

CHIRK CASTLE

Ref No PGW (C) 63

OS Map 126

Grid Ref SJ 268 380

Former County Wrexham Maelor

Unitary Authority Denbighshire

Community Council Chirk

Designations Listed building: Chirk Castle Grade I;
Scheduled Ancient Monument: (Del60: Chirk Castle gates; Del134, 135, 198:
sections of Offa's Dyke)

Site Evaluation Grade I

Primary reasons for grading

Outstanding landscape park, partly designed by William Emes, and terraced and informal garden, with remains from the mediaeval period onwards, in fine elevated position. Outstanding features within the layout include the early eighteenth-century entrance gates and screen by Robert and John Davies, the early eighteenth-century statue of Hercules by van Nost, and late nineteenth-century yew hedging and topiary in the garden.

Type of Site

Landscape park; terraced garden; informal garden

Main Phases of Construction

Early eighteenth century; 1760s-70s; late nineteenth century to c. 1920

SITE DESCRIPTION

Chirk Castle is a massive, squat, stone fortress, built around a rectangular courtyard. Projecting from its corners and the middle of the north side are massive round towers. The main entrance is under an archway on the north side. The castle is situated on elevated ground to the north of the Ceiriog valley, west of Chirk village. The ground around it is rolling, rising to a ridge to the west, and dropping quite steeply to the Ceiriog valley on the south.

The castle was mainly built by Roger Mortimer at the end of the thirteenth century. The outside has been little altered since that date, save the altering of windows to mullioned and transomed form in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The castle has been continually occupied since it was built. Having passed through several changes of ownership, in 1595 it was bought by Thomas Myddelton, a merchant adventurer and later lord mayor of London, whose descendants have lived here ever since. During the Civil War the castle was partly demolished, but was repaired in the Restoration period, when the east range was rebuilt with a new drawing room and long gallery on the upper floor. Further alterations affected only the interior. The state rooms were redesigned by Joseph Turner in neo-classical style in the 1770s for Richard Myddelton. The neo-gothic decoration of the 1840s, by A.W. Pugin, has been largely removed.

The stable courtyard abuts the south side of the castle. The stables were built in 1768-69 by Joseph Turner, and were altered in the mid nineteenth

century by E.W. Pugin, who also built the screen wall and two conical-roofed turrets on the edge of the steep slope to the south.

Chirk Castle park has a long history, beginning with the small fourteenth-century deer park of the Mortimer family. By the time of a survey in 1391-92 by Robert Eggerley, the park was timber-fenced and contained 100 acres of woodland. The timber was later cleared and replanted by the Earl of Leicester or the Myddeltons, after 1595. The trees were again cut down during the Civil War, and replanting was carried out by Sir Thomas Myddelton during the Restoration period. In 1675 he extended the park to the south and east to hold 500 deer.

A panoramic view of part of the park is given in the 1742 engraving of a drawing by Thomas Badeslade of 'The West Prospect of Chirk Castle in Denbighshire'. This shows a grand baroque layout of formal gardens, with axes extended into the park as avenues. This layout probably dates to the early years of the eighteenth century, the work of Sir Richard Myddelton or Robert Myddelton. To the east of the castle were formal gardens, to the north was a walled forecourt closed on the north side by wrought-iron gates and screens. Beyond was a great avenue leading down to a lake. Further avenues leads eastwards across the park from the main axis of the gardens and from the long walk down their south side. A public road runs below the forecourt, branching north-eastwards towards Whitehurst, and eastwards towards Chirk. Another runs along the southern side of the park from Chirk to the castle. Below it, near the river Ceiriog, is a small two-storey 'Cold Bath' building, with a rectangular pool next to it. The park is bounded with paling, and there are gates on the southern road, probably those referred to later as 'Bady's White Gates'. The most wooded part of the park appears to be the ground flanking the southern road; to the east of the garden the ground is largely open, crossed by avenues; to the north-east there are scattered trees.

Most of this layout was swept away in landscaping of the 1760s and 70s. The main survivors in the park are the southern road, now a drive, the lake, although later softened in outline, and the area of woodland in the southern part of the park. The forecourt gates and screens date to 1712-19, and were the work of Robert and John Davies of Bersham. They are one of the finest of their kind and period in the country, and now stand at the entrance to the park. The Cold Bath has long since gone, but a spring and a boggy area mark its position.

