

PENCERRIG

Ref No	PGW (Po) 19 (POW)
OS Map	147
Grid Ref	SO 043538
Former County	Powys
Unitary Authority	Powys
District	Radnorshire
Community Council	Llanelwedd/Disserth and Trecoed
Designations	None
Site Evaluation	Grade II
Primary reasons for grading	Home of Thomas Jones (1742-1803), foremost Welsh landscape painter and student of the picturesque who landscaped the grounds; good example of a prosperous medium sized, mid-Wales estate belonging to one of the premier Welsh families.
Type of Site	House and lodge, artificial lake in park, shrubbery, park planting.
Main Phases of Construction	c. 1750 on

SITE DESCRIPTION

The house at Pencerrig is reached by a straight drive which runs about 1/2 km west off the A 483. The drive approaches the house through a pair of simple gate piers which lead into the garden area and continues to the entrance on the north-east of the house around the north of an elongated turning circle.

The house faces south and east on the north side of a high ridge which ascends from the River Wye about 1 km below, to the south-west of the house. The ground around the house is characterised by outcrops of rock which give the house its name, 'Pencerrig' - the house at the top of the rocks.

The house is an ornate, but well proportioned, five bayed, hipped roofed building in the Tudor Revival style. It is rendered, painted pink and has a slate roof. Bow, mullioned windows open out from the family rooms on the south and west sides,

those on the ground floor offering access into the gardens. A large, sombre, grey square stone porch is sited on the north-east of the house. The main entrance is recessed inside this porch and is reached by stone steps. The Gothick interiors of the house partly survive.

The servant's wing is attached to the main house on the west. This is of a simpler design than the house but contemporary to it. It is distinguished by four bays which face south on to the garden.

Since the late 1980s various additions have been made on the north front of the house. A lean-to one-storey extension was added along the north front and a modern, two-storey accommodation block connects to the north-west of the house, creating an L-shape.

There has been a house on the Pencerrig site since at least 1500. The small estate was in the hands of the Powell family until around 1720 when it was sold to the Hope family from whom it was inherited by Hannah Jones of Trefonnen. Hannah Jones was a member of the powerful Radnorshire dissenting and land owning Jones family who owned the land in Llandrindod Wells where famous mineral springs were found in the 1730s.

The Jones replaced the Powell's stone Tudor manor with an unremarkable late eighteenth century house. Thomas Jones, the painter, inherited in 1787 and the house passed through his daughter to the Thomas family in the early 1800s who remodelled the house in Tudorbethan style in 1832-39.

Clara Thomas, the grand-daughter of Thomas Jones's daughter's widower, was the last of the local gentry to live at Pencerrig. She inherited in 1863 and carried out further improvements to the house, including the erection of the servants' wing. She was celebrated locally; Kilvert, the diarist, being among those who travelled to see her.

On her death in 1914 her estates were divided among her remaining family. Pencerrig, after a short period of deterioration, was sold to the Evan-Thomas family who restored the house and used Pencerrig as a shooting estate. They remained until 1952 when an auction, followed by a second in 1958, saw the final division of the Pencerrig estate. A further sale took place in 1978 when the present owners of the hotel bought the house and immediate gardens.

The stable block, which incorporated kennels, was a seven bay, brick fronted, slate roofed building with a pediment above the central three bays and an octagonal central lantern. It is believed that the stables, built in c. 1760, were in use until the late 1950s, after which they deteriorated, possibly being used as hotel storage or parking. They were finally demolished in 1986 to extend the car park area. The only surviving evidence of the stables is an area of whitewash on the east face of the service court wall, against which the stables were built, and areas of cobbles, partly covered with gravel, in the car park, illustrating the extent of the stable yard.

The cider house stands to the west of the service court wall behind the stable site. It is a modest, rectangular, stone service building which has been converted into a private dwelling. A circular stone cider press lies in the garden to the north of the house near what appears to be an attempted 'period' paved garden. It is unclear whether this building was the estate cider mill or if it is a name and character assumed by the present owners. It dates to c. 1760 and the present conversion appears to date from the 1980s.

