

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

SITE DOSSIER

SITE NAME Llantarnam Abbey

REF. NO. PGW (Gt) 25

OS MAP 171 GRID REF. ST 312930

FORMER COUNTY Gwent UNITARY AUTHORITY Torfaen B.C. COMMUNITY
COUNCIL Llanfrechfa Lower

DESIGNATIONS Listed building: Llantarnam Abbey Grade II
The Barn, Llantarnam Abbey

National Park AONB SSSI NNR ESA GAM SAM CA

SITE EVALUATION Grade II

Primary reasons for grading

Near complete layout of park, garden and kitchen garden of 1830s;
17th-century statues

TYPE OF SITE

Landscape park, formal garden, informal garden, walled kitchen garden

MAIN PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION

1836-7; c. 1905

VISITED BY/DATE Elisabeth Whittle/January 1991

HOUSE

Name Llantarnam Abbey

Grid ref ST 312929

Date/style 16th-early 17th century; 1836-7/Tudor; Victorian Tudor

Brief description

The house stands on the site of a medieval Cistercian monastery (founded 1179, daughter house of Strata Florida Abbey, and one of the few Welsh Cistercian houses), of which only the ruined tithe barn (13th-century), to the N of the house, remains. The monastery was closed in 1536, and in 1554 was bought by William Morgan, who built a house on the same site, using abbey materials. Edward Morgan (d. 1634) added to the house in the early 17th century. Nothing more was done to it until the early 19th century, when Reginald Blewitt inherited it. He restored the house (architect Sir Thomas Wyatt) and made some additions (the dining room, a conservatory on S side), made alterations to the park and built the garden. The huge cost (£60,000) led to his breakdown. Few later alterations. Sale particulars of 1888 list modern stables and coach house.

In 1895 the house and park were bought by Sir Clifford Cory (d. 1940), who wanted 'atmosphere', and lived here as a recluse. His main alterations were to the garden. He converted an old dairy house to a private chapel. In 1946 the Sisters of St. Joseph bought the Abbey and part of the park, and they are still in residence.

OUTBUILDINGS

Name Stables and coach house

Grid ref ST 312929

Date/style, and brief description

Late 19th century/utilitarian

At the back of the house is an enclosed courtyard with a clock turret over the entrance on the N side. Ranged around it are various utilitarian buildings, formerly coach houses, stables, granary, brew house, laundry, hay lofts, wood house, seed room, potato store, tool house, coachman's cottage (1888 Particulars of Sale).

THE PARK

Central grid ref ST 312929

Date/style

1836-7/landscape

GENERAL DESCRIPTION, HISTORY AND LAYOUT

The park of Llantarnam Abbey is about 80 acres in extent and lies between the Afon Lwyd on the the N and the Pen-y-Parc road on the ridge to the S of the Dowlais Brook on the S. The W boundary lies along the A 4042 road which was moved to its present position when the park was made in 1836-7. Between the two brooks the ground is level and low-lying. To the S of the Dowlais Brook the ground rises to a higher, rolling plateau. The park is wooded along the Dowlais Brook and to the S of the Afon Lwyd, between it and the Abbey. The rest of the park is open pastureland with isolated trees.

There may have been a hunting park here in the 16th-17th centuries, but there is no record of one. Nothing was done in the 18th century, when the house was uninhabited. In 1836-7 Reginald Blewitt rebuilt the house and made the park and gardens. The main Newport road (A 4042) was moved to its present position, and a high stone wall built along it and along the S boundary of the park (along the Pen-y-Parc road). The entrance arch and lodge off the Newport road, the Magna Porta, was built in a similar style to that of the house (Victorian Tudor) and a winding drive constructed along the south side of the Dowlais Brook, with flanking planting of deciduous trees and evergreen shrub understorey. Scots pines (for pit props) were planted to the N of the house. The 1880s 6" OS map marks an avenue running N-S north of Pen-y-parc, between the road and the belt of woodland along the Dowlais Brook. It is aligned on the S front of the house, and would have been clearly visible from it on rising ground beyond the brook. There is now no trace of it.

In 1895 the house and park were bought by Sir Clifford Cory, who instituted various changes, mainly in the garden. In the early 20th century the flat area of the park to the south of the house was used as a polo ground, and the rest was stocked with a pedigree herd of Black Kerry cattle.

