

BRYN GWYNANT

Ref No	PGW (Gd) 20 (GWY)
OS Map	115
Grid Ref	SH 641 514
Former County	Gwynedd
Unitary Authority	Gwynedd
Community Council	Beddgelert
Designations	Snowdonia National Park
Site Evaluation	Grade II

Primary reasons for grading Good survival of interesting range of trees; extensive woodlands; remains of Japanese garden; superb views.

Type of Site Steeply sloping park and woodlands with long drive with good plantings; small ornamental garden with interesting features; kitchen garden; orchard; terrace with views.

Main Phases of Construction Mid nineteenth century

SITE DESCRIPTION

Bryn Gwynant is situated c. 7 km north-east of Beddgelert, on the south side of Nant Gwynant, a valley famous for its beauty. The house lies on a fairly steep hillside, facing north-west towards Snowdon over Llyn Gwynant. The scenery is rugged and romantic, and the house well placed to enjoy it.

The house was built in 1834, shortly after the estate was acquired by the Wyatt and Vawdrey families. Daniel Vawdrey, who owned Plas Gwynant, the next estate to the south-west, was related by marriage to the Wyatts, and it appears that he and Benjamin Wyatt, Lord Penrhyn's agent, bought the estate. Benjamin was a son of James, the well-known architect, and is thought to have designed the house himself, for use as a summer residence. The house is typical of its period, being stone-built with many sharply pointed gables, decorative bargeboards, mullioned windows and a verandah running part way along the north-west and south-west sides. It is on a stone plinth, with steps up where necessary, to cope with the sloping site. The hillside has been cut away at the back of the house and it is tucked close into the resulting rock face.

The house was sold in 1929 and again in the early 1950s, when it became a youth hostel. The

purchase of the house by the Youth Hostels Association was instigated by Mr and Mrs E Hughes, who felt the house and remaining 40 acres should be kept together and would be ideal for the purpose. They subsequently became the first wardens.

The stables and coach house were no doubt built at the same time as the house, but the building has now been modernised and converted to extra accommodation for the youth hostel. It is built of stone with a slate roof; the original large arched doorways have been partially blocked and smaller doors inserted, and a verandah has been added, but the outside staircases to the lofts (which have been converted into an upper floor) remain and the building is still recognisable for what it was. A new garage has been built at the rear.

There is a range of very small outbuildings built against the cliff behind the house, squeezed into the narrow space at the back of the house. It consists of a couple of stone-built stores or sheds, now semi-derelict. Immediately outside the back door is a slate tank catching water which runs down the rock.

Just south of the kitchen garden is a small group of farm buildings, including an animal/cart shed, which is unusual in that the west end is irregularly curved, fitting into the sharp bend of the track. It is stone-built and slate-roofed, with a triangular vent at the back between two stable doors, a very wide opening at the front, and drains in the floor.

Across the track from the building above there is a further row of stone-built sheds, some with slate and some with corrugated roofs. The one at the east end of the range has large double doors and no windows, the others have single doors and ventilation openings, one of which has wooden bars and one of which is covered over.

The studio is a small building that has been converted to domestic use, and was once lived in by an artist, hence the name. It lies above the house to the south, just beyond the garden. The studio is stone-built with a slate roof and has two slit windows in the gable end, with a door between. A glazed window has been inserted on the south side. It was probably originally an agricultural building, perhaps pre-dating the present house.

Laid out in the nineteenth century, the park adapts itself to the site - a mountainside difficult to tame. A large part of it is woodland, formerly managed as a commercial resource, and the rest rough and low grade grazing, suitable only for sheep. At one time part of the lake was included; and the area of the immediate estate (excluding the lake) was 52 acres in 1929. It is now about 40 acres.

It seems likely that the park and garden were all laid out around the same time, by Wyatt in the 1830s when the house was built. The park is on a steeply-sloping, north-west-facing hillside, with the house near the bottom and large areas of woodland behind. The views of Llyn Gwynant, Nant Gwynant and the Snowdon range were evidently to some extent responsible for the choice and layout of the site.

The previous owner of the estate, then a large farm, was the Revd H. Wynne Jones, who used it

to try out new farming methods. He obviously felt forestry was the way forward (an idea also espoused by Daniel Vawdrey), and within four years of acquiring the property (in 1809) had planted 160,000 trees. He therefore laid the foundations of the woodland which still covers much of the site, but the wide range of exotic conifers in the gardens is more likely to have been planted by Wyatt, who would have had access to ideas and expertise, and probably nursery stock, at Penrhyn Castle.