The park at Pencerrig lies to the north-east and south-east of the house on either side of the present drive on land which slopes down to the north-east. It is a modest park, being little more than about 50 acres in total, extending one field beyond the lake to the north, to the south by a road known as Club Lane and to the west, behind the house by the plantations Dugoed and Pencerrig Wood and to the east by the A 483.

Pencerrig appears to have progressed from being a farm to a gentry estate in the Tudor period when the Powells replaced an original farmhouse with a more substantial stone house. In keeping with their ascent into the gentry class it is probable that by the time the Powells left Pencerrig in the early eighteenth century some sort of ornamental grounds could have been laid out, although no records have been found to confirm this.

The earliest known illustration of the estate is a naïve sketch dated 1831, attributed to Clara Thomas, which records the woods to the west and north-west of the house. Some of these woods were ancient oak woodland, the timber of which was an important source of income for the estate.

The same illustration also records orchards to the south and north-east of the house and farm, as well what appears to be ornamental planting within the vicinity of the house.

The first acknowledged landscaping came with the inheritance of Thomas Jones who created the lake soon after 1778 as a feature to be seen from the house. The Pencerrig stream was dammed on its northern side and the lake was formed, so successfully that the main Builth/Llandrindod road was flooded and had to be moved further to the east. The lake, known as 'the Great Pool', became badly silted and in 1795 it was dug out, resulting in an enlarged lake which covered about five acres. An island was created at its eastern end. In 1796 Thomas Jones's diary recorded the accidental drowning in the pool of his servant Jack Smith.

An early nineteenth-century engraving appears to record the picturesque Pencerrig lake. Large boulders and overhanging trees edge the water, a weeping willow in particular attributing a peaceful, almost oriental character to the scene. A sail boat is recorded on the water and this use of the lake is believed to have continued at least until 1905.

By the late eighteenth century the ancient oak woods around the site had been depleted to the extent that Jones embarked on an extensive period of replanting in

1792-96. His daybook records the planting of about 300 trees a year from his walled tree nursery and the payment of labourers to weed among the young trees.

Jones certainly bought some of his tree stock from commercial nurseries; in 1794 from Watts & Co of Piccadilly he received white and black American Spruce, Spanish Chestnut, Filberts, Stone pine, Ash(?) pine, Cluster pine, Ilex oak and Scots pine. Conifers were widely planted, Scots pine being favoured for their Jacobite symbolism by the traditionally Royalist gentry of Radnorshire. The diaries record specific plantings behind the house to the west, above the 'new' garden, a possible reference to the walled kitchen garden, and on Castle Hill, within the wider Pencerrig estate to the west.

Elements of this planting possibly survive today within the plantations in the park and in particular in woodland beyond the park boundary to the north-east of the site, on land which was once within the Pencerrig estate.

The next significant change to the park is believed to have taken place between 1832-39 when a second drive was created which directly connected the house to the Bulth road to the east. This drive is not recorded on an estate map of the early 1830s but it is faintly recorded on a title of 1844. The original drive entered the park from the south-west corner and proceeded diagonally across it. However, it is unclear when this earlier drive was created or finally abandoned.

The east drive initially appears to have been a service drive; no lodge was built until 1927 by either the Lindsay or Evan-Thomas families and the drive itself is not recorded on either the 1905 Ordnance Survey map or the 1952 sale catalogue map. However an apparent avenue of 'forest trees', according to the 1952 sale catalogue, is recorded on both maps, apparently planted along the line of this drive and these same trees also appear on the estate map of about 1830. These trees were possibly intended to hide service traffic from the main approach or to block any view of the lake until visitors had reached the house.

The stumps of this planting survive along the eastern drive and from their diameter they appear to date from the mid-nineteenth century. Clara Thomas, who owned Pencerrig from 1863 until her death in 1914, therefore could have been responsible for this planting as well as for other ornamentals to the south of the lake, which appear to be of a similar date.

The gradual division of the estate from 1914 has meant that there has been no cohesive management policy regarding the park or the woodlands. Some planting survives, but little replanting has taken place.

