



# YORKSHIRE GARDENS TRUST

## Skelton Castle park and garden

### Statement of Significance

This statement of significance for Skelton Castle park and garden, created by the Yorkshire Gardens Trust, is derived from research carried out as part of the Historic Designed Landscapes project.

#### 1. Heritage Values Summary

With its long history, Skelton Castle park and garden provides an interesting case study in the development of designed landscapes in Britain, reflecting the ambitions of the owners of the castle. Starting with the powerful de Brus family who created extensive hunting parks in the 12th century, later owners have reshaped both the building and the grounds around it, particularly from the late 17th century when funds from mining on their lands became available. What is seen today is the work of John Wharton in the late 18th and early 19th century, who spent a fortune to create his ideal home and designed landscape.

#### 2. Historical Value ('Narrative')

Since the late 11th century, Skelton Castle has had a designed landscape. Initially a defensive structure, the castle later became a high-status building and was surrounded in the medieval period by gardens and orchards in a 'little park' with further large enclosed areas to the south and west that served as hunting parks. Over time, these areas were divided into smaller parks and by the beginning of the 18th century, two small walled parks remained.

Skelton Castle itself began to deteriorate from the mid-15th century as it ceased to be a primary residence and then became a divided inheritance. Once entirely in the hands of the Trotter family from the mid-17th century, it was subject to remodelling and rebuilding over the next 150 years. These changes impacted on the immediate grounds and in 1775, the then owner, John Hall Stevenson, employed Thomas White to produce an improvement plan for the area. Although only the kitchen garden was implemented from this plan, major changes were undertaken by Stevenson's grandson, John Wharton, in the 1790s, possibly under the direction of Adam Mickle junior. This included a new moat around the castle, a fishpond, a lodge with a carriageway over a bridge to the castle and parkland to the west.

Wharton, despite having inherited a large fortune, went bankrupt in 1829 and so little was done to the estate either by him or his successor until the 1860s. By this stage, ironstone mining had started on the site of two of the former parks and Wharton's nephew, John Thomas, benefited from the royalties. Apart from draining the moat, he made no significant changes and it was his son, William, who made some minor modifications including moving the main entrance to Marske Road to create the landscape that we see today.



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### 3. Evidential Value ('Research')

The estate archives for Skelton are very limited and there is much more to learn about its long history. While there is documentary evidence for the extensive medieval parks that adjoined the building, their exact boundaries are unknown and further research is needed to see if any of these remain. Similarly, the early gardens and pleasure grounds of the medieval and early post-medieval period lie in open land that may be examined to see if anything remains below the ground.

The current designed landscape was laid out in the 1790s. While it is clear that the plan provided by Thomas White in 1775 was probably not executed apart from the walled garden, the possible link to the designer, Adam Mickle junior, should be explored further. The dates of construction of the grotto and the icehouse are unknown although both have small handmade bricks suggesting a date before 1784. Further evidence is needed to confirm this.

### 4. Aesthetic Value ('Emotion')

The designed landscape at Skelton has been directly affected by the owners of the castle, either by the creation of aesthetic features such as deer parks, woodland, gardens and pleasure grounds or by the exploitation of its natural resources through mining of alum and then ironstone. With the latter now closed, the landscape is again rural and the historic areas are largely extant. While the castle and its immediate grounds are private, the former church may be visited and the area remains an important focus for the neighbouring town.

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