Further west, the terrace scarp turns to meet a stone wall. The top of the eastern end of the terrace narrows appreciably and is marked by a hedge at its limit, but it may have continued to meet the wall along the eastern side. Situated along the scarp are a number of slight cuttings. An alternative interpretation of the narrowing at either end of the terrace is that they may be as the ends of the Elizabethan garden terrace, which would place the loggia stairs at the centre of the garden. Additionally, the base of the Elizabethan fountain was found during excavation in the parterre area to be in line with the centre of the terrace and the steps to the keep.





*Figure 2. The Elizabethan garden viewed from the keep. Note the long low mound beyond the hedge, which may have formed part of the garden landscape by obscuring views from the town.*

No earthworks were recorded within the parterres or walks. A cursory inspection of the wall surrounding the garden, where it was accessible, was carried out. It would appear that the western wall, south of the hedge (i.e. the last 10m), may have been lengthened, or re-built (Fig 3).



*Figure 3. A join in the western wall.*

The 'Swan Tower' area is triangular in shape and lies on the western side of the garden, beyond a stone wall. It is contained in the west by the curtain wall, with a small gate mid-way along, and on the southern side the Outer Court wall. Within this area is a slight, curving rectilinear platform, possibly a building platform, abutting the curtain wall; it measures c12m by 24m, and is c0.1m high. A slight scarp against the Outer Court wall, parallel to the longer platform scarp, probably represents the platform's original course. The platform,

therefore, extends from the gate in the curtain wall, to the gate in the Outer Court. A geophysical survey undertaken in June 2004, suggests this area may have contained buildings.



*Figure 4. Earthworks bordering the inner court curtain wall in the 'Swan Tower' area*

To the east of this slight platform, and separated from it by a level 4m gap, is a spread scarp that extends in a north-east/south-west direction from the garden wall in the north towards the gate before turning to form another slight platform; it measures 8m by 15m. Slight, amorphous scarps and a cutting are evident on this platform, which may represent walls. Whether there is any relationship between the scarp and the garden terrace is not entirely clear, but it is perhaps significant that it extends towards the terrace where there is again a scarp in the path between the terrace and wall.

Situated to the east of this spread scarp is a much more substantial mound set against the Outer Court wall (Fig 4). It stands up to 2m high in the west diminishing to c1m in the east and extends from an angle in the Outer Court wall northwards towards the garden terrace wall where it turns east for 15m before again turning towards another angle in the wall. The top of the mound slopes gradually from the wall to scarp edge. A large scoop is located along the western side. Beyond this point a spread scarp continues to the Keep. Deep cuttings near the eastern end may have been for drainage. Along much of the bottom of the Outer Court wall is a berm measuring up to 1m wide.

Beyond the northern curtain wall (the wall here appears lower than elsewhere), between the wall and road, is a long mound that extends along much of the length of the garden (not surveyed). Although the purpose of this mound is unclear, it may have been an integral part of the garden landscape since it effectively blends into it and presents an uninterrupted view



*Figure 5. The keep viewed from the town. The long, low bank appears to be on a similar level to the garden terrace.*

to the keep without the 'hard' face of the wall: it hides the garden and adds to an element of surprise as it is approached (Fig 5).

## Methodology

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The survey was undertaken over a period of two days by taping offsets from known points on the castle.

## Bibliography

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Kerr, B 2004 *English Heritage: Kenilworth Castle Elizabethan Garden Project. Project Design for Evaluation*, unpublished

RCHME 1999 *Recording Archaeological Field Monuments: A Descriptive Specification*

### (Footnotes)

1 The main source for this section is the Kenilworth Castle Elizabethan Gardens Project Definition.