

"Built circa 1766, originally in the grounds of Vale Mascal. Cold plunge bath house in the Gothic style, beside River Cray. Flint with brick edging. Pairs of cinquefoiled windows to north and south; entrance to west; all beneath labels. Cruciform gabled roof, with chimney stack at west. Splayed corner buttresses. Grade II*". (Source: Department of the Environment: List of buildings of special architectural or historic interest in the London Borough of Bexley.)

The busy, single-carriageway part of North Cray Road, just outside Bexley Village, still follows today its 18th Century path, just above the spring-line along the east bank of the River Cray. 250 years ago the slopes down to the River were part of the Vale Mascal Estate, one of a number of wealthy estates in the Cray Valley, which included Foots Cray Place, North Cray Place, Bourne Place, Hall Place and older seats such as Woollett Hall and Mount Mascal. Of these only Hall Place survives.

Vale Mascal was built in 1746 on part of the Mount Mascal Estate, stretching along the Cray from Wollett Hall almost to Bexley Village. The gardens were laid out professionally, probably between 1760 and 1775, either by Capability Brown, (who it is known worked at Danson in 1760/61 and at North Cray Place in 1782) or by one of his disciples.

The ingenuity with which the River was treated shows skill of the highest order. Lakes were created and cascades and weirs built, developing channels and sub-channels to give the whole River a braided appearance as it flowed around the islands thus created. It was on one of these channels that the Bath House was built, its construction involving a significant amount of hydraulic ability to achieve a satisfactory inflow and discharge in the gradual gradient of that part of the Cray.

The Bath House was fed, via a sluice gate on an almost level channel, approximately 150 feet downstream from a weir. A further internal sluice gate operated on the outfall pipe of the Bath which discharged down a slight slope back into the Cray. This enabled the Bath to be filled to a level of 4 feet and completely drained when required.

The ownership of the Bath House has changed many times, the last major change being in 1935 with the division of that part of the Estate into suburban building plots. Two significant restorations were carried out, by the Revd. Egerton in the 19th Century and by Robert Cooper in the early 20th Century. The Bath House suffered major damage in the storm of 16th October 1987. The 1990 restoration to its original 18th Century appearance was carried out by a local firm, and funded principally by English Heritage, with contributions from Bexley Council's Heritage Fund and the owner's domestic insurers.

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