

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

SITE DOSSIER

**SITE NAME** Mathern Palace

REF. NO. PGW (Gt) 35

OS MAP 162            GRID REF. ST 524908

FORMER COUNTY    Gwent    UNITARY AUTHORITY Monmouth B.C.    COMMUNITY  
COUNCIL Mathern

DESIGNATIONS    Listed building: Bishop's Palace    Grade I

National Park    AONB    SSSI    NNR    ESA    GAM    SAM    CA (Mathern)

SITE EVALUATION            Grade II\*

Primary reasons for grading

Garden designed by H. Avray Tipping around medieval bishops' palace.  
Well preserved structure and structural planting; immaculately  
maintained

TYPE OF SITE

Arts-and-Crafts garden

MAIN PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION

1894-1914

VISITED BY/DATE    Elisabeth Whittle/May 1991

## HOUSE

Name Mathern Palace

Grid ref ST 524908

Date/style mainly early 16th century; late 19th century/Tudor; Tudor vernacular

### Brief description

Mathern Palace is a rambling stone building which stands to the S of the churchyard in Mathern village. Throughout the medieval period it was one of the residences of the bisops of Llandaff. The oldest part of the fabric is 15th century, built by Bishop de la Zouche, who also built the gatehouse to the outer court (now gone) in 1419. In the early 16th century bishop Miles Salley made some additions (probably the chapel, later turned into a farm dairy and granary, the refectory (most gone), possibly the kitchens (later rebuilt by bishop Godwin in the late 16th-early 17th century, and when Tipping arrived reduced to cart-horse stable). Further building was carried out by bishop Godwin at the end of the 16th century-beginning of the 17th century, and the palace entered a long phase of decline. After c. 1700 bishops no longer used it, and the palace declined into a farmhouse.

In 1894 H. Avray Tipping bought the palace, and began extensive renovation, rebuilding and additions. The NE entrance side, with its tall tower next to the entrance hall, was left alone, except for minor repairs. No attempt was made to restore the destroyed parts of the quadrangle to the SW, ruined parts of which he incorporated into the garden (refectory). The kitchen wing (W wing) was rebuilt as it was more or less ruinous. The inside was extensively refurbished. Avray Tipping lived here until 1914, when he moved to Mounton House.

## OUTBUILDINGS

Name Various

Grid ref ST 524908

### Date/style, and brief description

Various stone buildings, mostly utilitarian but including a small cottage, on the E side of the palace, arranged irregularly within the walled precinct.

## THE PLEASURE GARDEN

Grid ref ST 524908

Date/style 1894-c.1900/Robinsonian (formal structure/natural)

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION, HISTORY AND LAYOUT

The gardens of Mathern Palace lie to the NW, SE and SW of the house, with a small forecourt and entrance to the NE. They are the creation of H. Avray Tipping, who made them from 1894 to c. 1900. When he arrived there was only 'the sordid untidiness of a hopelessly ill-contrived and unrepaired farmstead', and the medieval fishponds in the valley bottom to the NW of the house. Avray Tipping laid out terraces on the SW-facing slope, simply walled with local limestone. Level lawns, the kitchen garden and a sunken rose garden were made to the SE, and the whole structure was linked by paved paths and grass walks flanked by clipped yew and topiary hedges. Clipped yew hedges also formed the boundaries between garden compartments. The steeper slope on the NW side, which led down to the fishponds, was made into a rockery, which is now a grass slope, and mature trees in this area were incorporated. The two fishponds, linear ponds on a NE-SW axis, were also brought in to the scheme. The lower, larger one (SW) has recently (1990) been dredged and widened, giving it an irregular outline, and it now leaks. Planting in the garden was originally very rich and varied, with borders along the yew hedges, the sunken rose garden with a rose pergola across the central path, climbers, yew topiary, and formal beds on the upper terrace. Much of this planting has gone or has been simplified, but the structural planting (yew hedging) remains, as does a large circular yew arbour on the highest terrace SW of the house. Some trees remain, and original shrubs include lilacs and magnolias, and original climbers include wisteria and double Banksian roses on the house and a Hoya on the ruins.

### STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

To the NE of the house (entrance side) are a gravel drive and forecourt, with a tarmacked parking area.

To the SW of the house are a series of terraces bounded by low limestone dry-stone walls. Next to the house on this side are two level terraces. The northernmost one is bounded by the NW wing of the house on its NW side and by ruined buildings on its SE side, with a further free-standing ruined building incorporated into the SW side. A concrete-paved path runs NE-SW across the terrace from a door in the house. To the SE is a further terrace, reached through a doorway in the ruined building. There are similar straight concrete-paved paths, and a concrete-paved area bounded by a low wall immediately in front of the house, next to the loggia.

The next compartment to the SE is the sunk rose garden, reached on the NW side through a stone arch (modern). This is a rectangular area divided into two slightly sunken rectangular areas, with a narrow terrace all around, and a wide central grass walk orientated NE-SW. The sunken areas are reveted with dry-stone walls. In the sunken areas are diagonal paths of isolated concrete paving stones and small central beds edged with concrete paving.

There are two further rectangular terraces to the SW of the house, below the northernmost upper terrace. The middle one is bounded on the NE side by a low revetment wall. The lower one is bounded on its NE side by a higher revetment wall (c. 1 m. high), with central dividing steps (rebuilt). Its SW side forms the boundary of the garden, and is revetted to ground level with a stone wall.

To the NW of the house is a steep natural slope, down which winds a gravel path. At the foot of the slope are the two ponds. These are orientated NE-SW, have an outlet at the SW end, and are linked by a shallow bar at the W end of the upper pond. The westernmost pond is long and narrow, widest at the W end, and of irregular outline (of recent making, when pond dredged). The easternmost pond is sub-rectangular and slightly wider, with a shallow bar at its E end. The garden is bounded on this side (NW) by a ditch.

