

SITE NAME: Address	Halton Grange (Runcorn Town Hall), Heath Road, Runcorn, WA7 5TD				
Unitary Authority:	Halton Borough Council				
Parish:	Runcorn				
Location:	0.5km south of Runcorn Town centre				
Grid Ref:	SJ 518 820.				
Owner:	Halton Borough Council				
Recorder:	JC	Date of Site Visit	20.04.2016	Date of Report:	29/04/17

Summary

Halton Grange was built in the 1850s as a residential property for a local soap manufacturer. The grounds were laid out in 1853-4 by **Edward Kemp**. In 1932 the property and a small portion of the surrounding land were sold to Runcorn District Council who took it over as council offices. Many original features survive inside the building and elements of Kemp's layout and features remain in the grounds. The kitchen garden has been lost to council offices. Halton Grange is now known as Runcorn Town Hall and belongs to Halton Borough Council.

Principal remaining features

House, listed Grade II (List Entry Number: 1104859)

The long **walk**

Sandstone **retaining wall** with niche

Sections of **wall** associated with the **kitchen garden** and outbuildings

An **ornamental pond**

Parkland trees

History (numbers in brackets refer to images, letters in brackets refer to maps)

The earliest record in the deeds of Halton Grange is August **1778** when Thomas **Fearnhead** was granted a tenancy of land owned by the Duchy of Lancaster, by The Court of the Manor of Halton.

In December **1780**, the tenancy passed to Daniel **Orred** and then to his nephew, George **Orred** upon his death. The total land holding was described as 14 Cheshire acres.

At the Manor Court in **1836** evidence was given of the grant to George **Orred** of the tenancy, of its subsequent transfer to William **Johnson** (victualler) for £1,900, and of a further transfer to Francis **Salkeld** (grocer) in **1830** for the sum of £3,720. Francis Salkeld is shown as the owner of the land on the **Runcorn Tithe Map** apportionment of **1845**¹ his "Clover Field" containing two marl pit ponds (**A**).

Francis **Salkeld** sold most of the land to Thomas **Johnson**, a local soap and alkali manufacturer, in January **1854** for £4,280. Thomas Johnson built Halton Grange 'about **1856**'.² The property occupied a slightly elevated position overlooking a brook that ran down to the River Mersey. This land was used for barge building during the late 19th Century/early 20th Century and is now filled in with sunken barges. The land to the north was mainly farmland, not all in the ownership of Halton Grange.

The house was designed by Charles Verelst, previously known as Charles Reed³, in an Italianate style⁴ with a belvedere or tower. It was built 1854-56. The grounds were laid out by Edward Kemp 1853-54 and described in the 2nd Edition of his book, How to Lay Out a Garden.⁵

The grounds were entered beside an Italianate Lodge, via gates between piers set back from the high road (**H**). Kemp mentions “another gate at the point where the pleasure grounds are entered” (though this is not indicated on any of the historic plans), and the plantations fenced in separately. The main drive led to the carriage turning and arrival space in front to the hall (**G**), while a spur off the main drive provided access to the stables and kitchen gardens. The buildings were sheltered to the north by a plantation. Within the grounds Kemp appears to have retained former marl pits as an ornamental pond, and to have kept existing mature trees (**B**).

He describes the house accompanied by offices and stables to the east, a conservatory on the south side of the kitchen gardens and garden sheds to the north. These included a root and onion store, potato and root store, mushrooms, fruit and potting sheds. “A handsome ornamental wall, with piers and panels, likewise connects the house with the stables, and with the conservatory, extending beyond the latter to the south-east corner of the kitchen-garden, and from thence taking a lower form, as a retaining wall to a bank of earth, until it terminates in a recess, where a seat gives its finish to a long walk by the south front of the house.”

The long walk linking the arrival or carriage turning space in front of the house with the east passed the flower gardens. These were “in two sunken panels”, two-feet below the surrounding ground level with sloping banks of grass accommodating the change in level. They contained evergreen plants, pedestals with vases placed in the centre which were to be filled with summer flowers, and a dwarf conifer at each corner. Another pedestal and vase were located in the long walk to encourage people to ‘stop’. At right angles to the long walk and between the sunken panels another path led to the conservatory, either side of which were two beds containing 6 Laurustinus, which backed onto the kitchen garden. This wall was wired for climbers.

Kemp described the view from the house:

“The library, drawing room, and morning room have their windows to the south; and the latter has an eastern window also, over the fire-place, which looks on to the flower garden, and takes in Halton Castle, a ruin on a rocky eminence in the neighbourhood.”

A painting by E Jones depicts the Grange in rural surroundings with views to Halton Castle and St Mary’s Church (**I**) as indicated by Kemp

In the **1861** Census, a gardener is listed as living at Grange Lodge. In the **1871** census the building is called Grange Hall, with a gardener living at Gate Keeper’s Lodge.

In January **1871**, the property was mortgaged for £5,000 and in July **1872**, the mortgagees sold the land to Charles **Hazlehurst** for £10,428. **Hazlehurst** moved from Waterloo House in Waterloo Road, Runcorn, where Edward Kemp had also designed the garden.

Hazlehurst spent two years increasing his landholdings which reflected the fact that his soap works were increasingly prosperous. He died in December 1878 and left the property to his son, Charles Whiteway **Hazlehurst**, but with a life interest to his wife, **Julia**.

The property was mortgaged in December **1880** to Thomas Francis **Hazlehurst** of Misterton Hall, Leicestershire and Samuel Beckett **Chadwick**, of Daresbury Hall for £52,572 and the mortgage was redeemed in June **1903**. Julia **Hazlehurst** had died on 11th January **1903**.