Although replanting, and improvements such as the rebuilding of the boundary wall along the south side, were made during the mid eighteenth century, no major scheme of landscaping took place until the 1760s and 70s when an ambitious scheme of landscaping was undertaken by William Emes for Richard Myddelton. A start had already been made to remove the formality of the garden before Emes arrived, with the demolition of the east wall and building of the terrace in 1761. In 1764 Emes gave a general plan of improvements and began work on the park immediately, planting clumps in the 'Upper Park', to the west of the castle, and starting the building of a ha-ha around the garden. In 1766 a large bank was made in the field to the east of the garden terrace in order to screen its wall 'from the view of travellers'. In 1767 the coach road from Bady's White Gate to the castle was 'new formed' and at the castle end moved further away from the stables. In 1769 an ice-house was built, and a new drive made to Tyn-y-groes. At the same time the old public roads across the park were closed. The forecourt was dismantled in 1770, the Davies gates and screen being re-erected at the New Hall entrance between two new pavilions by Joseph Turner. A new drive was made to the entrance in 1771. The statues that had stood in the forecourt, of Hercules and Mars, were dumped in the park. In 1773-74 the 'hill' in front of the castle was reduced to give the present smooth slope. Landscaping, mainly consisting of planting, continued until 1774 with

Emes in charge. From the names of the woods mentioned in the Steward's Commonplace Book, 1751-75, it is clear that the park took on more or less its present configuration of woodland and pasture at this time, and that probably some of the woodlands were already established before landscaping.

The castle lies in the centre of a medium-sized landscape park, stretching from the Glyn Ceiriog to Chirk road in the south to the Tyn-y-groes road in the north, and from the Chirk to New Hall road in the east to Tyn-y-groes in the west. The ground is rolling, rising to a ridge in the west, and dropping steeply to the river Ceiriog in the south. The great earthen bank of Offa's Dyke cuts across the park from north-east to south-west, passing just to the west of the castle. It is interrupted by the larger of two ornamental lakes which lie to the north of the castle. From the north front of the castle and the terrace at the east end of the garden there are fine views over the park, with rolling grassland dotted with deciduous trees and punctuated by woodland and the large lake.

There are two main entrances to the park, both on the east side. The present main entrance, west of Chirk village, consists of the magnificent wrought-iron gates and gatescreen of 1712-19 by Robert and John Davies of Bersham. The gates are ornamented with much scrollwork, are flanked by openwork piers topped with lead wolves, and have an elaborate overthrow with a heraldic panel of the Myddelton arms in the centre. These are flanked by side gates and simpler screens. Gates and screens were moved to this position from the New Hall entrance in 1888, when a small half-timbered lodge was built on the north side of the entrance. The screens stand on a stone wall, and are terminated by high stone piers topped with pineapple finials. The 1888 drive veers south to join the old road, converted into a carriage drive in 1767, which runs north-westwards along the edge of the Ceiriog valley, leaving the castle to the north, and swinging round northwards to enter the castle from the north. In the south-east corner of the park is a ruined entrance, flanked by two stone piers, 'Bady's White Gate'. From this entrance, now disused, the grassed over former drive, flanked by oaks, runs westwards to the present drive, also flanked by oaks from the junction to the late nineteenth-century Deer Park Lodge.

Deer Park Lodge stands at the eastern end of the Old Deer Park, which is situated above the Ceiriog valley to the south-east of the castle. It is now an area of scrub, bracken and light woodland, with a stone wall along its east side.

The second main entrance is at New Hall, on the north-east boundary of the park. This is set back from the road, flanked by curving stone walls and two single-storey ashlar classical pavilions of 1770, by Joseph Turner. In 1770-71 the Davies gates and screen were moved from the castle and re-erected between the pavilions. A drive winds uphill from the entrance, through grassland dotted with trees, past the lake, to the north side of the castle.

Another former entrance lies on the south side of the park, at Castle Mill, where there is a ruined entrance flanked by stone piers with pyramidal tops, with a pedestrian doorway on the north side. A track leads from here up the slope to the west side of the castle. This may be contemporary with the rebuilding of the park wall here in the 1760s.

Within the park there are several woodland areas. The slopes of the Ceiriog valley are largely wooded, partly with semi-natural deciduous trees, partly with coniferous plantations. In the eastern part of the park and several woods of mixed planting, including larches: Mynattyn Wood, Deershed Wood, Baddy's Wood, and The Belt. In the north, the two lakes have woodland around them, except on the south-west side. The west

side of the park is fringed by coniferous plantations: Gwyningar Wood, Mars Wood, Warren Wood and Top Plantation. Open areas of the park are dotted with isolated deciduous trees and clumps, mainly of oak. Very little of the planting is earlier than the 1760s, but from that era some oaks and beeches survive. Most of the oak planting in the park dates from 1800-40. The oaks lining the west end of the south drive were planted in 1953 to commemorate the Coronation.

The garden lies to the east of the castle, entered through wrought-iron gates made of redundant parts of the Davies gatescreen, erected at the north end of the garden in the late nineteenth century. The garden can be divided into three main component parts: the formal terraces, the informal area, and the woodland. Immediately in front of the castle the garden is formal, the sloping ground carved into a series of terraces. These are laid out to lawns, with a wide gravel path running southwards from the entrance, with stone steps between the terraces. To the east is a series of three smaller terraces, with a tennis court on the lowest. A feature of the formal area is the sculpted yew hedging around its edges, and the yew topiary flanking the path.