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

Winding drive (gravel) from the main entrance (Magna Porta) to the W side of the house. Secondary drive (farm track) from the North lodge, in the N corner of the park, along the edge of the woodland next to the Afon Lwyd to the NW corner of the house.

WATER FEATURES

Two natural streams: the Afon Lwyd, forming the N boundary of the park, and the Dowlais Brook, in the middle of the park. To the north of the Dowlais Brook are two rectangular holding ponds for flood-water, built in the second half of the 20th century.

BUILT FEATURES

Magna Porta

ST 304927

Built 1836-7 by Reginald Blewitt (architect Sir Thomas Wyatt). A neo-Gothic arch and small two-storey lodge to the N.

N lodge

Small picturesque building in north corner of park, on A4042 road, on south side of secondary drive.

Walls

A high crenellated stone wall along the W boundary of the park (1836), along the main Newport road. Continues (with breaks for houses) along S boundary, along the Pen-y-parc road, as far as field boundary to the W of Pen-y-parc.

Bridge

To the west of the forecourt of the house the drive crosses the Dowlais Brook over a single-arched stone bridge with low stone parapets. This would appear to be contemporary with the Blewitt alterations (1836-7), and is possibly also by Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Railings

Iron fencing along S boundary of woodland flanking main drive and around the Magna Porta entrance lodge (curving).

PLANTED COMPONENTS

The park is mainly open pastureland. There are two main areas of woodland - along the Afon Lwyd and flanking the main drive.

The woodland along the Afon Lwyd is mainly semi-natural and deciduous, including large mature beeches. There are some coniferous trees interspersed in the woodland, but the early 19th-century planting of Scots pines has gone.

The strip of woodland flanking the main drive is mainly deciduous, with an underplanting of rhododendrons near the Magna Porta, and mixed deciduous and coniferous trees and rhododendrons at its E end, near the entrance to the house.

The W boundary is planted with a narrow strip of mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. Near the E boundary of the park, W of Ty-isaf farm, are a number of clumps, both deciduous and coniferous, probably dating from the 1830s. To the S of the garden, E of the house, is a fenced field in which there are mature specimen trees, both deciduous and coniferous. In the field to the south is a fine mature evergreen oak. The remaining trees in the park are scattered isolated deciduous trees.

BOUNDARIES

W: A4042 Newport-Cwmbran road
N: Afon Lwyd
E: field boundaries
S: Pen-y-parc road

ESSENTIAL SETTING, VIEWPOINTS AND CONTINUATIONS OF FEATURES BEYOND THE PARK, EYECATCHERS ETC.

Not applicable

LAND-USE

Mixed woodland: part unmanaged, part managed (along Afon Lwyd)
Agricultural: pasture

ELEMENTS OF BOTANICAL OR OTHER NATURE CONSERVATION INTEREST

None known

SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS

Structural components: all
Water features: all
Built components: all

Planted components: some

THE PLEASURE GARDEN

Grid ref ST 312929

Date/style 1836-7; c. 1900/formal and informal

GENERAL DESCRIPTION, HISTORY AND LAYOUT

The gardens lie to the S and E and W of the house, with the large walled kitchen garden immediately E of the stables courtyard. To the west of the house the drive enters a rectangular forecourt in front of the house. The forecourt is bounded by a low stone wall, and the drive enters under a Gothic archway with a small decorative lantern on top. The structure, some of the layout (paths have gone), and some of the planting of the gardens survive. They were created for Reginald Blewitt in the late 1830s. The garden on the W and S of the house is enclosed by a low stone wall and outer dry moat, with bastions in the SW and SE corners, and low decorative cast iron gates in the middle of each side. In the middle of the bastions are two life-sized stone statues, a pilgrim and a musketeer, both thought to be 17th-century. There are known to have been further smaller statues (thought to be 17th-century also) here, at least until the early 20th century, including a 'Dancing Man', a 'Boy with Drum', 'Two Knights', 'An Owl', 'A Stork', and 'a head and bust of a man with a staff'.