The park remains mostly wooded, later owners also apparently having felt this was the best response to a site of this type. There is, however, a large open area to the south-west of the house, where parkland trees have flourished, and from where the best views are obtained; and the woods themselves are extensively criss-crossed with paths and were obviously treated as part of the pleasure grounds, despite being managed for timber.

There are two drives, which approach the house from the east and west. The main entrance is at the east end of the site, off the A498 road. The lodge, at this entrance, is a low, two-storey stone building in a style similar to that of the main house, and presumably contemporary with it. It is now a private house. The entrance gates are not used, and one of the square-sectioned stone-built gateposts, with low pyramidal caps, is damaged. The gates at the entrance to the west drive are white-painted iron. They are hung on square stone-built posts, one of which has a rather elaborate machicolated top, and again a cap in the shape of a flattened pyramid. There is also a length of white-painted iron fencing on a dwarf wall on the south side just outside the gate, and a segment of similar wrought ironwork fitted into a curve on the end of the boundary wall where it meets the road.

The two drives, which come up the slope at a gentle gradient and meet in front of the house, have been the focus for most of the plantings of ornamental trees, which include many excellent specimens of different exotic conifers. The drives were specifically mentioned in the catalogue when the property was sold in 1929, as 'double carriage drive bordered by flowering trees and shrubs', and this description remains accurate. The overall effect, with trees framing the view and a patchwork of different shapes and colours, has obviously been important, but the range of species suggests a particular botanical interest. Between the drives and the road is a further small area of parkland with more magnificent trees, including a huge giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*).

The higher park area, south-west of the house, is steeper and rougher, with occasional rocky outcrops. There are some excellent specimen trees, but *Rhododendron ponticum* is encroaching. At the top there is a *hafod*, where the remains of three successive houses can be seen, the most recent older than Bryn Gwynant and still inhabited. This cottage is called Pen-y-Bryn, the original name of the farm which became the Bryn Gwynant estate. The view over the lake and towards Snowdon from here is spectacular. It has clearly been protected when planting: there are no large parkland trees in the way, and the tall trees around Bryn Gwynant frame the lake most effectively. From the break of slope just below the *hafod*, the house can be seen.

There is an extensive system of walks in the woods to the west, south and east of the house,

planted over the steep and rocky hillside. Some of the original ones are overgrown and impassable and some new ones have been made, but most of the old walks can be seen, even if not used. Many of them have stone or rock edging, sometimes revetting, and occasional little quarries where stone for this purpose has been obtained can be seen beside the paths. None of the paths are surfaced, except that some rough steps have been made where necessary. Occasionally some rudimentary drains run beside the paths.

A tennis court lies just south of the stables and east of the group of farm buildings. It is disused and has a drain cut across it, with *Rhododendron ponticum* and other undergrowth gradually encroaching, but is level and the grassy banks surrounding it are clear. On the higher, south, side the bank is revetted with dry-stone walling. This was probably constructed after 1914, as its outline is not shown on the map of that date, only the small enclosure (perhaps a paddock) within which it now lies.

The garden now consists of a lawned terrace around the house, without plantings but ideal for admiring the view, and a Japanese garden and two rockeries.

The house is surrounded on three sides by a sloping grass terrace, retained by a stone wall. There were once statues on the wall, but these have all disappeared. This wall does not seem to have been original, at least in its present form, as the 1914 25" Ordnance Survey map shows a wide path crossing the area from west to east, passing straight in front of the house, and the lawn appears to end at the edge of this. On the other hand, there is a boundary which suggests that the western end at least was terraced, below this path, although the steps are not shown.

The photographs in the 1929 sale catalogue unfortunately do not show the terrace clearly, but the existing steps do appear on one of them. It is probably therefore safe to assume that at some point between 1914 and 1929 the terrace wall was rebuilt, incorporating the short flight of steps at the western end, and curving back towards the house on the east. There is also a curve into a corner about half way along, giving the terrace a pleasing, irregular shape. At this time the path in front of the house, of which there is now no sign, must have been deliberately removed, although the access to the lawn from the disused service drive has been retained.

A small stream is culverted under the lawn near the western end of the terrace. Below the terrace wall, between it and the drive, is a grass slope planted with fairly young conifers and shrubs; one larger tree by the steps has become too big for its position.

The Japanese garden is to the east of the house, beyond the orchard, and is reached up a steep slope. The ascent of this has been made more interesting by adding rocks to the already rocky surface, causing the path to zig-zag amongst them, and planting shrubs and small trees in keeping with the Japanese theme, such as acers. The overflow from the pool in the Japanese garden has also been trained into miniature waterfalls.

