

The Rich Pickings of Somerset Place

If you walk up Lansdown Road from the town centre, turn left onto Lansdown Place East, follow the road past Lansdown Crescent and Lansdown Place West you will arrive at another crescent named Somerset Place on your right. It will likely be quiet: perhaps one car parked halfway down the road, but other than that, few signs of life. The sloping lawn out front is a fine spot to bathe in the sunshine if you are feeling idle; and the only thing likely to bother you is the sound of cars driving over a loose manhole cover near the pillar box. A typically grand magnolia tree may be witnessed in bloom to the right of House 15 but you might not dare to venture so close to the security lodge. Though you may. Back at the corner by the pillar box Somerset Lane heads uphill a while. Here at the bottom, after the sooted wall with the names of a handful of useless art students scratched into it, the lowest part of the wall may await your return. As you head up towards some houses at the top the lane turns left past the garages and continues on by a small gate wedged shut with a boulder. Near here you ought to see a few branches of a fig tree teasing over the high wall. Van Morrison lives in one of the houses on your right. The Warden's house on your left is empty. A washing line hangs in the little yard, you can see it if you stand on the wall to the right of the house. That wall you are stood on is the wall of the Photography yard. In the yard grows an inviting Western Red Cedar or perhaps, John says, a Lawson Cypress. The Photography building continues round and becomes a wall until you see a shuttered archway. If it were open to follow it would lead you through the garden and out to the other end of Somerset Place. The arch connects the wall to Cavendish and where Cavendish ends a low wire fence follows the edge of the grass, incorporating a padlocked gate, and turns left down Winifred's Lane. Over the road you can see the gates to Bath School of Art and Design. Head down the hill until you reach the crossroads; as you near the blind corner be mindful of people driving cars up the hill who are not being mindful of people walking down it. Turning left you will be

confronted by a red telephone box and beyond it are some steps that lead up to Somerset Place. Alternatively you can walk up Sion Hill towards Lansdown Place West and the pillar box where your circuit began. If you ascend the steps you will appear at the opposite end of Somerset Place from where you started and see there a padlocked cast-iron gate that, if it were open, would allow you access to the gardens and a stepped path alongside Cavendish that leads up to the archway, now boarded shut. The wall before the gate is quite low.

In the gardens of Somerset Place there grows a pear tree, two or three apple trees - one perhaps a cooker, a fig tree, grapes, a bay tree, blackberries, and plenty of wild garlic; along with countless other less edible but equally appealing flora.

Most of these are in the well-wooded eastern end of the garden. The pear tree, however, is in the middle of the lawn in front of Photography.

The apple trees are dotted about though not difficult to find; you may need to stand on a wall to scrimp from them. The fig tree is at the back as you enter the walled area from the lawn in front of the empty Warden's house. It fruits in August or September. The grapes grow in the far corner at the back of the garages. The bay tree is somewhere in amongst the rest along with the blackberries and the wild garlic.

All of this will be left to spoil as Somerset Place languishes in development limbo for the next few years. The building will sit empty waiting for its insides to be converted into something ugly and strange. It could house a hundred people right now.

It seems a terrible waste.

Adam Burton.

Thank you to
Chimene, John, Martin, Penny, and Phil
for sharing their knowledge about the fruits of
Somerset Place gardens.