The formal layout of paths in the garden has gone, except the central one, as has a fountain originally in the middle of the garden on the S side (there in 1946: Sale Particulars). One of a pair of wellingtonias that flanked the central path survives. Blewitt built a conservatory on the S side of the stable court (where the chapel now is), which had a copper-framed cupola in the middle of the roof. This was in existence in 1946 (Sale Particulars) but has now gone. To the E (S and E of the kitchen garden) was the informal part of the garden, the shrubbery and an area with walks and a small lake. The shrubbery retains its outline and some of its specimen trees. On the N side of the lake was a small building, ruined by the end of the 19th century and rebuilt in 1905 by Cory as a picturesque pavilion with a turret called the 'Monk's Cell', which survives. The lake has now been drained and filled in, and is now a grass field, with a disused stone fountain of a scallop shell held up by dolphins marooned in the middle, put there by Cory (found 'broken among the debris'). The pile of stones to the S of the 'Monk's Cell' is the remains of a grotto re-erected by Sir Clifford Cory to the west of the house at the beginning of the 20th century, and since fallen again, with the stones removed to their present position. The grotto is said to have had tunnels, and inside was the life-sized stone figure of a praying monk (thought 19th-century), now in the kitchen garden. In this grotto Cory put all he could find of the remains of monks' tombs, and there was also a small stone lion (now in the garden S of the house).

Some 19th-century tree planting remains, in particular some specimen conifers, including a very fine large cedar just to the north of the forecourt. The rest of the garden is now mainly grassed over. There was a maze, a trapezoidal area to the NW of the Monk's Cell, but this has now gone.

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

To the W and S of the house the garden is levelled, and bounded by a stone revetment wall continued as a low parapet wall c. 0.8 m. high of dressed stone, capped with pitched coping stones. The area was originally L-shaped, with the larger part being the rectangular area on the S. A modern extension to the house protrudes into the W half of the garden to the S of the house. Outside the wall is a small dry moat. The drive enters the forecourt in the middle of the W side. In the SW and SE corners are 5-sided bastions. This area was built by Reginald Blewitt in the late 1830s, and the architect may have been that of the house (Sir Thomas Wyatt).

The small lake in the E half of the garden is now filled in, but its area can be roughly discerned from the slightly concave surface of the ground. The 'Monk's Cell' stands on its former N edge. The fountain stands in the former middle. It was dammed at its E end, and beyond, in the wood, is a now dry stream bed, the stream of which would have been the lake's overflow.

There is a gravel path running N-S down the middle of the garden to the S of the house. Along the S side of the kitchen garden, flanking the long border against the wall, is a concrete path edged with brick on the S side.

BUILT COMPONENTS

The garden W and S of the house is bounded by a low dressed stone wall in neo-Gothic style (c. 0.8 m. high), capped with pitched coping stones. The wall is pierced at intervals with quatrefoil holes with tracery. In the bastion walls are square holes with angular stone tracery. A small paved sunken garden has been made in the dry moat at the NE corner of the garden (post 1946). The drive enters the forecourt of the house in the middle of the W side, through a Gothick gateway with a lantern and ironwork on top and two flanking pedestrian gateways. In the middle of each of the sides of the garden to the S of the house is a small Gothick ironwork gate in the wall, flanked by stone piers, leading to a small bridge over the dry moat.

The Monk's Cell ST 313929

A small single-storey Gothick building originally standing on the edge of the lake, now in the middle of a field. It was built as a picturesque object in 1905 (architect C.B. Fowler) by Sir Clifford Cory on the site of a ruined building. (It is said to have been used for changing rooms for polo.) In one corner is a circular turret. The building is at present disused.

The grotto

To the SE of the Monk's Cell is a large pile of big stones (some possibly from the medieval monastery), some of which are dressed, now much overgrown and jumbled, which is all that remains of the grotto. This was re-erected to the west of the house by Sir Clifford Cory, and was dismantled and removed to its present position in the second half of the 20th century.

In the E corner of the garden, E of the former lake, is a low iron gate leading into the woodland.

Gardener's cottage

Outside the SE corner of the kitchen garden, reached by the concrete path along the kitchen garden's S side, is a small two-storey building, in cottage orné style, formerly a gardener's cottage.

ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENTS

Fountains

To the S of the Monk's Cell is a stone fountain, now standing in the middle of the field, originally in the middle of the lake. It was

found broken by Cory at the beginning of the 20th century, was pieced together and erected in its present position by C.B. Fowler. It stands c. 2 m. high and consists of three intertwined dolphins with a large scalloped bowl on top. Date uncertain.