At the top of the rockery, the pool is reached, and beyond it is a hexagonal gazebo or summer-house, not exactly a pagoda, but designed to appear oriental. It is now sadly dilapidated. The Japanese area is very small, but even in its overgrown state has a tranquil atmosphere.

The other rockery is on the far side of the setting-down area west of the house, and decorates the approach to the tennis court which lies above. It is on a larger scale than that by the Japanese garden, utilising very large rocks, though it still covers only a small area, and unfortunately all the planting has been shaded out by large trees above. It has a picturesque walk along the top.

The orchard is rather oddly sited on a steep slope immediately behind the house; it is just possible that it began life as the kitchen garden but was made into an orchard when the garden was moved to a flatter site. It is sub-rectangular, with a rounded top, and walled on three sides; there are several low terraces across it.

The orchard is reached by a steep flight of informal but well made stone steps leading up to the north corner. The wall is part mortared, part dry-stone, the corner near the steps having some massive blocks, and the height varying because of the slope, over 2 m at the highest. It has collapsed in a few places. At the sides the courses are at an angle, because of the steepness of the slope. The top course is set on edge. Apart from the corner by the steps, the north-western side is not walled; the undergrowth in the orchard hangs over the service drive and the roofs of the sheds at the back of the house.

None of the entrances now has a door or gate, but there are gate hinges in the wall at the north entrance, and also three more steps. The other openings are towards the top on the south-east, giving on to the Japanese garden, and at the top on the south-west, giving access to a path passing behind from the Japanese garden back down to the drive west of the house. This entrance still has part of a wooden framework, probably for a small gate.

There are four levels of terracing, retained by dry-stone walls less than a metre high throughout, with two or three steps up at either end. This makes the slope more manageable, but the terraces still slope quite steeply.

Traces of some of the paths remain, particularly up the north-eastern side, where some of the thin slates on edge used as edging are still in place. The orchard is now almost entirely overgrown, with bracken, rhododendron, nettles, brambles and scrub, as well as some sizeable wild trees, especially willow. One apple tree and one conifer remain of the original plantings, and there are some ornamental shrubs along the north-western edge.

The kitchen garden is presumably contemporary with the house, although the area which is now the orchard may possibly have been the kitchen garden at first. The lower part of the kitchen garden may be a later extension. The garden is stone-walled all round, and is an irregular, elongated shape, to fit into the only fairly level space available. It lies immediately to the west of the stables/coach house, and is now used as a car park, with a patchily gravelled surface. The lower part is grassy. The entrance has been altered, presumably widened to admit vehicles; probably the wall originally joined the corner of the stable block, with a doorway through.

The surrounding wall is more or less intact, of mortared stone between about 1.5 and 2.5 m

high, partly acting as a retaining wall on the higher south side, and with very few straight stretches, the shape of the site being irregular. The wall has a rough slab coping. The wall of the western extension is very similar, and there seems to be little difference in date, if any, although there is no doubt, from the wall joints, that the western area was built on to the main garden afterwards. It is smaller than the main garden, with the walls at a uniform height around 2.5 m. The entrance is filled with rubble so the steps down into it from the main garden, if there were any, are obscured.

Apart from the main entrance by the stables, the only doorway is out through the far western wall, and although it is possible to walk along above the drive there does not seem ever to have been a proper path here. The doorway is square-headed with a stone lintel; part of the door frame remains.

No buildings survive within the garden, although the 1914 map shows two glasshouses against the wall in the main garden and two smaller free-standing ones in the extension, and a building in the south-east corner of the latter. There is now no sign of the free-standing glasshouses, but the site of the western lean-to can be picked out by marks on the wall. The foundations of the building in the lower part can also be made out.

There were also buildings against the outside of the garden walls. Each lean-to glasshouse seems to have had its own boiler-house outside the north wall, and these remain, in a ruinous condition. There was a door from the garden into the western one, but the other seems only to have been reached from the outside. At the far western end was a small building against the outside of the wall, north of the doorway; part of one wall with a window opening remains.

One solitary plum tree has survived in each part of the garden, but there is no other clue to the planting or layout. The lean-to glasshouses are still marked on the current 6-in. Ordnance Survey map, although without glass; they must therefore have been demolished fairly recently.

Sources

Primary

Information from youth hostel staff

Sale catalogue of 1929 (National Library, Aberystwyth)

Secondary

Youth hostel walks leaflet