

CADW/ICOMOS REGISTER OF LANDSCAPES, PARKS AND GARDENS
OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST IN WALES

REGISTER ENTRY

Silia

Ref No	PGW (Po) 49 (POW)
OS Map	148
Grid Ref	SO 306642
Former County	Powys
Unitary Authority	Powys
District	Radnorshire
Community Council	Presteigne
Designations	None known
Site Evaluation	Grade II
Primary reasons for grading	A noted late Victorian private and unusual arboretum, still containing fine specimen trees, particularly conifers. Connections with the Banks family of nearby Hergest Croft, Herefordshire, probably influenced some of the planting.
Type of Site	Arboretum and ornamental woodland garden. Late Victorian house and earlier lodge. Simple parkland to east.
Main Phases of Construction	c. 1870, arboretum; c. 1906, house and garden

SITE DESCRIPTION

Silia house is set on a level terrace, part way down the ornamental wooded hill side, facing south-east with views towards the small border town of Presteigne in the east, over a small park. A drive enters the site from the east, to the south of a lodge, known as 'Silia Cottage'. The cottage is the earliest building on the site and stands below the Warden ring and bailey on the south side of Warden Road. The cottage is a two storey, rendered building with a slate hung east end which has been modified; a modern conservatory stands on its south-west side. To the south of the cottage the

ground slopes away steeply to a small pond. The drive to the houses across along the southern end of the pond on a simple stone bridge/dam. The ground around the pond has been turned into a private garden.

Silia House dates from about 1906. From the road below, the house appears to be hidden in the wood, only its roofline being visible. The house is constructed of rendered brick and has a red tiled roof. It is modest in size with three storeys and four bays on the south front, including a central square bay and an octagonal corner bay on the east. All of the windows have stone dressings. To the east of the square bay there is a recessed, square Italianate porch with stone pillars to the west and east of a central arch and a tiled floor interior. Two stone steps connect the porch with the terrace/drive below. A single-storey extension in the same style as the house was added on the east in about 1930 and at the eastern end a flight of four, semi-circular red brick steps descends into a small, formal garden area. To the north of the steps, set back against the original line of the house, there is a wide concrete base where a conservatory was sited. The date of the erection and demolition of the conservatory are unknown.

The first known use of the cottage was as part of the kennels for Captain James Beavan, a local landowner and magistrate, who kept his hounds there from about 1860 having bought most of the surrounding land. Beavan himself resided in Presteigne. From about 1870 James Beavan began to lay out an ornamental wood to the west of the site of the later house. By the early twentieth century the cottage had become established as a lodge to a new house, Silia House, which was built by the Whale family in about 1906. The old kennels were used as vegetable stores. During the Whale's tenure it became the gardener's residence and a large, lean-to peach house was erected along its southern side. This glass house is believed to have stood until the late 1940s. The lodge remained as the gardener's residence through the subsequent owners, the Lees, during the 1930s and 1940s and the Hills who sold the house to the King family in 1949. The Kings used the lodge as a chauffeurs residence. It is believed that the lodge finally became a private dwelling in the mid 1970s when it took the title 'cottage'.

Silia was built for a Mr Thomas Whale (Wall/Whalle) in about 1906 by a local builder. By 1931 the house and grounds had been sold to the Colonel Lee and family who lived there until 1945 when the Hill family from Birmingham bought it before opening an iron foundry business in the town below. In 1949 another Colonel, Colonel King bought the site and it was he who began to sell off the estate from about 1950. Since that time the house has passed through other ownerships, gradually falling into disrepair. The present owners have been in residence for about three years and have embarked on an extensive restoration programme of the house.

Immediately to the north-west of the house there is a small stone garage which faces south-east. The garage dates to c. 1910 and is built into the hillside, its interior lined with roughly dressed stone. The internal north wall of the garage continues outside to create a high dry-stone retaining wall, which rises to about 3m, running behind the house to the north for about 12m. A narrow service passage separates this wall from

the laundry and kitchen area of the house. Centre north of the house, set within the opposite wall, there is a small, deep chamber which is believed to have been used as an ice-store.