A replica of the bowl was made (early 20th century) and it now stands on a stone octagonal plinth to the SE of the SW corner of the kitchen garden, surrounded by large yew trees.

Statues

In the bastions to the S of the house stand two old and rather weathered stone statues, thought to be of 17th century date. That in the SE bastion is a pilgrim with a wooden staff. He stands on a rough stone base c. 1 m. high, and the total height is c. 2.5 m. That in the SW bastion is of the same height and general style, and is a musketeer, with a wooden gun barrel. Nearby, to the NE is a small statue of a rampant lion, standing on a tree stump (this was originally in the grotto).

The praying monk, or hermit, which originally stood in the grotto, is now in the walled kitchen garden, and will be described under that heading.

A modern statue stands in the garden to the W of the house.

PLANTED COMPONENTS

The gardens W and S of the house are laid out mostly as lawns. The drive (tarmac here) enters the gardens on the W, and continues along the W front of the house to another exit at the NW corner. Just to the W of this there is a large cedar of Lebanon just outside the garden wall. In the S garden, just W of the central path, is a large wellingtonia. There are a few more conifers, a border around the edge, and a large clump of Pampas grass near the SW bastion. Just outside the W side is a large oak tree.

A relatively recent (post 1946) garden to the E of the bastioned garden is largely grass, with conifers in a row along the S side and a cypress hedge along the S boundary.

The shrubbery, to the S of the kitchen garden, is an area of grass and specimen trees, both deciduous and coniferous, with some old yews. To its N, along the kitchen garden wall, is a long border (formerly roses), flanked by a concrete path.

The field in which the lake used to be has some isolated trees (deciduous). A maze is marked on maps to the NW of the Monk's Cell (shown as a trapezoidal area on the edge of the woodland), but this is no longer there.

Reconstructions of original planted features

None

Special collections of garden plants

None

Documented living plants

None

Other (including elements of nature conservation interest)

None known

ESSENTIAL SETTING AND VIEWS BEYOND THE SITE

Essential setting: the park to W, S and E, and the walled kitchen garden to N.

ANY SPECIAL FEATURES

None

SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS

Structural components: most
Built components: most
Architectural ornaments: some
Planted components: some

UTILITARIAN GARDENS

NAME Kitchen garden and orchard

Grid ref ST 312929

Date/style 1830s/walled kitchen garden/orchard

DESCRIPTION (categories as for the pleasure garden)

The walled kitchen garden, incorporating an orchard, stands to the E of the house, adjoining the stables courtyard. It is a large parallelogram in shape, aligned NE-SW, surrounded by stone walls c. 3 m. high. The southern half of the W side is formed by a post-war residential block (for the convent), which forms the E side of the stables courtyard. There are entrances on the N, E and S sides. The garden is divided in two lengthwise (NE-SW) by a cross wall, the southern, larger half being the orchard, and the northern for vegetables and glass houses. There were originally cross and perimeter paths in both halves, but only parts of this layout survive. Inside the N half are two free-standing glass houses (a vinery on the E, sunken hot-beds on the W) and cold frames. The southern half is planted as an orchard, with mostly young fruit trees and a few old ones, and has grass paths. An old loquat tree also survives.

In the SW corner, next to the doorway out into the old shrubbery, is the stone statue of the praying monk or hermit. He is kneeling, life-size, and stands under an arch of rough stones (recent). This statue is thought to be 19th-century, and originally stood in the grotto by the lake (now fallen down).

Along the outside of the N side are brick lean-to sheds (tool sheds), and outside the E side are further similar sheds (rendered).

SOURCES

Primary

Sale Particulars, plan and lithographic view, Messrs Driver and Co, 1885: Gwent Record Office (D 163.002).

Deeds relating to Llantarnam Abbey: Newport Reference Library (M433.2 (900 x M453.2 (671))

Particulars of Sale, 1946: Newport Reference Library (pf M310 631)

Two photos, late 19th-early 20th century (National Library of Wales: Llantarnam Photo File).

Secondary

Allgood, H.G.C., Llantarnam Abbey (1907)

Sisters of St. Joseph, Llantarnam Abbey, 800 Years of History (1979)

To be appended: 1:10,000 map of site, marked with boundaries, viewpoints etc.; colour photographs of site, photocopies of relevant material, where available.