The garden lies to the south and south-east of the house. It is relatively small, covering about one acre. It is dominated by a large circular area of lawn to the south of the house, the central eastern section of the lawn is dominated by a large, mature copper beech. The lawn is bordered on the south by a raised earth bank against a high

stone wall which encloses the garden, separating it from the abandoned service drive beyond. The earth bank appears to be terraced. It is largely hidden beneath low maintenance planting that runs along the southern edge of the garden to the east. A wooden gate in the west part of the wall connects the drive with the western end of the garden.

Along the south front of the house a modern, paved terrace has been created which merges into the lawn at its western end by an area of rock garden. Large stone slabs have been arranged slightly above the level of the lawn and these are partly hidden by prostrate junipers and small conifers. A narrow, circular gravelled path runs from the rock garden around the southern side of the garden, below the earth bank, to a modern pergola or covered seat.

Beyond the beech tree there is a rough elongated turning circle, the southern branch of which connects with the car park. The centre of this circle is grassed and a mature yew tree stands on the eastern edge opposite the garden gate way.

To the south-east of the copper beech there is a new area of planting, creating a path that leads up through a nineteenth-century gate into the park and on to the site of the old drive. Immediately opposite the gate an iron wicket leads into the shrubbery. The shrubbery is a small deep valley, with mature planting, where paths have been created around a brook, the channel of which appears to have been modified with pools and a small bridge.

Below the southern branch of the east drive, to the north-east of the car park, there is a small area of planting behind a low concrete wall. This was the site of a swimming pool used when the house first opened as a hotel in the late 1950s. It is now a vegetable garden and composting area.

It is possible that an ornamental and/or productive garden was laid out around the manor house of Pencerrig by the Powell family who owned the site from around 1500 until 1720. However no evidence to support this has been found. Thomas Jones's diaries do record that by 1794/95 there was an 'old' and a 'new' garden, the latter being created by himself. It is unclear however whether these are references only to productive gardens as Jones planted the new garden with a variety of fruit trees. An entry in the diary of 1794 records the delivery of '100 Balm of Gilead bedded' which, as herbs/flowers, could have been planted near to the house (Jones's diary appears not to distinguish between the park and the garden, referring to all as 'the garden'). One possible clue to the position of the 'old' garden comes in a diary entry for 30 and 31 March 1796 which records the planting of trees 'on the bank above the new garden and in a little dingle above the old garden'. The little dingle is a possible reference to the later shrubbery, siting the old garden on or near the site of the present garden to the south of the house.

A naïve sketch, possibly by Clara Thomas, of about 1831 records an early version of the southern garden as tree-planted lawn, which may have been a remodelling of an earlier garden, possibly by Jones. The present drive and turning circle are certainly

recorded and were probably all improvements contemporary with the remodelling of the house in the late eighteenth century.

The sketch also records planting, including possible flower borders, around the east front of the house, a conifer on the lawn, the present site of a copper beech, and a small area of planting south of the house. A garden gateway to the west of the house is recorded but no garden wall, the south garden wall being attributed to Clara Thomas after 1863.

The layout of the present garden seems therefore to date from about 1863, only the shrubbery being a later addition, possibly by the Evan-Thomases as late as the 1920s, but even this is uncertain. The garden trees, the conifers and the tulip tree appear to be no older than about 100 years old. Only a yew tree to the east of the house appears to be older and may actually be a planting by Jones or his father.

Sources

- Primary** 1844 tithe map. National Library of Wales.
Photographs taken mid 1980s by Radnorshire District Council
1952 sale catalogue, National Library of Wales
'A scene near Pencerrig', after Thomas Jones, engraving c. 1800 PB 5861, National Library of Wales & National Gallery of Wales, Cardiff.
Undated photograph of house and lake, c. 1920. National Library of Wales, PB A1 3/14
- Secondary** Anon., 'The Diary of Thomas Jones, Pencerrig', Radnorshire Society Transactions (1943), vol. 13, p. 37.
Haslam, R., The Buildings of Powys (1979), p. 251
Kilvert, Revd. F., Diary - 1870-79.
Oliver, R. C. B., 'Pencerrig: the house at the top of the rocks', Radnorshire Society Transactions, (1969) vol. 39, pp. 36-47.
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