To the east of the southern end of the terraces is the informal part of the garden, on a gentle slope leading to a terrace that bounds the garden on the east. The main features of this area are a long lawn, flanked by a mixed border and rockery slope on the north and by a large shrubbery on the south. From the terrace at the end there are magnificent views across the park to a wide area beyond. To the west and north of the terrace is an area of woodland on ground rising to a small summit. It is divided by a straight ride, flanked by rows of limes, on the main axis of the castle. The woodland to the north, now called Pleasure Ground Wood, was formerly Jane Smith's Wood. It is now largely a larch plantation, and is not incorporated into the present garden. A ha-ha, which starts to the west of the castle and curves around it to the north, encloses this wood and joins the terrace wall on its west side. The south side of the garden is bounded by a revetment wall at the top of the steep slope on the edge of the Ceiriog valley.

The garden has a complex history, and elements remain from a number of periods. The planting, which is of high quality, dates mostly from the late nineteenth century onwards, but much older structural and built features are present. There is known to have been a formal garden here in the seventeenth century. A Latin inscription found in the garden records that Sir Thomas Myddelton made a garden in 1653. The only known relic from this period is a sundial, now set in the Rose Garden, which was moved here in the 1950s from Whitehurst Garden, then the kitchen garden. The next phase was the making of a much grander baroque layout in the early eighteenth century. This was at least in part the work of Sir Richard Myddelton, 3rd bt., as work was in progress in 1708. It may have been finished by Robert Myddelton, who succeeded in 1718, who is known to have instigated the grand north forecourt with the Davies gatescreen and statues of Hercules and Mars, erected in 1719-20. This and the garden to the east are depicted in the Thomas Badeslade engraving of 1742. From formal terraces to the east of the castle a great central axis ran past a bowling green through a wood cut into formal rides to gates on the garden boundary. Along the south side was a long tree-lined path referred to later as the 'long' or 'large' walk. To its south was a long narrow 'Nursery Garden' with an octagonal dovecote at the west end. The whole garden was walled, with a walled kitchen garden divided into compartments on the slope to the north. Survivals from this period include the wooded part of the garden, which has retained its original outline, if not its formal rides, and the central axis through it, flanked by rows of limes. The statue of Hercules by van Nost, erected in the forecourt in 1720, removed to a wood in 1770, was re-erected at the summit of the axis in 1987. The present terraces, although they may have been altered in detail

later, are probably also relics from the early eighteenth century. The Badeslade engraving shows three terraces, and the present terracing has three main levels, separated by low grass scarps. The main difference is that the original terracing extended further north than the present terraces, which stop in line with the north front of the castle.

In 1761 Richard Myddelton began a comprehensive scheme of transformation for both park and garden, sweeping away almost all formality. The first step taken was to demolish the wall along the east side of the garden in 1761, replacing it with a terrace revetted with a stone wall. This has survived to the present, and is embellished at its north end with a small classical pavilion, or 'Retreat Seat', built by William Emes in 1767. A shrubbery was planted behind it. After 1764 Emes was in charge of improvements. He demolished the walls, and removed most of the formality in the garden, planting it as an informal shrubbery with extensive lawns. The ha-ha was built around the garden. The kitchen garden was demolished and its yew hedges grubbed up. In 1766 a 'greenhouse' designed by Joseph Turner was erected on the site of the present Hawk House. A sundial of this period, originally in front of the classical pavilion, was recently moved to the front of the Hawk House.

After the 1770s there was little change until the late nineteenth century when the present entrance was made, and the yew hedges and topiary were planted on the terraces by Richard Myddelton Biddulph after 1872. These now form a major feature of the garden, having reached a large size. They border the terraces, and line their gravel paths, the individual bushes generally clipped as tall cones, the hedges sculpted as battlements, punctuated by higher cones. At the south end is a yew arbour known as the 'Crown on a Cushion'. The yew hedge backing the northern end of the terrace at the east end of the garden probably also dates from this period. The formal Rose Garden, a small rectangular area laid out with geometric rose beds, lies at the south-east corner of the castle, on the middle terrace. It is thought to have been laid out by Algernon Myddelton, Richard Myddelton Biddulph's son, at the end of the nineteenth century.

The informal area of the garden is reached by steps flanked by two bronze nymphs by Andrea Carlo Lucchesi (1860-1924). The shrubbery was originally created at the end of the nineteenth century on the site of part of Emes's lawn. The winding grass paths and beds were laid out by the garden designer Norah Lindsay for Lady Howard de Walden, but much of the planting and layout has had to be renewed since. Within the area are two ancient larches, possibly planted in the early eighteenth century. The area contains many fine specimen shrubs, including rhododendrons.

This informal part of the garden assumed much of its present appearance between 1911 and 1946, when the castle was leased to Lord Howard de Walden. His wife, aided by Norah Lindsay, laid out a long herbaceous border which was replaced soon after the Second World War by the present mixed border. The Hawk House was built in 1912, as a wooden pavilion with a thatched roof. It was used as a mews for hawks. At the top of the winding path above is a fourteenth-century font, which may have been brought here from Valle Crucis Abbey in the nineteenth century. A path flanked by yew hedges runs along the south side of the garden, past a small dogs' graveyard (earliest grave 1826), from the shrubbery to the south end of the terraces.

Sources

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