A small area of parkland, more accurately tree ornamented fields, was created between the southern garden/woodland boundary and the Slough road and town of Presteigne to the south and south-east. This area extends to about 8 acres and it retains its form although it is now in divided ownership and split into three areas; a sweeping green pasture, dotted with a few old oaks, in the south-east, a central field of about 2 acres planted up with winter wheat and, to the west, a paddock, which abuts the Woodland Trust access track to Silia Wood. Along the Slough road ornamental conifers, including wellingtonia, occur in the boundary hedge. In the south-east corner of the park development on the edge of Presteigne, housing and a junior school, has encroached upon the park.

The early history of the area of the park is unclear. It is assumed that the land was bought, together with the woodland area, by Capt. James Beavan in about 1860-70 who began to plant the ornamental woodland. Beavan did not live on the site, preferring to retain a house in town, together with stables, but his hounds were kept at, or near, the lodge and it is possible that the park was used for exercising the dogs as well as providing a setting for the woodland. The hounds were the predecessors of the present Radnorshire and West Herefordshire Hunt. The oaks in the south-east park may be the relics of field boundaries removed at this time. A drain from the lodge pond ran south-east into the park which was apparently used to feed watercress beds, since lost. Until the 1940s the local agricultural show was often held on the park field.

Farmland, affiliated to the wood, lay to the north, outside of the park. It is unclear when this additional land was added to the property but in 1912 there was a dispute when Mr Whale tried to argue his ownership to common land around Harley's Hill, to the west of the Warden motte which resulted in town victory. (It is possible, but unclear, that the Silia estate at one time extended to include the Warden as ornamental conifers similar in type and age to those at Silia occur in the woodland on the south side of this monument). To the north of the wood, set in and around the farmland, there are shelter belts and plantings of Scots pine, oak and sycamore which may date from around 1912, as the trees do not appear to be more than 70-80 years old.

The park remained as part of the Silia property until around 1950 when the Hills and the Kings began to sell off the estate. The town council purchased land in the south-east of the park and since about 1980 this area has been developed to cope with the growth of the town. On the east side of the paddock a detached house, Meadowbank, was constructed in a private plot in the 1970s.

The wood and woodland garden at Silia surrounds the house to the north, west and south on south-sloping ground. Around the house there is a more formal area of garden of mainly early twentieth-century shrub planting. The drive and circulatory paths, which run above and below the drive, pass through this area. The different

ground levels are connected by sets of formal stone steps or rougher, more recent, timber ones. On the south of the house the drive, which enters the site from the east, reaches a narrow terrace, which runs along the length of the house, about 25m. A strip of lawn runs along the southern edge of this terrace, separating it from a steep slope to the garden and park below. A small, stone ornamental bird bath is sited on the grass, opposite the porch, with ornamental shrubs and a ginkgo to the south, which hide the steep slope. To the east of the conservatory site, above the drive, there is a small triangular lawn with narrow borders running along its north and south sides. In the east corner of the lawn there is a timber rose pergola recently erected over a small area of tiled floor, which may be the site of an earlier garden building. Tender climbers including solanum and roses are grown against the south front of the house.

The line of the drive continues to the west in a straight line from the terrace. A dry-stone retaining wall runs along the north side of the drive for about 12m from the west side of the garage, to which it connects. A simple rock garden, bisected with a flight of stone steps, and a curved seat recess, are to be found along its length. To the south of this area there is a modern utility area of a free-standing green house together with an older timber woodshed to the west.

Beyond this area, to the west, the garden becomes increasingly wooded with many mature ornamental trees including wellingtonia, cedar, spruce and tulip trees. Beneath the trees there are many fine examples of magnolias, Japanese acers, rhododendrons and azaleas. Rough mown grass paths run throughout this area forming circuit walks which extend down to the inside of the southern boundary. Near the western Silia house boundary recent clearing work has created a small enclosed lawn. To the south of the house, below the terrace, at the base of a steep slope, there is a semi-circular, raised grass terrace which extends into the park. The terrace is dominated by a pair of oaks which appear to be among the oldest trees on site and is enclosed by nineteenth-century park rails along the south side. West of this terrace there is a small but deep circular pool and to the north-east there is a small area of relict orchard. A path continues back up hill through the orchard to intersect the eastern stretch of the drive. Below the drive at this point, overlooking the south-east park and towards the Warden, a new rock garden is being created in a similar style to the rest of the garden. To the north-east of this feature a new, timber pergola and seat has been constructed looking out over the park.