In April **1904** **Hazlehurst** leased the house and grounds to Francis **Boston**, the owner of the Boston Tannery, Halton Road, Runcorn. **Boston** had the option of purchasing the house and grounds, including the pictures and did so in June **1909**. He bought more land over the next thirteen years.

The property was put up for auction in **1930**⁶ following the death of Francis **Boston** in **1929**. The sale catalogue includes a plan of the property and a photograph of a walk (**D&J**). In **1931** some of the land was sold to the builders, **Clare and Ryder**, with a condition that they did not build within a certain distance of the house. This land outside this boundary was later intensively developed with residential properties and schools.

In **1932**, **Runcorn Urban District Council** purchased the house, including pictures and grounds, in total about 11.75 acres, from the executors for the sum of £2, 250. The local newspapers accused the elected representatives of 'squandermania'⁷. At this time, the house and land were in the area of Runcorn Rural District Council and outside the Urban District boundary. The boundary was revised in 1936.

The pictures referred to in the purchase are two large paintings on the main staircase and landing. They are by the Italian artist, Chevalier Andrea Casali (1720 – 1785). They are mounted in carved oak wood frames, contemporary with the paintings, and by William Kent.⁸

An aerial photograph, **1945 – 1948**, shows the Grange and grounds intact with flower garden and well treed park and pleasure grounds.⁹

In **1974** the buildings and park became the responsibility of the newly formed Halton Borough Council and are now used as the Civic building, Council Chamber and offices. Rooms in the original building are mostly used for ceremonial occasions and civil weddings.

In **2006** a Chinese style garden was created north of the hall, between the hall and car park. "Features include a pergola painted in Chinese red, arch and walkway, seating, lighting, and the many traditional Chinese plants and flowers including the peony, China's national flower" and a bronze statue as the centrepiece.¹⁰ It is used by employees, visitors and for wedding photography.

Description

Halton Grange is now known as Runcorn Town Hall, and the former grounds are Runcorn Town Hall Park. The site is bounded to the west by Heath Lane, to the north and east by the B5155, separating the park from 1950s housing, and to the south by Boston Avenue. Vehicular access is from Heath Lane via the original entrance drive which leads to a large car park situated on part of the former pleasure grounds and parkland north-west of the house. Vehicles leave the car park via a new drive and exit the site south of the original entrance on Heath Lane.

The original entrance gate piers have been relocated to a pedestrian entrance alongside and replaced with replica piers (1). The lodge was demolished many years ago. There are additional pedestrian entrances on Boston Avenue connected to the main pedestrian path crossing the site from north to south (**F**).

The relicts of original parkland tree groups and single parkland trees remain (**3**). The ornamental pond, which has some large stone boulders in the banks and ornamental planting, no longer has a bridge to the island (as shown on the First Edition Ordnance Survey **B**) and is enclosed by railings (**9 & 10**). The path linking the pond with the flower garden has been removed.

The historic arrival space by the west elevation has been retained. However the entrance to the Town Hall is now via a modern extension on the north side, approached by a path from the car park that passes the Chinese style Friendship Garden (**4**). The Chinese style garden and the historic flower garden to the south are enclosed by railings separating them from the park. The long walk and flower garden are only accessible from the Town Hall. The flower garden panels have been replaced by a simple lawn with shrub border (**7**). The retaining section of the

“handsome ornamental wall” described by Kemp remains complete with niche (8). The conservatory no longer exists and the site of the walled kitchen garden is occupied by a 1960s office block, re-clad and refurbished in 2007.¹¹ Sections of walls associated with the kitchen garden and outbuildings remain as part of the current service complex (11 & 12)

The grounds are now developed as a public amenity, including play areas for children of all ages and paths for dog walkers and to provide links from the shopping area to the housing estate built by the council in the 1950s.

Please note that this report contains the research and recording information available to Cheshire Gardens Trust at the time. It does not purport to be the finite sum of knowledge about the site as new information is always being discovered and sites change.

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¹ http://maps.cheshire.gov.uk/tithemaps/TwinMaps.aspx?township=EDT_348-2

² Halton Borough Council. 1990. *Runcorn Town Hall. A History and Description*. Halton Borough Council.

³ <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> Liverpool Mercury Wednesday 14th December 1859, the obituary for Charles Verelst records that he was born Charles Reed. He was educated by his uncle whose surname was Verelst, trained and practised as an architect, and on his uncle’s death succeeded to his estate of Aston Hall near Rotherham on condition that he changed his name to Verelst, which he duly did.

⁴ The Italianate style had become popular following the building of Osborne House on the Isle of Wight 1845-1851, a summer retreat for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, designed by Prince Albert.

⁵ Kemp, E. 1858. *How to Lay Out a Garden*. London. Bradbury & Evans. 270-272

⁶ Thomson & Moulton (Auctioneers) Sale catalogue, 25th June 1930.

⁷ Halton Borough Council. 1990. *Runcorn Town Hall. A History and Description*. Halton Borough Council.

⁸ Figueiredo, Peter de. & Treuherz, Julian. 1988. *Cheshire Country Houses*. Sussex. Phillimore. 235-6.

⁹ CHER 1945-1948 RAF National Survey *Source Organisation URL: www.geoinformationgroup.co.uk*

¹⁰ <http://www.chesterchronicle.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/friendship-garden-full-eastern-promise-5260086> The statue was given to Halton as a token of friendship by the Chinese city of Tongling.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Runcorn_Town_Hall