#### BUILT COMPONENTS

At the entrance to the palace, on the NE side, is a gateway flanked by stone gate piers, with high stone walls along the boundary on either side. Further stone walls flank the drive and bound the garden of the small cottage on this side.

The upper terraces on the SW side are bounded on their outer sides partly by ruined medieval/Tudor buildings and partly by low stone walls. In the N corner of the southernmost one, tucked into the angle between the house and the ruined wall between the two terraces, is a small pent-roofed loggia, open to the S, with a tiled roof, simple wooded supports on the open side, and a concrete-paved floor. In front of it is a paved area bounded by a low stone wall.

In the rose garden shallow flights of stone steps descend to the sunken parts in the middle of all sides except those flanking the central grass walk, where there are stone benches set into the sides instead.

There are two flights of steps down from the upper to the middle terrace, in the N corner of which is a small stone shelter (modern). Around the central millstone and sundial is some stone flag paving.

In the centre of the NE side of the lower terrace are dividing steps up to the middle terrace (recently rebuilt).

On the SW boundary of the garden, near the W corner, and at the end of the main NE-SW axis through the sunken rose garden, is a simple stone pavilion, made on the N end of a small stone barn. It is open to the NE and NW, where it looks out over the field outside the garden.

To the SE of the house the garden compartment at the northern end of the garden is the kitchen garden. This is bounded by a high stone wall at its NE end, against which glass-houses formerly stood (whitewashing on wall, and roof-line visible). One projected from the wall, and its back wall still stands, at right-angles to the wall. There is one (modern) ruined glass-house.

## ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENTS

In the centre of the middle terrace, on the main NW-SE axis of the garden on this side (formed by the grass walk flanked by yew hedges), is a sundial pillar set in the middle of a large circular millstone, with stone flag paving around it. The pillar is wooden, squared, with four geometric carved motifs on each side.

## PLANTED COMPONENTS

The gardens are largely laid out to lawns, with some ornamental tree planting, clipped yew hedging flanking paths and defining garden compartments, and some yew topiary.

To the NE of the house, in the courtyard in front of the house, are a small lawn, and some shrub/herbaceous borders at the foot of the walls. Notable mature plants are a *Magnolia grandiflora* to the NE of the front door, and nearby lilacs and magnolias.

The northernmost upper terrace is laid out to lawn, with peripheral borders and climbing plants on the house and ruined buildings. Notable mature plants are all climbers: wisteria and a double Banksian rose on the house, and a *Hoya* on the ruined building.

The southernmost upper terrace is also laid out mainly to lawn, in the centre of which is a circle of eight yew trees, clipped to form a 'house' with a curving 'roof' and eight cylindrical 'supports'. (This was formerly clipped, in Tipping's day, to form doorways and windows.)

To the SE of the house, the kitchen garden is cultivated, and is bounded on its SW side by a high clipped yew hedge. On the wall of the stables, at the NW end of the garden, is an old espalier peach. To the SW is a large level lawn bounded on all sides by clipped yew hedges. In the middle of the NE side is a rectangular recess or alcove in the hedge. There are three openings in the hedge on the SW side. A former path along the SE side has been converted into a flowerbed.

The sunk rose garden to the SW has a wide central grass walk orientated NE-SW, with slightly raised borders on either side. The two sunk gardens are grassed. The garden is surrounded by clipped yew hedges, with openings at the ends of the grass walk. On the SW side this is flanked by large topiary shapes (formerly peacocks). The roses of the former 'rose' garden have gone.

The grass walk axis in the sunken garden is continued southwards as a grass walk, with a clipped yew hedge on its SE side (formerly with topiary foxes on top). At right-angles to this, running SE-NW along the SW boundary of the sunken garden, and continuing on NW for a short distance, is a long grass walk flanked by clipped yew hedges.

To the SW is an area of rough grass, mature trees, including poplar and sycamore, and shrubs, including lilac. There is a yew hedge along the SE boundary.

The middle and lower terraces are both laid out to lawn, with narrow peripheral borders. At the NW end of the lower terrace are two yews clipped into 'mushroom' shapes.

The NW slope is rough grass with a few mixed trees, including two clumps of old yew trees. The NW boundary of the garden, next to the ponds, is planted with willows. Along the SE side of the upper pond are three fir trees.

Reconstructions of original planted features

None

Special collections of garden plants  
None

Documented living plants  
Old photographs (1910) of yew arbour, yew topiary and yew hedging.

Other (including elements of nature conservation interest)  
None known

ESSENTIAL SETTING AND VIEWS BEYOND THE SITE

Essential setting: pasture field to SW of garden, pasture fields to NW of garden, and churchyard to NE.

Views: SW from house and terraces over pasture fields

ANY SPECIAL FEATURES

None

SURVIVAL OF INDIVIDUAL COMPONENTS

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

## SOURCES

(Primary and secondary. For primary, give location. Aerial photos (AP): ref. no and collection)

### Primary

1914 Sale Particulars: Gwent Record Office (D25.1407)

### Secondary

H. Avray Tipping, 'The Old Palace at Mathern and its gardens 1.', *The Garden*, 27 January 1900, pp. 57-9.

H. Avray Tipping, 'The Old Palace at Mathern and its gardens 2.', *The Garden*, 3 February 1900, pp. 77-8.

H. Avray Tipping, *Country Life* 19 November 1910.

R. Haslam, 'The Houses of H. Avray Tipping I', *Country Life* 6 December 1979, pp. 2154-57.

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

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