The woodland, which covers about 4.4 acres, now within the Woodland Trust ownership, is managed primarily for ecological interest and has a low-impact management regime. A narrow, metalled high hedged track ascends from the road to a small car parking area from where a circular path runs to the east and north, up a steep ground slope, to the summit of the hill and the northern boundary of the wood. The path continues to the west before descending once again to the starting point. Small sections of simple timber steps have been constructed where the hill is particularly steep. This circular path is the main path but the line of an old drive does run, approximately through the centre of the area, from east to west. Other smaller paths, have also been created through the wood, with simple wood seats for visitors.

It is only in the eastern section of this wood that the mature ornamental planting remains. There are many examples of coniferous introductions including wellingtonia, Douglas fir, Brewers spruce, larch and red cedar. The ground surface is lost beneath a dense cover of bramble, bracken and litter. To the west the wood is more open and, here, is predominantly more recently planted oak and beech. From the west end of the wood there is a view over a small, steep valley and a small wood on a rise opposite. The line of the continuation of the old drive is discernible, heading towards Paradise Farm in the west.

The history of the woodland prior to James Beavan's ownership is unclear but it was probably ancient woodland which, by later accounts, contained vast numbers of native bulbs. From about 1860 until 1896, when part of the wood was sold off, Beavan embarked on an ambitious and expensive planting scheme ornamenting his woodland with many new and, at that time, rare introductions which were labelled and named. No building other than the lodge was on the site at that time and Beavan used the land to create a private arboretum. In 1896 the woodlands were described as being 'one of the finest in the kingdom with specimen trees of conifers, ornamental, deciduous and others'. They included, somewhat bizarrely, a stand of Scots pines planted in commemoration of the Battle of Trafalga. The source of the trees is unclear but the Beavan family were friends, and near neighbours, of the Banks family of Hergest Croft and the gardens share many trees of similar age.

In 1910 the Whales bought the property and built the house. It is believed that the garden was created from this time with the Whales introducing equally rare and expensive flowering shrubs and bulbs to be planted beneath Beavan's trees. Some of the trees must have been cleared however to permit the construction of the house and the more formal areas of the garden.

References have been found to various garden buildings in the woodland during the 1930s and 1940s and evidence has been found of a garden building within the garden. One of the summer houses was described as having 'stained glass windows, tiled floors and seats all round' and another which was: 'at the end of the wood looking across towards Paradise Farm; this was the place for the early primroses, violets and daffodils'. No trace of any of the woodland buildings have survived. The woodland buildings may have dated from Beavan's time as apart from tree planting he was recorded as having 'beautified his grounds', but again this is uncertain. By the time of the departure of the Whales in the late 1920s the basic design of the gardens is believed to have been established. None of the subsequent owners are believed to have made many significant changes to the site.

During the 1930s further links with the garden of Hergest Croft were made when Bruce Jackson of Kew catalogued both Hergest and Silia gardens for the Banks and Lees respectively. The garden at Hergest, similarly laid out underneath an earlier arboretum by Dorothy and W. H. Banks, dates from about 1896. Dorothy initiated the Kew catalogue of the gardens and so appears to have been well aware of a connection between the two.

By the early 1970s the gardens and woodland had deteriorated with fallen trees left lying and the rhododendrons obscuring many of the other shrubs. The western part of the wood was clear felled during the 1960s before being replanted with native hard woods. The present owners took possession in about 1993 and embarked on an extensive restoration programme which is continuing. The Woodland Trust were given their portion of the wood by deed from the Town Council, the then owners, in 1994.

Sources

Primary Old photographs c. 1940, private collection.

Secondary Fenn, Revd. Dr. R. W. D., Archivist - Hergest Trust, pers comm.
Howse, W. H., Presteigne Past and Present, (1945)
Hyde, H.A., Welsh Timber Trees (1961), pp. 8,42,43,45,47.
Leverage, C., 'Silia', Presteigne Parish Magazine (1995)
The Woodland Trust, 'Silia Wood' (leaflet).